A Study of At-Risk Youth and How They Respond to Life's Challenges

by

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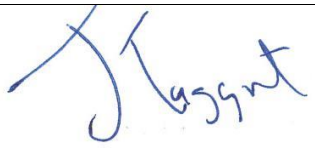

_____ (Director, Canadian Education Programs)

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Students who attend alternate education programs are often the most vulnerable population in the school system. These youth face numerous challenges in their lives, including poverty, trauma, academic struggles, mental health issues, domestic and community violence, racism, and discrimination. At-risk youth have many ways of responding to these challenges, both maladaptive and adaptive. We tend to see what is visible to us: their maladaptive responses, such as self-harm, substance misuse, or other risky behaviour. This action research project explores the topic of at-risk youth and the various ways they respond to life's challenges. Also in question is whether the youth find the school programs that teach adaptive ways of responding to life's challenges, as valuable and meaningful to them, and how this research could influence future programming at the school.

The findings from this research have provided a better understanding of how at-risk youth respond to life's challenges and how school programs can play a supportive and active role in contributing to their responses. The data revealed that although a small proportion of the youth did have maladaptive responses involving substance misuse and self-harm, they had many more adaptive responses. These included the programs offered by the school, which included yoga, expressive arts, self-regulation and mindfulness practices. Recommendations of this action research project for the alternate school include: expanding the yoga and expressive arts programs; continuing to be leaders in the areas of self-regulation and mindfulness; and incorporating adventure programming within the physical education program. These recommendations can be applied to alternate programs working with at-risk youth throughout the educational system.

KEY WORDS: alternate schools, at-risk youth, trauma, substance misuse, self-harm, yoga, self-regulation, expressive arts, mindfulness, nature

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Human beings are tender creatures. We are born with our hearts open. And sometimes our open hearts encounter experiences that shatter us. Sometimes we encounter experiences that so violate our sense of safety, order, predictability, and right, that we feel utterly overwhelmed – unable to integrate, and simply unable to go on as before. Unable to bear reality. We have come to call these shattering experiences trauma. None of us is immune to them." - *Stephen Cope, Author of Yoga and the Quest for the True Self (2011)*

This action research project explored the topic of at-risk youth and the various ways they respond to life's challenges. In particular, I was interested in finding out if youth find the school programs offered that teach adaptive ways of responding to life's challenges, as valuable and meaningful to them, and how this research could influence future programming at the school.

Purpose Statement

Applying an action research methodology, I aim: to understand how at-risk youth respond to life's challenges, and how the school programs can play a supportive and active role in contributing to the ways they respond; and to mobilize the findings with the researched, namely the youth. By including at-risk youth participants in a dialogue, thereby incorporating insider knowledge, I aim to better understand how school programs can help youth regulate their emotions. I also aim to discuss recommendations for future programs within the alternate school setting based on the findings of my action research, and how to go about applying these findings.

Research Question

In this action research project, I explored the research question: How do youth from alternate schools respond to the daily challenges in their lives and how can school programs play a more contributing role in the way they respond?

Situating Myself as the Author

I have spent the majority of my career working with at-risk students in different schools and in different communities. Working within these communities and with vulnerable children and teens, has always been my passion. