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This microethnographic study examines critical literacy and the lives of participants in an urban, non-profit organization, the Opportunity Center, serving low income youth and adults in the Seattle area. The Center's primary mission was to provide alternative educational opportunities for youth who have been unsuccessful in traditional school settings. The Center also provided ESL classes to the area's homeless Hispanic population and writing workshops for the homeless. The Center sought to provide literacy and general education for empowerment, meaning education which would encourage learners to think about society, their lives, and to enable them to shape their own destinies. The three programs use a student-centered curriculum, and they encourage student participation both at the classroom and organizational levels.

The purpose of this research was twofold: to describe how a critical literacy approach works and to describe the lives and needs of participants in such a program by

exploring the social and psychological factors in the educational process. Case studies are included to provide a deeper understanding of the clients who use literacy services.

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Education as a Rite of Passage:  
An Ethnographic Study of an Alternative  
Adult Education Program

by

Macaela Cashman Keegan

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# Education as a Rite of Passage: An Ethnographic Study of an Alternative Adult Education Program

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

#### Introduction

In an ethnography, the ethnographer is the research instrument. For this reason, I would like to begin by telling the reader something about myself and how my interest in the topic of critical literacy and alternative education developed. When I was young, I was always a good student, but when I got to high school, everything changed. My life was in turmoil, and by my senior year I had attended five different high schools in three different states.

The five high schools I attended, like most traditional schools in the United States, were organized around the theory of functionalism, a theory which perpetuates the cultural values of competition and individual achievement. According to functionalist theory, the purpose of the school is to transmit knowledge and cultural values, and a person can either conform to the status quo or drop out. I dropped out.

Despite my unfortunate experiences in high school I continued to love learning. Years later, in a graduate course on education and anthropology, I discovered the revolutionary ideas of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and

his notions of critical literacy, education for empowerment, and student-centered learning. Freire's theory is the opposite of functionalism. He encourages learners to question the status quo, its values and standards. He is not concerned with the transmission of knowledge but rather how knowledge and values are constructed.

Many studies have been done on what has gone wrong with schools, the family, and students. Rather than rehash these well-studied problems, I chose to investigate the Opportunity Center, a Freirian-based program, as an alternative to the status quo. The Center provided its students tools to cope with the problems which had made it impossible for them to succeed in more traditional settings.

According to Spradley (1980), ethnography has two broad purposes: to expand our understanding of humankind and to serve human needs. The ideal is to synthesize these two uses of ethnography. My research attempts to do this, taking the field of literacy and looking at it through the perspective of a particular group, the students and staff of the Opportunity Center.

I undertook this study because I wanted to see how critical theory could be put into practice in an American school, in a student-centered classroom. My purpose was not to test a hypothesis or gather more statistics, but rather to see the people behind the homeless and dropout statistics and to gain insights and possible solutions to these

problems. I wanted to know what motivated these particular high school drop-outs to swallow their pride and try again. What motivated people who did not even have what American culture considers the basics of survival--shelter, work, adequate food--to seek out learning opportunities and to pursue their own growth with discipline and dedication?

In ethnography a researcher relies on guiding questions, rather than hypotheses to focus one's study. I articulated two questions for this purpose: How does a critical literacy program work here in the United States? Who are these students, and what are their needs, motivations, and world views?

### Research Objectives

#### Culture and Social Organization

Through this research, I endeavored to explore the nature of teaching and learning as social processes within the particular context of the Opportunity Center. My focus was on how this group of adults learned within a student-centered, critical literacy environment and how schooling related to their education on a larger social scale, i.e. "real life". After obtaining participants' consent, I talked to students about their backgrounds and lives. I also talked to the teachers and observed instructional and organizational characteristics of the program as well as the

interaction of participants. I have included brief case studies and a more complete oral history from each classroom to illustrate learners' goals, needs, the variety of backgrounds they brought to the school, and their interpretation of the school's culture and society at large.

Although I started out with the intention of studying the institutional setting and the strengths and weaknesses of critical theory, the most interesting information turned out to be about people. As time went by, I availed myself of the ethnographer's prerogative to change direction as I discovered more about the students' culture and began to focus increasingly on the students themselves. I realized that it was their lives and backgrounds which shaped the classroom dynamics. It is also the students' lives which are the most important thing for an educator or researcher of classroom culture to understand. Knowing what types of struggles students are facing in their personal lives enhances the chances of an educator knowing how to make learning relevant for these persons. Understanding students' lives is also at the very heart of designing a student-centered program.

Two theories regarding culture and the role of schooling provided structure for this investigation: interpretivist theory, which provided the framework for investigation, and critical theory, which was embodied in the method of teaching at the Center, critical literacy.

The interpretivist theory of education maintains that in order to understand the relationship between school and society, researchers must analyze the interactions between students, teachers, administrators, and various peer groups, as well as how these relationships interact with curriculum and school achievement (Pai, 1990).

I used the techniques of interpretivist theory to investigate critical theory, a perspective which is concerned with social change, power relations, and conflict. Its proponents argue that the dominant culture exerts more than just economic oppression. Through the media, the work place, and through such institutions as schools, it determines the standards by which we are judged and by which we judge ourselves. Critical literacy is one of the techniques advocated by this school of thought to counter the status or mainstream cultural programming students receive in school. The American mainstream includes people who act like members of the dominant population and who have the income to support such a lifestyle (Spindler & Spindler, 1990). Giroux (1983) writes that the primary purpose of education is to learn to think about things which affect our lives, and to think critically about society's values and practices. According to Giroux, most schools discourage critical literacy by stressing the transmission of knowledge, life-styles, learning and communication styles of

the dominant class rather than exploring a variety of options and the social construction of knowledge and values.

### The Program

#### Background of the Organization

The Opportunity Center was an urban, non-profit educational center serving low income youth and adults in the greater Seattle, Washington, area. The Center's mission was to provide alternative educational opportunities for youth who were unsuccessful in traditional school settings for a variety of reasons, among which were poverty, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, domestic violence, and homelessness. The Center offered instruction to people who were interested in getting a GED, returning to public school, preparing for college, learning English, or improving basic skills for employment and/or self-expression.

The Opportunity Center was initiated as a response to the "hard to serve" members of society: ex-convicts, drug abusers, and inner-city street youth. Its mission, according to several informants, was originally "to keep people off the streets", meaning out of trouble with the police. Its mission continued to include keeping people out of trouble, but grew to embrace a more ambitious vision: that the students at the Center would find a place where

they were respected as individuals, regardless of their past. In fact, students' histories were acknowledged as being a source of strength and experience they could draw on in creating their own futures.

### Student-Centered Philosophy

While the students themselves often thought that they needed to focus on learning basic skills or that they brought to the classroom a deficit which needed to be remedied, the staff at the Center sought to provide a more wholistic education. The curriculum was designed to help students see their problems in the context of larger society. Education for empowerment was the essence of the Center's philosophy, an idea associated most closely with Brazilian educator and founder of critical theory Paulo Freire. The goal of empowerment is to enable learners to shape their own lives, touching on all facets of life: personal, social, economic, and political. Students in this type of classroom also learn to challenge social forces which oppress them or undermine their self-determination (ACBE, 1988), rather than to allow themselves to be victimized or to act their frustration out in self-destruction or rebellion. In essence, empowerment will increase the student's capacity to make choices in life and to reject prescriptions forced on them by others (Freire, 1973).

While the staff of the Opportunity Center wanted to help students meet survival needs, they did not subscribe to a deficit model which prescribed remediation. Nor did they focus on what Abraham Maslow has called deficiency motives (Bee, 1987), i.e. motivation to change because of a lack in physical or psychological circumstances. The staff was proactive in their response to students, having high expectations for what students could contribute to each other, their community, and what they could do for themselves. The Opportunity Center's philosophy contradicted Maslow's position that all of life's pieces must be in place before one can begin steps towards self-expression and self-actualization. After collecting and analyzing case studies describing the lives of program participants whose basic needs had not been met, my findings call for a more critical look at Maslow's theory of motivation and its implication for education.

The staff at the Center encouraged student participation both at the classroom and organizational levels. The staff observed that when students made decisions and became responsible for their own learning, they became more confident in making changes in their lives. In the classroom, students had the chance to discuss current events and social issues, to participate in student directed projects, and to work on individualized study plans.

## Structure

The program offered two types of classes, ESL classes for homeless Hispanics, and a GED classroom which prepared students to take the General Education Development high school equivalency exam (Costa, 1988). The program also offered writing workshops for the homeless, and although these workshops no longer exist due to budget and staffing problems, I have included them in the study as an example of the Center's creative response to society's needs. In the GED classroom many of the students were homeless as well, defined by the program as those who were not paying rent and not living with their families, whether they lived on the street, in a car, at a public shelter, or with friends. The ages of the people served by the program ranged from the early teens to about 50, but this study will include only participants over the age of 18 in order to comply with the human subjects guidelines for this research.

All classes were organized on an open entry, open exit system and had fluctuating attendance. In the GED classroom there were anywhere from three to fifteen students. The homeless writing workshop involved a core of four students, but at times had as many as eight. The ESL classroom had about 25 students, only three of whom were women. Their proficiency in English ranged from essentially none to near fluency, and the students interviewed were chosen from the more fluent students.

Students came to the program in a variety of ways. Some were referred to the GED program by caseworkers or the court. Most found out about the various classes by word of mouth. The Center also posted flyers at the shelters, the library, and other places around town. The recruiting focus was on the GED classes. The ESL classroom was always full and had a long waiting list. If one of the ESL students was absent excessively, someone else was allowed in as a substitute.

The Center held classes four days per week. Writing workshops were held on Saturday mornings from 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. ESL classes were Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9:00-11:30, with Talk Time (conversation) class on Wednesday morning from 9:00-11:00. There was a morning GED class from 9:00-11:30 and an afternoon class from 1:00-3:30, Monday through Thursday. Friday was reserved for processing new student applications and administrative work.

### Setting

The Opportunity Center was located in an urban setting and was part of a social service agency which I will refer to as the Northwest Education Foundation or the Foundation. The Foundation provided a variety of support services to people studying at the Center. Young adults 25 years old or younger who came to the Center were assigned to a case manager from the Foundation who helped the participants

obtain housing, find jobs, and further their education. Participants then had options of enrolling in life skills workshops, English as a second language classes, basic skills/GED classes, a clerical skills program, a work-study program which involved cleaning the city streets, and drug and alcohol groups. The Foundation allowed students at the Center to use their gym and pool which served downtown business people. It also provided shelter to homeless youth.

While the Foundation provided many services and benefits to the students who studied at the Opportunity Center, it also required that the staff of the Center comply with its rules. The teachers and director were expected to participate in fund raising for the whole program and were restricted from applying for grants from prior donors. The Foundation also raised overhead costs so much that the Center could scarcely meet its financial obligations.

The Center was in an accessible location for most of its learners, downtown in an old brick building, near various shelters and street hangouts. The GED classroom was on the sixth floor, the two ESL classrooms on the seventh, and the writing workshops were held in either of these two classrooms on Saturdays.

The personal style of the GED students was reflected in their room. The classroom was painted a light florescent green with purple trim. A volunteer decorated one wall by

painting portraits of staff and students. There were tables set up around the room divided by GED topic: science, math, social studies, reading, and writing. There was a futon couch in the back of the room along with stacks of flyers on various cultural, political, and social service events happening around town. The room was decorated with a few wilted plants and posters on domestic violence, AIDS, and various African-American movies or musicians. Sometimes student drawings were posted. Announcements and the plan for the day were always written on the front board. At the back of the room were three boxes for recycling. Books for the students to check out filled bookcases and occasionally the tables as well. Unfortunately, students could not take home any of the GED books; there were not enough to go around. But copies of the exercises were provided for those who wanted homework.

ESL classes were housed in two pleasant but conventional rooms upstairs. One room had rows of tables which faced the blackboard. This room was used for the two formal classes each week. The lower level students stayed in this room for the once a week "Talk Time", while the more advanced students used the big room which had a blackboard but was otherwise more like a meeting room. During the Talk Time break, coffee and cookies were served.

## The Staff

The offices for the staff were also located on the sixth floor. During most of the year, an average of ten people worked either full- or part-time at the Center, not including volunteers. The director, four full time staff, one temporary full-time teacher, one part-time teacher, one teacher's assistant (a former student), one program assistant (a former student), and one VISTA volunteer made up the personnel at the Center. In order to protect privacy, I will refer to all participants in the study by pseudonyms.

The Center's director, Cassandra, shared a rather small office with the ESL/GED teacher, Emily, the VISTA volunteer coordinator, Melissa, the part-time ESL teacher, Lauren, and the student program assistant. Reina, the creator of the writing workshops and part-time GED teacher, shared this space as well, before her position was cut. Along with the people, the office was crammed with bookcases, a coffee machine and supplies, VCR equipment, and file cabinets. The full-time GED teacher, Aaron, and the homeless program coordinator, Martina, each had their own offices, although Aaron shared his with the full-time temporary GED teacher and the teacher's assistant.

### Organizational Chart

Cassandra - director

Rachel - director and GED teacher from 1989 to 1991

Pat - case manager who worked for the Foundation

Emily - VISTA volunteer and volunteer coordinator

Melissa - ESL teacher, part-time GED teacher

Lauren - part-time ESL teacher, assistant to Melissa

Aaron - full-time GED teacher

Erica - GED teacher from 1989 to 1992

Reina - creator of writing workshops, part-time GED teacher  
from May 1991 to October 1992

Martina - homeless program coordinator

Brian - student program assistant

Quia - student teacher's assistant

### The Problem

#### Definition of Literacy

One of the first difficulties in studying literacy is to determine which definition to use. Traditionally, literacy has been defined as the ability to read, write, and comprehend texts on familiar subjects and to function easily within one's environment (Costa, 1988). Venezky, Kaestle, and Sum (1987) provide a more comprehensive definition of what it means to be literate.

Literacy is not simply reading, or reading plus writing, but an ability to use print for personal and social ends. It is a functional skill in that it requires the application of various skills in common, everyday situations. In this sense, that phrase "functional literacy" is redundant, in that literacy, by definition, is a functional ability. Literacy is also a continuum of skills, not an all-or-nothing ability. One can define arbitrary levels of performance for designating discrete literate or illiterate categories...but this obscures the true literacy issue, which is what people can do and how these abilities relate to particular social needs (p.5).

This definition informs the perspective of my research. I will be focusing especially on "...what people can do and how these abilities relate to particular social needs."

In order to define literacy we also need to examine its function in society. Spindler and Spindler (1990) define education as cultural transmission, and in American society literacy is central to the social transmission of knowledge. It has symbolic significance as a barometer of how well our culture is maintaining itself. There is a moral element attached to literacy. A literate person is seen as a good person with good judgment. Judgment is improved by access to written knowledge of collective experience. Literacy is seen as a social virtue and as the foundation of democracy, on the one hand, and as a set of schooled skills on the other (Cook-Gumperz, 1986).

In order to address the problem of illiteracy, we need to understand better the social process of literacy acquisition -- not only how literacy is acquired, but how the meaning of literacy is constructed through the formal

and informal evaluation of learners (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). Literacy includes not only knowing how to do certain things, but also when to do them and under what circumstances. We need to be concerned about the social and environmental factors essential for learning and to discover the best experiences to facilitate learning.

There is a movement in this country to get back to the basics in education. Proponents of this movement cite deficiencies in literacy as the cause of high rates of unemployment and other social problems. This movement assumes a mechanical conception of literacy, reducing it to the technical skills of reading and writing. Literacy, however, is a process which continues throughout our lives, a process whereby our understanding of the world is continuously enlarged. It is not arrival at some predetermined destination. Literacy is not something acquired in a vacuum, but rather in historical, social, and cultural contexts. Researchers must go beyond the "how" of literacy to explore what, where, and why people read, write, and speak as they do (Mackie, 1980). The importance of the social processes of literacy was appreciated by the Opportunity Center, and while the staff recognized that technical skills were important, the social aspects of literacy and literacy's meaning to the students were the primary focus of the Opportunity Center and this research.

## Rationale

The role of qualitative research in education is to discover how the process of schooling interacts with students' needs, assumptions, values, expectation, and attitudes--in other words, to gain a participant's perspective (Sevigny, 1981). The ethnographer describes and identifies recurring behavioral patterns and defines rules for participation but does not evaluate the process. The concern is not effectiveness versus ineffectiveness but rather the present context and the existence of patterns in the data. The researcher takes a bottom up approach, first describing the situation, then developing a model for what is occurring, then testing the validity of the model in other, similar situations (Green and Wallat, 1981). The purpose for qualitative research is to provide a three dimensional picture of a situation, which then leads to insights that a purely quantitative method of research would not uncover.

The purpose of an ethnographic study is to look at aspects of meaning and belief from the perspectives of actors involved in the events. In the present study, this includes investigating what teachers and students need to know in order to do what they are doing (Erickson, 1981). Ethnography is the most appropriate tool for describing processes (Bernard, 1988), for looking at a cultural scene and for understanding, describing, and explaining patterns

of interaction through the use of a wide range of data gathering techniques (Spradley and McCurdy, 1972).

Rather than being a treatise on learning in general, this study provides a contextualized account of learning in a specific situation and of how students were transformed by learning in a particular time and place. The rationale behind the case studies in this research is that since culture is shared, one particular case or person is not only unique, but also shares characteristics with others. It is my intention that the insights gained from this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how a critical literacy program works, how critical literacy is developed, and will provide a deeper understanding of the clients who use literacy services, which is imperative to designing effective educational programs.

In keeping with ethnographic tradition, I have attempted to probe rather than prove and to focus on what I observed, without borrowing too heavily from psychological theory (Wolcott, 1987). The data sources I used include formal and informal interviews, participant observation, life histories, and discussions with key informants who were particularly knowledgeable about the culture in question (Wolcott, 1988). Those involved, both students and teachers in the program, became co-investigators and participants in the research.

### Practical and Theoretical Significance

Wolcott (1987) points out that anthropology is concerned with making sense of the lived-in world. While educational anthropology has primarily focused on issues of teaching, Wolcott asks us to consider looking more closely at learning processes themselves. By looking at how learning occurs, anthropology can help teachers develop an interest in the natural/social process of learning and help shape a learning-centered profession. Wolcott calls for "...increased attention to the processes through which individuals continue throughout their lives to 'gropingly discover' what they need to know (p.48)." In congruence with Wolcott's goal, the objective of this ethnographic study is to explore the processes by which people make meaning, focusing on the learning process through looking at a learner-centered teaching approach and exploring the students' and teachers' experiences and perspectives.

Microethnography, studying a particular classroom or school, is an important tool for exploring ways of facilitating success among language minority students. Microethnography can lead to theory development for integrating successful learning activities helpful to those who find themselves in cultural transition (Trueba, 1988).

Spindler and Spindler (1990) describe education as the process of cultural transmission. But whose culture is to be transmitted? In the United States, it has traditionally

been the dominant mainstream culture (Pai, 1990); however, this is beginning to change. Student-centered educators are turning away from being chiefly reflexive, reproductive instruments of the system, and are seeking more creative and innovative methods to stimulate learning. The approaches being utilized at the Education Center represent a sample of such methods.

Vygotsky (1978) stated that culture influences not only speech and social interaction but also cognitive structure. Therefore, we must seek to understand students' cultures before we can provide effective instruction. Spindler & Spindler (1987) agree that culture affects the entire process of knowledge acquisition regardless of sociological forces. An ethnographic study of the techniques used in this program may serve as possible guidelines for other programs serving diverse populations and for use in teacher training. Theoretically, student-centered and critical literacy programs may be used to value students' unique experiences, to promote communication, to build self-esteem, and to promote cross-cultural communication. This research will elaborate on how such a curriculum works in practice.

#### Delimitations of the Study

First, I gathered research data over a twelve month period of time, during which the Opportunity Center was continually evolving. There was turnover in the staff as

well as the student population, and the people I was able to work with most closely (because we spent time together and built up rapport) are those who are represented most frequently in this study.

Second, my intent has been to provide specific examples and cases, describing what critical theory looks like in practice in an American educational setting. To describe critical theory in practice involves looking at what "oppression" consists of in the lives of the disadvantaged in American culture. While my intent was not to generalize from these specific examples, the results of this study can help educators see human beings behind the homeless and dropout statistics and gain insight into the origins of and potential solutions to these problems.

Third, although I visited each classroom on a regular basis, I spent less time in the ESL classroom than I did in the writing workshops and the GED classroom. I was welcome in all the classrooms but felt I had more to contribute to the latter two. The ESL classroom had plenty of volunteers, and the GED classroom needed them. Although the writing workshop was such a small group that I did not think they would need much help from a volunteer, I was especially welcomed by both the teacher and participants, and these were the students I got to know the best. Fourth, I openly took notes during both the formal interviews and classroom observation. At times it would have been

disruptive to conversation and inappropriate to have taken notes, therefore I occasionally needed to rely on my memory.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

#### Introduction

In this section, I will explore the idea of literacy as a social process as well as the functions and purposes of literacy and how these relate to educational theory. I will also look at what is involved in implementing a learner centered approach, or literacy for empowerment, the philosophy of the Education Center.

#### Social Aspects of Literacy

People, on the whole, do not really think by themselves. They think through the filter of culture, through the filter of the group that has socialized them. This is why the study of literacy necessitates the study of social groups and the institutions which socialize people into specific interpretations of the world and the word (Bruner, 1986).

Learning is social. People learn about things of interest to their group, whether it is rap music, baseball, cars, or literature. The learning which goes on in people's daily lives is not deliberate or instructed, but rather it is generated by interest. Reading is a social activity in that it can be used to generate talk (Heath, 1980).

There are differences in the way people from different social classes read a text, just as people now read texts from past times with different interpretations than people did at the time they were written. People's lives provide the context for their reading, and no text can really be taught without drawing on the reader's previous knowledge, life, and culture. Too often, mainstream literacy approaches assume that the social reality of the learner corresponds to that of the dominant culture; these assumptions are not always correct. Critical literacy, acknowledging the social nature of knowledge, looks at texts analytically to reveal their political perspective and cultural messages (McLaren, 1988).

Frank Smith (1989) argues that the pre-packaged materials and techniques used in schools are not as important to the development of literacy as is developing students' interest in reading through the relationship between the teacher and students and the students among themselves. He criticizes ready-made materials which remove the teacher from the learning process, especially computer-assisted learning programs which claim that the teacher is unnecessary.

All of these instructional programs ignore the fact that literacy is a social phenomenon. Individuals become literate not from the formal instruction they receive, but from what they read and write about and who they read and write with. (p. 355)

Lauren Resnick (1991) believes that literacy is a set of cultural practices people engage in, rather than a list of abilities. She is concerned with the social conditions under which people engage in literate activities. This leads to new questions for investigating what many are calling the literacy crisis:

Who are the actors--both readers and writers--in these situations? How do they define themselves in relation to the texts they engage with, to each other, to people who may also engage with those texts? Why are they reading and writing? What are they attempting to do with the written word? What kinds of institutional or broadly social invitations, permissions, and constraints influence their activities? How do people read and write? What are the processes, cognitive and social, that define literate practices? Finally, what do people read and write? What are the texts themselves like, and how do their characteristics facilitate particular forms of literate practice? (pp. 170-171)

In looking at literacy as a process of socialization into a literate community, Resnick compares the process to an apprenticeship. She calls for an increased use of authentic writing and texts for three forms of literacy: practical, informational, and pleasurable.

McDermott (1974), in looking at the importance of the social aspects of literacy, has focused on illiteracy and school stratification, finding communication patterns between students and teachers to be especially important. Many teachers were unknowingly communicating strongly negative messages to their ethnically different students. The response of the students to these negative messages was

to reject the teachers' values and to form their own, conflicting, values. The students eventually lost status with the teachers by not learning to read, but gained status with their peers. They were learning to behave in a way they found culturally appropriate according to their social interactions. Many students simply refuse to participate in an institution which negates their worth, their culture, or their history (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Willis, 1977).

Scaffolding, an interactional system of social and cognitive support, is one way the social nature of the learning process can be improved and students' abilities realized. Both students and teachers, using scaffolding, redefine and negotiate learning tasks to make learning more meaningful (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Education for adult learners is a group process of sharing knowledge which builds on their strengths and provides mutual support (Kozol, 1985). The opposite of this approach is when students are forced to learn around a standardized test, allowing neither teachers nor students to help shape tasks, inhibiting creative teaching and disempowering both teachers and students.

Whether a teacher encourages a competitive or cooperative learning environment also influences how well students perform. While it is widely accepted in the mainstream culture that competition is motivating, this is only true if all students perceive themselves as having an

equal chance at winning. Competition often generates feelings of rivalry, envy, and contempt. It encourages blaming the loser, since the loser "deserves" his or her fate. Competition leads to isolation and struggle between students, rather than collective action for positive change and the building of a democratic system. Cooperative learning, on the other hand, can be used to enhance student learning, develop interpersonal relationships, and even to develop critical consciousness about the basis of inequality in school and society and options for change (Sapon-Shevin & Schniederwind, 1991).

The New York Public Library has developed a highly successful adult education program which utilizes the idea of literacy as a social process. They have created a community of learners, which the learners themselves define as a place where they find people with common interests, and a place they feel safe to take risks and experiment. Students reflect on their goals, their strengths, and weaknesses. They discuss what they want to learn and work together with the program's tutors as equal collaborators on their writing. Small groups negotiate with tutors on what they will learn each week, and the tutors are encouraged to grow along with the students of the program (Schneider, 1989). The New York Public Library program was used as a model for the writing workshops at the Opportunity Center.

### Self as social construct

The idea of literacy as a social process begins at the level of the self. All of our perceptions of ourselves, our feeling for who we are, are developed through interaction with other people. We even use different "registers" or ways of speaking, depending on our purpose and social context (Halliday, 1978). These different registers can be seen as different facets of the self.

While the European culture perceives of the self as an integrated and stable entity, others, for example the Samoan culture, see the self as consisting of many facets which are weighted differently in different personalities. One cannot speak of personality in this culture without considering the particular behavioral and social context in which the assessment is being made (Shore, 1982).

This idea of the flexible, shifting self is receiving attention from Western scholars as well, and can be applied to the concept of literacy in that there are many literacies. The pragmatic philosopher George Herbert Mead (1977), like Vygotsy (1978), argues that human nature is social, and that experience, thought, and language begin in a social context, working from the outside of a person to create the inner "self". In fact, the individual self only exists, is only defined, in relationship to others. The self is a process, constantly in the state of becoming, rather than a distinct entity.

Kazemek (1988) explains how the two parts of the self, the "me" and the "I", in dialogue, make up thought. The "me" is the social part, censor, social critic and controller and works to maintain the social structure. The "I" is the initiator, spontaneous, creative, free, and responsible for changing social structure. There is only one "I", but many "me's" to respond to many social situations. A person's function or role in context thus determines the self.

There are two implications of this theory for adult literacy. Using Mead's perspective of the self as a process, one must consider how a person interacts in a variety of situations to determine how literate he or she is.

The second implication of this concept can be drawn upon to engage in empowering learners. Literacy allows transactions with others and a chance to examine and construct the self. Both the self-examining, critical "me" and the creative, spontaneous "I" are engaged, allowing a dialogue between the two. Through this dialogue, the writer finds a vehicle for awareness and reconstruction of the self and even society.

Mead maintains that the self is a process which changes as it interacts with the world; in turn, the world changes through such interaction with the selves. Freire has taken a similar understanding and placed it within a revolutionary context. (Kazemek, 1988, p.11)

Here again we see the idea that literacy is not a "thing" to be acquired, but rather a process. This avoids the ideology of domination by the "haves" over the "have-nots".

Emphasizing the dynamic quality of our roles and relationships creates the possibility of change and the chance for remaking our society, whereas assuming the "individualist" theory of the static self attributes more power to psychological motivation than social relationships. This results in mistaking a social outcome for psychological reality (Risman and Schwarz, 1989).

Erickson (1984) argues that teaching and learning are social and even political transactions that we negotiate collectively. When a person changes the nature of a learning interaction, either by changing the tools and symbols, or by changing the relationship among people involved, one profoundly changes the nature of the learning task -- and what we usually refer to as a person's ability, for better or worse. The next two sections will expand on this thesis.

### Functions and Purposes of Literacy

Public education serves two functions: instructing youth in academic subjects and socializing them to become good citizens. Critics of the system argue that the socializing function takes precedence over the academic. In fact, students from different social classes receive differential academic preparation which prepares them to fulfill their prescribed place in society (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Another of the socializing functions of education is to mark and facilitate transitions in life. Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1960) has done intensive study of how rituals and rites of passage help facilitate life's transitions in various societies throughout the world. Going through an educational system is a rite of passage with the objective of becoming an adult, a competent member of society. Van Gennep's model explains that passages are marked by three phases: rites of separation, transition, and incorporation. In school, children are separated from their parents, their homes, and at the Center, students separate from their friends or peer group. The schooling itself is a transitional period where people learn how to take care of themselves and learn about the world at large. At the Center, the graduation banquet and celebration is held at a

building outside the schooling area, marking students' incorporation into society.

Education, however, requires more than passing tests and going through the ritual of graduation. Literacy is supposed to be the path to upward mobility and equal opportunity. In reality, many of the present practices in literacy merely perpetuate the status quo (Shannon, 1985). According to what Graff (1987) calls the "literacy myth",

...education is supposed to do many things: stimulate economic development, provide a foundation for democracy, and expose people to common values, institutions, and languages to unite and integrate them. (p. 384)

But, despite higher levels of education throughout the world, the expected changes have not followed.

School-based literacy, subscribing to this literacy myth, claims to address the problem while perpetuating this myth (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). Rather than focusing on personal growth or vocational training, avenues which could actually lead to changes in society and economic improvement for individuals, education has historically focused on passing on dominant class standards for the proper attitudes and behaviors of good citizens: docility, respect, and discipline for the lower classes, preparing them for service jobs, while the elite is schooled in critical thinking skills, preparing them for management and leadership (Graff, 1987; Oakes, 1985).

In an extensive study on tracking in American schools, Oakes (1985) found that a student's race or class had more to do with which educational track he or she ended up in than intellectual ability, and that students nearly always remained in the track they were initially placed in. In this way, literacy is used to reinforce society's power structure by ensuring that those in the lower tracks accept the values dictated by the dominant class, even when it is not in their self-interest to do so (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). English as a Second Language classes do the same thing as the lower track classes, training non-native speakers for lower level positions in society (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985).

This control by the dominant class is not brought about through outright coercion, but rather through hegemony. Schooling has helped elicit the consent of the oppressed in their own subjugation by indoctrinating them to accept the symbols of prestige, values, and norms of the elite (Graff, 1987). A clear example of this is people's attitudes about proper speech. Studies have shown that many groups apply the middle class standard to their own unique forms of speaking, ranking their own form as inferior and unconsciously belittling their own culture (Labov, 1966).

Another myth dovetails the literacy myth: the belief that schools already provide equal opportunity and that the system is fair. The product of this belief is that if certain groups do not succeed in school or later on in life

in the working world, they deserve the position they find themselves in because there are no longer any formal barriers to achievement. However, the inability of many groups to perfectly replicate unquestioned middle class norms, along with unequal academic training according to one's status in society, perpetuates an unfair class system. The system is all the more unfair because it claims to be fair (Weis, 1988; Wilkens, 1976).

Heath (1980) also rejects the notion that the function of literacy is primarily to improve people's economic status. She states rather that transmitting cultural behavior of literate people (middle class values) through schooling may have greater influence on upward mobility than academic achievement itself. Within the working class, African-American community in Heath's five year ethnographic study, literacy was not motivated by faith in the end goal of mobility, but rather was pursued for its usefulness in daily life. Heath recommends that ethnographic work among various social groups will help policy makers get a better idea of the many uses of literacy and the corresponding skills that comprise it.

Csikszentmihaly (1991) agrees with Heath that to understand what is referred to as the "literacy crisis" in the U.S., educators need to examine how people use literacy. Their motivation is a key issue. Education should focus less on the transmission of skills and more on stimulating

learners' enjoyment of reading and writing, addressing how they can use literacy for their real life needs. From the invention of the first writing system, literacy has raised two questions: What purpose does it serve? And who benefits from it?

Young people realize that a high level of literacy may not be necessary for future work roles. While education has traditionally been promoted as a path towards upward mobility, this extrinsic motivator is no longer so convincing.

The greatest future demand in the labor market appears to be for armed guards, fast-food preparation personnel, truck drivers, sanitation workers, nurse's aides, and other relatively unspecialized tasks. For some reason our sophisticated economy still needs an under class, and if we can't produce it domestically, we shall import it from abroad. (pp. 122-123)

While the extrinsic rewards of literacy are less relevant to today's learners, Csikszentmihaly argues that literacy activities are still very valuable intrinsically, and educators should give more importance to intrinsic rewards.

St. John Hunter (1987) cautions against rating people on a standardized literacy scale. We must ask instead what people want to do with their literacy, what use they make of it in daily life. Researchers and educators show the greatest interest in testing for technical and linguistic skills, since these skills are measurable and appeal to potential funders. But it is more important to begin paying

attention to the social dimension and people's motivation to achieve literacy.

Literacy is not simply learning how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. The nature of these practices, including, of course, their technological aspects, will determine the kinds of skills ("consequences") associated with literacy. (Scribner & Cole 1981, p. 236)

### Educational Theories

Every educational practice implies a concept of humanity and the world (Freire 1970a). In looking at the various views on education's role in society, there are four main theories: the functionalist/reproductive, the conflict/resistance, the interpretivist, and critical. Critical theory is the primary subject of this research, but I will look at the other theories to provide a context for the previous school experiences of the students at the Center, an explanation for some of their behavior, and to compare and contrast these theories with critical theory.

#### Functionalist Theory

The functionalist theory sees the role of the school as a means of perpetuating the existing social, cultural, economic, and political structures of society. School is the place where people learn the social skills which will later be necessary to their success in the world, and they

are judged by their accomplishments according to the school's criteria. Achievement is prized, and there is little room within the system for special treatment. Functionalists argue that as long as individuals have the same opportunities available to them, it is fair to reward people according to their achievements (Pai, 1990). Most of the GED students at the Center have come from schools which subscribe to this theory; these students were not able to function successfully in such schools.

This theory has superficial appeal, but it is important to look at the hidden curriculum of schools which undermines opportunities for the success of non-mainstream students. It is also important to question whether the system which schools are perpetuating is actually the best system. While traditional American public schools share explicit goals, i.e. the publicly announced goals of teaching reading, writing, math, history, and science, an implicit curriculum exists along with a school's stated goals. For example, materials used for instruction and the structure of the classroom transmit social values in a subtle but powerful way. The grading system fosters compliance. Students learn that providing the teacher with what he or she wants will earn them high marks, while creativity often goes unrewarded. In effect, schools modify students' behavior in ways that facilitate the school's ends.

Eisner (1985) points out some of the most universal elements in the traditional American culture of schooling. Students only speak when called on. All the activities in a course are determined by the teacher. In fact, the entire organization of the school is a hierarchy where the students are at the bottom. Communication flows from the top down. This quite effectively socializes people for compliance. It is usually difficult for students coming from this type of learning environment to change their behavior to take a more active role in their learning in a critical literacy classroom.

The system of grading on a curve, ability tracking, and even sports all contribute towards a culture of competition as well. Even using the word "honors" as a reference for higher level tracks implies that good students are more honorable and, therefore, better people. Expensive colleges and private schools, while offering the same explicit curriculum as public schools, differ in the role for which they socialize students. Students are allowed more chances for creativity, initiative, critical thinking and original thought (Eisner, 1985).

Along with socializing people for their future place in society, the culture of schooling influences a students' motivation. Holland & Eisenhart (1990) found three major cultural interpretations of schoolwork organized around a group of female college students' motivation: work in

exchange for "getting over", i.e. attaining credentials; work in exchange for "doing well", i.e. getting honors and good grades; and work in exchange for the chance to learn meaningful information from experts. These interpretations of schoolwork had a strong influence on academic success, the student motivated by the third interpretation being the most likely to succeed academically and, more importantly, professionally. This final type of motivation is intrinsic motivation, which is not commonly tapped in traditional schooling and the philosophy of functionalism.

In looking at how schools reproduce society, Erickson (1984) identifies three functions of schooling: child care for working parents, keeping youth out of the labor market, and as a social sorting device where "higher" forms of being lettered are used as cultural capital. Since elite forms of being lettered are the forms most valued, society perpetuates itself by accepting these forms without question and downgrading alternative ones.

In current public discourse about literacy, are we talking about knowledge and skill in decoding letters, or are we talking about being "lettered" as a marker of social class status and cultural capital? Do we see the school diploma mainly as evidence of mastery of knowledge and skill in literacy, in the literal and narrow sense of the term? I don't think so. I think that the high school diploma functions, for low SES students, primarily as a docility certificate. Were it otherwise, private industry could not be content to allow public schools to produce graduates--potential future employees--who cannot read, write, or do simple arithmetic. This would make especially good sense if ordinary work in most of the company's jobs does not really require

literacy, as schools define it. (Erickson, 1984, p. 527)

In Fine's (1986) ethnographic study of why urban adolescents drop out of school, she also discusses the school as a tool for sorting and perpetuating existing social classes. Schooling reproduces the inequities of the larger society, and although education is more equally distributed in this country than capital, a degree is worth more to those of privileged status, whether this status is due to race, gender, or class. Students dropping out of school altogether, becoming marginalized and handicapped from full participation in society, is the worst example of social reproduction in education.

### Conflict/Resistance Theory

John Ogbu, a prominent researcher in the area of minority school performance, has written extensively on the reasons why some minority groups have been successful in crossing cultural boundaries and others have not. He points out that not all minority groups are equally unsuccessful in school. Ogbu explains this using a macroethnographic perspective, relating behavior to the structure of society rather than to cultural differences in cognitive, motivational, and learning styles.

Ogbu (1987) distinguishes three types of minorities. The autonomous minorities are those whose beliefs, rather

than physical characteristics, separate them from the dominant culture, minorities such as Mormons or Jews. These groups, according to Ogbu, are not subordinated socially, economically, or politically.

The immigrant or voluntary minorities experience difficulties due to the linguistic and cultural adaption process, but they do not have the same proportion of school failure as does the third category, the castlike or involuntary minorities. An example of a voluntary or immigrant minority are the first generation Mexicans who are learning English at the Center and other immigrants who come to the United States voluntarily with the goal of improving their economic situation. The immigrant minorities tend to do better in school because they believe that education is the key to a better life.

The third group dealt with by Ogbu is the one he is most interested in and the one which encompasses a majority of the students at the Center: the castelike or involuntary minorities. This group includes American Indians, African-Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Mexican-Americans. These are people who were originally brought into the United States or forced to accept American mainstream culture against their will, whether through slavery, conquest, or colonization, but were never fully assimilated into the mainstream. The dominant culture, in this case white America, has tended to see its culture as the norm. The

involuntary minorities develop cultural patterns in response to the dominant group which Ogbu calls cultural inversion.

Cultural inversion is the tendency for members of one population, in this case involuntary minorities, to regard certain forms of behaviors, certain events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because they are characteristic of members of another population (e.g., white Americans); at the same time, the minorities claim other (often the opposite) forms of behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings as appropriate for them because these are not characteristic of white Americans. Thus, what the minorities consider appropriate or even legitimate behaviors or attitudes for themselves are defined in opposition to the practices and preferences of white Americans. (Ogbu, 1987, p. 323)

In essence, children from the subjugated group are encouraged to replace their cultural identity with that of the "oppressors", without even the assurance of gaining acceptance. Since their history shows that this has been an unfruitful practice, they instead resist the dominant culture by forming their own, often opposing culture.

Willis (1977) formulated a theory similar to Ogbu's, the resistance theory, through his study of British working class youth. The resistance theory emphasizes the importance of the peer group, and explains that working class and minority youth reject the culture taught by schools, either consciously or unconsciously, because they realize that the education offered in school is not applicable in their daily lives and does nothing to alleviate their problem of subordination.

Freire & Macedo (1987) have a place for resistance theory within critical theory. They see illiteracy within the United States as an act of critical literacy. It is an example of people resisting the dehumanizing culture of silence they find in schools and affirming themselves.

That is, the refusal to read the word chosen by the teacher is the realization on the part of the student that he or she is making a decision not to accept what is perceived as violating his or her world (p. 123).

Literacy is a form of narrative, about someone's story, by someone and for someone. Critical literacy concerns a struggle over whose stories will be chosen as legitimate narratives for study (Giroux, 1987).

In Fordham & Ogbu's (1986) study, black students did not consciously reject education and actually expressed how much they valued education; however, they often acted in ways which undermined their success in school. Fordham & Ogbu noted that peer culture emphasized being black, which involved rejecting school authority and academic achievement. A student in this environment was pressured by peers not to do well in school. Those who did not comply with their peer culture hid achievement from their peers to avoid being labeled as "acting white".

Although Ogbu's theory (1974, 1987) has been widely recognized as an important contribution to the literature on minority school performance, he has been criticized for his emphasis on race as a defining feature, without accounting

for variation within his defined groups, and for focusing on the problem of failure rather than possible solutions

(Trueba, 1988; D'Amato, 1987; Delgado-Gaitan, 1988).

D'Amato (1987) points out that it is not only subjugated minority children who resist school, but all children.

School is competitive, constraining, and often uninteresting. Those students who offer little resistance and therefore succeed in school are those who see the future possibility of reward from their education. He concludes that researchers must look for the reasons behind students' acceptance or rejection of school politics and expectations.

Holland & Eisenhart (1990) did an ethnographic study of college women which revealed that women, too, have developed a resistance to education through a peer culture which helps them avoid confronting barriers to upward mobility. In this group, the peer emphasis was on romance. Women obtained their status through their relationships with men, and labels such as "brain" or "intellectual" were considered negative and detracted from a woman's status. Peers complained when too much time was devoted to school work, creating a situation for ambitious women similar to the African-Americans' in Ogbu's study who tried to avoid "acting white" to maintain their peer status.

### Interpretivist Theory

The interpretivist approach to the study of schooling uses a context-specific approach to explore the educational process, maintaining that social-psychological factors in the learning environment affect the rate of learning and ability to succeed among minority groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988). One sub-theory under the interpretivist theory, the cultural difference theory, proposes that the difficulties minority children experience at school are due to a conflict between the culture and values learned at home and those expected by the school. Culture affects the learning process, regardless of sociological factors, and the focus is on micro issues: the home, school, and the community (Trueba, 1988).

The interpretivist theory looks at the school as one aspect of socialization, but seeks to include other aspects of people's lives in analyzing research as well (Pai, 1990). In fact, interpretivists agree with critical theorists that inequalities in the class system have the greatest impact on people's education and future work (Bernstein, 1977).

The educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competencies and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 494)

This theory is useful for looking at class conflict, but it does not offer solutions which will reduce the social

inequalities in society. Critical theory takes things a step further in advocating change.

### Critical Theory

The theory of education subscribed to by the director and staff of the Opportunity Center demands that education be a vehicle for addressing the problem of social inequality. According to Pai (1990), critical theory is concerned with social change, power relations, and conflict. It argues that the dominant culture exerts more than economic oppression; it determines the standards by which we are judged in the media, the work place, and such institutions as schools. Mainstream schools teaching status culture, the dominant culture and values, do not adequately address the needs and experiences of those students outside the mainstream.

Critical literacy is the technique derived from critical theory for addressing the programming students receive in school and in society. Aronowitz and Giroux, proponents of this approach, (1981) accuse schools of reducing education to a technical level. They argue that a primary purpose of education should be to enable people to think about what affects their lives and to think critically about society's values and practices. People need to think about and question the nature of knowledge, gender models, our institutions, and our mass media. The way schools

presently function, critical and creative thinking is discouraged and impeded.

Critical theory has its roots in John Dewey's work. Dewey (1897, 1915) wrote that education is what happens when a person learns to participate in social consciousness. The educational process, according to Dewey, has both a psychological and a social side, the starting place being an individual's innate abilities. But, knowledge of a person's social conditions allows proper interpretation of an individual's abilities. Education is mainly a social process which can and should be used to improve society. He believed that the school itself must be an active form of community life, not a place set apart for people to learn lessons. In order for the school to form its own community, the group must have common aims, sympathetic feelings, and a sense of unity to provide enough security to engage in a free exchange of thought.

Dewey believed school focuses too little on developing community, and was too future oriented to fully engage students. He felt that the subject matter should all be related to students' social life and needs, that expressive and constructive activities were more important than passive assimilation, and that the role of teachers was to help students respond to and understand influences in society rather than to impose certain ideas or habits.

Dewey also stressed the importance of language and literacy as a social tool.

It is true that language is a logical instrument, but it is fundamentally and primarily a social instrument. Language is the device for communication; it is the tool through which one individual comes to share the ideas and feelings of others. When treated simply as a way of getting individual information, or as a means of showing off what one has learned, it loses its social motive and end. (Dewey, 1897, p. 12)

Paulo Freire (1970a, 1970b), a Brazilian educator famous for his work in adult literacy, expands on Dewey's ideas and is one of the most important contributors to critical theory and the idea of critical literacy. He takes a stand against the "banking" or "nutritionist" approach to education where students are fed the wisdom of the teacher. Students are recognized for having their own legitimate wisdom, culture, and life education. Literacy does not exist in a vacuum; it is always political, according to Freire. He believes in teaching students how to question the society which determines how they live. He believes that through critical literacy and questioning, learners engage in a dialogue for social change. This is a step towards humanizing a stratified society.

Through questioning, learners move from a passive acceptance of their fate to take positive action on their world. Knowledge and thinking skills are tools for empowerment, and this dialogue is the starting place for

humanizing the structure of society in which various groups are oppressed.

Moll & Diaz (1987) have done experimental research to explore this theory. They instructed a group of working class students in critical ethnographic techniques to improve their motivation and engage them in complex writing. The students' writing improved when they were involved in writing to communicate socially relevant issues.

Cummins (1986) also advocates this approach in his paradigm for empowering minority students. Among other things, he recommends incorporating students' language and culture into the classroom, using a pedagogy which promotes intrinsic motivation, and having students actively use language to generate their own knowledge.

### Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is the application of critical theory. Researchers are now recognizing that background information and experience is especially important for literacy acquisition. The relationship between text and context is what makes understanding possible (Hawkins, 1991; Snow, 1983), and it is the inability to understand and reproduce the decontextualized material found in school that so often impedes the progress of readers. Critical literacy brings reading and writing into the contexts of the learners' lives.

Haverson (1991) points out that there are two approaches to literacy. The skills-based approach emphasizes pronunciation and identification of words, teaching language by breaking it down into its smallest parts. The strategy-based approach, developed from research in the fields of psycho- and sociolinguistics, teaches strategies for finding the meaning in a text. It is also known as the whole language approach because it conceives of reading as an integrative process where language is synthesized, rather than as a series of pieces and parts.

The whole language approach is more effective for adult literacy development than a decoding, skills-based approach for two reasons. First, approaching reading as a decoding process overtaxes short-term memory. This inhibits the reader's ability to draw meaning from the individual sounds and words. Secondly, a skills-based approach does not draw on the rich background of experiences adults bring to a learning situation, which prevents them from interacting with a text as fully as they might (Haverson, 1991). There is increasing data that a whole language approach is preferable to a decontextualized, skills-based approach (Collins, 1987; Moll & Diaz, 1987).

The whole language approach to literacy is similar to the approach taken in critical literacy. The difference between the two approaches is that critical literacy goes one step further than the whole language approach. In

addition to contextualizing learning, critical literacy seeks to implement action and change, both at the personal and societal levels.

Critical literacy is centered on the idea of empowerment, meaning literacy which will enable learners to shape their own lives; to examine personal, social, economic, and political concerns; to define goals; and to challenge social forces that make them passive or dependent. The goal of this type of literacy is to enable learners to create new realities (ACBE, 1988). It differs from traditional, what Freire calls banking, approaches to education in a number of ways:

1. Learners, rather than teachers, determine the goals of the class.
2. Knowledge of both facilitators and learners is recognized rather than assuming that the teacher is knowledgeable and the students ignorant. Classes are structured around a discussion rather than lecture format.
3. Learners apply knowledge and skills to pursue immediate goals rather than for future purposes.
4. The purpose of the learning is to create change rather than to perpetuate the status quo.

(National Council of Churches Conference Report, September 14-16, 1987, cited in ACBE, 1988).

The way to achieve literacy for empowerment is through a technique called problem posing, typified by the use of codes. Problems to be studied are chosen by the learners. A code can be a dialogue, reading, film, song, chart, advertisement, anything that represents an important conflict or problem in learners' lives. The reason for using codes is to allow learners to discuss important problems in an objective way, and codes provide respect for people's privacy. No solution is offered to the problem, rather participants are encouraged to propose possible solutions and action themselves (Wallerstein, 1983; Freire, 1973).

In using a learner centered, Freirian approach for second language, the class goes beyond mere communication. Instead, learners identify themes that are important in their own lives, and discover ways to connect their own experiences to the world of those whose language they are learning. The learners act as social and political scientists, critically analyzing the human condition and actively working to improve society and their own lives. Content takes precedence over grammar. The class does not practice asking and answering questions to which students and teachers already know the answers. The focus is on becoming a more critically conscious and concerned person, rather than on the language tool itself (Graman, 1988).

Through taking action, the learners begin to see themselves as social and political beings with rights. How far a class can go with this depends on classroom dynamics, societal/cultural factors, and the learners' self-confidence. In-class action can center around community building and developing a supportive atmosphere as the learners take charge of their own learning. They choose classroom projects, topics, and codes. The classroom becomes a bridge to action in the outside world by providing learners with the opportunity to write letters to organizations or to newspapers, to interview people, to lobby, and to organize for community action (Wallerstein, 1983).

### Problems with Critical Literacy

In most ESL programs, textbooks and tests determine the curriculum. Funding often depends on government agencies and the testing programs that work with them. There is a trend in the field to promote "competency" and "proficiency", which means that students will be judged on their ability to reproduce discrete units of knowledge deemed important by the test maker. This is a system which controls students rather than empowers them (Graman, 1988). In typical adult ESL programs, teachers who follow prescribed curricula often emphasize job related tasks such as reading directions and following orders, rather than

questioning or analyzing the nature of the job. Students and teachers end up being receivers rather than generators of knowledge (Auerbach, 1986).

Using a Freirian or critical literacy approach to prepare for a standardized test, for example using GED preparation books, is challenging. Freire (1970b) notes that when the teacher is using a primer, it is the teacher, or the dominant society, who is choosing the legitimate words and view of the world. The students are filled with the words and knowledge that the teacher or someone else has chosen. The student becomes passive, an object in the learning process rather than its subject.

Some learner centered GED programs try to circumvent this problem by avoiding the GED books altogether, using problem posing as a curriculum and letting students study the GED books on their own. Others select the test itself as the problem and have the students analyze how the values of the dominant culture embedded in the test affect their lives (Clark, 1988).

Learner centered programs sometimes have difficulty meeting learners' needs when the goal is to achieve a credential such as the GED. They may be too flexible and eclectic for some; others do not want so much participation (Fox, 1986). People have no experience using this approach and resist change. Empowerment takes more time and effort to achieve than literal understanding, and it is also more

difficult to measure whether one has achieved success (ACBE, 1988).

As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to meet the needs of funders who use standardized tests as their only achievement criterion and still have time for critical literacy (ACBE, 1988). Many successful programs must close due to budget problems. The idea of empowerment is unfamiliar and misunderstood by donors and funders. It is too non-traditional and threatening to the representatives of the status quo. They want a focus on traditional literacy, not unemployment, poverty, or housing issues (Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1986).

Lisa Delpit, a prominent African-American educator, (Miner, 1992) offers some suggestions in addressing these problems. She feels it is important to speak openly in the classroom about power and oppression, to discuss with students how the system operates to prevent some people from achieving power. Delpit encourages teachers to spend some time explicitly preparing for the standardized tests because the tests are barriers to power. If the students know the rules of power they can use the system and change it. She feels this is particularly important for minority students. It is also important, however, for teachers to teach that the test is only one perspective on the world, and not necessarily the right one.

### CHAPTER 3

#### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

##### Ethnographic Perspective

Ethnography is an inductive process which usually begins with a research question rather than a theory to be tested. Theory will gradually emerge through data collection, and inferences (the ethnographer's hypotheses) are then refined and tested through further data collection. This recursive and evolving process is a distinctive feature of ethnographic research and a key difference from the linear design of quantitative research. In fact, sometimes a researcher will begin with one research question, only to discover that there is a much more interesting and relevant question which needs to be investigated. In describing the process of ethnography, Agar (1980) commented, "Sometimes I think ethnography is to social science what jazz is to music" (p. 92). The ability to change direction according to what is appropriate is one of the special strengths of ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). As I mentioned earlier, I began my investigation focusing on the organization and ended up focusing largely on the students' lives and homelessness.

Spradley and McCurdy (1972) believe that one of the most important contributions of ethnography is to elicit

tacit cultural knowledge and rules. These tacit rules are the most powerful rules in governing behavior, but they are often contrary to the outwardly acknowledged, explicit rules or values which would be identified if the researcher had only short term contact with a group. When asked directly about aspects of culture, informants will often respond in vague generalities or with what they feel they are supposed to say. The ethnographer elicits tacit knowledge through documenting observed details and getting to know people until structures and themes begin to emerge.

### Sampling

According to Bernard (1988), "...there is no need for scientific sampling in phenomenological research, in which the object is to understand the meaning of expressive behavior, or simply to understand how things work" (p. 80). I worked with about twenty students individually while tutoring in the GED classroom, interacted with about twenty students in the ESL classroom, and had classes with about fifteen or twenty different people in the writing workshops but only saw six of these people on a regular basis.

It would be impossible to do this particular type of study using random sampling because of the fluctuating population and the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Some students refused to talk about their pasts: some because of legal difficulties; others were trying so hard to

start a new life that they did not want to be reminded of or be identified with their past. Perhaps others lacked trust in the "establishment" or were tired of being categorized, already confronted with too many forms to fill out or invasive questioning by social service providers. Finding students with a desire to communicate and taking the time to develop a trusting relationship was crucial to obtaining insight into their lives. Even when students said they were willing to talk, it was often difficult to get beyond abstract beliefs to concrete examples of what they meant, since they did not want to incriminate themselves in any way.

When I did find students who wanted to talk, they were extremely cooperative. They seemed to appreciate having someone seek out their viewpoints and express interest in their experiences. As mentioned above, the main problem I had was in getting people to be specific about their experiences--for example trying to elicit why a person hated his father so much that he nearly ruined his life trying to get even with him, or why a person became homeless or went to jail.

## Validity

In ethnographic research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. In order to avoid a biased interpretation of a cultural scene, the researcher consciously acknowledges and addresses the problems inherent in all social science research: 1) Selective observation is inevitable, 2) Selective interpretation permeates each phase of data collection, since meanings are social constructs, and 3) Observation and interpretation will be influenced by researcher's experience and background (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972).

Validity, or whether the observation measures what it intends to measure, can be addressed in several ways. The long term nature of the relationship between the researcher and informants and the development of personal rapport is one of the most important techniques the ethnographer has for addressing the problem of validity. As mentioned above, a long term and trusting relationship reveals things that a short term survey study would be unable to account for, and close association with a group helps the researcher develop appropriate questions to ask (Agar, 1980). Learning what questions to ask is an important way of overcoming theoretical bias. Theoretical bias assumes that the source of certain social problems is already known, and this assumption inhibits objective discovery.

Another way validity is addressed in ethnographic research is through what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description", recording more than a specific event, which would give only the ethnographer's point of view (the etic perspective), to include the ways participants interpret and perceive the meanings of an event (the emic perspective). The task is to discover concepts which guide and inform action. According to Geertz (p. 26) "...the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them." In order to discover a group's own criteria for understanding and interpreting their world, the ethnographer asks them how they classify things and people (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). For my research, I have documented the emic point of view by asking students how they see and experience things, using interviews and life histories as the core of the research.

Yet another method used by ethnographers to ensure validity is triangulation -- using a variety of data collection techniques including life histories, participant observation, semi-structured interviewing, and unobtrusive measures such as personal documents, diaries, sample products, as well as repeated observations (Pelto, 1970; Seigny, 1981; Wolcott, 1975).

In considering questions of validity and reliability, a person must remember the purpose of an ethnographic study.

The researcher is not concerned with finding facts per se but rather finding out how people account for facts in particular settings. Since social order in the classroom is a socially constructed phenomena, it emerges as participants interpret and evaluate interaction. The research question for the ethnographer is: What is the interpretation and meaning of a particular social interaction from the participants' point of view? This type of research addresses a need for subjective data on internal states of students and attempts to discover how the process of schooling interacts with their purposes, assumptions, values, expectations, attitudes. Instruments of quantitative research may be convenient but are not necessarily appropriate (Sevigny, 1981).

Ethnography assumes that meaning is context bound. It does not ignore previous research but is more concerned with the present context and existence of patterns in the data within and across contexts in the study, i.e. what is occurring, how it is occurring, what definitions participants hold about occurrences, and what one needs to know to participate as a member of the various groups across occurrences (Green & Wallat, 1981).

## Reliability

Reliability refers to how this research might be replicated either by another researcher or at another site. The most important way ethnographers can approach the question of reliability is to carefully specify their methods and procedures for data collection and analysis (Pelto, 1970). As mentioned above, the primary purpose of ethnography is not to generalize among groups, but rather within them (Geertz, 1973) and within a given context (Green & Wallat, 1981).

Hammersley & Atkinson (1983) assert that using a natural setting will strengthen the reliability of research. They argue that controlling variables does not necessarily improve reliability, and the common technique of using standard questionnaires with a wide population has its own reliability problems, since people interpret questions in different ways.

## Scope

Spradley (1980) identifies three modes of inquiry to help delineate the scope of a project: comprehensive ethnography, which covers the total way of life for a group; topic oriented, covering one or more aspect of life; and hypothesis oriented, based on in-depth knowledge of a culture. The scope of a research project can range from

macro-ethnography to microethnography. This research is at the microethnographic end of the spectrum, focusing on a single social institution, the Opportunity Center, and narrowing the focus from there to include the multiple social situations of the three classes and the lives of individual participants.

### Symbolic Interaction

This study, while inductive in that it is guided by research questions rather than hypotheses, is influenced by various theoretical perspectives from both anthropology and education. While I will incorporate Hammersley's recommendation to document how action is communicated, I am particularly interested in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, or how behavior and concepts of self are socially constructed. Bogden & Biklen (1982) describe how this perspective can be applied to a study of schooling:

A high school may have a grading system, an organizational chart, a class schedule, a curriculum, and an official motto that suggests the prime purpose is the education of the "whole person". People act, however, not according to what the school is supposed to be, or what administrators say it is, but rather, according to how they see it. For some, high school is primarily a place to meet friends, or even a place to get high; for most, it is a place to get grades and amass credits so they can graduate--tasks they define as leading to college or a job (p. 34).

Nearly all the students at the Center shared this idea of school as a stepping stone which would hopefully lead to a job and possibly college. The exceptions were the students in the writing workshops. They did not share this utilitarian viewpoint. They wanted to write for personal, social, artistic, spiritual, and therapeutic reasons. Their motivation, for the most part, did not include an expectation of improving their financial circumstances or position. They were working on that part of their lives on their own, inspired by their writing successes.

How the students saw school evolved as they were in the program over a period of time. As students in the other two classes spent time in the program, I noticed the attitudes of many of them changing. When Reina interviewed the GED students for an assessment project she was working on, they told her that the most important things they were learning were how to listen better, how to respond to conflict in non-volitable ways, how to work out disagreements; in other words, they were learning social skills. Belonging to the classroom as a social group was changing the students' perceptions of themselves, their possibilities, and the world, giving them an alternative culture.

Jacob (1987) offers an overview of the characteristics and assumptions of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionists see neither internal factors (instincts, drives) nor external factors (cultural norms, social

structure) as being the primary shapers of human behavior. Behavior results rather from an individual's interpretation of meanings, which are socially derived and shared by groups. Blumer (1969) formulates three essential premises as the foundation of symbolic interactionism:

Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters (p. 2).

People belonging to a social group share many interpretations and perspectives, although the definitions they come up with are negotiable. A symbolic interactionist orientation also sees our definition of self as a social construct created through interaction.

In constructing or defining self, people attempt to see themselves as others see them by interpreting gestures and actions directed toward them and by placing themselves in the role of the other person. In short, we come to see ourselves in part as others see us (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 35).

The symbolic interactionist point of view is appropriate for studying this particular program because its most salient feature is change. The staff is constantly attempting to change how the students see themselves by sharing decision making with them, treating them with respect, and showing an interest in learning about their cultures and topics of interest to them.

In summary, this type of research focuses on the processes through which meanings are developed and how they in turn guide decisions and actions. The goal is to identify themes and develop hypotheses which may account for behavior and to explore critical theory, which sees knowledge as a social construct.

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## CHAPTER 4

### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS

#### Research Methods and Structure Used

This study involved the use of a variety of ethnographic techniques to compile data: participant observation as a volunteer in the program from May 1992 through May 1993, informal and semi-structured interviews of participants, talking with key informants, and use of written documents such as classroom writings, discussion materials, and classroom records.

#### Interviewing and Key Informants

There are three important criteria in choosing informants and especially key informants. The informant should be a participant of the cultural scene and be able to describe events and beliefs of the cultural scene with expertise. The informant should like to talk and be able to communicate his or her own actions and beliefs as well as the activities going on in the cultural scene. Finally, the informant and the ethnographer should share a sense of rapport and trust.

I chose two or more key informants from each class after spending several months getting to know the students. As part of this study, I have included life histories for

several of the key informants and paraphrased interviews from the others. On many occasions students began chatting with me about their lives when they were tired of working on GED studies. These chats sometimes turned into interviews, or I would ask students if I could talk to them again for my research.

One of the key informants for the GED classroom, Tyrone, was recommended to me by a caseworker. Tyrone had been in the program for two years. His familiarity with the program, his strong rapport with the caseworker, and his candor and willingness to talk made him an ideal informant.

All interviews were conducted in English and with students who were over the age of 18. I have proficiency in Spanish, which was occasionally helpful when talking with or interviewing ESL students.

I also had informal interviews with the staff of the Center and became good friends with Melissa, the volunteer coordinator and Reina, the writing teacher. Both enjoyed discussing their work with me, their struggles and rewards, their experiences with students, their insights, goals, and philosophies. All members of the staff were very supportive of and interested in the research, and willing to answer questions whenever they had time.

Since ethnographic interviewing involves letting the informant guide the conversation, I did not follow a questionnaire format, and the interviews varied considerably

in what the informants chose to talk about. I did, however, prepare a list of topics I was interested in, but the questions I asked varied with each person. Usually I would ask them hypothetical questions, questions about the past, the future, or questions about their family or friends to get answers to the guiding questions indirectly. These questions were as follows:

Background information - approximate age, where the informant lives and with whom.

What life experiences led the informant to his/her involvement with the organization?

Describe significant past educational experiences, past family experiences.

What roles have others (friends, teachers, family, etc.) played in the informant's decision making, both past and present?

Has life changed for the informant since being involved in the program, and if so, how?

How do the participants in the program interact with each other?

What are some of the problems faced by the informant that the program helps him/her deal with?

How would the informant characterize the program's goals? Do they match with the informant's own goals?

How could the program be of more help to the informant?

Any suggestions for improving the functioning of the program?

What are the informant's goals and hopes for the future?

While I was initially interested in talking to the students about their educational experiences, school was not a particularly interesting topic for most of them. The students generally expressed the opinion that education was important, that it would help them have a better life. But they spent far more time talking about their families, adventures in life, problems, and their socio-economic situation past and present. Their personal lives had more impact on how they came to be in the program than any previous educational experience. Life histories, while not necessarily representative of the "average" person, offer a vivid account of cultural information which can help outsiders understand a particular way of life.

### Looking for Patterns

In my efforts to organize the data I had collected, I finally categorized people according to which class they were enrolled in, rather than by clique or social group, but even this was difficult because there was overlap. Some of the GED students were also learning ESL, and several ESL students visited the writing workshops. Despite ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity, the students had an important problem in common; they had very little money, and a majority of them were homeless.

I first became interested in the Center after hearing about the ESL program, and I thought that ESL would be my

main focus. The ESL classes already had a number of volunteers, however, and I broadened my focus to include other classes in the program. I became increasingly involved in the homeless writing workshops, becoming friends with the teacher and several of the writers. I decided to focus on this part of the program, but unfortunately, Reina's position was cut in October 1992. Although a part time teacher was hired to replace her in January 1993, she quit about two months later and the writing workshops were abandoned.

For the first few months, the GED classroom seemed completely uninviting. I felt a sense of hardness and hostility from the students, and I dreaded going there to volunteer. When I finally began developing rapport with these students, I decided that I enjoyed the challenge of working with this class. While the learners in the homeless writing classes were generally older, they had much in common with the GED students in terms of background. Hearing the stories of the homeless writing students was like looking into the future of some of the GED students, so I decided to focus my attention on these two classes.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I thought I would focus on "types" of students, looking at categories and subgroups. As time went on, I realized that my original focus on categories would be unimportant because of the

limited size and the transient nature of both the GED and writing classes.

I had also thought I would look at why students dropped out. I eventually came to discover that most of the time they dropped out simply because of life circumstances: they had a baby and had no one to help them, they had a sick parent or were sick themselves, or they had no money and had to work. Other times they dropped out because they started using drugs again or had gone back to a way of life or circle of friends which exerted a negative influence on them. I was in the classroom on a number of occasions when students came back after one or two years' absence to try again for their GED. I never heard a single negative remark about the program or the teacher. It was life that was the major impediment to success.

### Procedures for Data Collection

#### Introduction

Ethnographic research requires constant feedback from one stage to another. Spradley (1979) has identified five research tasks which take place concurrently: identifying a problem, collecting cultural data, analyzing data, formulating hypotheses, and writing up the results. Even the final phase of writing up the results may stimulate more data collection.

## Stages

1. Identification of a problem. I began this research with the intention of examining teaching and learning as social processes within the context of a particular program. I interviewed with several organizations before finding the Opportunity Center, a place where I could learn more about the processes involved in critical literacy.

2. Collection of cultural data. This phase was carried out from the beginning to the end of the research, using descriptive, open ended questions, acting as a participant observer in the field, and making observation in the form of field notes. I began volunteering in each of the three classrooms in May of 1992. I also had the chance to substitute teach for the writing workshop and the GED class. In addition, I was invited to attend outside functions of the program, such as the graduation ceremony, the volunteer recognition ceremony, and the annual fundraising breakfast.

Along with official participation, I was unofficially invited into the organization's culture by each of the staff as they extended their friendship to me. The previous director, Rachel, invited me to attend the Homeless Educators conference as a member of the program, and the writing teacher, Reina, asked me to participate in her presentation at the conference. I felt warmly welcomed by Reina and Melissa, the volunteer coordinator, and the three

of us met outside of the work context on various occasions as friends. Several of the students I interviewed also welcomed me into their cultures. Louise, from the writing workshop, was the most interested in sharing her world. She invited me to the day-drop-in-center for women, and I visited her at the shelter as well. She gave me a grand tour of each. She recently moved into her own apartment downtown and I was one of her first visitors.

Excerpt from field notes:

I wanted to give Louise a book I had bought for her. It was dark, about 7:00 p.m. as Melissa and I walked along the downtown street. There were men standing on two of the corners drinking. We were looking for the shelter, not finding it and not wanting to appear lost in this part of town. Then I remembered that Louise told me the entrance to all the shelters is in the alley. We found the door to the half-finished building. People had just finished eating and it smelled good.

They had Haagen Daaz bars for desert, which I normally love but which were hard to enjoy with such a nervous stomach. I complimented the director on the quality of the food and she laughed, saying they were always eating.

We waved to Louise in the smoking room and she came out right away to greet us. Her eyes were red and glassy. She looked heavier and tired. I didn't like seeing her here. The place really looked like a warehouse more than a place to live, but it was clean. I felt uncomfortable just stopping by for a look, but I did look. I felt sad to see Janet, Louise's friend, suffering from severe back pain, lying on her sagging bed with her box of Milk Duds and her book.

It was more difficult to build rapport with the GED students because the classes were less personal and intimate and because the students were focused on finishing their

GED, an external goal. But several of the students seemed to have appreciated the interest I showed in them. One young man told me he was going to keep in touch regarding his success in entering college. Another actually tracked me down to finish off our interviews, since his attendance was sporadic. They always asked me how my work was going. I was obviously part of the authority structure as a volunteer and occasional teacher, but a number of the students accepted me, supporting me when, as a substitute teacher, I had to tell students to be quiet.

It took several months before I began to feel comfortable. Students compared notes with each other on the volunteers, and after I had gained the trust of a few students, more of them were willing to talk to me and let me help them with their work. For example, the first time Nelson worked with me he let me know he had heard good things about me, "You're cool."

3. Analyzing data. Analysis, involving the identification of cultural symbols and the relationships among symbols, took place throughout the data collection phase. I began noticing what topics were most interesting to the program participants. Some of the categories that emerged through conversation were language frustrations (even for native speakers), housing problems, violence, drugs and/or alcohol, concern with appearances, and relationships with family.

Food was another important issue. I noticed that students often ate in class, and they always ate highly processed, sugary foods. They ate meals such as Cracker Jacks and orange pop for breakfast. Some would mention that they had not eaten for a day. I learned from one man that he had no place to cook and had essentially eaten nothing but cold food and sandwiches for several months. These months included the holiday seasons of Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In my observations, I focused on interactions in class, teacher/student, student/student, and on staff/staff interaction outside of class. The issue of "help" was a problem among teachers, volunteers and students. Emily, the ESL teacher and part-time GED teacher, discussed this with me. She said that students were often possessive about which teacher they would let help them. Melissa said that all the volunteers had expressed discomfort with the students' lack of receptivity to help. I noticed that I, too, tended to work with the same students most of the time, and often, when I asked others if they needed help with their work they would ignore me or just say no, and give a sigh or roll their eyes as if I had insulted them.

4. Formulating hypotheses. As hypotheses emerged, new data was collected. As mentioned earlier, I had expected to focus on what was happening in the classroom, on action.

But when I realized that the classroom itself was not nearly as important to the students as their outside concerns, I became more interested in what those concerns were.

Following the premise of symbolic interactionism, that our selves are socially constructed, I wanted to get to know the selves who first came to the classroom and see how these individuals were changing. The idea which became most interesting to me concerned what these students had in common: they were all a liminal phase, in a transitional period between cultures. While most students in all three classes were critical of the dominant culture, they were learning things that would help them partake of the benefits it offered. This separated them from their original peer group, especially in the GED class.

5. Writing the results. Near the end of the process I wrote, attempting to make sense of what I had experienced. But new insights continued to stimulate more data collection even at this phase. I decided to write a section on each of the three types of classes offered and to include a case study of one or more of the student participants with each section. Finally, I compared all three programs to formulate conclusions.

### Data Analysis

Analysis results from looking for patterns in the recorded data and developing ideas to account for those patterns. It is important for the ethnographer to engage in analysis throughout the research process (Agar, 1980; Spradley, 1979, 1980). After I had collected all the data, I conducted a final analysis to determine patterns and themes. By looking at a number of areas, I developed coding categories from the field notes and personal observations: settings and contexts, situations, perspectives, informants' categories and definitions, processes, activities and events, strategies, relationships and social structures, problems, and procedures. I categorized my notes by code, analyzed relationships, identified themes, and developed an outline for the final product (Agar, 1980; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Bernard, 1988).

### Guiding Research Questions

Along with the guiding questions I used for interviews, I developed a series of general questions to guide myself in both observation and analysis. As I spent more time in the field, it became obvious that some questions were more relevant than others. Under the category of general observations, I asked:

Who are these students and what are their needs, motivations, world views? (This question

developed into case studies of individual students.)

What does the classroom look like? Do students prefer working independently or in small groups? Who talks to whom? What is the relationship between students and teachers? What are the social processes for demonstrating knowledge and learning ability?

How are the classes and the program organized? What are the effects of this type of classroom structure on performance?

I hoped to discover neat rules for student culture by observing group interaction or by examining cliques, which are often important in the organization of school culture. Instead, I discovered that students wanted to work independently and did not have much interest in each other, although by the time I left the program that was changing. The only categories they used among themselves were racial categories or the distinction of being a serious or non-serious student.

I began to despair of discovering the social process for demonstrating knowledge and learning ability in the GED class. The students seemed to be much more concerned with appearing "cool" than demonstrating learning. However, again, time showed me that students demonstrated their learning and knowledge in a different way than I had anticipated. While they did not seem comfortable expressing themselves publicly in group discussions, they were highly motivated and uninhibited when they had the chance to

express themselves in writing for the newsletter or for personal purposes.

A second category of questions I was interested in was student perspective and response:

How do the students learn and interact in a critical literacy program? Do they interact with each other? What is the response of the students to this approach? Does it encourage their interest in participating and learning? Do they talk readily about social and personal problems? Why do students select particular problems to deal with? Why do they choose certain problems over others? What changes are students experiencing as a result of literacy development?

The third category I used to approach the research situation was teacher perspective:

What do the teachers think about using this approach in the classroom? How do they choose themes that encourage students to participate? From their perspective, how does this technique affect classroom interaction?

### Personal Feelings and Biases

During my first field visits to the Opportunity Center, I felt awkward and nervous, especially in the GED classroom. As I mentioned in the introduction, my own experiences in high school were difficult. While I felt considerable empathy with non-traditional students, I was also uncomfortable remembering my own struggles in school and the self-destructive ways I had used to cope with my fragmented life.

Being in the GED classroom was difficult because many of the students did not want to be helped and were

unfriendly or rude, protecting themselves from ridicule or condescension. My discomfort increased when I heard the teachers talk about students bringing guns into the classroom and students talking about gang involvement. I was also nervous about the rough looking groups of non-students who loitered on the steps outside the Center.

The ESL classroom was the most comfortable for me because the students were friendly, thankful for help, and respectful. I had taught ESL before, so I more or less knew what to do and how I could help.

Although I was excited about working with the homeless writing workshop, a place where people from the streets could come to work and receive guidance on writing of their choice, I was also apprehensive, not knowing much about "the homeless" aside from what I knew about the aggressive beggars I encountered on the Seattle streets. I first went through a honeymoon phase, idealizing the students and the program. After substitute teaching in the workshop, however, I realized how difficult it was to work with this population and how talented Reina was at teaching and demonstrating problem solving and social skills. This increased my empathy and pre-existing admiration for the program's teachers and my awareness of how difficult the interactional part of the job was.

I also had a number of opportunities to substitute in the GED classroom for Aaron and Emily. As an observer, I

had questioned Aaron's reiterated complaint that he needed another teacher in the classroom with him at all times. After all, there were usually only about ten students who attended on any given day out of the twenty-some on his roster, and besides, he had volunteers to help him. However, the first time I substituted for him I came away with a feeling of relief that I had managed to survive the day. As Reina said once, speaking with admiration at Aaron's ability and dedication, "Between the two classes, Aaron is teaching forty of the most difficult students a person will find anywhere. And he likes it!"

From my own experiences in the GED classroom, I came to understand that more than anything, what Aaron needed was moral support, someone with whom he could share authority, another "grown-up" in the room. Volunteers helped with the individual needs of students, but they were not expected to have to deal with angry or disruptive students, or to guide classroom discussions. If I had not had the opportunity to try on Aaron's role, I could not have fully understood his perspective.

The classroom discussions, the most exciting, most "Freirian" part of the day, were the part of the job I enjoyed least when I was substituting. It was a struggle to get students to talk at all, to say more than, "I don't know," "I don't care," or "It's all right." When students dared to risk being "uncool" and offered a more profound

comment, "cooler" students made fun of them. Aaron handled the problem by reminding them that everyone had a right to his or her opinion and that he appreciated their comments. However, peer pressure was usually stronger than Aaron's encouragement. The fear of looking stupid to one's peers often made people's comments come out haltingly, with much "um, you know" vagueness.

One morning when I was substituting, I tried to get the students to discuss the monthly newsletter. Aaron had already led a stimulating discussion on the newsletter with the afternoon class the previous day. In his class, students volunteered to read various poems and essays aloud, and their classmates gave them frequent and positive feedback. In my class, no one had anything to say. Finally, the student assistant mentioned that she liked one of the poems, and she read it out loud. No one had any comments. I had planned to spend a half an hour on the discussion and only five minutes had gone by. Silence.

"Okay," I said, "What about this field trip that a couple people wrote about, when you went to the exhibit on homelessness?" This was a topic which was a little bit "cool". They began describing the experience to me and to the students who had not attended. It was a walk-through, experiential show in which participants felt what it was like to be reborn as a homeless person. The students particularly enjoyed the part of the show where they were to

lie down on a bed, imagining they were a prostitute as a recording of obscenities added to the experience. Several of the students went into detail about the recording, becoming increasingly loud. I worried about people going by outside the classroom, and how I could relate this back to the newsletter. It was a discussion, of sorts, but a somewhat pointless one in terms of reflective thinking. They even concluded their lively narration with the noncommittal, "It was okay." One student was upset by the profanity the others had been using and walked out. I had the distinct impression that I had lost control of the class.

The issue of control in the GED class was a difficult one. The staff's philosophy was that this was the students' class. Students should be empowered and have as much freedom and control over their learning as possible. Yet the students themselves felt like they need someone to tell them what to do, or at least that was what they said. However, if a teacher or volunteer tried to tell them what to do directly, they took it as an insult and did whatever they wanted. In one-on-one interactions there was rarely any problem, but in group situations, I found the paradox of the control issue to be anxiety producing and draining.

During the course of my fieldwork, I learned to take more time before I formed strong opinions of people and situations. I have also overcome many of my fears based on

stereotypes and appearances. I have realized that I enjoy working with some homeless people and not others, and that the "homeless" is not a homogeneous group. The same can be said for the students in the GED and ESL classrooms.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ORGANIZATION

#### History of the Organization

The Opportunity Center began as a tutorial program in 1985. At that time there was no real classroom or program. The Foundation had developed a youth employment program for 16-24 year olds for what was called a "harder to serve" population, primarily African-American males coming from prison with a history of chemical dependency and/or family problems. These youths were given jobs cleaning the city streets. The Private Industry Council (PIC), funder of the employment program, saw education as an important way to help people improve their lives. PIC's philosophy was shared by the first teacher and director of the Opportunity Center, Rachel, whose philosophy was, "Education provides the opportunity for every individual to design a positive life." The first students cleaned streets in the morning and went to class in the afternoon. Rachel recalled,

"It was rough in the afternoons. Almost all the students were in gangs and court mandated. There was a lot of anger, a volatile atmosphere. Many were crack addicts just there to access the social service system."

However, when I suggested that her job must have been unpleasant, she disagreed. There were enough success stories to keep her optimistic. About 25% of the students

found jobs through the program; 18% completed some kind of vocational training or went on to college; and 33% attended drug and alcohol groups or went into treatment.

A real sense of community began to develop among the students. They received funding to start a ski program and a basketball team. Rachel told me, "When they went to the mountains for the first time, they just went nuts. They became like little kids. They loved it!" Pat, the caseworker, told me later that Rachel had to "jump through hoops" to keep people interested in the program and to bring them together, organizing all the extra curricular activities herself and concerning herself with the problems of each individual student.

From 1988-1991 the program was geared towards African-American males in the afternoons, and towards teen mothers in the mornings. They called the morning class a parenting program. This parenting program was focused on meeting students' needs, and it brought about the development of a housing program for teen mothers. The morning classes tended to attract students, and these students were primarily high school dropouts from higher income backgrounds. Rachel had to recruit for the afternoon classes through flyers, radio announcements, and visits to low income housing projects. But the best recruiting tool, according to Rachel, was word of mouth.

The classes were attended fairly regularly and ran on an open entry/open exit policy. While many of the students did complete their GED, many more students passed three or four tests and did not complete the rest.

Rachel thought that students' biggest obstacle was lack of self-esteem, which often developed into social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse.

"They are alienated from the greater society. Downtown is a strange place for them. They feel like they can't go into a nice place, that nice places are separate from them.

We did a lot of field trips to counter that. We went to movies, for example. I could tell they weren't used to it. They would act out, become more black, project their comfort zone. When I lived in Japan it was like that for Americans too. You could never forget you were a foreigner. My students feel like that all the time. Those who made it had to leave their backgrounds and hang out with whites. It's a class thing too, not just color."

Later, Rachel obtained a grant to expand the program. She saw a need for and an interest in ESL classes for the city's Hispanic population, and she coordinated the development of her ideas for the new program with the Union Gospel Mission, which had a large program for homeless Hispanic men.

In its early years, the Opportunity Center was not actually a part of the Northwest Education Foundation, but the two organizations worked closely together. Rachel believed that the Foundation knew that the young adults in the Center's program needed social services, and that they

could not have the school without the services. For example, the Foundation had a gang intervention program and a program which recognized drug addicts and arranged for up to a year of drug treatment before the student entered the classroom.

Changes took place over the years. The Foundation hired a new director. The new director was more enthusiastic about the idea of youth leadership than social services. He called Rachel's program a "deficit model" which held that the kids were "screwed up." "But they are!" Rachel said, shaking her head. Rachel told me,

"Maybe on paper a kid has a GED, has a job, but their real needs have never been addressed. These kids have an identity problem, and I would say 80% have mental health problems. A typical student might have been a 17 year old who has been on heroin since he was 13 and only sober for the past 30 days."

The first thing Rachel did when new students came in to the program was to go around and ask them about their housing situation. Rachel remembered one teenage couple especially vividly. The girl was six weeks pregnant and both were homeless.

Rachel said that both the direction of the program and the students were changing. One of Cassandra's goals for the program was a GED/college preparatory program with a two year follow up and expanded ESL services. Rachel worried about what would happen to the "harder to serve" students. There was a new attendance policy which did not allow

students to be more than a half hour late, and they could not miss more than four times per month. She used to have students who could only be in class for an hour at a time, but she would work with them. When she was the director, she taught as well, which gave her insight into the struggles of teaching this population. And there were always two teachers in the classroom, something she saw as essential.

Rachel also pointed out more positive changes she has noticed since she left. She saw the addition of Melissa, the VISTA volunteer coordinator, as a great help to the program, and felt Melissa was doing a terrific job getting the community involved in the program. Rachel also thought highly of Aaron. When she visited the GED classroom she heard nothing but the highest praise for him. She also thought that the idea of using a student assistant in the classroom was a positive change.

### Change

When I first started fieldwork at the Center, Erica was still the lead GED teacher but had already decided to resign. Having been with the program since the beginning, she had a wealth of information, which she wrote down as a guide book for Cassandra and future teachers. She also spent some time helping me understand some of the changes the organization had experienced and why she wanted to move on.

Erica taught in Japan and Korea before she began teaching at the Center. The Foundation had started the Opportunity Center as part of a youth employment effort, and its purpose was to offer basic skills instruction. Classes were divided between GED and CASAS competencies, i.e. job related reading, writing skills, and math. She described the students as hard young males, drug addicts, most of whom were just out of prison. There were only three or four students to every teacher, but still the students suffered from attention disorders and they did not get much done.

About one-third of Erica's time was spent helping the students structure their time, encouraging, mothering, and counseling them. These roles only took up about one-fifth of her time by the time she was leaving the program, a welcome change. She had never enjoyed the counseling role and preferred to be an educator.

Erica herself has changed with the program. For the first six months she was shocked and intimidated by the students. Her way of dealing with them was, "to give a lot of strokes and overlook the bad." This did not work well, and after about six months, she said, "I found my voice and my power. My voice actually changed. I became more authoritarian, tougher." She was tired of the white liberal patronizing attitude. At the same time, she realized that she enjoyed the fast pace these students required. Like them, she had a somewhat short attention span and a need for change. She began to find a sense of satisfaction in the variety of subjects students brought up and in explaining things.

The second year Rachel started using group work in the classroom. Rachel implemented more organization, more field trips, more fun. Erica was uncomfortable, however, at how Rachel seemed to glamorize what she referred to as youth at risk. This was Erica's main criticism of her ex-director.

During the third year, two new teachers, Reina and Emily were hired and Cassandra became the new director. In the beginning, the program was small and the teachers did not have much direction. With Cassandra, the Center gained a new focus, a philosophy which Erica described as, "Let's integrate into the community and be known." A new level of professionalism was expected, including regular presentation at conferences.

Since its inception, the Center had made progress in certain measurable achievements. In 1991 only 10% of the enrolled students completed their GED. When I spoke with Erica in June of 1992, 16% completed the test. At that time two-thirds or more of the students had completed at least one of the five tests.

The many changes in the organization after Cassandra became the director, while exciting, also contributed to Erica's decision to leave. Enrollment was up 120%, too much growth in too short a time. And in addition to her previous roles in the classroom, organizing, teaching, governing, helping, and planning, Erica was expected to participate in staff development, staff meetings and workshops, and more administrative work. She felt emotionally and intellectually exhausted and wanted only one piece to manage.

## Organization's Constraints

### Introduction

The main concern of the program was obtaining enough funding to stay afloat. Cassandra, the director, cited funding as her primary concern in the August program report to the Foundation and mentioned the problem to me on many occasions. The overhead charged by the Foundation after the merger of the two organizations increased the Opportunity Center's financial burden.

The other funders imposed additional constraints on the program in terms of standardized testing requirements, frustrating the Opportunity Center's goal and philosophy of teaching critical literacy. For some time before Cassandra started, in fact, the staff taught the contents of the tests explicitly to enable students to make the required gains, but both teachers and students became bored with this approach, precipitating a change to a theme oriented classroom based on the philosophy of critical literacy and student-negotiated curriculum.

Various staff members expressed distress and a sense of being spread too thin, trying to provide the best individual attention possible for the students while attempting to accommodate the demands of the funders, and participate in fund raising themselves. The excessive demands reduced job satisfaction and impacted the entire organizational climate,

leaving inadequate time for staff to build supportive relationships with one another or with students.

### Overhead Costs

The merger of the Opportunity Center with the Foundation was difficult for a variety of reasons. The Foundation originally promoted the formation of the Center because their youth employment program saw a need for it. One of the funders, the Private Industry Council (PIC), eventually prompted a merger, which meant overhead costs went up. (Overhead costs include payment of the executive director's and associate director's salaries. Rent, reception services, health insurance and retirement benefits are paid for separately.) The Opportunity Center lost its own independent board of directors, and it became answerable to the Foundation both for financial and administrative matters. It was just after the merger that Cassandra became the director.

Cassandra's first problem was that the financial records left by Rachel were extremely limited, consisting only of a checkbook for the program. Cassandra was hired because she was bilingual, had an ESL and critical literacy background, and experience in financial and program management. She was hired by the Foundation after Rachel had already been gone a month, and there was no one who could provide orientation, guidance, or support.

Cassandra's supervisor had agreed to help her with fund raising, but in 1993 Cassandra wrote eight grants and the supervisor none. She felt frustrated that her learning curve was slow. She had no help with the question of how to make ends meet with increased budgetary demands required by the higher overhead and indirect costs.

### Problems with Funders

In October 1992, Reina invited me to give a presentation with her at the Homeless Educators Conference for the State of Washington, where I gained first-hand insight into the constraints and guidelines of the program. The state was a major funder of the writing workshop in particular and provided approximately 25% of the funds for the other programs at the Center. The state director had only a short time during the conference to inform the group of his vision for the next three years, and to outline important constraints to the program as well as future struggles it would face.

Of central concern to him was the question, "Are long term GED and ESL programs appropriate for the homeless population?" He said grant recipients needed to think of education in bite-sized modules, focusing on interactive instruction where people could learn interpersonal skills. The focus needed to be on interpersonal skills, as well as critical thinking and basic educational skills rather than

on training for jobs, since lack of such skills contribute to homelessness. He proposed that evaluation of programs be informal, using journals and both teacher and student evaluations. He said there would also be a new emphasis on "therapeutic" education, which he did not define further. All of the teachers at the Center mentioned to me that they often felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the students' problems. They were concerned that they did not have the training to cope with mental health issues, nor did they see therapy as part of their jobs. This issue was raised by another teacher at the conference, but she was essentially ignored.

The state director dropped a bombshell when he announced that each of the state programs would have to begin serving more students with less funding. Rather than worry about how to improve their services, those receiving state money were to focus on recruiting. Cassandra pointed out that although she was required to recruit as part of the Center's state grant, and she was glad to comply, she did not have the space or the staff to serve any more people. And besides that, the Center's enrollment was steadily increasing by word of mouth. Cassandra stated that when more people were to be served with fewer resources the quality of learning would go down; therefore, the state director's goal seemed to be quantity over quality of

services. The state director merely responded, "You have a big challenge. It's irrational in some ways."

Cassandra offered a creative solution. Why not count student hours instead of numbers? That would give a better indication of the quality of a program. She pointed out, "We see real changes with those who stay for a long time, not just an hour. Those are successes. Those are the ones who give us job satisfaction." A student who is gone for 30 days could be counted as a new person up to six times in the annual report. One of the conference participants asked, "So should we discourage regular attendance on the part of students?" No answer.

The Private Industry Council funding requirements also made life difficult for the staff at the Center. The problem with PIC was that they paid for gains on a standardized test, the CASAS test, a test of basic literacy in a job related context. Cassandra had no ideological problem with them paying for educational gain, but she felt that the measurement instrument was faulty and that it detracted from instructional time. It also bore no relationship to students' goals. The students' goals were the motivating factor for learning, but they were being measured against something imposed on them from the outside. While Cassandra was trying to promote independence, goal setting, self-reflection, empowerment, and self-esteem among the students, standardized tests constantly reminded

students of their failings and neatly sorted them into categories for remediation. Such tests disempowered students.

"Also," Cassandra said, "the scores could be manipulated; but we don't do it. That's one reason we are in trouble financially." When I asked Cassandra what she meant by manipulating the scores, she explained, "All you have to do is make the students nervous the first time. Then coach them, and they improve." Even if a student scored high to begin with, the student could still make a five-point gain by being familiar with the test. In the past, staff did their best to increase scores. In fact, staff would give students a \$10 gift certificate for a five-point gain. Cassandra refused to participate in this kind of deception, and after she became director the Center lost \$12,000 because students were not "performing". Despite this loss of revenue, she thought the students were happier and the program had better retention.

The system of PIC funding was somewhat complicated. PIC paid \$300 when a student finished taking 25 hours of class, \$300 when a student made a five point gain on the CASAS reading and math test, \$532 when a student went from one level on the test to another, and another \$300 for finishing the GED. Any one student who had been with the program for at least twenty-five hours could generate from \$300, up to a maximum of \$2000 in revenue. All staff had

to do was test the students. The case managers of the Center also received funding this way, getting paid for enrolling youth in the GED program, for the five-point gain on the CASAS test, and for the numbers of hours in school.

Although she disliked the amount of testing and the types of tests used, Cassandra tried to comply with the funders' requirements. Her approach was to explain to the students that they needed to take the tests as a requirement for program funding, but that it would also help them with their test taking skills.

### Paperwork

A consequence of relying on these various funding sources was a mountain of paperwork. With the exception of Melissa, the VISTA volunteer, paperwork was the main source of job frustration for the staff at the Center. After helping Aaron record and compute his statistics for the homeless grant, just one of the four GED funders, I reached a better understanding of the complaints. I went through over 120 files for each quarter to find out which students were homeless, where those who were homeless lived, and then I filled out demographic reports for each homeless student. All of the administrative work was done manually; the Center had no money for computers. This task was made more difficult because the students often did not report themselves as homeless even when they were living at

shelters. Since the program considered this to be part of the definition of homelessness, I had to look up the address given for each student.

Aaron complained that he had too many students, although only about eight to fifteen would attend on a given day. After doing the report I understood what he meant. Just because the students were not physically present did not mean they did not create work for him. He had to keep files on every person who entered the program, even if they only attended for one day. The open enrollment system meant that the attendance records were not in alphabetical order, adding to the time required by statistical reports.

### Difficult Students

Even a very patient and kind person would find it challenging to work with some of the students in this program. Aaron seemed the exception. The students became more respectful when he took over the GED classroom. In fact, Aaron did not seem bothered by even the most difficult student. But the other staff found interpersonal differences with the students to be a significant source of job stress.

On one of the field trips for GED students, Melissa, the only staff member on the bus, politely asked one of the students to move over so that another student could have a seat. The student unexpectedly blew up at her. Swearing,

he told her that she had no right to tell him to do anything. She was shaken for several days. The student was taken out of class for a month and had to take anger management classes as a condition to be readmitted to school. He came back into class, but Melissa still felt vulnerable and uncomfortable around him. I overheard other students who had been on the bus say that they were not going to go on another field trip after that. They were afraid of him too.

Reina, having spent most of her life in New York City, was not as easily daunted, but some of the rougher students in the program had attended her GED night classes. She had to throw students out for carrying guns into class, and one night the class was so disruptive she got fed up and walked out.

In another incident, a student in the writing workshop did not like the writing teacher who replaced Reina. This student became openly hostile to the new teacher: challenging her qualifications to teach, coming in late, leaving early, repeatedly making negative remarks about her during the class, and comparing her unfavorably to Reina whom she liked. Finally, the student wrote a letter to the manager of the homeless program, threatening to go over her head to try to get the new teacher fired. At this point, the student was asked to leave the class. Not long after this incident, the new teacher resigned.

Although these types of behavioral problems were frustrating, the teachers seemed to endure even the most belligerent students. As a result of experiencing behavioral problems, however, the Center had plans for staff development training in dealing with angry or aggressive students.

### Summary

One of the most striking aspects of the organization was an atmosphere of continuing change. Cassandra's commitment to a student-centered, Freirian style learning environment was a major part of that change. She required staff development. She added new programs and constantly generated new ideas. But the continuous change and growth of the organization also had some negative effects. It added to the staff's paperwork and stress, and caused problems with funders who did not understand the Center's philosophy and unwillingness to focus on test scores.

CHAPTER 6  
ESL CLASSROOM

Description

The ESL program was envisioned by Rachel, who had been an ESL teacher for many years before becoming director of the Opportunity Center. She was interested in the problem of homelessness, and when she read a 1990-91 survey of shelter applicants she was inspired with a new way to build up the Center. From 1990 to 1991 there was an 800% increase in shelter applications by ethnic minorities. Hispanics represented the biggest ethnic group, thus the idea of ESL classes for homeless Hispanics was conceived. Cassandra also taught ESL for many years, had lived and taught in Latin American, spoke fluent Spanish, and was enthusiastic about developing this new branch of the Center.

Cassandra and Martina met with the Union Gospel Mission's Buenos Nuevos Program, the only homeless program in the city which catered to Hispanics, to determine a convenient meeting time for the classes. The Mission had no room or facilities for classes, so Cassandra decided to hold the classes on the seventh floor of the Center, within walking distance to the Mission.

The class filled on its first day. Emily had intended to take 15 students but ended up taking 16 and immediately

starting a waiting list. She was the only teacher, but she had two volunteers, one for each level. She had planned to put people on a waiting list and have new enrollment each month. Attendance quickly dropped off to a total of seven in the class. But when Cassandra called the people on the waiting list, no one came.

Emily and Cassandra decided to change the model to open enrollment. If a person had three unexcused absences they would lose their spot in the class. In order to accommodate the many applicants on the waiting list, Cassandra developed a conversation or "Talk Time" class on Wednesdays, a class which was more structured than many conversation classes. The class consisted of small group discussions, each group led by a native English speaking volunteer. After Cassandra started this class, Emily took over as the teacher.

Emily taught preschool, served in the Peace Corps for three years, and taught elementary school ESL before coming to the Opportunity Center. She loved teaching ESL and was inspired by her students. It was important to her to be organized, and she spent more time outside of class preparing her lessons than teaching in class. Two afternoons per week she worked in the GED classroom and spent the other two afternoons preparing for her own classes, preparing the Talk Time class, and working on a curriculum development project for the ESL class. She had to prepare lessons for the volunteers, respond to student

journals, keep up with administrative work on each student, and work on an ESL manual she was preparing for a grant she had recently received.

Emily's grant was for designing a manual to explain how she had implemented a student-centered ESL classroom. She also created an alternative assessment method which was based not only on comparing the competencies students had when they entered and left the program, but also on their goals and needs. Although she attracted attention from other ESL teachers in the city, she was always modest about her accomplishments. She told me that, while she was starting to get a grasp on Freire's ideas and on how to pose problems, she was still learning.

After Aaron was hired, he took over the administrative duties for the GED classroom and Emily took on the role of his assistant. She was happy to be slowly separated from the GED classroom. Cassandra's goal was to get enough funding to expand the ESL classes and hire Emily full-time. Emily saw striking differences between the GED and the ESL classes. She said that in the GED classes a teacher had to spend most of the time overcoming resistance, while the ESL students wanted to be there. They were motivated, positive, and appreciative of anything she offered them. Emily preferred working with ESL students as opposed to the GED students because she wanted to have harmony in her daily

life. She wanted to get along with people and did not enjoy confrontation.

While she loved her work and was completely dedicated to it, Emily had not wanted to be the one in charge of an entire program. She saw her mission in life first and foremost as being a teacher rather than an administrator. She wanted to be in the classroom, and to have other teachers to talk to. She found planning lessons for the long term was difficult when she had so many other functions to carry out.

Emily organized and typed lesson plans for the volunteers of the three Talk Time levels. Volunteers discussed the lesson plans before the class began. Emily facilitated an ice-breaker event for each session, after which the students divided into small groups to work with the volunteers. Emily tried to group the students by level so that the students who could speak better English did not dominate the group. After the class was over, Emily reviewed how the groups went and asked for suggestions and feedback from the volunteers.

Students were accepted on the waiting list for the more formal class by going to Talk Time. Usually they had to wait two or three weeks for a spot in the regular class to open up. Talk Time increased retention by working as a screening device. Students in the regular class became more serious and usually stayed at least three months. Their

main reasons for leaving the class were either moving from the area or getting a job.

Emily said that during the the Talk Time classes she felt like a hostess at a party. She was responsible for dividing the students into groups, making coffee and having snacks for the break, and for facilitating the ice-breaker. The ice-breaker changed from class to class. For example, one day each student wrote down personal information such as a job they would like to have, a person they admired, a favorite musical group, and a favorite time of day. Students pinned this paper to their shirts and walked around the class talking to each other. After the ice-breaker the groups split up. The less advanced group did activities that focused on vocabulary building, playing games such as bingo and concentration; the two more advanced groups engaged in conversation which related to themes they had chosen or to current events.

Occasionally, Emily wrote a newsletter for the class, reviewing for the students material they had covered. The newsletter also welcomed new students and recognized students' accomplishments. Emily provided tutors with a sheet of typed notes for each class, outlining exercises and the plan for the day. She began having the students keep a journal on the new things they were learning. The students said they enjoyed this exercise.

Lauren, the most dedicated volunteer in the program, assisted in all three of the ESL classes, the Talk Time and the two days of theme based grammar and vocabulary lessons. Later she was hired to help Emily on a part-time basis. Since one of her daughters was living in Mexico, she spent part of the year there. She took special interest in the students from Mexico. "These students are such an inspiration to me," she told me. She added that while all of the students in the ESL class were poor and homeless here in the U.S., some of them came from very good backgrounds in Mexico. One of the students was a physicist before he left Mexico. He was working at Jack-in-the-Box, but he always had a smile on his face and did not seem to be bitter. Lauren told me that the students from uneducated backgrounds tended to be the clowns. She saw this as a defense mechanism. Many students were illiterate in Spanish.

In this classroom, motivation to learn English was both extrinsic and intrinsic. It was extrinsic in that the students needed English to find jobs and to communicate with the larger society. Motivation was intrinsic in that learning a language is an infinite goal which one can work on for a lifetime. It was hard to track life changes of students from this class because they were typically in classes for only a few months, most leaving because they found work, their primary goal.

One important experience provided by the ESL class was a chance for students to explore their own culture and compare it with American culture. They did this exercise with enthusiasm. They had the chance to express their opinions and increase their confidence in speaking. During the Talk Time classes, no correction was given by the volunteers or teacher. The focus was on communication and confidence building.

In the GED classes, students sometimes struggled, feeling as if they had to give up some aspects of their own culture in order to gain access to the mainstream because their cultures were discounted in their previous experiences with traditional American schools. The difficulty for the ESL students was not that learning alienated them from their community, as in the GED classes. On the contrary, their difficulty was the frustration that they did not have more classes and more opportunities to learn. They had not had the negative experience that many American minority students have with the school system, and they considered learning a privilege (Ogbu 1987).

### Freirian Influence

The ESL class used a student-centered approach in that the students themselves negotiated the curriculum in sessions held about once each month. Emily started the sessions by asking the students, "If you could speak English

better, what would you do? What do you need English for?" Students responded by brainstorming, making a list of situations or topics that they needed to learn about, and voting on a topic. After that, she questioned them further about the specifics of the chosen topic. Students were most interested in topics related to work, using the telephone, interviewing for jobs, reading a newspaper, and talking to Americans (which was narrowed down to talking to the opposite sex).

The curriculum was originally negotiated in Spanish for all three levels. After students expressed their dislike for using Spanish, the top two levels began to negotiate the curriculum in English. Emily pointed out that students expressed no interest in the typical ESL topics such as shopping or using the bus.

### Case Studies

Case studies provide information which helps educators to gain a deeper understanding of learners, of the clients who use their services. The following life histories demonstrate the perspectives of students, an essential part of creating a student-centered program. One interview is paraphrased and one is a more detailed narrative. The interview with Domingo is paraphrased because, despite his outgoing nature, he was nervous during the interview, and his English became more halting. The second, more detailed

interview with Rigoberto was much more free-flowing. He and I developed a good rapport the first day he came to the Talk Time class, and his love of words and talk made him an excellent key informant.

### Domingo

Domingo, a husky-voiced 26 year old man with lightly tinted glasses, was one of the most outgoing students in the ESL class. He proudly informed me that he was the first student to show up for the first English class offered at the Center on February 8, 1992. He was desperate to learn English, and was agreeable to an interview if I would correct him as we talked. Most of his Mexican acquaintances came to the U.S. to work, but Domingo came here primarily to learn the language. Life in the United States had been more difficult than he anticipated. In Mexico he had a career. He studied to work in the travel industry and had experience working in vacation sales. He needed to know English to advance his career.

Eleven years earlier Domingo's father had lived in Seattle and was impressed by its beauty. When Domingo was considering where he would go in the U.S. to learn English, he rejected the border cities because too many people there spoke Spanish, and he figured that New York was too dangerous, so he settled on Seattle.

Domingo traveled to Seattle by bus. Seeing the towns through the windows, he thought it would be easy to live in the United States, but it was not a smooth transition. After arriving in Seattle, he stayed in the Greyhound bus station for six days and nights, since he knew no one and had no place to stay. He was asleep in a chair, he said, when, "Two black men robbed me; they took everything."

When he found the courage to leave the Greyhound terminal, Domingo decided to explore Seattle and rode the bus around town. He thought he might enroll at the University of Washington to learn English. While he was walking the streets near the university, an American man asked him for a cigarette. Domingo gave the man a cigarette and the man told him about a mental health organization that helped Latinos. Domingo filed away this information for later use.

After six nights spent in the bus station, Domingo moved in with a man who said he was a friend. This man lived in a house with eight others. To Domingo's shock and dismay, they were all homosexuals, and all the neighbors he met were homosexuals or lesbians. "At night I would wake up with someone's hand on my leg. There was a lot of drugs and alcohol in that house." He felt betrayed because he thought the man who invited him there was a friend.

"After a month in that house, I developed psychological problems and went to Consejo [the Hispanic social service agency mentioned to him by the man on the street]. I met a psychologist at

Consejo who said I could live in his office if I did some work for him."

Domingo was worried that this man might be a homosexual as well, but he turned out to have no ulterior motives. I found out later that this man was also Cassandra's husband! Domingo earned his rent by helping out at the reception desk and keeping the archives for the medical records, and it was at Consejo that he found out about the ESL courses at the Center. He did not like his work, but it provided a place to stay. He slept on the sofa, which he said was a lot better than the floor or the street.

Domingo told me that many people thought he was homosexual because he had no girlfriend. A car accident had damaged his left hand, which he had to hold in a stereotypically effeminate way. The fact that men tried to pick him up troubled him deeply, and he was further discouraged at how difficult he found it to talk to American women. Many of his friends have had the same experience. They came to Seattle on their way to Alaska, looking for fishing jobs, and they were picked up by homosexuals. One of his friends was dying of AIDS. Another became a homosexual, and the last time Domingo spoke with him he was living under a bridge. "People! They don't think! I'm born a man--I die a man!"

When the conversation turned to the classroom, Domingo told me,

"People who study here are poor in Mexico. They think it will be easy to make money. Many live on the streets and take drugs. I have many friends who are on drugs. They get them on 1st and 2nd Avenue. All my friends here in this classroom have tried drugs here in the United States. I have too. Now I don't take drugs, just alcohol sometimes."

One day he came in to class with such a strong smelling hangover that it was repulsive to be near him. His friends teased him about the smell and his drinking.

Work was another problem facing Domingo. Although his main priority was to learn English, he had to find a source of income to survive. He had experienced discrimination in his two restaurant jobs. His bosses kept cutting his hours and finally let him go. "You know, I studied in Mexico. I never thought I'd work in the kitchen as a dishwasher. In my country I have a career and my studies." When I commented that he chose a difficult way to learn English, he responded "Querer es poder", or "where there's a will, there's a way". Despite his problems, Domingo's goal was to stay in the United States four or five more years.

Domingo found his English classes somewhat disappointing. He enjoyed the conversation class, but did not benefit as much from the regular classes because new people were constantly starting and he could not make progress; the class continually repeated old information. I asked him if the classes helped him deal with any of his outside problems, such as discrimination, and he said "no". He planned to continue with classes at the community college

in the fall, but he was also disappointed with the community college classes. He had hoped that the students would be from all over the world and that they would have to speak English. As it turned out, there were primarily Hispanic students there as well.

"I need one person, one friend, to speak English. In my house and at Consejo we always speak Spanish. I need to speak English. I need to go to movies, to dinner, to the disco. I need one American friend."

### Rigoberto

Rigoberto was in the ESL Talk Time group. He had been coming to class for about two months but found a job before he was able to take advantage of the regular classes. His English was nearly fluent. His goal was to work on grammar and vocabulary so he could more completely and eloquently express the thoughts he felt so passionately about. He loved story telling and needed no prompting to talk. As soon as we sat down for the interview, he began speaking, as though his life were being replayed in front of us like a movie in vivid color.

"Six or seven years ago I talked to a newspaper reporter about my life. The reporter told me I could write a good book and I think so too. My life has been a hard experience, but now I'm feeling good in my soul and good about myself. About two years ago I was depressed, but now my life has changed.

I began taking drugs and sleeping on the streets when I was about eight or ten years old. I ran away. My father is a good person. He

believes in himself, is honest, doesn't smoke or drink, and works very hard. My mother is also a good person. She's a Catholic and goes to church every day. She is a tender kind of person.

My father used to take me to work with him every day. He was a blacksmith. He is very tall and strong. That is hard work. From 8:00 until 12:30 I would be at work with my father. Then I'd wash my face and run to school. I was at school from 1:00 until 5:30. Then went home. I had to walk 40 minutes.

I was bored with that life. One day I decided to steal some ornaments from my house to sell them. When I went home that night about 7:00 my brother said, 'Father is going to kill you.' I believed him. My father used to hit me so hard that I would have to go to the hospital. So I ran away. I was out on the street and the only people out that late were rough people. They saw I was too young to be out so late. One guy talked to me and I explained that I had run away. He asked me if I wanted to make some money. I said yes. He told me to go into this house through the window and then open the door so he could go in. Then he robbed the house. This was in 1963. He gave me 20 pesos. That was too much money for me.

Some time later I saw people smoking marijuana. I thought it was bad because my mother had warned me about it, but six months later I tried it and liked it. I used to steal bicycles and other things from the streets.

I used to carry this big, long knife with me. One guy asked me, 'Why you carry that big knife?' I said, 'Because I'm a thief.' He asked me, 'How much you make?' I told him I made about 150 pesos a day. He asked me, 'You want to make 1000?' I said yes. He told me to come back tomorrow.

This is what we did. You know the lottery here? Well the system in Mexico is similar. I would stand outside a bank and wait for people coming out with money. I would pretend I was an Indian from the countryside, that I couldn't read or write. I would ask the person, 'Can you help me? I'm looking for this address.' Then the person would ask me the address and I would pull the lottery ticket out of my pocket. We would

change the numbers so they would be the winning number.

Then the person would say, 'That's not an address.' I would show him an address on the ticket and explain to him that my father bought this ticket, but he is sick and old, and he sent me and my little brother to collect his money. I would also have a newspaper article which showed the winning number. I would ask the man to help me get the money and I would give him \$1000 pesos.

He would say yes. Then I would say, 'But first I have to get my little brother. He is standing on the corner.' I would go to the corner with him. I didn't have a little brother, but I would act worried and say 'Maybe someone took my little brother. Maybe he is lost. I better stay here and wait for him. Will you go to get my lottery money for me?' Then the person would say yes and start to put the ticket in his pocket. I would say, 'No, don't do that. Someone might pick your pocket. Put it in a handkerchief like this, like you put your money.' I would take his handkerchief to show him but exchange the handkerchief that he had with his money rolled up with mine, which had paper in it. Then I would say, 'How do I know you are coming back? Leave your watch and chains with me so I know you will be back.'

The first day I made 2000 pesos. I liked it. That's how I started my career as a professional thief. I would give money to my brothers and sisters. I tried to give money to my mother but she wouldn't accept it.

Three years later, I was about 14, the police caught me. I spent one and one half years in the correctional. There were a lot of young people there. The first day someone stole my shoes and I had to fight him. I worked in the kitchen and the laundry. We wake up at 6:00 a.m. and go to bed at 7:30 p.m. There were lots of rules. Like the military. We had exercise, church, school. I got my certificate for the first six years of school there. That was good, but I was in jail.

Six to eight months after getting out of the correctional, I was caught again. I was back in for two years. Most of my old friends are under ground [dead] right now. I thank God I'm still

alive. We were 100 then. Like a gang. We all lived in one room. There were about 24 of these dormitories. Each dormitory was about 100 people. My mother would come every Monday.

I feel sad about my mother. I'm the black sheep. My big brother is an engineer. Another brother is a doctor. My sister is a doctor. My other brother is a karate champion in Mexico. I'm the only one to take the wrong way, but my mother and father know that I'm good inside and they love me a lot. My mother cried for me a lot when I was young. I'd feel sad but then go back to the same life.

I needed friendship, someone to care for me. I never found it in my family. I don't want to be a thief, but I do want to be Rigoberto. My father wanted me to be just like him.

I was picked up by the police a lot. See this cut on my arm? I did this myself. One time I was beaten up by the police so bad I was pissing blood. They beat me for three days. They told me if I didn't tell them who I was with they would kill me. I knew they would. On the fourth day when they called my name I threw my cup at the light on the ceiling and broke the light. I picked up a piece of glass and cut my arm here as deep as I could. I cut everything. I almost passed away then. They had to take me to the hospital and the newspapers found out about it. They wanted to talk to me, but the police said I should stay quiet. They knew they were in trouble and said they would get me out, but I had better stay quiet. I did. I love my life.

A lot of my friends are dead. Last week I saw a guy get shot on the street across from the mission. It made me think about my old life and my friends. That happens in a bad situation.

One day I stole 3 million pesos. I robbed a place where they sold chickens, but I mean tons of chickens. I knew where they kept the money so we took it. I was caught by the police and they took everything. They took the money and everything from my apartment. I was thinking, I started poor and I'm still poor. There is no point to this. This time I spent three months in jail.

After I got out, I made another robbery. My friend killed the owner of the place. He got 24 years and I got 18. My friend was killed in prison. He stole some money from another inmate and the guy stabbed him. There are a lot of gangs too. I survived because I believe in God. Even in prison, every morning I've praised God for my life. I got out for good behavior after six years and some months.

When I was in jail I worked in the laundry, the bakery, and went to school. I finished secundaria [high school]. I read a lot of books. They had church but I didn't like it. It was Catholic. I believe in God but not in human beings. I go now to a Pentecostal church. It is a different church from the mission. I stay there because I need to. They are hypocrites. They teach but they don't do. For example, poor people come. They are cold and hungry. They say, 'Do you have a ticket?' If they say no, they can't eat. [The mission where Rigoberto was staying required people attend a church service before they received a meal ticket.]

You know, I was married for thirteen years, but I don't want to talk about it. We are separated now. My wife lives with my mother. We have four kids. I pray every day that we'll get back together. I can't talk about it or I'll cry.

The first time I was here I went to Juarez. I was all by myself. I tried to cross, but immigration took me back eight times. I was tired, sick, hungry, and dirty. I went back to Chihuahua to work in the forest. I had never done that kind of work but I needed to make money. Then I went back to the border and jumped on a train. I didn't know where the train was going. It made a lot of stops, but I didn't get off. Six days later I got off. I didn't know any English, but I met a Mexican guy and asked him where I was. I found out I was in Pennsylvania!

This Mexican guy got me a job on a farm. I changed jobs and started work for a mushroom company. I made good money, \$10 per hour. I spent six months there and then went back to Mexico with money. I gave money to my wife, my mother, and my kids, and then came back here. It is hard on the family, working in the United States. That is how I lost my wife. Remember I

told you about that woman I lived with in Reno, Brenda? Some people I knew told my wife about her. I told Brenda last week that I'm not coming back. I love her but I want to get back together with my wife. She is also too young. She is only 24.

While I was in Reno I spent five years in jail because I sold drugs. I started reading the Bible while I was in jail. We think of God when we are in trouble. The Bible said believe in me and I will help you. God told me he would set me free if I didn't get in any more trouble. When I went in front of the judge, a woman, she asked me if I wanted to say anything for myself. I said, 'I realize I did something wrong and I have to pay for it, but I am different now. I believe in God.' The judge thought about it and decided to let me go.

After I left the jail I was reading my Bible at the bus stop around 7:00 p.m. I saw people going into a church and I decided to go in. I went to church three days in a row. I started learning about God. I feel God in myself. Now I know I was taking the wrong way. Now for sure I'm taking the right way.

In Reno I was self-employed as a body worker on cars. I was bored. I was having problems with Brenda. I knew too many people in Reno and I felt like they were judging me. I wanted to start a new life in a big city where there were opportunities. I left with \$200 in my pocket and came here. I like everything here. I have a place to stay, a job, food, and a church. I miss Brenda a lot, and my wife, my kids, my mother. Brenda was such a good person, but we can't make a life together. I tried too hard to make her like I wanted her to be.

I've been here two months and two days now. I've never stayed in a mission before. It's o.k. because I like to live like a person. The way you look is the way people treat you. The mission is just a place to stay--a bed and food. I can't say anything when they are lying. They'll kick me out. Besides, it's up to God to judge. I'm supposed to work there a certain number of hours per week, but I don't work. Downstairs they think I work upstairs. Upstairs they think I work downstairs. They still give me room and board and

\$12 per week. It's good. I don't know how long I will stay there. It is good because I can save money. I don't worry about if they kick me out though because I always have God.

Maybe I will stay here for one year. I hope. I don't like to make plans for the future. You have to live now, this moment. Take life the way it is coming. I can fix things a little with the help of God. God is teaching me. If you are in trouble, praise God. If you are happy, praise God. Put God first and everything will be o.k. Someone tried to shoot me four times once and nothing hit me. I know God is taking care of me.

I want to learn more English so I can express my real feelings. I don't have the right words for this conversation, for example. In Spanish I can express myself very well. In this program I can only participate in the conversation classes. I can read and write better than I speak. I want to learn more.

The classes are good, but my learning depends on myself, on all of us. We have to help ourselves. Yesterday I went to the Salvation Army and got a book for little kids for 80 cents. I can't go to the library because I don't have papers. It doesn't matter. I have God.

You know how I got my job? I was lying in bed and someone came in and asked me if I wanted to work. I had been praying for a job. And I have no papers! I could get them, but I don't want to spend time in the immigration office.

The people at work are nice. They like me. I work hard and try to be honest. I work at packing used clothes into 135 pound boxes. They go to Africa, the clothes that don't sell in the thrift stores. I try to do good because I know those clothes are going to poor people.

What do I need from the program? I am an adult, but really a baby inside. I need love. I have never had it. I can be very strong too, but I used to cry a lot. It has been a hard life. It is important to make people feel like you care for them."

### Summary

These two case studies offer insights into the background experiences and current struggles of the ESL students. They help reveal how students have made sense of their lives and interpret their own behavior and the behavior of people around them. These case studies also reveal deeper, psychological needs that a researcher might never discover using a conventional questionnaire format. Students' needs and meaning systems will be explored more fully in chapter nine, the analysis section.

CHAPTER 7  
GED CLASSROOM

Description

My first day of observation in the GED classroom was in May, 1992, Monday after the Rodney King verdict and the L.A. riots. A journal topic was written on the board: "What's happened since the last time you were here? Is violence ever finished? Justifiable?"

One of the two teachers in the classroom, Erica, announced that when the students finished their writing they would have a group discussion, then work on their math, and between 11:00 and 12:00 they would watch a movie. Emily was sitting with a male student discussing some sort of problem with a friend of his who had a shotgun. One student started complaining that he did not want to discuss the riots, that he was sick of it. He just wanted to do his math.

There were only three students in class by 9:00 when class officially started. There were nine by 9:20. That caused no problem. The teachers just pointed to the writing assignment and the students began their work. People were eating and drinking. I felt uncomfortable and tried to blend in by writing in my notebook. I did not want to seem pushy or too friendly, which proved to be a good instinct.

The students were wary and even hostile towards overly enthusiastic attempts to "help" them.

Posters covered the walls, all with African-American themes, from Spike Lee movies, Eddie Murphy, and Martin Luther King, to Sonics basketball stars. Free condoms were available on a shelf. There were maps of the world, of the U.S., Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, as well as posters made by the students which said things like "Drugs No - Education Yes" and "Education to Raise the Nation."

When Erica finally drew the students out, the discussion was hostile. The African-American women were the most vocal.

"Middle class people have no idea what poor people go through."

"It happens every day. Those cops just got caught."

"It's the fear that white people's got. Rodney King was already stunned."

"If things don't get better it's going to get scary. Tolerance level has hit bottom. It's going to be a war."

Erica, acting as the lead teacher, for the most part kept out of the discussion and the students spoke with each other. The African-American students were angry about the racism of the legal system, and their hostility extended to include other, un-named examples of oppression. Most of the African-American students agreed that this was a black issue; the whites could not understand it. The whites in the class did not say a word. Towards the end of the

discussion, one of the teachers brought up the topic of voting as something the students could do to express their anger. The students did not respond with enthusiasm.

Later in the month, the students became involved in choosing their new teacher. The candidates were screened by a hiring committee consisting of the director, staff, and two representatives from the students. The three finalists were given a chance to audition in front of the class. One of the candidates was an African-American woman whom the students were interested in because she was black, but her background was in elementary education and her philosophy did not match with the program's. She was too interested in expressing her own ideas, had outspoken ideas about discipline in the classroom, and regarded the students as "kids", which neither they nor the staff would tolerate.

The students were encouraged to think of questions for the prospective teacher. They identified the most important quality of a good teacher as being "caring". Cassandra asked them to consider how they could find out if the person were caring without coming right out and asking directly. They formulated some hypothetical questions, for example: What would the teacher do if a student was having a bad day and could not concentrate? Did the teacher accept where the students came from, i.e. homeless or in trouble with the police? Aaron was voted the chosen teacher, a person who would prove time and again how much he cared about them.

Aaron served in the Peace Corps in West Africa, taught in the public school system in Virginia, and taught at an alternative school in Seattle before coming to the Center. He said he enjoyed working with young people and helping to create positive change in their lives. When he was young, school was not interesting, the teachers were not enthusiastic, and he wanted to do something to change that. At the Center, Aaron enjoyed watching the students grow and learn to work together in group activities. He found this one of the most satisfying parts of his job, as well as participating in the semi-annual graduation ceremony, seeing students pass individual tests, learning about growth they achieved outside of class in their personal lives, and seeing their ability for self-expression increase as they worked on the newsletter and their writing.

For Aaron, one of the biggest advantages of teaching at the Center compared to his other teaching experiences was the freedom to be creative. However, the Center also shared some negative similarities with other places he taught: too much paperwork, lack of time and support to finish his tasks, and being undervalued and underpaid. I asked him if the students he worked with were ever problematic for him. He had no complaints about the students. In fact, he enjoyed the students. He just wanted more time to prepare his classes and to have less paperwork so he could serve them better. I never saw him lose his temper or get

discouraged with any student. When, after numerous attempts to draw them out, the students would sit at the tables, uninterested in participating in the discussions he had prepared, he took their disinterest with saintly good humor, shaking his head with a sad little smile. He would just plan a new strategy for the next day.

When Aaron was hired, he was under the impression that there would always be two teachers working in the classroom. The Center had not hired another teacher to replace Emily (who had been a full-time GED teacher to start out with) when the ESL program was started, and her absence increased his bureacratic workload tremendously. She continued to spend Wednesday and Thursday afternoons in the classroom, taking charge of the class discussion on these days so Aaron could return phone calls and do paperwork. He was usually too tired to get paperwork done after the students left at 3:30, and he also had to plan the next day's class.

In dealing with the students, Aaron tried to connect with each person on an individual basis every day. Some people did not accept help. Then he just talked with them about their life problems. One way this job was more challenging to him than working in the public schools was that his work at the Center required dealing with all the emotional problems students brought with them to class. When I asked him if that was getting any easier for him, he said, "It's getting easier for me, but I don't know what

happens with the students. I have been sending them to their case managers lately instead of following up on everything myself."

There was a possibility that the Center might merge with a section of the parent organization that dealt with youth employment. If that were to happen, Aaron would like to get a therapist on site for student use.

During July, I took a break from the field. When I came back in August, after Aaron was hired, the transformation of the classroom was instantly apparent. Tables were organized according to topic, the schedule for the day and the week was written on the board, and while conversation still hummed in the classroom, there was a different sense of order. There were announcements on the board regarding a new recycling project in the classroom, an opportunity related to transitional housing for single mothers, an appeal for suggestions and ideas for a newsletter, and an upcoming money management presentation.

In my initial visits to the GED classroom, before Aaron was hired, I felt welcomed by Erica, but I did not know what to do. I went from table to table, offering help but feeling like I was a distraction. My first day back in August, Aaron told me what each student was working on and who would like help with their reading and writing, guidance I greatly appreciated. His attention to me and introduction also helped the students accept the idea of working with me.

Aaron insisted that people respect each other and take turns when they needed to talk to him. When a student walked into the classroom one day and demanded his attention, Aaron explained that he would be able to talk to him during his noon-hour break. I noticed that students were interacting with each other in a more task-focused way, and the room was now quieter. Several students were helping each other at the math table. A discussion area had been set up at the back of the room where three students were sitting. Aaron had received funds from the parent organization to hire two recent graduates as student assistants and peer tutors. The assistants were circulating, helping other students.

The students appreciated this new sense of order. In fact, the only suggestions I heard from the students, were that the program not have an age restriction of 16-24, and that the class have an even more serious atmosphere. Rachel, the ex-director, commented on the positive change in the class atmosphere when she was substituting one day. She thought it was an improvement, but she worried about what had happened to the rowdy students and was critical of the new attendance policy. There was constant turnover of students, so most of the students she had taught were gone, and the students who replaced them were much quieter. Students were now allowed no more than five absences and were required to be in class by no later than one hour after

the start of class, even with an excuse. If they missed more than four times in one month, they needed to write an essay explaining why they should be let back into the class. Otherwise they were dropped from the class list.

The attendance policy was difficult to implement because Aaron wanted to give the students as many chances as they needed to finish their GED. But he and Cassandra decided that in order to encourage the commitment students needed to pass the GED, he had to insist that they come regularly. Most of the students adapted to the new system, but several with poor attendance were dropped. Even when students were dropped, they had another chance. They just had to write an essay on why they should be readmitted and then wait until there was another opening. The policy was flexible enough to accommodate work schedules or emergencies, but one of Aaron's improvements was to provide a structure so that students could learn how to be responsible.

Aaron's teaching style involved listening closely to the students and then finding a way to work their needs into some sort of lesson or project. For example, one of the students was wearing earplugs in class because he felt the class was too noisy and he was offended by the profanity being used by some of the students and the student assistants. Instead of taking an authoritarian stance and telling the students how they had to talk in class (which

probably would not have done any good), Aaron asked the class to first write in their journals and then discuss the idea of different ways of speaking and the appropriate language for different situations. He used a newspaper article about President Bush telling the MIA protesters to "shut up" to prompt discussion.

As time went by, Aaron found more ways for the students to be in charge of their own learning. He and Melissa, the VISTA volunteer, developed something they called the "Speakers of Color" forum. The majority of the students in the program were people of color, yet all the staff and volunteers were white, except for the second writing teacher (whom the GED students never saw) and the teaching assistant. So each month the students determined what they wanted to learn about. Speakers appropriate for each topic were invited in once a month to discuss the chosen subject with the students.

One of the first topics to emerge was racism, which was narrowed down to a concern with police brutality. Aaron invited the Seattle police to talk to the students, specifically asking for officers of color as guest speakers. Instead, two white officers came and aroused further feelings of hostility from the students. A week later the same two officers came back, bringing an African-American detective with them. It was a difficult encounter for the officers, because the students really wanted a chance to

vent their anger, rather than to learn from the police. But this venting gave the students a chance to speak, to do something about their frustration. Venting their anger verbally rather than physically was a step in the right direction for many.

### Freirian Influence

Aaron listened carefully to students' needs and interests and tried to help them learn to think reflectively. As he gained experience, he improved his technique. In an early class he had difficulty using the Freirian technique of problem posing. He planned to take the students to an Irish play and was using the opportunity to discuss culture. He initiated a group discussion by asking people how they maintained their cultural beliefs. He tried to provide a Freirian code, an example to facilitate discussion, by using the personal example of how he maintained his Jewish culture.

His example did not succeed in promoting dialog because it was religion-based and too different from the students' own cultures, primarily African-American. The students did not know their own cultural beliefs. Cultural beliefs in general are much more difficult to name than specific religious beliefs and customs. I attempted to help out by generalizing all I could about my Irish culture and family beliefs. One of the African-American men surprised me by

saying that he too was Irish (I had thought he would identify primarily with being African-American), and that one of his strongest cultural values was cleanliness (which had never stood out in my mind as a particularly Irish value). No one else knew anything about their cultural values.

To talk about culture was too abstract. As with ethnography, the Freirian method of problem posing ideally does not approach problems or topics in such a direct fashion, because direct questions about culture or problems will elicit "pat" answers which do not reveal much about the participant, nor do they provoke any depth of thought.

Later in the year, a woman came to do a presentation on money management. She started by asking people what sayings they had heard about money, like "Money doesn't grow on trees," and how these sayings may have influenced them. This conversation was more effective, but the students did not respond well to the woman's style and soon lost interest. They were rude to her, either carrying on their own conversations or asking to go to the back room to work on their own studies.

A more successful day was International Literacy Day. Aaron asked the students what it meant to be literate, and found a way to access their beliefs.

Maricella: "Reading is important. Some people can, some can't. It is important for all learning. If you can't read, you can't fill out a job application or anything. Like our parents.

My parents didn't go to school. They don't know how to write. They might know how to read."

Miguel: "A literate person is a person who has been educated."

Aaron: "I was in the Peace Corps in Gabon for two years teaching English in the public school. Women had less opportunity to go to school as the grades went up."

Quia: "That happens everywhere."

Aaron: "What is the implication of more literate men than women?"

Maricella: "Men have more job opportunities."

Miguel: "That's why I like socialist government systems. There are more opportunities."

Aaron: "Who are the people who can't read and write? What does that mean for people's lives? Is there prejudice around literacy?"

Quia: "Yes. Men feel threatened if women can do what men can do."

Miguel: "Mexican women quit school earlier. Men think they should stay home. They learn to read and write but they are not in the higher levels."

Aaron: "So education represents power. Lack of education represents lack of power."

When the class studied a topic that the students chose themselves, they came to life. The topic of AIDS, for example, brought about lively discussions and strong opinions. The students were practically unanimous in their opinion that the government had a cure for AIDS but was not releasing it as a means to decimate the gay and minority populations. Several students also remarked that if they had AIDS they would either kill themselves or kill the person who infected them. Aaron was quick to pick up on

their interest and arranged for a person with AIDS to speak to the class. He showed a video on the topic as well.

Students seemed lonely, and, while many were outspoken, even rude at times, they were shy when dealing with issues which revealed too much of themselves in front of the group. They built trust slowly. As Aaron got to know many of the students, he became aware that domestic violence had been a problem for nearly all of them. He arranged for a speaker to come once a month to talk about the issue. The students were interested and asked questions of the speaker, but no one volunteered anything personal. Several of the women even voiced the opinion that some women liked being abused.

Later, after the speaker left, Martina, the coordinator of homeless services (who was substituting for Aaron that day) and I sat with two African-American women who had said nothing during the presentation. They knew and trusted us well enough to tell us their experiences. One woman had had to go to court to get a restraining order against a boyfriend. The other's sister had escaped from a violent partner in Missouri. They could not start on their GED studies that day before they discussed their feelings with each other and with us, but they did not have enough rapport or trust to discuss their problems and experiences with the group.

During our conversation, Dennis, one of the tutors, kept dropping by the table, trying to become involved in the

conversation. The two students obviously did not like him. They started talking to him about a look in his eye; it seemed to them like a superior look.

"I see you across the room looking at me like that with that look in your eye. Then you come over and ask me if I want some help. That's why I always say 'no.' I don't want your help. Are you offended now?"

Dennis was hurt and also put on the spot. They kept asking if he was offended, and finally he answered that he did not mean to have any particular look in his eye and that they were reading too much into it. Both he and I were embarrassed.

On another occasion when I was helping Karen, a very outspoken and intelligent African-American woman, with her math, she began talking about domestic violence. Karen began telling me about a friend who kept getting beaten up by her boyfriend. The boyfriend even hit her in front of Karen. Karen told her not to take the abuse, but her friend defended her boyfriend's action, saying she deserved the beating. Karen could not tolerate that kind of attitude.

But then Karen asked me what I thought about the Mike Tyson rape case. I responded that I had not followed it very closely and asked her what she thought. She thought the woman who pressed charges against Tyson was lying, that she had not been raped and was just angry at Tyson because their relationship had been only a one night stand. Karen told me that lots of women did that. She had an argument

about this case one day with a speaker who had come in to talk to the students about rape. Karen defended Mike Tyson as did nearly everyone else in the class. She said that the speaker acted as though women never did anything wrong, that, "Women can't be bitches. Well let me tell you, I can!" She also thought that too much was made of the whole subject of rape.

"Me and my friends, we always talking about 'my man raped me', or 'he just took it last night.' That don't mean we don't want it. That's just how we talk."

This conversation disturbed me and I mentioned it to Reina. In her night class the students, the women included, had taken the same point of view that Karen had on the Mike Tyson debate and they also thought that Anita Hill fabricated her allegations against Clarence Thomas. Reina said that most of the women at the Center had probably been raped at one time themselves, and the hardness of their lives had become normal for them. Another thing this conversation showed was that cultural norms, i.e. what is "normal" for a particular group, differs. Discussions such as these were beneficial for showing both the students and teachers that another reality and perspective was possible.

### Change

Aaron, like the others who worked at the Center, was always looking for ways to improve what he could offer the students. One of the major obstacles faced by many students

was the lack of day care for their babies. It was not unusual for the students to have to bring their babies and toddlers to class. Karen, the woman mentioned above, had to commute by bus almost two hours each way in order to take her baby to day care and get to class.

One of the class readings was a story about a young woman's struggles with single parenthood as she was completing her GED in New York City. The program she attended had day care. The students discussed the story and several of the mothers commented about how much they wished there were day care at the school. One of the students who had brought her baby to class on several occasions decided to take a survey to see what kind of need she could prove. Although the student finished her GED and left the program, Aaron continued working on the idea with some of the other students, and they presented it to the executive board as a recommendation.

### Writing and Empowerment

Writing and math were the two GED tests which worried the students the most, but writing seemed to bring out the greatest insecurities. Aaron had considerable success, however, in encouraging students to write to meet their own needs and to enjoy the process, without any formal instruction at all. He provided information on real-life opportunities for them to write and be heard.

Several students wrote essays for an anthology published by New Readers Press about what it was like to be a teen parent. One woman actually wrote her essay in class while she rocked her baby in his carriage with the other hand.

One day before Christmas there were about ten people in class. The two women at the front table explained to me they were going to work on their math, but first they needed to write some letters to a social service agency that collects donations for needy children. On another day, Tyrone wrote a letter to the mayor, letting him know who he was, what he was doing at the Opportunity Center, and letting the mayor know he was doing a good job of running the city.

There was tremendous interest in writing for the student newspaper that Aaron and one of the volunteers started in January. Students were merely encouraged to contribute something. They wrote with enthusiasm and no evidence of the usual GED writer's block. When the newsletter came out each month, it captured everyone's complete attention for the first hour of class as students read it cover to cover. Writing was contributed by GED students and sometimes the homeless writing workshop participants and the ESL students. The students enjoyed seeing their writing in print and having it read by others.

The following poem shows how one student used writing as a powerful tool to work through inner pain and to communicate.

### I'll Never Forget

I've become the wanderer  
 Without another place to roam,  
 Like an unwanted or uninvited guest  
 Time to spiritually find myself a home.  
 I would never have dreamed, ironic as it seems  
 That history is practically repeatin,  
 Losin one in death and one in life  
 In this game I'm truly beaten.  
 Before I depart from physical to mental  
 There's just one thing I want to see,  
 Seein' him/her with my sight, the one thing I've  
 done right  
 Create the one half of me.  
 I'll burn the light of faith, hopin you'll break  
 away  
 From the descending path of the misguided,  
 This force is strong burnin three times as long  
 hopin you're born with my strength, to fight it.  
 I won't be around to help when you fall down  
 Don't hate me and don't be upset,  
 Someone doesn't want me there so don't think I  
 don't care  
 'Cause you're one person I'll never forget.

After reading this poem I sought out and introduced myself to Jamie, the writer, and asked him to tell me more about his writing. He told me that through writing he has dealt with the incredible pain he has suffered in his short life. He was involved in gangs. His fiance was shot to death and he saw it happen. He had two children out of wedlock, one of whom the mother accidentally drowned in the bathtub. At the writing of this poem, Jamie was homeless and hoping that the program would help him get back on his feet. He was taking his time getting his GED so he could

get housing benefits. He had the background to pass the tests immediately, since he had already completed three years of college using a forged high school diploma.

### Teacher as Social Worker

One day I was substituting so that Aaron could get caught up on his administrative work. "Hey, do you know where I can get any food around here?" asked a tall man with a stringy black pony tail, about 25 years old, wearing a parka in the 75 degree heat and reeking of sweat. He stopped me as I was trying to close up the classroom to go for lunch. I fumbled with the question. "Restaurants?" "No man, you know, free food?" I helplessly directed him to the front desk, not knowing how to make him leave so that I could go for my own lunch.

Suddenly this insistent young man spotted Aaron in the hall and stopped him. "Hey, Aaron, do you know where I can get some free food around here?" He also wanted to use Aaron's guitar for another hour. He complained to Aaron about how sick he was that he was playing so badly, how stressed he was from quitting smoking, and how angry he was because no one wanted to help him find a place to live. Aaron listened patiently, although he had taken the day off and was not even supposed to be at the Center. Aaron ended up giving the young man \$2.00 from his own pocket.

Aaron had what I consider the most difficult and thankless job in the program, with the possible exception of the director. But he showed unceasing effort, despite the students' absorption in their own problems and their frequent rudeness. The students loved him. As one of the students told me,

"For the first time it seems like someone cares for helping me. Not only me, but everybody. He proves that he cares. He studies with me before the tests. I can tell him my personal problems in my journal. I trust him and look up to him. I only have one other friend and Aaron. And he's like a psychologist. When I took the science [test] I was depressed. He wrote to me: You're smart. You'll pass next time. I felt so much better."

This was also one of the difficulties for Aaron. His job often required that he act as a psychologist, a role for which he did not have training, time, or desire to fulfill. During the winter he was given funds to hire a student assistant, and he happened to hire a man who had been deeply involved with a gang.

This young man, Raphael, was attempting to get on with his life, pass his GED, and get out of the gang he was involved with. One day a rival gang found him on the street and beat him severely. Raphael was angry and decided to press charges. After his house was the target of a drive-by shooting, he tried to drop the charges, but the police would not let him. The opposite gang continued to haunt him and to shoot at his home. He moved into housing provided by the Foundation to escape. He talked to Cassandra and Pat about

his problems, but Aaron felt that he was the only person Raphael really confided in. Raphael told him that he was in serious trouble, both mental and physical, and that soon he would probably kill someone or be killed. Aaron tried alerting the caseworkers to help, but they did nothing. One week later Raphael tried to hang himself in his room. Aaron thought he was the only person concerned enough to visit Raphael, but Cassandra and Raphael's girlfriend and kids all went to see him. Then Raphael left the state to live with his mother.

Aaron was deeply distressed both by the suicide attempt and by what he saw as the lack of program assistance. He felt the director and staff were saying, "You can't let these things bother you too much. You just have to do your job." This message left him with a paradox, since he took the job at the Center because he sincerely wanted to do something to address society's problems. Although there was not the time or money to further train teachers to handle psychological crises, moral support was free, and it would have meant a great deal to Aaron to hear something like, "It was a good thing you were there. You really go the extra mile," rather than, "Just mind your own business and do your job."

The other side of the story was that both Cassandra and Melissa actually did commend him on the extra involvement and care he showed in this crisis. Cassandra was frustrated

that he could not seem to accept her support, and that he continued to feel "like it was him against the world".

Aaron wanted a limit on the number of students the Center admitted each month in order to keep track of them better and keep up on his paperwork. Sometimes students just disappeared. He never knew how many would attend on any given day. One day in November he mentioned how glad he was that about half of the students were attending a presentation on nutrition being given by another organization. Too many students had shown up and he was exhausted and overwhelmed with paperwork. He had also been sick for the past week. He kept worrying that one day all 21 students on his list would show up, and the list kept getting longer. He did new student orientation once a week. This involved testing and talking to each new student. He did not feel able to give enough time to each person.

Students mentioned that one of the most important differences between regular high school and this program was the time and caring given to the students by the teachers.

"Public school teachers never have time for you. They just tell you to do the homework and there will be a test on Friday. When you ask them to explain it, they don't have time. They would rather go work with a smart kid.

Another thing I have problems with is authority figures. The teachers there think 'I've got a B.A. or a master's degree and you're here to get your education. There is nothin' I can learn from you.' That's why I quit going to school from my freshman to my sophomore year. In my senior year I started going again. I was motivated then to get out, but then they came to me and said I

still had 30 credits or something like that to make up. I think I finished one semester and then just said forget it. If I had had teachers like the teachers here, I would have been a 4.0 student and graduated on time. There wasn't one teacher I liked in high school. They thought I had an attitude problem, but it was because none of them took the time for me."

### Case Studies

The following case studies demonstrate the perspectives of students, and taken together, give insight into student culture at the center. Three student stories were gathered on an ongoing, informal basis as I helped students in class. The fourth study was done on a more formal basis. Tyrone, popular with the students and staff, was ready to make a time commitment to several interviews. He trusted me, and his readiness to talk freely made him a good key informant.

#### Brian

I talked to Brian during his first week in the classroom. Brian was one of the few Caucasian men in the GED class. He had had a job washing dishes for the three years after leaving school. He was tired of that job. He liked to read and felt that he was smart; the GED posed no problem for him, and with the GED in hand he could find a better job. Brian told me he wanted to go into retail because he thought he could con anyone, but the problem was that he did not have suitable clothes for the job or a

steady address. Lately he had been going from friend to friend to stay the night. He bought food, cooked them dinner, stayed the night, and then moved on. The last thing he wanted to do was impose.

Brian's mother lived in Seattle, but they did not get along. She insisted that he give her everything he earned for room and board. When his father died three years earlier, his mother decided she could not handle him and turned him over to the state. Brian had an older brother in Chicago, but his brother was involved in the Mafia and they were not close. He felt his friends were his only family. His teenage years were spent in group homes and foster homes just trying to get by. School was too much to cope with and too conformist. He fell into the drug crowd for two reasons: they skipped school, and they accepted non-conformists.

For a while, he told me, he had reformed. He had stopped using drugs and had a regular place to stay. Then he broke up with his gay lover and the world fell apart. He started using drugs again. When we talked the first time, he told me he was experiencing strain with his present lover because he was back in school and doing something positive with himself. His lover did not support this change.

After finishing the GED, Brian began working for the Center as the program assistant. His administrative work was highly praised by the Center's staff.

Tara

I was helping Tara, a nineteen year old African-American woman, with her writing as we began talking. She said she has always needed a lot of individual attention. When she was in seventh and eighth grade she was in special education classes, which she liked because they were smaller. (This surprised me because she was an articulate woman and quick to catch on.) In sixth grade she had a tutor three times a week. As soon as she started going to the tutor she began getting A's and B's. She felt she was slower than most people.

She quit high school after tenth grade because she had skipped school for almost the entire first half of the year. Her social worker said she would have to go back to the juvenile center (she had been in the juvenile center for running away from home) if she did not go back to school, so she tried to go back. The problem was that her best friend was a bad influence on her. She and her friend always skipped together.

At that time she was living with her father in Mississippi. Her father had been sexually abusing her since she was thirteen and finally she ran away. She did not tell anyone about her father's abuse until she was in tenth grade. When she told her mother, her mother left him and moved to Seattle with Tara and Tara's twelve siblings, all younger than Tara. In Seattle, Tara tried living with her

mother, but they did not get along well with one another.

Tara said that her mother wanted too much control.

Tara thought that high school would have been a lot easier to complete than the GED.

"In high school they just pass you on. I was getting D's and F's in sixth grade. They just let me by. I thought I was getting over [conning the teachers], but it has all come back to me now."

Tara tried to kill herself several times when she was living with her drug addicted father. After coming to Seattle, however, she improved her life through talking about the trauma of sexual abuse with counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. She hated her father, but she was trying to come to terms with him and recently had written him a letter letting him know how well she was doing.

The real key to changing her life, Tara told me, was her boyfriend, whom she met when she was seventeen. Her mother did not approve of them seeing each other and threw her out of the house. With nowhere else to go, she went to live with her new boyfriend, a difficult adjustment since they had only been dating for one month. A few months later she got pregnant.

"We were living in a terrible apartment with a big hole in the ceiling and cockroaches everywhere. When I found a roach in my baby's bed, I said, 'That's it. We're moving.'"

They tried moving in with her boyfriend's mother. That did not work out because his mother was on drugs and, "there

were crazy people in and out all the time." The baby spent most of the time at Tara's mother's house.

She started praying about their situation and things improved dramatically. They moved into an attractive apartment with a patio in a nice neighborhood. They even had two cars, because her boyfriend was hit by a car and got insurance money to buy the second car.

Tara did not have any friends. There were people at school she talked to, but she was extremely jealous and did not want to bring friends home for fear they would try to flirt with her boyfriend and make trouble for her. She thought most people her age were "party animals". She just wanted to stay home and "kick it" [hang out/have a good time] with her daughter. Her boyfriend was modern and did not want to have a lot of children. He wanted both of them to have good jobs. They planned to get married someday.

### Kelvin

Kelvin, a thin African-American man, about 5'9" tall, had a bright smile and a nervous, restless manner. When I met him, he only had one more GED test to pass, the writing test. He was a talkative person, and as we worked together he was pleased to have found a listener.

Kelvin left Seattle when he was 16 to live with his father in California. (He was 20 when I interviewed him.) His mother had a new boyfriend whom he did not like. He

told me he had been getting into more and more fights at school because of the pressure at home. The breaking point was when his mother caught him shoplifting. She told him that the belt obviously was not working for him anymore so he should go into his room and take off his clothes. He protested, but went into his room and took off his shirt. Then his mother came back into the room and hit him with an extension cord, and her boyfriend came in and hit him some more. He still had the scars from this ordeal. Soon after this, he told his mother that she was not going to hit him anymore. His mother felt that she no longer had control over him and sent him to live with his grandmother for four months before he went to live with his father. When we last talked he was living with the same grandmother and his older brother who was 24.

Kelvin explained to me that he had a short temper, and after he went to California he was constantly getting into fights because of the rage he felt towards his mother. He said he would pick fights if someone looked at him funny or stepped on his foot. He gave me some examples. At a bus stop, a man was standing close behind him and out of the clear blue said that he felt like killing someone. He had a bulge in his jacket that looked like a gun. Kelvin just said "If that's how you feel.." Then the man said "I like to kill niggers." Kelvin saw red and had the man on the

ground without even remembering how he did it. The man did have a gun, which Kelvin took. Kelvin beat him up badly.

Another incident happened while Kelvin was living in California. He and some friends sold some Skinheads [members of a white supremecist gang] a bag of parsley instead of marijuana for \$60. Later, one of them came up to Kelvin and told him how good it was. When Kelvin could not keep from laughing, the Skinhead realized that he had been made a fool of and he pulled out a switchblade. Again, Kelvin remembered seeing red. The Skinhead had two friends backing him up and Kelvin was alone and unarmed, but he grabbed the Skinhead and went crazy. He beat all three of them up, and when the police arrived, he was beating the first Skinhead's head against a car, as if he were in a trance. One policeman surprised Kelvin by grabbing his arm from behind. Kelvin almost swung at him. Despite the fact that there were three Skinheads against one young man, the police blamed Kelvin. He demanded permission to call his father and the police reluctantly allowed him to do this. His father came to get him and supported him, telling him that he had done the right thing.

Kelvin's father was the greatest source of strength and happiness in his life. Sometimes they stayed up until 6:00 in the morning talking. Even though they had fights (they both had short tempers), they were best friends. "No matter what, I will always have a place in my heart for my dad."

His father knew martial arts and taught Kelvin how to defend himself. He advised Kelvin not to start any fights unless he was prepared to finish them, and he did not want his son to go looking for fights.

Kelvin's father lived in Nevada and worked with gang members out in the desert. He was a strong, commanding man with a powerful voice. "He has like a huge aura around him. When he is angry, it's hard to stay in the same house with him."

The family was divided by the divorce. I did not realize until quite late in our conversation that Kelvin even had a brother. His brother did not get along with their father but got along fine with their mother. When his parents married, Kelvin said that people did not think they would last together a year, but they lasted thirteen. He wished they were still together, but realized that they were completely different people. He felt nervous about getting married himself someday.

Kelvin finished his GED and got a job as a delivery driver. When I last talked to him, his goal was to save enough money so he could move out of his brother's apartment.

### Tyrone

Tyrone, a handsome African-American man with a shaved head, a square jaw, an imposing physique, and gold wire-

rimmed glasses, was a member of the Bloods gang in L.A. When he was 16 he moved to Long Beach, California, Cripps territory. In Long Beach, Tyrone became a "homey", a partner or friend, of the Cholos, a Mexican gang, since this was not Blood's territory. "Is it safer to be a homey than an actual gang member?" I asked.

"No. You just can't really be from two gangs. You can leave, but you always know where you come from. I'll always be a member. It's in me. They [Cholos] might want you to join in a fight, but it's not your battle. We got in fights together, but not for the same reasons."

I asked him about how dangerous it was to be in a gang here in the Northwest.

"I'm not from here so I don't have anything to fear. In L.A., I do. Especially now. It's like I've been off on vacation while they are protecting the neighborhood. In every neighborhood there's somebody to fear, but people kill because of that fear.

When I was 18 I was convicted of selling drugs. I did nine months. It was a cool thing for the neighborhood. I was 'with the men'. People envy that. Being in prison means getting into huge gang fights and coming out alive. Sometimes it means killing people. If you kill someone, you are a man, you got a lot of heart.

Through your reputation you gain respect. You got to suffer consequences to get it. Respect don't just come to you on the streets. It's what you can do. You are a coward or you're not. It's not money, not how you look. If your reputation gets too big and you have too much respect, someone will envy you and kill you to get the respect for killing someone big. That's called getting a stripe. Respect is like a military organization.

Some people are born to the street. I was born to it. I was like a normal kid. I woke up, went to school, stole toys, GI Joe, Hot Wheels, a

typical kid. As you get older you can see things differently. We were not in the projects but in South Central L.A. with a lot of low income homes. If your mom's on welfare she can't give you things you want.

I grew up with one parent. My dad was killed when I was 14, but I was already grown up without a father. He wasn't happy with the way I was growing up. I was too much like him. Life for me was like any person in the ghetto. Fuck all the white folks. The only ones we knew were the police. Dad didn't want me to think like that. I thought I was impressing him."

Tyrone's father had been involved with another woman, Dot, before Tyrone's mother and he got together. They had a daughter older than Tyrone. The night his father was killed he was with Dot and some other people, drinking alcohol. Tyrone's father and Dot were not romantically involved anymore, but Dot's boyfriend got jealous and was probably on drugs. While Tyrone's father was asleep, this man poured gasoline on him and set him on fire.

"Mom said the guy who killed him was arrested. I just shook it off. Sometimes life is a trip. Life in the ghetto, you just have to accept. Everything in this world is not for keeps. It's all temporary. You got to appreciate things before things are gone.

There is a lot of pain growing up fast. I still learn. I'm still in contact with the streets. The only people I can communicate with and be myself with is on the street. I do the square thing, but it doesn't turn me on. I go on the streets and kick it.

If I were in politics or anything like that, I would never forget where I came from. All that other shit is fake. You got to be fake to get by. If you want to know the blunt truth about anything, ask someone from the streets. Other people just have the fear of being judged, not

doing as well as the neighbors. They have only two thoughts, being rich or being broke.

I was 22 years old when I got my first job. Street life grabbed me. I got a street education. Can't no book in the world produce it. It's an economic education, not just on paper. You learn to be an accountant, counting money, a chemist, cooking drugs. With an academic education there are no immediate benefits; on the streets you want it right now. The world is all based on production. It's a fast way to live, but it's illegal. Even before the recession there were thousands of people without jobs, even those who went through school. There just aren't enough legal jobs. You got to create or produce to get paid.

I took the road to the street because it was the shit [cool]. Couldn't beat it. My two older sisters were in it, prostitutes, dope dealers. They were getting respect in the neighborhood by being themselves. There's more man in them than most men. I envied them. They had game, verbs and words in them. One's in prison. She came out and went back in.

After nine months in jail I went to camp [work camp]. I hung with the Mexicans. I grew up in two cultures. I can't kick it with the Cripps so I kick it with the Mexicans. I can be comfortable with them. You watch their back and they watch yours. I was still cool [alive] after getting out so I got a sack of drugs. I was on a team [4 men] selling drugs. When the weekend came, I wanted to take a vacation. I went to Long Beach and was selling drugs and kickin' it. I started using drugs.

People in South Central kind of envy the kind of life of gangster movies. Like if you want something you got to take it. You can't ask nicely. So I started using drugs. I was tripping on Scarface [the star in a gangster movie], how he put coke in his nose. My sister was using too. Life at 19 started to drop. I was out of control. It overwhelmed me, even though I tried to quit. I didn't know nothing about AA.

When I was 19 I started getting DUIs [tickets for Driving Under the Influence], and I was not seeing my parole officer. I was picked up for

having dilated eyes and got 16 months in prison for violating parole. I turned 20 in jail before going to prison. I went on gang banging [being an active gang member] in prison. Everyone knows what goes on inside and outside, and you must get respect. It's better to be scared and not let nobody know. If you get hurt, you get hurt, but it's better to get hurt than to run. If you run, you get marked out. You can't go back to the hood. You have to live in police custody. Nobody wants that.

In my own free time, when I was eating, in my cell, talking on the phone, I started thinking about things. You can feel lonely even with a thousand people. I realized that L.A. was no place to get out of prison with no high school diploma. I would also rather cry over my mom than have her cry over me.

So after I was out, in '88, I was sent up here with some drugs [to sell]. Nobody knew me. Even at my worst, I always had a girlfriend. I always kept my appearance up no matter what. Mom always said, even if you're doing bad, make sure you look good. I always kept my hair cut and would even steal clothes. So I was broke up here, selling it. This girl kept wanting drugs and I gave them to her. Finally I smoked the rest because I didn't want to give it to her. I didn't make the effort to go back. I had too much pride, and I didn't accomplish my mission of making money.

It wasn't easy. At my worst, I got arrested for criminal trespassing and served fifty days. A home boy told me about a job here at this Center sweeping streets. I wasn't sober but I was working and kept on working. Then Pat, one of the Center's caseworkers, found me and started working with me.

Whatever you do in your life, even in a negative environment, staying down [faithful] is staying strong. Dealing drugs has three possible outcomes: jail, death, or success from staying down, strong, with the gang. In economic life [white collar work], staying good has two outcomes: 1) success, 2) happiness. If you stay in school and stay positive, there is a trophy at the end. Your only trophy in street life is success, but there are many side roads. But

outside the streets, you can have a future, a career. That's your trophy. Most go for that. But if you are raised in the ghetto, peer pressure is enormous. Those people who do make it usually have two parents with them. When there is only one parent and five kids, some of them are bound to slip. I saw a weakness in my mom. I knew she'd love me anyway, no matter what I did, and I took advantage of that.

My experiences are still good. I dig myself today. I'm not too far behind society's world. Even a person from the streets couldn't produce a book to give people the understanding and experience I have. That's one thing about street education--there's only one way to get it. By the time you are 15 you are grown. I'm only 24. That's young on the outside, but I can relate to someone 60. Sometimes I feel 50. When the pain sinks in it becomes knowledge, wisdom. You don't know.

One thing I would like to do, I've been thinking about writing a book. I always say I don't have time. My verbal skills is o.k. around most people but my writing, my spelling is hard for me. I can't write it the way I want to write it. Even on the GED I'm stuck on the stupid-assed writing skills. I know I'm smarter than that. If they had a GED in street language I'd be through with it. I'm going to pass it though because I'm going to college. One year off the streets and you know what it takes. When you are above, in society, you see what needs to be done. It's easier. Beneath, on the streets, it takes longer.

The problem I have with society is my verbal skills. They get so twisted. It's aggravating! A person from the streets is pointed at as being a dummy because he doesn't have the papers a society person does to back up his education."

I asked Tyrone what he thought about the GED program:

"It's cool. They deal with people. They got a lot of heart. They should get paid lots lots more for even having the courage to deal with people from the streets, people who are homeless, suicidal, runaways. These are people with an education willing to deal with people without an education."

Regarding his future:

"I don't have any kids. I'm pro-choice. A lot of people want to get the prettiest woman pregnant. They want her to carry a load and not go anywhere. Then they can say she's his woman. They will never be able to make ends meet. Abortion is just another chance to proceed with your life and give a better life to your kids later. I'd push a girl to have an abortion. I will take her to the clinic, push her to have it. I know she'll be happy later. Otherwise you're stuck. You got no shot at success. I'll have kids probably at 39. Maybe 35. Most things take about 7-10 years. At 31 I'll have two educations, street education and college education.

I want to study political science. They have good people up there but it's the assholes that are showing. I really know what's going on behind the liquor store or Safeway, how people feel. Some rich folks care, but more poor folks do. That's why this center is here. The government knows that at-risk people don't have anywhere to go. This world would be tore up if they didn't do something. They won't let you sell drugs. People here should get more money for their work. They don't try to change you; they just want you to understand.

I have thought about drama. Acting is acting, but I don't really have time to read a script and memorize. I'd rather do a talk show. I want to stick with real parts of the world. No scripts. I don't want to get rich and leave the ghetto. I would rather build a nice house in the ghetto and help out the people there.

One of my role models is Scarface, Robert DeNiro, and other gangsters from the gangster movies. Another one is John Gatti, a king pin of the Mafia. He killed people, but he was still a good guy. It was either kill or be killed. But the important thing is to put money back in the neighborhood.

Who can you put your faith in but yourself? That's my religion. You don't need a church to believe. Sharing your faith with others makes you feel good if you can help.

Right now I am working on the GED by myself with a book, doing writing exercises every day. I'm working with Rachel one night a week. I will take it again in two weeks. I have to work on it by myself now that there are no night classes.

Things have changed a lot. I've been here at this program for two years now. I didn't like a lot of the teachers in the beginning. I really only came here because I wanted the job. I didn't think they cared. After a long time I realized they did care. When the old teachers started leaving my feelings came out. I missed them. Rachel, Erica -- they were good people. This was something new to them, dealing with at-risk participants. They couldn't relate to our slang words. We had to share with them.

They did dances, talent shows. It was good. I like them all now. All the teachers are cool. The case managers don't have much interest in helping other people. I don't know why some of them are still here. Some of them just be here to make their own lives comfortable while others do care some."

I asked Tyrone about how he had gotten to know Pat, since she had introduced me to him and I knew that she had extended herself considerably for him.

"Pat was going to San Francisco for a training. She gave Martina the o.k. to enroll me in school and take over my stuff till she got back. At the time I was on coke and alcohol. She asked me about whether I was on coke and I said yeah. She wanted me to get into a treatment program. I was working and going to school here for security and safety so I would be off the streets.

So I got a two week voucher to stay at the Sundown Inn. They made you go to church. You stayed in a big room full of bunks like a jail. I knew some girls in one of the neighborhoods and spent the night with them. Or I said fuck it and slept in the park, or I would break into a vacant house. I only had to do this for two weeks until my bed came open at the Center. Here I had my own room. I started working for Clean City. I was 22. It was the first job I ever had. I kind of

felt if I stayed here and did the right thing something good would come of it. I never was one of those guys who would disappear, even when using. When I was using, I would admit it to Pat.

If I went to treatment, DSHS would pay \$320 for housing, plus I would have what I made here and food stamps. I was in this thing called denial with myself. I thought I would stop doing coke but that I could still do alcohol. I went through the ninety day program still drinking. It was an outpatient program with groups every day. So I was always broke and asking Pat for vouchers. She asked me why. It came out I was drinking.

Six months after my enrollment in the program, I was living in an apartment downtown. The rent was due in two weeks and I needed a job desperately. I got a job where they pay you each day, but it had unpredictable hours. One day I stood out there from 8:00 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon and my name was never called. So I called my mom and she sent me \$162. I was only \$132 shy of the rent.

Then I got arrested for first degree robbery with a deadly weapon. This robbery had happened two weeks after I started the treatment program. I had to spend twenty days in jail. I didn't pay my rent because I was in jail. I got out of jail fifteen days into the month and was evicted from my apartment.

Pat hooked me up with a church program in the south part of the city. It used to be a Catholic school. We slept in the section where the nuns slept. It was clean. It was a good shelter. We got up at 6:00 a.m. We ate, read the paper. We were like a family almost. We had to be in at 5:30 in the afternoon, but I had breaks. I worked at a ski store and my boss intervened for me. He liked me. Of all the places I've been, I respected that place. I appreciated that place. I stayed for four months. I saved and got my own apartment again. I lived there for almost a year until I got mixed up with drugs again. At this point I had been here with the program for about one and a half years.

I started selling drugs and using the drugs. I needed rent money. When rent was due, I had double the money. But I didn't pay it. I bought

more coke and spent it all. I just said fuck it, I can use. When I went for broke I called Pat and said I needed help. Pat was close to me. She had love for me as an individual.

We went down to another treatment center where they had a scholarship program, twenty-one days for free. It was a good place. I stayed in there and it worked for me. Before I went into treatment, I was messing up bad. My boss said just take care of yourself first and then you can have your job back.

One of the things I've learned is not to be too shy to talk to people when you need help. Go to AA meetings. Find places where you can relax and be yourself. I knew I couldn't stay sober being on the street or in an apartment. I went to a new program with the Salvation Army. I stayed seventeen days. Then Pat set me up to live at her sister's. That's really cool. It's like a mother/son relationship. She tells me to take it easy on myself. I just need some time to catch up, since I've been absent from the world for so long."

#### Dennis - A GED Volunteer

The volunteer program at the Center, created by Melissa, had developed rapidly. It was non-existent in 1991; by 1993 there were 24 volunteers for the ESL and GED classes, and a waiting list for future volunteers to go through training. Melissa was able to become more selective with the huge interest people showed in the program, requiring an interview process and a weekend training.

Dennis was one of the earlier volunteers, and not an especially popular one, but he was with the program for nearly a year and was interested in sharing his perspectives. This profile gives another participant's

point of view, but a quite different one from the students' or teachers' perspective because of the different expectations and background he came with. Dennis's suggestion (which follows) to improve class participation is an example of how difficult it is to pair up the "work ethic" cultural values embodied in white middle class volunteers (there are also two Asians whom the students regard as white, not "of color") with meeting the students' needs, which to the volunteers are often unimaginable.

Dennis, an office worker at a downtown law firm, was looking for a chance to do something which would help others when he saw the flyer at the library advertising for volunteer teaching assistants. He thought this would be a valuable experience because he would eventually like to become a teacher himself one day. He came in for orientation.

Dennis told me many of the students were very distracted. They came in with their friends who had a negative effect on them about sixty percent of the time. Another distraction was that the students often brought their children or infants to class. For the most part, Dennis was comfortable with the students and enjoyed the quality of interaction he had with them, although sometimes they asked questions about the GED test that he could not answer.

He saw problems in the attitude of the students.

"Some of the students think that just because they are here they will learn something. They waste their own time that way. Also, they come with distractions, but I guess that's normal. Some know what they need to study. Others have no direction. Some of the students were in detention centers and can get out by going to class. Should they really be here?"

Dennis saw the goals of the GED program as being three-fold. First, the intention of the Center was to develop students' knowledge so they could participate in city life, so they could compute costs, read, and have skills for office work. Second, Aaron tried to raise people's social awareness by looking at what was going on in their lives and world so they could participate. In other words, to empower them. Third, the program showed people how to access education they could receive on their own. For example, the program exposed them to the library, movie series, theaters, museums. It showed them where these things were and what they were like. This helped people participate in their own lives. If they did not participate, there would be more chance that negative things would fill up their lives. The difficulty for Aaron, as Dennis saw it, was that the students did not seem to have social awareness as a goal. They mainly just wanted to pass the GED.

"This class seems to lack a certain intensity. Even though the instructor is totally enlightened, the goal of the GED lowers the intensity of class participation. This is because in this kind of class you 'do as you want as fast as you want.' It would be helpful if students could be made more enthusiastic so they would go further with the opportunities presented to them. Some people just sit there and stare out the

window. Are they on drugs? I don't know. I don't have the experience to say for sure."

Turnover also hurt the program, turnover of students. A cohort would get to know each other better and would be more of a support system. For the teacher and the students, a constant influx of new students was distracting.

Another problem in the class was the wide variety of levels. Some people, according to Dennis, were barely fluent in English and others were almost done with their GED. Younger students also seemed to have different motivation than older students.

Dennis talked about a successful model that he was familiar with, the "Morningside Model". The teacher in this program acted as a learning coach. Students timed themselves on tests and competed against themselves. The class did considerable rote memorization of rules to increase fluency in math, and Dennis suggested that something similar might benefit this program.

Dennis expressed concern about the future of the program. He felt that it was succeeding at a low to moderate level, but not a high level, and he somehow thought that the root of this problem was a lack of funding.

### Summary

The interview with Dennis shows the need for ethnographic studies. Despite his good intentions, he only

saw the surface level of students' lives. He saw some of the problems they had, such as being negatively influenced by friends and distracted by children, but he criticized rather than listened. He was not interested in learning from them so he might develop teaching techniques that could help them with their problems, but instead suggested that the class could benefit from memorization and competition. Dennis made those suggestions even though intellectually he knew what the program's goals were, at least enough to mouth the language. He showed no ability or even willingness to understand the participants' perspective. He saw turnover, the variety of levels, and self-paced learning as problems. His perspective demonstrates the difficulty of implementing a student-centered learning approach using white, middle-class tutors, and it demonstrates the need to understand the students' concerns.

## CHAPTER 8

### WRITING WORKSHOPS

The Center began the writing workshops under the life skills program for the homeless. After getting feedback from the students of earlier life skills workshops, the staff discovered that creative positive experiences were more valuable for improving students' lifestyles than teaching students techniques for goal setting, anger management, and self-esteem. Students said they learned the most when they were challenged to express themselves through writing, drawing, or collages. The following excerpt outlined the plan for the project:

All program participants in this project will become the artists, regardless of artistic experience or skill. The artists will come from many different location: emergency and transitional shelters, transitional houses, service providers and the streets.

The final project goal is to create an exhibit which will consist of different environments created by the artists. Possible environments may include an alley, a shelter, a shanty town and a dream home. Within these environments will be displayed the various art produced by the individual artists, including photography, paintings, writings, drawings and street theatre, thus juxtaposing peoples' inner thoughts and feelings with the environments in which they live. The artists will choose the mediums. The Opportunity Center will provide the instruction, guidance and materials through different workshops and provide a studio space for the artists to create their work.

An integral piece of this project will be weekly discussion groups where people will gather to talk about the project and other aspects of

their lives. The groups will provide peer support and referral assistance for the participants. We will also provide transportation assistance as needed to project participants.

The writing workshops, which began on April 25, 1992, were the first of these workshops. No others were implemented, and, despite the positive impact they had on the participants, the writing workshops were discontinued.

The writing workshop grew out of what had previously been "Life skills" workshops, which had focused on such things as building self-esteem, goal setting, and accessing community resources. The participants in these life skills workshops felt that they knew plenty about self-esteem and goal setting, but they needed more opportunity to practice what they knew. In their workshop evaluations, the students indicated that the most valuable part of the workshops were when they had the chance to express themselves, through writing their stories, improvising skits based on things they dealt with day-to-day, and art work dealing with real life topics. The writing workshop was conceived as an opportunity for the participants to learn the life skills mentioned above through self-expression and in a meaningful context.

Before coming to the Center, Reina, a wild-haired redhead with big earrings, horn rimmed glasses, funky clothes, and a gentle voice, taught adult basic education in New York for seven years. She facilitated over 20 student publications in both New York and Seattle, and taught

writing workshops and developed writing curriculum in both places. From her experience in adult education, but more importantly, from her personal experience of homelessness, she created the writing workshops. For a period of time she was living at the YMCA in New York City, living from hand to mouth, and what helped her keep her sanity was a writing group she had formed with several friends.

She was always encouraging the students to appreciate what they had done but to strive to do better. Her biggest strength, and an essential strength in a job working with homeless people struggling with emotional and physical problems, was her ability to negotiate conflicting feelings. She was both an instructor and a diplomat.

Reina wanted to create an environment of self-exploration, something she saw as lacking in a homeless person's life. One of her primary goals was to show participants that their thoughts, ideas, and experiences were important, that they were valuable citizens with things to share. She expected that as the writers came to believe this, and as they formed a support group in the workshops, their self-esteem and self-confidence would be enhanced, enabling them to make changes to better their life situations. She also wanted to provide professional writing skills, instruction in basic computer literacy, and opportunities for publication for all levels of writing ability. In her proposal, she envisioned that,

"During the workshops the participants will create supportive partnerships with each other, share knowledge of community resources, work together on publishing committees, and interact with volunteers from the community who are involved with writing, libraries and the arts."

### Writing Class Design

Together the participants and the instructor developed the structure of each class, which included journal writing, time to work on individual pieces, teacher conferences, and the chance to share writing with each other or the group. Most classes included a lesson, decided on by the participants, on topics such as editing skills, topic selection, revision, drafting, and style. Reina also shared her own writing and sometimes brought in writing from other authors to share with the group. The participants were taught to use the computers and given opportunities to do their writing on them.

Along with the chance to learn writing and computer skills, workshop participants had the chance to learn and practice critical thinking and interpersonal skills: active listening, communicating ideas, analyzing a piece of writing, and using appropriate feedback. They practiced each of these skills at every class session. Later, the participants had a chance to publish their writing themselves. They were responsible for negotiating the publication design of a self-published book compiled of their work, how it would be organized, and how the

distribution of the final project would be managed. Essentially, this involved intensive problem solving and learning to work as a group.

### The Environment

The workshops were held on one of the top two floors of the Foundation, located downtown. Originally class was held twice a week, for two and a half hours on Wednesday and another two and a half on Saturday. Since many of the students found jobs soon after joining the workshop, class was switched to Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

In one of the rooms used for the workshops there were computers available. Both rooms had chalk boards. Usually several tables were pushed together to provide a group space, but there were also tables around the room for students to use if they wanted more privacy. Paper, pens, journals, and disks, as well as coffee and bagels, were provided for the students.

### Outreach

There was a core group of four to five students who came to the workshops regularly and others that came sporadically. The program planned to perform sample writing workshops at local shelters twice a month to recruit students in a familiar environment, but they only did one of

these. The teacher and the VISTA volunteer sent flyers to local shelters, the library, social service agencies, adult education programs, and informed the Foundation's case managers about the classes.

### Assessment

The intake process, conducted by Reina, involved having the students fill out a demographic information form and discuss their needs and goals. Participants kept all of their work in a file box. This work, which included journals, drafts, exercises, revisions, and finished pieces, was later used to create portfolios of their work. Through looking at their progress as well as their weak areas, they were then able to evaluate their own work.

### A Typical Day

#### 1. Journal Writing

Participants began by writing in a dialogue journal for approximately half an hour. This gave people a starting place for the class, some time for reflection, and helped increase vocabulary and improve the flow of writing.

#### 2. Plan and work on projects

After journal writing, the participants got their folders from the file box and set their plans for the day. They

thought about what they were working on and what the needs of their pieces were. Reina was available to conference with individual students.

### 3. Share

Approximately an hour later, the class shared what they were working on and provided feedback to each other. The emphasis was on positive responses. As the writers listened to each other, they were to be thinking about several things. Does this make sense? What pictures does the piece create in my mind? What does it make me feel? What is needed to make it complete?

### 4. Lesson

The class decided on a particular lesson they wanted to work on and Reina worked with them on the chosen topic, for example grammar, style, writing letters, description.

### 5. Return to writing.

Reina brought a poster to each class which outlined the stages of the writing process, which she used in each class. The poster addressed the following points:

### Stages

1. Find your ideas -- brainstorm, read, think, sit, freewrite, observe, talk, listen.
2. Draft -- write everything you can, fast, discovering what you know.
3. Read and revise -- read to yourself, move sections, cross out parts, add parts, make sense of things, create order.
4. Edit -- proofread for punctuation, spelling, and grammar until ready for publication.

### Sample Lesson

The class was structured to accommodate the needs and wishes of the students, so it demanded great flexibility of the teacher. One of the students was interested in writing science fiction and had no experience in writing anything. Reina asked him how he would approach the task. He said he would get some ideas from the newspaper. He was especially interested in aliens. She added to his ideas by suggesting that he sketch out his characters.

"Maybe you have a character in mind. Or what would happen if you had a man who thought like a woman? Next, think of the setting. And next? Yes, events. So what else would you add? 'How', yes! Start with the general and go towards specific. You could start with an event which happened. How does that affect people? You can come into a style of writing through many different doors. Like if you were writing a detective story you might start with a crime.

When you are starting to write, start with a small increment. I have been writing a story for about a year. I started with an image of a woman lying in a hammock looking up at the New England sky, stunned, saying 'All we know about life is that it changes.' This is an example of starting small in how we go about reaching our goal."

### Outcomes

The writing workshop achieved its goal of developing self-esteem and self-confidence in its participants through setting goals and reaching them. Each participant had a different reason for being in the group. Some saw it as a chance to pursue self-discovery and self-analysis. Others saw it as a form of therapy, a chance to develop their literary, poetic, or communication skills. One person, Louise, felt strongly about using her writing skills to educate people about the experiences of the homeless. Despite a variety of goals, there were a number of common achievements.

1. Each member of the core group desired to publish more. Publishing their book, Revealing the Invisible Homeless, seeing their work in print, gave them an identity as writers, as they themselves have mentioned. A couple of the students began improving their writing skills further outside of class through self-paced writing and grammar books.

2. Their self-confidence increased to the point that each of the students took charge of his or her own learning both inside and outside the writing group.

- \* Randy was learning "what it means to be a writer" by going to the nightly readings at Elliott Bay bookstore.
- \* Hugh was studying writing books on his own and dedicating himself to writing four nights a week.
- \* Jeremiah was writing letters after not having written a word for the past twelve years. (He even wrote four to me!)
- \* Gertrude started taking paralegal classes.
- \* Louise visited the UW and began the application process to go back to school. She also got a promotion.
- \* The group as a whole began contributing their own ideas and suggestions for class writing exercises and projects.

3. The book gave participants tangible evidence through their publication that they had much to contribute, despite being homeless.

- \* Gertrude submitted her poem to two poetry contests. She credited her experience with the book as having given her the confidence to do it.
- \* Louise said, "The book shows people that we are not just something to be thrown away." She also

began publishing work in the shelter newsletter and was beginning to work for the homeless newspaper.

4. The publication process gave the students enough of a feeling of mastery that they started making changes in their lives.

- \* On a small scale, Sherry, who had been feeling the need for better time management skills, began working on this by disciplining herself to write in her time outside of class.
- \* Gertrude applied for and got a better job.  
"Before I felt like I was stuck. Now I know I can do something. It feels so good!"
- \* Randy and Louise, neither of whom were consciously focusing on their housing earlier in the course, both found places to live outside the shelter.
- \* Jeremiah found a new job and wrote to me that he had become more peaceful and happy and was taking better care of his health.

5. The workshop stimulated the group to begin focusing on helping others and doing something about the problem of homelessness.

- \* Louise became an advocate for the homeless, working to promote more classes within the shelters, going to public hearings, and allowing her piece on being sick and homeless to be read at

a health conference. She was working with the new writing teacher to obtain a grant to write a women's resource guide for the newly homeless.

- \* Gertrude brought in a poem she encouraged her homeless brother to write. She was also learning about legal procedures so she would know her rights and could help her family when they needed legal advice.

6. As a final outcome, the participants learned how to work as a group in dealing with conflict resolution. Deciding on the title of the book was difficult, since some members of the group felt stigmatized by being labeled homeless while others felt that the very essence of the book was to educate people about homelessness. Reina demonstrated her diplomatic genius by bringing the group from a complete stalemate, where one member was ready to take her work and go home, to a consensus where everyone loved the title. This was the best model of conflict resolution any of us had ever seen, and it gave us a goal to work towards when future conflicts arose. For a time after Reina left, Randy especially seemed to have benefitted from her modeling, as he quite effectively took over Reina's role of conflict manager.

The group dynamics played an important role in the outcomes of the writing workshop. Through the group work, the students gained a wealth of unmeasurable skills, things

that could only be discovered through ethnographic study, including learning to listen and accept feedback, to support each other's efforts, and to explore aspects of themselves that they might not have had the strength to approach alone.

### Case Studies

The following two case studies offer a glimpse into the problem of homelessness: what some of its causes are, what it feels like to be homeless, and the diversity of backgrounds homeless people come from. The studies show what kinds of self-actualizing needs homeless students may have, in addition to their more obvious mundane needs, and how these needs were partially met by the writing workshops.

#### Louise

Louise, a hard working, single, middle-aged white female with an 18 year old son, has, as she said, "... traveled from the suburbs to the streets in one short leap." When she agreed to talk to me about her life, she commented,

"It's important to look at the cold, hard facts. We [she and her son] are homeless now. It is unfortunate, but I'm not ashamed of it. I'm a survivor. I want people to become aware of the system and to look at the system for what it is."

She had little tolerance for the victim mentality she saw in the homeless shelter. She was a fighter. I asked her how she came to be such a fighter.

"I've been a victim for too long. I was physically abused as a child, and later sexually abused. I was raped when I was 14. I married an alcoholic, and then I got involved with a batterer. I finally decided to get myself out of the situation that was harming me. Those men who abused me have to deal with themselves. And it's no use spending my life blaming my parents. It's my choice to be a survivor and not a victim."

She admitted it took years of therapy and reading to get to this point, but her conviction was clear in her strong, raspy voice.

The oldest of 13 children, Louise's life was hard from the beginning. She grew up in northern Idaho. Her parents were second generation European immigrants; neither had more than a middle school education. Her father was a logger, and she remembers going to the woods to help collect firewood to sell in town by the age of five. Both sets of grandparents lived with her family, but by the age of seven the last grandparent died and taking care of her younger siblings became her responsibility. Louise said that her brothers and sisters learned to say Louise before they learned to say "mom".

When the eleventh baby was born, her mother had health complications and had to remain in the hospital for some time. Louise's father brought the baby home when he was five days old. By this time Louise was in high school. She had to take care of the newborn baby and get the other children fed before school, come home and make lunch for everyone, and then prepare dinner after school. Despite her

intense family involvement, she told me she was not close to her parents or her siblings. Her brother, who lived in Seattle, would do nothing to help her when she lost her job and her home.

Louise went to the first eight grades in a one room school. As she described it, she just repeated the first four grades twice. It was dull, but writing became an escape for her and she began to keep a journal. High school was better but still small and boring; there were twelve in her graduating class. Despite all the responsibilities she managed at home, Louise was a good student. Education was important to her father, and there was no question that she would stay in school, no matter what. His word was law.

She won a scholarship to a teacher's college where she had her first and only real writing training, a basic English class. It was a special program where after two years a person could begin teaching at a small country school and go back to finish the course work during the summers. Student teaching came at the end of her first year. She had thirty ten year olds in her class, and she hated it. The kids were all used to their own teacher and she was inexperienced and nervous. She told me that she was only eight years older than these kids. While she was used to dealing with her brothers and sisters, teaching was different. When she had any problems with her siblings, "I

would just backhand them, but I had no recourse with these kids."

After deciding to quit college, Louise went to San Francisco where she had some relatives. She had some secretarial training in high school.

"It was expected of us. Girls, you know. We could be a teacher, secretary, receptionist, nurse, or a beautician. This was coming out of the 50s, the beginning of the 60s. I took some more secretarial training after high school but I didn't like it. I didn't like taking shorthand."

Louise found it difficult to live in San Francisco after growing up in the country and she moved back to Idaho. In 1964 she was married. She describes this time as a kind of cultural shock--everything around her was changing so quickly. She was writing a lot during this time. "When I was married writing was a good outlet for my feelings."

Later, Louise's husband was sent to Vietnam. He developed a serious drinking problem. In the early part of her marriage, Louise was working as a waitress. When her son was two and a half years old, she slipped and tore the ligaments in her knee. She could not work for a year so she went back to school to become an occupational therapy assistant. After a year and a half of school, she discovered that she could not do the lifting required because of calcium buildup in her arms, so again she quit school and went back to waiting tables.

Louise counted time according to her son's age. When her son was fourteen, his stepsister died of cancer. Later

that same year his father died of a stroke. Louise was then involved for a short time with a man who abused her, but she soon broke off the relationship.

She was managing quite well for a time, actually working sixty hours per week in the building industry, but her boss slowly began cutting everyone's hours until she was only working six hours a week. Finally, she had to file for unemployment, only to discover that she was thirty-six hours short for one quarter so she was not eligible. Bills were not getting paid. She stopped paying her medical insurance. Finally, she was evicted from her suburban home. Then, she could no longer pay the storage bill for her belongings. She lost everything: clothes, furniture, photographs, her journals, all that she had earned in a lifetime.

I asked Louise if anyone could have kept her things for her.

"My friends couldn't deal with what was happening to me. They couldn't help. I kept my brother's kids for up to three years when he was having problems. When I asked my brother if my son could stay with him for his last year of high school he said no. And my sisters--I wouldn't ask them anyway. They have been so selfish to other members of the family. I've observed what's going on. I wouldn't ask them."

In July of 1992, Louise had surgery for endometrial cancer. She wrote about the experience in the writing workshop: the stress of having no insurance, of being unable to pay for the pain medication she needed while waiting to be given a surgery date, the frustration of being unable to

be given a surgery date, the frustration of being unable to get medical attention any sooner despite her pain and the fact that her tumors were growing larger, and her inability to take proper care of herself and reassure her son. After the surgery she needed bed rest for several weeks, which was problematic, because the shelter required that the women leave at 7:30 a.m. and return at 5:30 p.m. In fact, going in the hospital jeopardized Louise's place in the shelter, since the shelter was always full and turned people away nearly every night. Finally she was able to get some assistance from welfare, and they paid for a week's stay at the Center so she could remain in bed to heal.

"My welfare support stops tomorrow. It lasted for two months. Now I need to be employed full time, starting Tuesday. However, there are certain limitations to getting a job because of where I live. For one thing, I have to work during daytime hours. The job has to be in the free-ride zone, or else I have to take the bus and walk the distance outside the free-ride zone. Where is the money coming from to pay for my lunch? My laundry?

These minor details become very important in my situation. I am allowed to do one load of laundry a week at the drop-in day center. When I work, I can't get my laundry there between 8-2, and it's not open weekends. I also get free lunch at the drop-in day center. If I can't have lunch during work, I can't do a good job. And then there is the problem of making it back in time for dinner. Also, I need medication. I have no money and no source for the medication. And I need to take care of my son. Right now he has shelter in a private home, but I have to help him to some extent. He needs food and clothes. He works too, but he can't pay for everything."

These are some of the problems with the system that Louise describes. She pointed out that right now all the social service agencies are at the end of their budgets and can only help the direst cases. First they help women with small children, then teens, then seniors, then the mentally ill. Healthy males and females come last. She is the forgotten minority: over 40, single, white.

"Agencies think I should be in suburbia somewhere. What do you think is the first question they ask a man? 'What is your job?' What do you think they ask me? They ask me, 'What happened to him?' They stereotype me into a role. That's an insult!

I have a friend in the shelter, Jane. She's in the same situation. She was working hard, raising her nephews, getting along. Then she got hurt and lost everything. Jane has spoken in front of nurses groups and others. She tells them to take two shopping bags of dirty clothes on the bus on a rainy day to go to the laundromat. Wear your oldest clothes. See what happens, how people react to you. If your shopping bags are from Nordstrom or the Bon it is not so bad, but try it with a bag from K-Mart, or worse yet, a garbage bag. Try going out with no money for one day. You need to take everything with you that you will need for the day. What will you take? You need to take a warm sweatshirt with you and hope you won't need it.

What will you do all day? If you stay in one place too long the police will tell you to move along. If you stand too long your feet swell and you have to sit down. If it's hot you need liquids, but you have no money and the public drinking fountains are turned off this year because of the drought. There is one in the library. Where will you go to the bathroom? Why do you suppose there are signs on all the restaurants? To keep the homeless people away. At Wendy's you have to pay a quarter to use the bathroom! If you want to go in some shops, try carrying a bag and wearing jeans and a t-shirt into a department store and see how many security

people follow you around! Even if you have money in your pocket, if you look a certain way, you will be treated a certain way."

Louise made friends with another woman in the shelter. The three of them formed their own support system and each got an apartment in the low income housing unit recently opened. She was worried about her future though, and continuing to make ends meet.

"I can work part-time where I am at the import/export warehouse, but there is a lot of lifting and standing, and since my surgery I can't stand very long. I also have problems with my feet and have to tape them every day until my orthopedics come in November. That means I can't wait tables and can't do custodial work. I've got to somehow take care of my kid. He's got to have a life, some childhood. He has so long to be an adult, and the last year of high school is so important."

Despite all the problems facing her, Louise felt that she and her two friends would be able to make it with the moral support they provided for each other. "The three of us will pool our resources, and I mean moral inner strengths, not financial."

The writing workshop helped Louise deal with several of her daily problems. It gave her a place to go and something to do. It was a time to reflect and gave her an outlet for her feelings. The most important thing she learned, however, was how to be an advocate. She saw the mission of the workshop, or at least the publication they worked on, as a means to inform people and advocate for the homeless.

"I want to be an advocate. Learning writing skills allows me to write articles from being there. You can't write from the streets unless you have been on the streets. And I thank God for the shelter. Just because I get out of there doesn't mean I can turn my back on them. I have a responsibility for speaking up for those who aren't as articulate. This is a big problem. When the shelters are full, where do you think people sleep? There are tent cities in the hills, and they sleep on the streets. The reason so many homeless people are on drugs and alcohol is because it is a means to escape their life. They don't care how they escape.

You don't have to worry about the alcoholics. They don't really bother you. When they ask you for money, you can just tell them, 'No, now go on with you.' But the drug addicts are another story. They can be dangerous. You don't fool with them. If they get in your face, just tell them 'Not today' and then you get out of there. They can be crazy."

I asked Louise what she thought the goals of the workshop participants were. She said, "a home of our own." I had expected a more literary answer, but the problems of being homeless, and in the beginning jobless, were the top priority of all the participants. In describing how the core group related, Louise said,

"The three of us who have been with the class from the beginning are close. Gertrude is new and is trying to fit in. The rest of us are trying to protect that closeness. We've been through a lot together. In the beginning, none of us were working and we gave each other a lot of encouragement. Gertrude started with a job. I wondered what Gertrude was actually doing there. Underneath it all she is saying, I keep hearing 'I'm a victim.' Well we all are, but we can choose our attitude. I'm not going to stay in this place forever. I'll find the tools I need to get myself out one step at a time."

I asked Louise to talk about how she had experienced the writing workshop and if she had any suggestions to make.

"Well, this was the first writing group. Reina didn't really know what would come out of it and we didn't know what was expected of us. We were flying by the seat of our pants, working with trial and error, getting to know each other and our various writing styles. It was o.k. We had an open format. We made our own agenda with free reign to write what we wanted to."

Louise compared it favorably to her other writing course.

"In college we had weekly assignments. You were trying to write according to your teacher's expectations and not from our own experience, for example 'write on silence,' not our own topic. In our group here we always had a topic, homelessness, but we all had freedom of our own points of view. I can't write from Randy's or Hugh's perspective, but I can write from the perspective of a homeless woman and mother. I could write from what I knew. The class is good the way it is."

Louise felt a few things might make the classes even better.

"I'd say, 'here's what you all have in common.' Maybe also let people know about the book right away, which might give us some guidelines about pieces. Maybe a little more structure would help, for example, what are meals like in the shelter?"

There are so many things I could write about my experience being there: what it is like to stand in line waiting for a toilet because one of the three stalls is being used as a changing room by someone too modest; what it is like to have to ask people for tampons because you have no money to buy them; what it is like when there are no big clothes left in the clothing bank because some skinny person took them wanting to look sloppy. Before, if I wanted to buy a white ruffy blouse just because I liked it, it could hang in my closet for six months. Now, when I do buy something, it has to be serviceable. And there is the problem of where to get my hair cut. I have

gone all around town asking people what they charge for a haircut. They tell me \$30. That's six hours of work at minimum wage! No way am I going to pay that to someone for twenty minutes to cut my hair. Finally I found someone to do it for \$12.50."

To gather more ideas for writing exercises, I asked Louise to describe a typical day for a homeless woman.

- 6:30        Lights on. The inhabitants have one hour to get dressed, make their beds, and eat. There are three toilet stalls, three sinks, and one shower for forty women. There is a fifteen minute limit on the shower. Louise usually has them wake her up at 1:00 a.m. so she has a chance of getting hot water.
- 7:30        Everyone must be out the door. They usually go to Angeline's, a day drop-in center. There they have two showers and a shower list. Once a person is on the list, they can have a half hour privacy in the shower and dressing room. Angeline's also has a phone so people spend time calling about jobs. There are laundry facilities which one must sign up for on a list, and a nurse is there with a waiting list, a mental health worker with a waiting list, and once a week a psychiatrist visits. To see the psychiatrist a person first goes to the nurse, then is referred to the mental health worker, and then sees the doctor. It takes about three weeks. Angeline's has a clothing bank and sometimes there are clothes there. They also take messages for people there.
- 11:00       Lunch. After lunch there is a "quiet room" available so people can nap, but it is too noisy and crowded to sleep there. People are always banging the door.
- 3:00        Angeline's closes. For the next 2 1/2 hours Louise goes to the park, the library, or wanders around. They drink a lot of coffee at Angeline's, so a big problem is finding a bathroom. She often goes to the Pike Place Market because they have a public restroom and she can blend in with the tourists, read a book, or look at the water.
- 5:00        Line begins to form outside Noel House.
- 5:15        Louise heads for the shelter.

- 6:00 Shelter opens. They have coffee and snacks and get their voice mail messages. It is usually too late if they had a call for a job.
- 6:30 Dinner - prepared by a food service training project from donated food, always reheated since it was prepared early in the day. Usually something with rice and tofu and not much taste.
- 7:00 Read, smoke, shower, talk with those you know, orient new people.
- 9:30 Lights out, quiet till 6:30 a.m. The smoking room and dining room are available for those who can't sleep. Louise spent from 1:00-3:30 a.m. last night in the smoking room.

Tuesday evenings they hold a house meeting where problems are discussed. They do not mention names, just problems and possible solutions. At a recent meeting Louise was able to exercise her writing skills in drafting a letter to the City Council regarding the safety of the neighborhood. The residents of the shelter were concerned because there was a recent drive-by shooting across the street from the shelter at an after hours club, and it took the police a half hour to respond to the call for help. Louise joined a homeless advocacy group, and she volunteered to contribute to the shelter's newsletter.

Randy

Randy was the last person I would have expected to be homeless. He was 28 years old, about 6'4", blond, athletic, and handsome. My sister and I met him at the GED graduation party this summer. He was a volunteer for several months in the classroom and was recognized by the Opportunity Center for his service. He mentioned that he was active in the writing project and I assumed that he was a volunteer like I was. I was impressed with this nice, cheerful young man who invited my 20- year-old sister to go wind surfing. The next day after her date, my sister was alarmed to have discovered that this fun-loving person she had spent the day with lived in the Mission. It was a surprise for me too, and made me more keenly aware of my own stereotypes of a "homeless" person -- as if there were a specific type of person prone to this sort of hardship. The stigma itself makes the hardship more difficult to bear and to overcome.

My sister told Randy a bit about my research, that I wanted to record the experiences and stories of people being served by the Opportunity Center. He was supportive and enthusiastic about the research and felt he would like to contribute his story to my efforts. He also mentioned that although he had a lot to say, he was not ready to write his own story, so this might be a better approach for him as well as a help to me. Despite his theoretical willingness to participate, however, it was difficult for him to talk

about specific incidents and details. Randy showed tremendous nervousness about revealing his past. He was trying so hard to create a new life for himself, and he did not want to sabotage this new life and the trust of his new friends by dredging up the past, which made our conversation frustratingly vague.

We got together on a Sunday to have lunch up on the roof deck. Randy and I talked over the food in a relaxed atmosphere. Randy began by commenting on the Mission. He explained that there were various programs available there. For two dollars a night a person could have a bed, and for a dollar a meal you could eat. To stay there for free, a person was required to belong to one of the Mission's programs. For example, there was a special program for recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, and another was a 90 day program which helped get people on their feet. These programs were not exactly free because the participants contributed in some way to the maintenance and running of the mission. Randy put in 20 hours per week there and held down a job at an espresso bar so he could earn some money. Before each meal, those who wanted to eat for free had to attend an hour of religious studies. After breakfast, everyone left for the day, although they were allowed to come back for lunch.

The food at the Mission was terrible -- "monster mash" was the polite reference to the meals. The residents could

no longer have any of their own food there, and the refrigerators were removed because there was such a problem with bugs.

Randy described the atmosphere at the Mission as crowded. There was no place to put one's things. They had eight lockers for about 40 men, and when his turn came up for part of one, he turned it down. He did not want to get too comfortable there. Some people, he said, put up posters and make it homey, but he refused to see the Mission as home. I asked him if he felt his belongings were safe and he said yes, that he was respected by his housemates and did not worry about his things.

I told Randy how surprised I had been to discover he lived in the Mission, and despite my best intentions of being open minded, he did not fit my image of a homeless person. He asked me what my image was, and I discovered that my stereotype centered around an older person, male or female, but someone who looked poor and was in poor health, and definitely not a young, strong, good looking, white male.

Randy answered that one of his biggest concerns being homeless and living at a shelter, one of everyone's biggest concerns, was health. Everyone living at the Mission was now more susceptible to disease. Randy called it a "numbers game", referring to the overcrowded conditions. He pointed out that if he lived in my house with my husband and me, and

if he got sick, he would have the resources to take care of himself, insurance to cover the medical bills, healthy food, a clean house, and enough security to stay home from work until he recovered.

Despite the drawbacks of living in the Mission, Randy signed on to live and work there for an extra six months. My impression was that the living conditions were pretty miserable, especially the idea of enforced prayer, but when I asked Randy whether he felt the Mission had helped him, he said it was everything he had ever needed. Since he turned fourteen, fourteen years ago, he had shunned his responsibilities to others, but now he was changing his life around. He still had many tough questions because he wanted a deep understanding of God, but "the Bible has brought truth to the table and brought moral fiber to my understanding of right and wrong."

Randy said that his faith was very personal, however, and was something he did not try to force on anyone else, but he had finally found constant rapport with a God he could trust.

When I asked Randy how he came to be homeless, he became more guarded and our conversation strayed into generalizations. Finally, Randy decided to give me a few of the painful highlights of the past fourteen years of his life alluded to above. The most important person in his life was his father, and the shallowness of their

relationship caused him such frustration and grief that he set about destroying his own life, trying to hurt his father as much as possible in the process.

Randy's father was a Harvard educated surgeon. If Randy showed an interest in something his father approved of, such as golf, his father would provide all the money and lessons possible to help Randy excel. But Randy felt this type of attention was self-serving, as though his father saw him as some kind of trophy.

Randy did not like school and was not a good student, yet the typical conversation between the two of them always revolved around how he was doing in school. There was no real communication. Randy always answered "fine", even when he was flunking the advanced placement classes his dad insisted he take.

The things that Randy really loved were sports and art. His father ruined both for him. One of his happier memories from high school was when he was made the photo studio monitor because he excelled in photography. His father dismissed his achievement saying "you can't make any money doing that." So he quit. This lack of support was etched on his brain, causing him deep mental pain.

He was an all-star athlete and played college football. When he would be praised for his ability in football in the local paper, his father never mentioned he was proud, but instead took the opportunity to coach him, to give him more

tips and advice on how to do better, rather than pat him on the back. Randy had the feeling that his dad wanted to live his life for him, without ever listening to who Randy was.

When he was 13 he began experimenting with drugs. During college he became estranged from his family because of trouble with the police. By the time he was arrested this past year, he was hooked on cocaine. He was able to kick the habit while in jail, but he was worried now about the long term effects of the drugs and hoped he could "get his mind back".

Jail was a turning point in Randy's life. He only had to serve three months of the four month sentence because he "came clean" about his crimes.

"Three months is an eternity in jail because you are left alone with yourself. I did a lot of thinking. That's when I decided to break the cycle. I realized I had gone dead inside. I had stopped caring because my family meant so much to me and they weren't there anymore.

The fact that I've had nothing but superficial relationships with women comes down to the relationship with my dad. We always swallowed the truth and the bad feelings kept on growing. I left because I became a felon in a small community. We haven't talked for six years."

He did not want to talk about what type of activity caused him to end up in jail, but he referred to some type of "insurance scam." A partner was involved in the scam with him and the partner was never caught. Randy took the whole rap on himself, but he was worried that the partner would think he ratted on him, and the partner was still in

the Seattle area. He thought he should guard his secrets carefully so he could actually have a second chance in life, and that if people were to find out about his past they would not give him a chance. He said he was trying to practice the truth, but he wondered, "Does it set me free?"

In jail Randy found out that he loved to write.

"One of the best cures in the world is a hobby. No one can take it from you. It is tangible, something to show for your effort. It is therapy in itself and a wonderful escape. I am more than you see. I'm a writer. It is also a meditation. It is a private world to share with myself. I can take it wherever I go. It is my identity. I'm a writer."

He felt that the writing course was self-actualizing, totally personal. He was able to leave a mark, an extension of himself. He did not feel that the writing course offered social opportunities. The participants did not see each other outside class. The class was a place they went as writers and a place they developed their identities as writers.

He learned how different the creative process was for each person. "I don't own anything now except the words I've written, and they are becoming even more important."

Towards the end of the interview Randy commented on his life and how it related to the Center.

"A lot of my actions in the past had to do with getting attention. In fact, I see a lot of parallels in the kids in the GED program. Attention is one of the most important things in the program. It felt great to volunteer there. I would like to go back but I'm just too tired. I worked 48 hours at the espresso bar last week and

20 hours at the Mission. I still have from 12:30 to 5:00 p.m. open, but I use that time to catch up on my sleep. It is hard to get any sleep at the Mission because of the disrespect of others."

### Summary

Louise and Randy saw the writing workshops as a lifeline, something they could use both to define themselves and to make at least some impact on the world. Both were isolated from family and friends. The writing workshops gave them a new start, a place to try on new identities, a place where they could begin to make the transition back into a more comfortable world.

## CHAPTER 9

### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

The analysis of this research addresses the two goals which have guided the study: 1) What does a student-centered literacy program look like? How does it work in an American classroom? 2) Who are the students in this program? What are their beliefs, needs, and struggles? How do their belief systems influence behavior?

#### Portrait of a Student-centered Program

In order to create a literacy program, the founders consider their educational theory and their perception of the role of education in society. Every educational practice implies a theory of education. Critical theory, the theory subscribed to by the Opportunity Center, underlies the student-centered approach and stands in direct opposition to the mainstream traditional practice of functionalism.

Functionalism is based on individual achievement, not collaboration. It is a competitive system where students have the choice of fitting in or dropping out. This system views the purpose of school as a way to perpetuate society and the status quo. This also perpetuates inequities.

In addition to conflicting with critical theory, the functionalist system is in conflict with current theories of literacy, which emphasize literacy as a supportive, group process where students share their strengths (Kozol, 1985), and the learning environment is cooperative as opposed to competitive (Sapon-Shevin & Schneiderwind, 1991). Research has shown that the motivation for literacy development is social, stimulated by interest, and used to generate conversation, not to pass exams or to fit into a system (Heath, 1980). Vital to the process is the relationship between students and teacher and students among themselves (Smith, 1989).

Critical theorists argue that functionalist schools perpetuate not only economic oppression, but cultural and psychological oppression as well. They want to change the current system, from the process of schooling to society at large.

Critical theory advocates teaching people to question how society acquires its notion of knowledge. It is based on the goal of empowerment, which means that students discover and focus on the concerns most important to them, whether personal, social, economic, or political. They define their own goals and then take action to accomplish them. According to Wallerstein (1983), the action that takes place in class can range from community building and developing a supportive atmosphere to students taking charge

of their own learning. Classroom activities can be a bridge to community action, for example, by offering students opportunities to interview people, to write letters voicing their opinions, and to organize for community action.

Each of the classes at the Opportunity Center was unique, having different cultures and students with different needs and goals. Still, student-centered learning, a method based on critical theory, was effectively adapted to be the foundation for each of them. According to ACBE (1988), one of the first ways a student-centered classroom differs from what Freire calls the banking approach to education is that learners determine their own goals. In the ESL classroom the students had a brainstorming session approximately once each month to determine what aspects of English they needed most in their daily lives. In the writing workshops students chose the topic and type of writing, and directed the entire publication process. In the GED classroom students' primary goal was to complete the GED, and Aaron often had difficulty in eliciting discussions in which students applied what they were learning to their daily lives. One of the most successful ways he discovered students' learning goals was through the Speakers of Color Forum described earlier (see chapter seven, p. 131).

A second way a learner-centered classroom distinguishes itself is that participants recognize that

both the facilitator and the learners have knowledge to share. Teachers demonstrate this recognition by conducting the class in a discussion rather than lecture format. The ESL class held small group discussions each week in the Talk Time class. The topic was chosen by the students, and while Emily always planned activities, each group was free to do something different. The writing workshops were able to draw on student expertise to a greater extent. During the group sharing process students offered each other positive feedback to improve their writing. Reina referred any question directed at her back to the group first, asking them, "What do you think?" She refused the authority role; she instead acted as facilitator for group decision making and processes.

Aaron drew on the knowledge of his students by employing student assistants and by asking for student participation in program administration, fund raising, and decision making. He encouraged discussion and respect for varying points of view, but it was much more difficult to elicit discussion in the GED classroom than in the other two. Again, Aaron had the greatest success using the Speakers of Color Forum, which involved having students prepare the ground work for discussion and develop informed opinions on a subject of their choice.

A third distinguishing characteristic of student-centered programs is that learners apply knowledge and

skills learned to pursue immediate goals rather than for future purposes. The most immediate goal for the ESL students was to find work. In each class they learned applicable skills: how to read want ads, how to make phone inquiries, and how to interview for a job. In the writing workshops self-expression or self-exploration was the most important immediate goal. The writing students, seeking a way to redefine themselves after suffering losses of home, health, jobs, and friends, found strength in the realization that they still had their own ideas to explore and stories to tell, ideas that they could both contribute to society and use as a foundation in a difficult period.

In the GED class immediate goals varied. Obtaining the GED was an obvious goal, but students often had more pressing goals such as obtaining housing, finding childcare, and working out problems in interpersonal relationships. One example of how these goals were addressed was the petition students put together for childcare mentioned earlier in chapter seven. Students networked with each other to find out about housing opportunities. They had the opportunity to learn about relationship building through class dynamics. They also learned about patterns of abuse and where they could get help through the domestic violence presentations.

A fourth essential feature of critical theory is the conviction that the purpose of learning is to create change,

not to perpetuate the status quo. While Freire's goal is to rouse the oppressed to political activism, most of the students at the Center made changes at a more personal level. The ESL students addressed economic oppression by learning English and by learning how the American employment system works. In the writing workshops the participants made dramatic changes in both their personal lives and their degree of social awareness. The students began questioning a society that would allow people to fall through the cracks, to allow people to become invisible if they were unpleasant to look at. Louise was perhaps the best example of critical consciousness. She not only changed her own life for the better, but she began publishing on homelessness, speaking out for others who were in trouble.

The GED students also made changes at the individual and societal level. On an individual level, students developed skills and knowledge so they could participate in the workforce on a more equal footing with mainstream or traditionally educated youth. Aaron also helped them access additional education and attempted to build bridges from the "street" to the mainstream through visits to libraries, museums, and theaters. On a social level, the students became more conscious of politics, racism, and sexism, problems they faced in their own lives. Class discussions helped them learn to confront problems with greater knowledge and awareness of more alternatives.

### Ethos of the School

The Opportunity Center was a place where two cultures intersected, the culture of the learning environment created by the beliefs and actions of the staff and the culture students brought with them to the school. The ethos of the Center was mutually constructed by the students and teachers and had similar elements throughout the three classrooms. The most striking element was the sense of caring and dedication on the part of the teachers and the important role of student concerns in day-to-day classroom interactions. The curriculum was created according to the students' needs, and in any of the three classrooms one could find discussions going on about the students' lives, thoughts, opinions, and feelings. In each of the programs the teachers were dedicated, caring, and personally involved with the lives of the students, occasionally even giving students money for food or emergencies.

The goal of the program, to help the participants experience positive change in their lives, was addressed by teaching respect for oneself and others. This was achieved by offering chances for group, as well as individual, work and by modeling respectful questioning and listening. The explicit cultural rules stated in the writing workshop were applicable to all three classes: show up, participate, produce, and be respectful and supportive of each other.

The Opportunity Center, with its philosophy of promoting social change, provided academic instruction as well as opportunities to address personal and societal problems. At the survival level, it played the role of a social service organization, although the Northwest Educational Foundation was the actual social service provider. This was extremely challenging for the staff. Students often came to them hungry, suicidal, physically abused, or in danger from rival gang members.

The common denominator of the students' culture was the fact that all were struggling with potentially disabling personal problems. To serve the students well, the Opportunity Center provided such services as counseling, classroom discussions of effective parenting, time to talk about values and goal setting, and opportunities to reflect on problems of life and society, including topics such as police brutality, AIDS, and domestic violence. The school also provided a link with services which met the more basic needs of the students, for example, food, shelter, and emotional support, some of which a traditional family would ordinarily provide. In addition, the school provided for such daily needs as bus tickets, job training and placement, and social events to encourage friendship building.

The staff attempted to address the students' basic survival and general educational needs first, but they were dedicated to helping students on a deeper level. They were

not content to provide students with technical, job-oriented skills, and certification. They hoped to offer a perspective which would encourage students to challenge social circumstances which have impeded their success. The students had a variety of opportunities to function socially as a group and participate in extra-educational activities. During my year at the Center, the students saw "Phantom of the Opera", another play about the Irish Republican Army, and visited museums around the city. They also saw movies together, camped, and went on ski trips.

The respect the staff demonstrated for the students, just as they were, was fundamental to the ethos of the program and distinguishes it from many other adult education programs. The staff did not see their mission as trying to fix people, but rather to help them reach their potential and their goals.

### Self-directed Learning

An important problem in implementing a critical literacy approach, especially in the GED classroom, was that it was too flexible for some students, especially those who were extremely goal oriented (Fox, 1986). They wanted to be told what to do in order to pass the GED. Their motivation for entering the program, i.e. just passing the test as quickly as possible and finishing school, was in conflict with the broader, life and social goals of the staff. The

students were resistant to the questioning strategy employed by a critical thinking approach, impatient to find out the "right" answers and obtain their certificates.

My experience with Kelvin, in my first weeks with the program, was an example of how students' external motivation gets in the way of learning. Kelvin was struggling with a practice GED essay using the comparison/contrast rhetorical mode. I suggested he write about something he knew well, such as different kinds of school. He liked the idea, but after five minutes working on the first sentence, he had looked up a word in the dictionary, asked me how to spell "prefer", asked me what type of school the Center was, and how to indent paragraphs properly. Then he ran out of energy, dropping his pencil in discouragement. I suggested that he start with brainstorming rather than worrying about getting everything on the page perfectly. Kelvin found it easy to express his ideas verbally, but he was so worried about grammar and spelling that he could not write. He felt that he had to write everything in full sentences and that the structure was more important than the content.

In contrast to students who resisted critical literacy, others who had been in the program for some time became involved in discussions about personal and social issues and developed an interest in learning for its own sake. The enthusiasm of this latter group may have developed because the Center offered the students a variety of ways to learn

about things important to them. This was one of the ways the staff practiced "teaching for empowerment". The Speakers of Color Forum, for example, allowed students to chose a theme of interest for the month and identify specific issues they wanted to address. Their personal writing was another avenue where they were empowered to express themselves.

Aaron encouraged students to use class time for their own self-development. I noticed this one day when I was visiting a class which had a reputation for rowdiness; they were quiet, talking softly. No one wanted to work on the GED; they were all working on their own projects. One student was writing in his journal. Another was learning sign language from a book. One man was trying to learn about the Ivory Coast from the books available in the classroom while another young African-American man was reading as he rocked his sleeping baby.

#### Program Flexibility

During this same class two women came in with their babies looking for Aaron. They wanted to get back into class following the absence required for the birth of their children. Many students had been coming to the program on and off for several years. By having a flexible program which allowed for discontinuities in the students' lives, the Center offered the students a stable base they could

always return to, maximizing their chances of success. It also allowed the students to interrupt their studies without the stigma of failure. This was empowering to the students because they perceived that ultimately, they were in charge of their own learning. They were treated like adults.

At one point during the year, Melissa, the VISTA volunteer, and I decided to do a survey to find out how the program could more effectively retain its students. When I asked Aaron for his opinion, he politely restrained his irritation and asked me what I meant by retention. I realized that I had assumed that retention meant finishing the GED. Aaron pointed out that the value of this program lay in its flexibility. The program existed to meet the goals of its students and did not necessarily share this prescribed and narrow focus. The students themselves confirmed that program flexibility and the caring attitude of the teachers were the main reason for their success in the program. Many students had not finished high school precisely because they could not coexist with the schedule requirements of a regular school. In the GED program at the Center, they could drop out if they needed to work or have a baby, and they could and did come back. They were in charge of their learning and there was no stigma attached to lack of continuity.

### Theory in Practice

The explicit values of school programs are influenced by a variety of outside forces. Cassandra and the staff had to reconcile requirements for funding with their shared philosophy of education. Funders insisted on accountability standards which required a top-down, competency-based approach to learning. The Center's philosophy required a bottom-up, learner-centered curriculum. The Department of Labor and the Superintendent of Public Instruction required standardized testing with measurable gains as criteria for funding. That left the Center with the dilemma of whether to teach test-taking or to teach critical thinking. The staff was also burdened with the extensive paperwork required by funders which interfered with the time available for lesson planning and student needs.

The program's explicit values, i.e. focusing on inner city African-American youth and promoting independence and leadership skills, were tailored to adapt to outside forces. These goals were laid out in the Center's program report, written for the parent organization in August 1992:

- \* To promote education among inner city youth who have not been successful in a traditional educational setting.
- \* To develop independence in our participants so that they may reach their own life goals.
- \* To develop leadership skills in our participants so that they may work toward changing the social conditions which have

prevented them from being successful in school and in society.

It was only when one came to the more specific goals later on in the text that more implicit values were revealed, deeper level values which were not directly stated and perhaps not even conscious choices.

The Opportunity Center was initiated because the parent organization was concerned about getting "hard to serve" African-American youth off the streets, off drugs, and giving them access to employment. The GED classroom was first developed as a response to this need, and the target population continued to be African-American youth. However, Cassandra tried to avoid labeling the students as "at risk" or "hard to serve" from the teacher's point of view. Instead, she took the perspective that students in the GED program had special survival strengths which they could build on, calling them "youth-at-strength". Despite this new label, students continued to refer to themselves as "at-risk". The fact that the teachers gave the students a more positive label did not change their circumstances or their self-concept sufficiently for the students to be able to ignore how they were defined by the larger society.

The other target group the program increasingly aimed to serve were the ESL homeless, particularly Hispanic, whether youth or adults. This shift in focus reflected the fact that for funding purposes the program had to serve a large number of students, and the ESL classes were the most

successful part of the program in meeting this goal. One of the most recent developments in the program was a weekly ESL class held in one of the homeless shelters, and the Center planned to offer literacy classes to Hispanic homeless as well. One of Cassandra's specific goals involved expanding the ESL program so that Emily could devote all of her time to the ESL classes rather than having to divide her time between the ESL and GED classrooms. There was also a plan to begin a bilingual Spanish/English newsletter, incorporating the abandoned homeless writing workshop concept into the ESL classroom. Cassandra hoped that all of these efforts would help meet the enrollment goal for the program's homeless grant.

Previous to Cassandra, there had always been two full-time teachers in the GED class. Then Aaron became the only full-time teacher. Emily helped out half-time as did the teacher's assistant in the mornings. The Center's August 1992 program report also mentioned plans for a college prep class (which had not started by the time I left the field) and a special family literacy class, which was subsequently changed to a plan for a family literacy retreat and a group they will call "Book Talk".

The GED program received increased support through the implementation of the volunteer program, although several informants suggested that adding volunteers may have increased Aaron's work load because he had to help train

them. As helpful as they were in tutoring, the use of volunteers had a further limitation. Students did not build up the same kind of rapport with a volunteer whom they saw only once a week as they did with a daily teacher such as Aaron. They often just saved their questions for Aaron.

I tried to discover implicit values, the values underlying the directly stated philosophy of the organization, by looking at the day to day activities of the school, the program's future goals, and the opinions and attitudes of the staff, students, volunteers, and outsiders. The development of a new college prep GED program was one example of the youth-at-strength approach, but there was concern among outsiders, ex-staff, and even students about what would happen to "hard to serve" or students "at risk". By "at risk", students and staff were referring to students who were resistant to authority and not easy to teach, including those who had difficulty with drugs, attendance, and interpersonal interactions. As one student commented: "The Center wouldn't be here without people who care. They don't want to help at-risk kids though. Just all kids. But they don't need as much help."

Perhaps students were not as much "at risk" as the original students, although I would question this assumption, since most students still defined themselves this way, and most had problems that would easily qualify them for this category. I think the increasingly respectful

and serious atmosphere in the GED classroom was due to the structure of the class and Aaron's high expectations. On my first day in the GED classroom, before Aaron had started teaching, students were resistant. Although it was right after the Rodney King riots, students did not want to talk about the verdict or the riots; they just wanted to do their own work. People straggled in late throughout the morning. The classroom was noisy while the students worked individually and talked about their friends or their weekends. On my second visit to the classroom, Cassandra was trying to form a hiring committee for the new teacher and was having difficulty convincing the students to participate.

With Aaron as teacher, the noise level in the classroom did not get much louder than a constant hum, and the students seemed to be more serious about learning. Aaron expected them to be respectful of him and each other and, on the whole, they were. The use of profanity in the classroom became rare, and students monitored each other, keeping order in the classroom when someone was trying to speak. There were still difficult students, but they eventually adapted to Aaron's guidelines, at least when he was present. The students had not adapted completely to the attendance policy, however, and since Aaron was concerned with being flexible to meet their needs, he did not enforce it vigorously.

The writing workshops were held on Saturday, when other staff were not there and did not have much contact with either the student-writers or the teacher. Although there were only four to six core students and occasional new drop-ins in these workshops, Cassandra was dedicated to keeping them going by continuing to provide funding for the teacher. The booklet of the workshop's published writing was a tangible outcome which increased the Center's visibility in the community. Reina experimented with holding the workshops during the week, in addition to the ones on Saturday, so that the GED students could participate. She hoped this would increase class attendance and would please funders, but the idea did not work. The homeless adults from the Saturday class who had jobs could not attend the weekday classes, and Aaron was not supportive about releasing students from his GED class to attend the workshops. Reina's successor quit after only three months, and the writing classes were abandoned with the intention of starting up a bilingual newsletter instead. While Cassandra valued the writing workshops in theory, they were peripheral to the mission and vision of the Center. Cassandra and the other staff were trying to narrow their focus in order to manage their efforts more efficiently.

Cassandra explained to me that expanding and contracting was a survival technique for the program. She constantly had to start new projects to get funding from

grants, even when she knew that she would not be able to continue with all the projects she started. One of her goals was to improve the Center's fundraising capacity so she did not have to spend so much time and energy on expansion and contraction.

### Structural Pressures

Each of the staff members faced structural pressures which reduced their energy for meeting the program's goals. First, there was the pressure of being part of a large social service agency. The Center had to meet the needs and demands of the parent organization, the most difficult being the financial demands. The Center had to pay 39% of all grant money it received as overhead to the parent organization. Cassandra and the staff were constantly scrambling for money. The staff even helped out with the grant writing. Second, both the funders and the parent organization had detailed requirements for the statistical data from the Center, which meant that the teachers needed to spend a great deal of time keeping records, compiling statistics, and doing administrative tasks, further detracting from the mission of creative teaching. Third, the Center had been experiencing constant change. It suffered from too much expansion (i.e. both in students and new ideas being implemented), without the necessary addition of teaching or administrative personnel. Fourth, the

students themselves had serious personal and social problems that required more time, energy, and counseling skills than the teachers could provide, especially with all of their other duties.

The effects of these structural pressures varied from person to person. Emily, highly organized by nature, was so exhausted one day that she had to take a ten minute nap on the floor of her office, which she shares with three others.

Aaron, also an extremely well-organized and detail-oriented person, had the burden of trying to organize a chaotic filing system to keep up with paperwork and student needs, leaving him constantly frustrated. Melissa had a need for open communication and planning and the other staff members never had time to work with her. This frustrated Melissa because plans kept changing. She would be partly finished with a job and then she would be told that the plan had been abandoned.

Cassandra faced the dilemma of trying to be true to her personal philosophy but at the same time maintain funding from donors who had no understanding of critical literacy. She had to spend so much time on fund raising and record keeping that she did not have enough time for program development.

One way staff members dealt with their daily frustrations was to constantly generate new ideas and goals for the program. While this was a hopeful and positive

response, it frequently lead to further frustration and discouragement, especially when the staff began a project and devoted energy to it, but then were told to abandon it because there was not enough money or time to complete it. This lack of continuity was also hard on the students, since the Center was one of the most stabilizing influences in their lives. Instability at the Center left them with no place to turn.

### Discourse of Literacy/Education Equals Opportunity

Virtually all of the students in the ESL classes wanted to improve their English so they could find a job or a better job. The topics they chose for discussion were all job oriented except for one month which focused on dating. All of the GED students felt that getting the GED would help them have a better future or career. More than half wanted to pursue higher education, something they had never thought possible before. The director and teachers encouraged this goal and were trying to implement a program to help the students make this transition to higher education.

While I applauded the attempt to respond to the students' wishes and needs, it was interesting to note that the staff never discussed with the students the assumption that more education would directly result in better financial success. A future college prep course could lead to a more traditional and less effective approach to

learning if it focused primarily on what a person must do to "make it" in the system. Freire would ask students to question the very meaning of their education and of the GED or college degree, and he would ask how these certificates would or would not change their lives. By not discussing education in the broader context of society, students were encouraged to believe that the GED would play an important role in helping them get better jobs, which in reality may not happen. Perhaps the staff felt it was too discouraging for students to look at how much more education a black man or woman needed for the same job as a white person, and a white man in particular. But this should ideally be part of a real Freirian-based program, questioning not only the nature of knowledge and the educational process, but the middle-class value system which education perpetuates as well. If this kind of consciousness raising became part of the college prep class, then learning how to deal with the system in terms of preparing for college or a career would be a path of action for empowerment.

The American middle-class value system has its roots in the Protestant work ethic and the idea of the equality and perfectability of the person. Du Bois (1955) identifies three core values which constitute the skeleton of the "American way of life." The first is the belief in the value of hard work for its own sake. Whether in a profession, in leisure activities, or in education, working

hard is considered virtuous. The second critical value is material well being, which evolves naturally from the first. The implication is that hard work will be rewarded with success, a tenet of Calvinism. Examples of poverty and failure which challenge this hypothesis are ignored. The third critical value is conformity. Despite lip service celebrating individualism, society's rewards go to those who conform and become "good citizens." Each of these values, however, places the burden of failure on the individual rather than society. Discussion of these values could help students prepare themselves for the struggles ahead and help them avoid placing blame on themselves for all of the difficulties they encounter.

On their own, the students timidly began to question these assumptions. On a field trip to a local law firm, they were told repeatedly by the various support staff that all a person needed in order to get a job at the firm was a high school diploma or GED, and maybe a little college. The most important things, they said, could be learned on the job. When several students offered to volunteer or do internships at the firm, however, their inquiries were met with evasive responses. The students wondered why the staff first told them they did not need more education for these jobs, and then essentially told them they were not good enough for the jobs. Some of the students questioned why the firm even invited the students to visit. The implicit

message was clear: "We are doing a good deed for society by letting you poor inner-city kids come here to admire us, but don't get any ideas about working here."

### Student Culture

In order to study how a learner-centered philosophy is implemented by a program, it is imperative to understand the learners themselves. Student culture is closely related to how the classroom works and how teachers implement theory. Educators interested in this perspective need to look closely at the lives of their students, make learning applicable, involve them in the learning process. Many of the students at the Opportunity Center, while not technically adults, faced adult problems and demands: childcare, running a household, working, and commuting. A student-centered program that works well will give learners respect, allowing them and in some case pushing them to take responsibility for their own learning and their lives. According to the students, the flexibility of the Opportunity Center in respecting and accommodating student needs was a primary reason why its students stayed in school or kept coming back.

In trying to find a common culture among all students at the Center, I realized they were all in transition, moving far enough toward the dominant culture to enjoy some of its economic benefits. It took great strength on their

part to participate in furthering their education. They were outside the American mainstream; they suffered economic hardships, and many were homeless. I have identified five salient themes from the interviews and talks with students that lend insight into how the Center dealt with their culture and their problems: 1) material, social, and emotional needs; 2) identity and sense of self; 3) philosophical and religious beliefs; 4) family background; and 5) language.

#### Material, Social, and Emotional Needs

In addressing students' material, social, and emotional needs, the Opportunity Center aimed to go beyond transmitting values and norms which perpetuated inequalities to a level that could potentially transform society and the lives of its learners. The Opportunity Center attempted to meet the needs of those it served both by helping students and by showing them how they could help themselves.

Through the Northwest Education Foundation, the Opportunity Center was able to access social services which helped students meet their basic material needs. The majority of the students came to the Center without the basics that most Americans take for granted: a home, regular meals, income, and transportation. The fact that they were interested in learning despite economic and physical hardships indicated that this group of students was highly

motivated to improve their lives and was interested in maximizing opportunities that became available to them.

One of the most primary of the physical human needs is for adequate food. None of the students at the Center were starving; in fact, many were overweight. But the majority of them knew little about nutrition, and getting decent food was a daily problem. I was heartbroken to discover that Isaac, a courteous, ambitious, and optimistic student, was living in temporary housing, and the only food he had eaten for many weeks had been cold sandwiches bought with food stamps. He had access to a communal kitchen, but it was too dirty to use. He had been in this housing situation throughout the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. The day we spoke about this was his birthday, and he was going to celebrate by going alone to a restaurant for a hot meal.

On another occasion, in the morning GED class, I was helping a petite African-American woman with an essay. She said her essay was about "something she used to do but doesn't do anymore." She was writing about junk food. She wanted to stop eating so much of it because she was becoming too skinny from malnutrition. As I looked around I noticed one man eating a breakfast of cheese puffs and Coke. Another young woman was eating a package of Hostess doughnuts, and another person was sipping orange pop.

The Center made repeated efforts to educate people about nutrition, but the efforts were sporadic. When Reina

was teaching the evening GED class, she designed a month-long program on the students' eating habits. The students had been eating candy all through their evening classes. One night, the class was eating highly sugary foods and was out of control. Reina became so annoyed with the students she walked out.

The next day they talked about the effects of sugar on the body. One of the classroom volunteers brought in charts so that the students could figure out what they were eating and what the various types of food did to the body. They addressed what they would need to change in their diets to promote health; and most importantly, they talked about how to make such changes while still being homeless, without a refrigerator or stove, and dependent on food stamps. One of the students started bringing in fruit, and a noticeable change was evident in students' awareness of diet, at least in class.

For many of the students, this was their first exposure to the fundamentals of nutrition. The project, however, was not an ongoing theme. Isaac, the student mentioned above who joined the program after Reina was gone, did not have the benefit of learning alternatives to his cold sandwich diet.

The Center tried to find money in its budget to provide food to celebrate special occasions. Opportunities for meals were a chance for community building among the

students as well as a good time to talk about food issues. After the first Speaker of Color Forum, Melissa provided juices, vegetarian and meat sandwiches, and cake. Tyrone commented to me that meat and politics were going to be the downfall of the U.S. Terrell, another African-American man, said that he did not eat meat either, and that he fasted several days a week. He was a Muslim and followed the practices prescribed by Malcolm X.

Many of the women in the program were overweight, but toward the end of my fieldwork I heard several say they were becoming more interested in their health. The Center offered free passes to a gym and pool located in a nearby building. Some of the male students took advantage of this almost every day, but I spoke with only one female student who used the fitness facilities. However, learning to take greater control of their health was a growing concern of the female students.

Every month the ESL and GED classrooms brainstormed for a theme topic. The first time this happened in the GED classroom, students were interested in learning about AIDS, and they invited a speaker to the Center who had AIDS. They had videos and discussions, read articles, and designed instructional posters on what they learned. There were free condoms available in a container on one of the bookshelves, and students helped themselves without any obvious inhibitions. The comfort and openness with which the

students discussed related personal matters increased markedly over the course of the month; this was a hopeful sign that they would use some of the new information in managing their intimate relationships.

The students in the homeless writing workshops informed me that many people found themselves on the street because health problems caused them to lose their jobs. Even Randy, the youngest in the workshop, said that health was one of the biggest concerns among the people he lived with at the Mission. Everyone I interviewed in the writing workshops said that they could not sleep well with so many people in the same room and that the food they received was not balanced.

Louise was homeless when she underwent an operation and had difficulty finding a place to recover. Welfare helped her get a room through the Northwest Education Foundation. The Opportunity Center itself could not do much about the students' actual health concerns, but they could and did help connect students to services whenever possible.

The Northwest Education Foundation also helped students fulfill their material needs through job training and placement. Students under twenty-four years of age were assigned to caseworkers who helped them find work and housing. The Northwest Education Foundation offered classes in clerical skills and job-finding strategies and ran an employment program where young people were employed cleaning

city streets. While the Opportunity Center was not directly involved in helping to secure employment, there was opportunity in each of the three classes for people to discuss the kind of work they would like to be doing and how they could achieve their goals.

One of the most serious problems faced by many of the GED students was domestic violence. Every month, Aaron brought in guest speakers to discuss the nature of domestic violence, how to break the cycle, what the victim's rights were, and where students could go for help. Students were interested in these presentations, and although they were not eager to talk about their experiences in front of the class, they talked privately about their problems to other students after the presentations. Several even discussed their problems with me. Aaron tried to find alternative housing which would allow students to leave destructive situations. The opportunity for discussion with classmates was important, giving students a chance to re-evaluate what types of conflict they would tolerate.

The homeless writing workshop dealt with the need for housing at a symbolic as well as material level by helping them find a new sense of self-worth, and this was one of its greatest strengths. Being homeless in American culture shatters a person's sense of self. The middle class often sees the homeless as freeloaders or substance abusers, has a puritanical disgust with poverty, and fears violence from

the homeless. At the same time, they often have an unspoken fear that they too could become homeless (Boone & Weaver 1989). The writing workshop gave the writers a chance to challenge this stereotype and to re-establish themselves as real, thinking human beings. In their choice of a title for the book, Revealing the Invisible Homeless, the homeless writers hoped to bring attention to the fact that there are many hardworking homeless people who are not freeloaders and who want a chance to contribute to their world.

In my interview with Pat, she expressed the opinion that the Opportunity Center, in particular the GED class, did not meet the social needs of its students. One of the reasons it was difficult to address the students' social needs, despite the Center's commitment to community-building, was that the students did not easily trust others. These students were people who had suffered serious dislocation and trauma. They often manifested a need for security through possessiveness and distrust.

Writing workshops were much more intimate than the other two classes in terms of group interaction, but even here none of the participants socialized outside of the workshops except with me or with Reina. As in the GED classes, the men seemed to get along with each other better than the women did, and at times there was even outright hostility among the women. The ESL students trusted each other to a much higher degree and many, especially the men,

were friends outside of class.

The students' lack of trust was apparent in the interactions between students and volunteers or members of the staff. Most students were not eager to accept help from anyone until they decided the person could be trusted. Sometimes volunteers sat through a two-and-a-half hour class without being allowed to help anyone. A student accepting help often became possessive of the helper, wanting help only from that particular person and no one else.

Aaron and Reina addressed this distrust by providing a supportive atmosphere in the classroom. They did this through modeling respectful alternatives for social interaction and conflict resolution. They listened patiently to each person's opinion and students were encouraged to delve deeper into themselves to express what they really felt. Students were shown that, even when they disagreed with one another, they could work things out. For some of the students, this was a unique experience. Aaron and Reina were skillful in facilitating group discussions, recognizing the value of everyone's input, and helping members of the group to work towards conflict resolution. The result was that student interaction became more trusting.

Building trust created a dramatic increase in the feeling of community among the students. Towards the end of my fieldwork, a group of students began to "hang around" the

Center even when they did not have class because they had friends they wanted to see and because the Center was a positive place for them to be. A break room where students could smoke and talk was open between classes. The Center also provided social opportunities for the students through the Northwest Education Foundation by facilitating ski trips, bowling, camping, and benefit dances at the Center. Accommodating the students' need for belonging improved attendance tremendously. Students wanted to come to class, and even students who graduated still came by to visit.

The Center strove to meet the need for attention. Even in the ESL classes, which sometimes enrolled more than twenty people, volunteers ensured that each student was able to interact with staff on a daily basis. One-on-one interaction was probably one of the most difficult aspects of Aaron's job. He had over twenty students on his roster in both the morning and afternoon classes, none of whom had received the attention and support they needed in a traditional high school. Lack of individual attention was part of the reason these students dropped out of school. Although he had help from volunteers and other staff, Aaron felt a tremendous burden to give each student the necessary attention to stay motivated and stay in school. He knew that he was one of the few persons in a position of authority the students trusted. Aaron was the catalyst and key ingredient in the developing atmosphere of trust and

community at the Center. When he was gone for even a day, some students became anxious about where he was and asked when he would be back. The students had nothing but the highest praise for him. One of the students told me that, besides the woman she lived with, "He is my only friend."

### Identity and Sense of Self

The students were conscious of living in two cultures: what they regarded as their own "street" culture (although the ESL students identified primarily with being Hispanic), and the mainstream, middle class, or what most non-white informants called "white" culture.

Students separated from their community and street culture when they became involved in seeking to change their lives through education. One would expect this to be especially true in a critical literacy program. As Steven Brookfield (1990) noted,

Engaging in critical thinking is not a continuously joyful exercise in creative self-actualization. It is psychologically and politically dangerous, involving risks to one's livelihood, social networks, and psychological stability (p. 179).

Through this experience, students began to change at a fundamental level, but they still did not feel themselves a part of the mainstream, nor were they sure they wanted to join it. As Tyrone noted, he could "do the square thing",

but if he wanted to be understood, he had to turn to friends on the street.

Students had a feeling that they did not belong anywhere, and their estrangement was played out in a cycle of struggle where they made progress towards their goals and then fell back into self-defeating habits. At different times, each member of the staff talked about this cycle, expressing sadness that students would often make great progress, i.e. disengaging from gang involvement, leaving an abusive relationship, getting off drugs, only to fall back into old patterns and problems after a few months. The cyclical pattern of this behavior was illustrated by Tyrone's continued relapses with drugs and Rigoberto's repeated robberies and jail terms. Several staff members mentioned their concern about one particular student who had received her GED and had been doing well, but who later returned to her abusive, drug-addicted boyfriend and became pregnant by him. This example again illustrates the cyclical pattern of progress and relapse. This case also shows that women in the program tended to express their need for belonging either by focusing on having children, who exacerbated their hardships, or by focusing on their significant other, who was frequently a negative influence.

While learning alienated the GED students from their peers in the street culture, class activities helped them form a new peer group. However, teachers trying to create a

sense of community were thwarted by the problem that the students did not trust each other. When I asked students about friendships in class, they said they wanted to mind their own business, and several explained that having friends had only caused them problems in the past. At this point in their lives, they just wanted to focus on getting the GED. All six African-American women I talked to about friends were distrustful of other women, both in and out of class. They were concerned that women friends would be a threat to their romantic life.

This distrust was not altogether unfounded. Students sometimes sabotaged each other when one friend was doing better than another. Two women who became friends in Reina's class were a sad example. When one did well on a test, the other bought her drinks until she was too drunk to come to class the next day. In the writing class, even the women who lived in the same shelter were not friends.

The students knew that they could not go back to their old friends if they wanted to make a better life for themselves, but they still missed the intensity of their previous friendships. In an interview with Tyrone this paradox was especially clear:

"I have friends from AA home group meetings and from here, but no friends like I used to have in L.A. I love and care about them. They're my family. But they didn't have the opportunity I had to find out who I am by getting away. They're stuck there in the street. There's no doubt in my mind that if I were in L.A. I'd be dead or in

prison. But I don't even identify with anyone in Washington. They are almost slow. Their thinking is not like mine. They don't see things as deeply. I see what kicks things off."

On the other hand, these same friends would have preferred to see Tyrone dead than to have him separate from their gang.

Reina told me that people often dropped out of the program because they realized they did not share the same language with their old group anymore. Their identity was shaken. They also dropped out because they were afraid of success, of what they would do next. Tyrone was a good example.

"I'm still in contact with the streets. The only people I can communicate with and be myself with is on the street. I do the square thing, but it doesn't turn me on. I go on the streets and kick it."

Even within the supportive context of the Center the students sometimes felt as if they did not belong. Maricella felt uncomfortable because she was told she was really too old for the GED program. She was 31; the program was intended to serve 16-24 year olds. She also felt she was the wrong race.

In the writing workshops there was a stronger sense of belonging, but it was accompanied by jealousy in trying to exclude newcomers. On various occasions Louise expressed resentment that Gertrude participated assertively in class discussion. Louise was especially irritated with her input

on the day the class was deciding on the book title.

"The three of us who have been with the class from the beginning are close. Gertrude is new and is trying to fit in. The rest of us are trying to protect that closeness."

The students in the ESL classroom expressed the desire to fit in better with American culture, especially in the area of dating, but they seemed to have a greater sense of belonging to the classroom community than the other two groups.

One of the most important effects of the students' associations with the Center was their growing recognition that they could and wanted to contribute to the world. Several of them expressed a strong desire to help others, or as Louise said, to give something back. Louise was writing a guide book for the newly homeless. Tyrone was planning for the day when he would go into politics and be able to make financial donations for the public good, and especially for the Center and its parent organization. Maricella planned to go into bilingual teaching so she could help Hispanic children.

I was touched that several students wanted to do something for me. Louise brought me pink Italian wine glasses and a blown glass plate from the warehouse where she worked. This was to thank me for taking her and her friend to lunch and driving them to the University. Another student offered to help me later when he became a businessman. Yet another student, another ex-gang member,

was unhappy to hear I would be leaving to finish my dissertation. He asked me how he would get through his writing exam. He was especially disappointed that he did not have time to organize a going away party for me.

### Beliefs

Religious and philosophical beliefs helped students make changes and improve their lives. While some of the students attended church, most practiced a more personal religion or developed their own philosophy. Nearly all subscribed to the affirmation that "If you try hard enough, you can succeed." This motto appeared in the speeches students prepared for fund-raising presentations, in their writing, and in their talks with me. They all said that this belief was the reason for persisting with education despite the difficulties in their lives.

This belief shows that the middle-class Protestant work ethic, that virtuous hard work and conformity would be rewarded, was deeply ingrained, even among those whose life experiences were testament to its fallacy. This belief system, as I mentioned earlier, puts the burden of failure on the individual rather than society. The pervasiveness of this belief is one of the key stumbling blocks to implementing a Freirian based, community building program. The United States is first and foremost the land of the rugged individual.

Rigoberto expressed a variation on this theme, believing that as long as he placed his trust in God, he would succeed, or at least survive. Allen also gave God credit for changing his life around, and Gertrude found her church an important source of strength. For Jeremiah, spiritual development was the most important goal in life, and to him, his homelessness was a way to evolve more fully. On several occasions he told me about how much money he had previously earned, but that he had been too caught up in making money to focus on building his character. He deeply believed that as soon as he had improved his outlook on life that he would find housing and employment.

In my first interviews with Tyrone, he said his religion was self-reliance and belief in himself, but later he mentioned the importance of a higher power in helping him recover from drug and alcohol abuse. Many of the ESL students were casual in referring to God and their religious beliefs and enjoyed talking about spirituality. The GED students, who were more guarded in general, did not speak as openly about their beliefs. While God was not a primary focus for everyone in the writing workshops, about half of the writers were very deeply affected and felt aided by their spiritual beliefs.

Except for Gertrude, all of the people who spoke to me about God or their religious beliefs in any depth were men. It seemed that for the men, finding religion or God was a

turning point in their lives, a point when they decided to improve their attitudes and take responsibility for themselves, parallel to what many of the women experienced when they had children. Several of the African-American men turned to the Muslim Brotherhood, a highly structured organization which perhaps served as a positive substitute for the previous structure of the gangs. Although several of the men had an individual, private connection with God, most who had spiritual beliefs found a sense of community along with their spirituality, for example Tyrone in AA, some in the Muslim Brotherhood, and others in various Protestant churches.

### Family

Without exception, every student I interviewed had experienced physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse in their families. They talked fairly easily about their painful experiences, treating them as the norm. Some spoke almost as if violence were inevitable. In the GED classroom, during the first presentation on domestic violence, the speaker asked students why they thought abusive situations continued. An African-American woman replied that some women like to be abused. Two more women and a man agreed with her. Another man explained that some women ask for it. The speaker chose not to deal with these assumptions, but focused instead on the facts of domestic

violence, explaining how dangerous and difficult it was for women to get away from such situations. Her approach was a lecture style rather than a dialogue, and she had no luck in engaging students' participation.

Aaron, on the other hand, had gained the students' trust and knew when they were having problems. He listened to them, showed support, and helped them find alternatives. He did this in a one-on-one dialogue rather than in a group. After the domestic violence presentation, several women carried on conversations about their experiences informally in small groups. Three women mentioned that negative relationships with boyfriends led them to drop out of high school in the first place.

Many students expressed uncertainty about the possibility of having intimate relationships in the future. The men, more than the women, were pessimistic about eventually having a successful marriage and children. Several men admitted to having physically abused their girlfriends, and many of the women were, or had recently been, involved with physically or mentally abusive partners.

Among the African-American men, nearly all made remarks about "being a man." To be a man, for these students, meant to be tough, violent, sexually active, and savvy. Their view of manhood had nothing to do with the mainstream value of how a man earns his living. How one looked and acted was essential to students' definition of manhood. A man earned

respect through his toughness and courage. Isaac told me his father showed him pornography when he was only seven years old. This was a way of teaching him to be a man. He interpreted his father's physical abuse as an effort to teach him masculinity. Both Isaac and Kelvin said they learned to have violent tempers from their fathers, which made life difficult and dangerous for them.

Among the women, "being a woman" was equated with having children. Maricella and one sixteen-year-old girl were the only females in the program that who did not have at least one child. For some of the women, children were a source of strength and motivation to improve their lives. For others, children were just another problem.

Many students in the GED class, male and female, talked about the sense of family that came from being in a gang. "If someone were to do something to my sister, I'd kill them," one African-American woman told me. "In a gang, those guys are the only family each other has. They'll die for each other." This idea came up in discussions of police brutality as well. African-Americans felt harassed for seeking a sense of belonging in a group. Neighborhood groups bonded together for social activities and for protection. Members of these groups saw each other as family, but the police mistook them for gangs, especially when they were wearing clothing associated with Seattle gangs, such as plaid hunting jackets.

The sense of belonging that emerged among students in the GED class was crucial to their successful attempts to start a new life and disengage from gangs and negative relationships. The students were looking for a sense of belonging and a feeling of family. The writing class, especially the core group, had this sense of family while the group was intact, and the ESL class, with its games, food, and festive atmosphere, also promoted friendship and a sense of belonging.

#### The Power of Language and Self-expression

Language, and especially writing, was a source of frustration and discouragement for the students, but it also gave them a tremendous sense of empowerment when they achieved even a partial mastery over it. The program encouraged students to express themselves in writing for their own needs, without testing or emphasizing the conventions of grammar and usage. The success of the student-centered approach used at the Opportunity Center offers further support for Heath's (1980) position that learning is generated far more by people's interest, and literacy is developed far more by their desire to communicate, than by explicit and deliberate instruction. This approach was taken in all three classrooms.

Of the three classes, the GED students had the most negative feelings about writing. The writing test was

usually the last test students took before completion of their GED because it was the most threatening. They primarily worried about the essay, agonizing over practice sessions in class. They spent all their time thinking about spelling and grammar rather than what they wanted to say, and frequently told me how much they hated it. Along with concerns about grammar and spelling, the English language itself was an important issue for most of the students in the GED class. Many spoke a form of English which was not appreciated by mainstream society and was not acceptable on the GED. What they learned on the street was not the kind of knowledge sanctioned by society. While the students were proud of their street education, it presented a barrier to becoming bicultural and learning the ways of mainstream society. Although the ESL students were concerned about their need for better English, they did not have the same performance pressures experienced by the students in the GED class who felt they should already know their own language.

Tyrone, struggling with expressing himself in writing, took the writing test five times before finally completing the GED. Although it was extremely difficult for him, he was determined to improve his writing and to eventually write an autobiography. His sense of respect and awe for language was evident in his slang. Speaking of his sisters (both of whom had served time in prison), Tyrone said, "There's more man in them than most men. I envied them.

They had game [verbal toughness], verbs and words in them."

Although the writing test served as a stumbling block to their goal of passing the GED, the students showed an intrinsic motivation toward learning to write for personal expression. Nelson and Kelvin also wanted to be able to write their life stories. The students wrote freely in their dialogue journals, and were always anxious to see what Aaron commented in response. The use of such two-way journals was a way to help the students develop ease and comfort in writing through writing to communicate, rather than to achieve a grade.

Two students submitted essays to a new writers contest in New York City and were to have their work published in a book. One woman was writing to pen-pals in jail. Jamie found a vehicle for dealing with his emotions through writing poetry. Even in the ESL class the students were eager to write. Emily used dialogue journals in these classes and also required students to keep a learning log. In the writing workshops, where the students wrote freely about any topic, students demonstrated very few problems with finding ideas and writing continuously for the entire length of a five hour class.

In January 1993, Aaron found a new way to give the students more opportunities to express themselves creatively. He started a student newsletter to publish material written by any of the students in the three classes

and by staff as well. He solicited contributions by announcing the newsletter deadline in class, and students responded promptly. They could hardly wait to read each others' writing when the newsletter came out. They also felt pride seeing their own writing in print.

The motivation for coming to the writing class was more intrinsic than for the other two classes. There was no tangible reward, such as a certificate, but this class effected profound changes in people's lives at various levels: in the way they thought about themselves (i.e. with greater self-confidence), the greater respect they showed in interacting with each other, their optimism about the future, and in their improved living circumstances. Both the writing process and the successful publication of their work empowered the students in that it helped them find inner strength to make positive changes in their lives.

Reina never directly addressed issues of physical survival and never played the role of career counselor or mental health worker. Instead, she listened to their stories and treated the students as fellow writers--not clients, and not people to be helped or pitied. Students made dramatic improvements in their lives: Randy and Louise found permanent housing; Jeremiah found work; Gertrude and Louise both got higher paying jobs; Hugh, Sherri, Gertrude, and Randy all began additional self-directed learning projects independent of the class, and Louise began the

application process to go back to college. They attributed their success to the experience in the workshop.

Publishing, the goal of the writing class, meant anything from a self-published booklet produced by the class, to a newsletter, or any means of sharing experiences with each other in class. The writers wanted to be heard, as it gave power to their voices. This class was different from the Center's other classes because it was less "problem focused" in a group or Freirian sense, but paradoxically, the positive life changes accomplished by its participants were the most obvious and dramatic.

Most of the time in the writing classes was spent in the exploration of personal thoughts and experiences. The group dynamics were more intense than in the other two classrooms because the writing was so personal. The writers in this class had more in common because they were revealing themselves. Students in each of the three classes often had things they want to hide. In the writing class students were looking at themselves, their worlds, probing, and by writing and making their lives public, legitimizing their experiences. They broke down alienation and made connections with the mainstream as well as each other.

#### Recommendations for Further Study

Due to the limitations of time and the large amount of data to organize, I limited the topics I explored in this

paper. The findings of this study suggest a variety of avenues for future research.

One of the most important findings was the value of discovering and promoting students' intrinsic motivation towards growth. Future researchers might explore intrinsic motivation by designing an adult basic education program, or on a smaller scale, a class, which inverts Maslow's paradigm and focuses on self-actualizing needs rather than more obvious survival needs. Basic survival needs would still be addressed as they arose but would not be a focal point. This class or program would center around creativity and self-expression, for example a writing class which would include options such as journal writing for personal exploration, autobiography, family history, poetry, or fiction. The program could also include art or drama classes such as the Center proposed but never implemented. An important aspect of such a program would be that it would give students a chance to be "published", to share their work with the class or the larger community.

Another finding which might be investigated further is how a rites of passage paradigm could be implemented by educators as an alternative assessment tool. Learners could plan their goals according to Van Gennep's model, determining what aspects of their lives would change and what obstacles they would need to overcome as they moved through the three phases of passage towards their goals. It

would be interesting to determine whether an awareness of the transformative process of learning and the three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, helps students minimize the cycle of progress and regression. Students could also reflect on the value of ritual in their own lives and be involved in the creation of school rituals. The information gained from such self-reflection by students could be tracked and provided to funders as an alternative to standardized test scores.

Additional studies should be done on student-centered learning. Perhaps the student-centered approach could be implemented and studied in other contexts, such as in more traditional high school or college classrooms. It would be of value to compare how well student-centered adult education programs meet students' self-defined needs with programs which are less student-centered. Another valuable research project would be a longitudinal ethnographic study of students who go through a student-centered program and examines how their later lives are affected by the experience.

Another suggestion for further research is to do an ethnographic study of a student-centered program with an emphasis on the lives of the women in the program. In this particular study, the women seemed to gain less benefit from the program than men. They were lonely and mistrustful, and it was difficult to build rapport with them. Despite the

staff's attempts to help female students raise their self-esteem and improve their living conditions, overall there did not seem to be much change in the way they viewed their options or the world. Further research would help determine whether the hostility and lack of support for each other among the women in this program is a common problem in adult basic education, and if so, what could be done to ameliorate it.

### Conclusions

Looking at the program from an anthropological perspective, I see the educational process offered in the three programs studied as a rite of passage. The work of Arnold Van Gennep (1960) serves as my paradigm.

The analysis of ceremonies accompanying an individual's "life crises" which van Gennep called "rite de passage" is usually considered to be his unique contribution. He pointed out that, when the activities associated with such ceremonies were examined in terms of their order and content, it was possible to distinguish three major phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. (Kimball, 1960, p. vii)

Van Gennep's work, done in the early 1900's, deals primarily with rituals for groups of males found throughout the world. For example, several indigenous African societies have coming of age rites for boys. When boys reach adolescence, they leave society for a period of time, marking separation. Next, they enter a transitional phase where they undergo a period of education, learning male

secrets, bonding to each other socially, and surviving ordeals to demonstrate their manhood. Then they return to society to be reincorporated as men, an event celebrated with banquets and dancing. Their relationships to the others changed after this; especially important was their eligibility for marriage and the respect earned for newly acquired cultural knowledge.

The process of learning at the Education Center represents a status change and can be considered a rite of passage for the students. In a modern day educational setting, however, the phases and rites are not as clearly marked as they are in simpler societies, and the change does not happen all at once. The students separate from their previous environments, friends, substance abuse, habits, abusive situations. The educational process itself imports new cultural knowledge, contains social activities that create social bonding, and is experienced as a kind of ordeal. This is the transitional or liminal phase. Incorporation takes place through achieving the GED, English language knowledge, or writing proficiency as a symbolic transition to mainstream adult status. The incorporation into society is celebrated through the biannual graduation ceremonies, awards, and periodic recognition of student achievements in the student newsletter. The graduation ceremony involves dressing up, feasting, and dancing in an elegant downtown conference room, physically incorporating

students into mainstream society.

Even though the students at the Center do not go from one phase to the other in an abrupt fashion, it is still useful to understand how the rite of passage model fits their behavior. Some students could not separate from their previous community and discontinued the program, often coming back at a later time. Several students who were almost finished with the GED mentioned that, despite increased material hardships, they had intentionally left their parents before going back to school, a symbolic rite of separation. In the homeless writing workshops several students mentioned how important it was to separate from the negative influences of old friends. They saw their homelessness as a time of transition, even calling their group "The Transitional Quartet".

One of the challenges for the staff at the Opportunity Center was to facilitate the transitional period for students heading for a new life. Several simple rituals strengthened the sense of community in the classroom. Van Gennep mentions that food often plays an important role in rituals. The writing class always served food and coffee because most often the students would miss lunch. Reina started a tradition of bringing bagels and cream cheese. When a substitute teacher brought donuts, the class became upset. They wanted their regular food, and it had to be bagels.

Before writing workshops were started, the Center offered life skills workshops. Martina, the woman in charge of these workshops, told me she was afraid that students went to the workshops primarily for the free food. The food may have been a key element in attendance, but it could have been the social aspect of eating together that drew students as well. Thus, food serves symbolic social purposes as well as the practical purpose of providing nutrition and sustenance.

Another characteristic of transitions is what van Gennep calls the territorial passage, a rite which involves consciously moving from one physical place to another, often passing through a neutral area or transition zone before entering the new place. The school itself is the neutral area where learners are able to redefine themselves. The field trips outside the school such as the trip to the law firm or the camping trip were forays from the neutral zone where students were given orientation to new territories and an opportunity to test out new identities in preparation for new roles in mainstream society.

Melissa, the volunteer coordinator, used effective rituals which strengthened commitment to the program. In the year after she joined the Center, she created the volunteer program and expanded it to a staff of 24 people. She sent thank you notes in the mail to volunteers, encouraged students to write thank you cards, let volunteers

know about upcoming events at the Center, organized training days where volunteers shared experiences and concerns, and even invited volunteers to her home for a pot luck dinner party. Melissa also exemplified the participatory ideas espoused by the program. She respected the needs of all: students, volunteers, staff, and program director. If she encountered problems, she engaged in dialogue with the concerned parties, treating all those involved with equal consideration. Her emphasis on rituals and her sense of equity helped volunteers feel important and increased commitment to service.

Rites of incorporation were used at the Center to recognize entry into a new social status. Graduation was held twice a year for students who finish the GED. Consistent with the van Gennep model, it was an elegant celebration held downtown in a beautiful conference room with food, speakers from the community, student speakers, and family and friends. It would be important for the Center to continue these rituals and possibly elaborate on them, including developing rites of incorporation for the ESL classes and writing workshops. The lack of ritual in our society eliminates needed support which can reduce the difficulty of life transitions. The successes of the Opportunity Center were clearly related to ritual as well as instruction.

Both the Van Gennep model of rites of passage and the Freirian theory of education for empowerment celebrate change. Both models recognize that people are not static selves. People can change themselves and their world with the help of a supportive and respectful environment. In a student-centered setting, school becomes an arena for redefining oneself and for testing out new and more powerful roles.

In many ways, a Freirian system of education and learning is difficult to implement, but the Opportunity Center is an example of how effective it can be. Traditional educational settings could benefit by examining this theory more closely and implementing what they can. The Freirian approach to learning not only incorporates but is based on students' lives and problems. It asks the question: How can education have the most positive effect on people's lives? It asks the students what their needs are and puts those needs first. When students do drop out of the Center's programs, it is most often because their lives have become too disrupted to allow them to continue, or because they have met their own goals. But when they drop out, they often come back, so dropping out is not considered the same problem it is in traditional high schools.

Programs such as those provided by the Opportunity Center are intensive and expensive, but they are doing much to address society's ills. In the long run, such programs

will pay off in less spending for prisons, welfare, and drug rehabilitation. Student-centered learning programs are the programs mostly truly committed to real equality of educational opportunity, and they could prove instructive to more traditional educational establishments.

The students nearly all said that the Center met their needs. Therefore, the program could be considered successful. It was difficult for the staff to know what happened to all of the students after they left the program, but many previous students kept in touch. Two students stayed on at the Center after obtaining their GED to work as administrative and teaching assistants. Tyrone, from the GED class, and Jorge, from the ESL class, both went on to college, and Hugh, from the writing class, began adult education writing and computer classes. Isaac completed the GED and began to take college preparatory classes. He found housing in a group home. Tyrell completed a drug rehabilitation program, kicking a crack-cocaine habit, completed his GED, and found work in a warehouse.

Their lives do not all end perfectly. Tyrell also impregnated one of the young women in the program, and then began a new relationship with another, fulfilling the pattern of relationships that both the men and women feared. A bright and engaging sixteen-year-old girl finished her GED, got a job she liked as a fitness instructor, and, when I saw her six months later, she happily announced she was

pregnant. These were more examples of the students' cycles of progress and regression as they tried to change their lives. Some finished the GED and continued life as before. Others just disappeared.

Theory justifies social programs. Critical theory condemns the current educational system for being unfair and perpetuating oppression and calls for a reform in educational practices to create a more just and equitable society. The Opportunity Center has put theory into practice by focusing on students' internal motivations for change. The staff encourages all students to exchange knowledge, which will lead to feelings of greater power, better ability to deal with life's problems (empowerment), and improved self-esteem. By changing the structure of the school, the Opportunity Center offers a model for changes in society. The staff believes that social problems are complex and have multiple causes. Therefore, they deal with the students' whole self, their culture, needs, identity, family, beliefs, and most importantly, the programs encourage students to express themselves and communicate.

These findings call into question Maslow's (1968) theory of hierarchy of needs, which puts survival first and self-expression last. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a widely accepted but largely untested theory of motivation. He analyzes human behavior in terms of "deficiency" motives which all animals share, and "growth" or "being" motives

which are unique to humans. This theory posits that people must sequentially meet their existence needs before they can move into self-actualization or higher levels of self-development. According to Maslow, people must first be concerned with meeting basic physiological needs, then safety needs, then need for love and belonging, then needs for esteem. These are all deficiency motivated. The "being" motives, on the other hand, are what make us human.

Maslow argues that humans have unique desires to discover and understand, to give love to others, and to push for the optimum fulfillment of their inner potentials. (Bee, 1987, p. 248)

But only very few, according to Maslow, are able to reach the point where they can meet needs for self-actualization, which would result in complete self-knowledge and self-expression.

But being motives are quite fragile and do not typically emerge until well into adulthood, and then only under supportive circumstances...That is, if you are starving, the physiological needs dominate. If you are being physically battered, the safety needs dominate (Bee, 1987, p. 249).

Many students at the Center had not even met the basic needs for food and shelter, yet they came and they wrote. Most had been or were presently in abusive relationships. Yet they wanted to describe and share their experiences and let their imaginations carry them towards fulfillment. They wanted to learn.

Maslow's theory is an ethnocentric and elitist paradigm. It puts forward as truth a crude, biological

model of motivation which portrays people as little more than animals until they have risen above the masses through reaching a specified level of material comfort and accomplishment. Maslow claims that only a select few can reach this point. Acceptance of this exclusionary theory of motivation has devastating implications for education. It allows educators to dehumanize students who have difficult lives and to see them as unable to achieve what the elite will accomplish.

The students of this program have proven Maslow wrong. Despite lack of food, shelter, security, health, these people are coming to the program. The human spirit wants to learn, regardless of the body's circumstances. And all people have self-actualizing needs: self-esteem, respect, knowledge, and self-expression. These needs are what make us human.

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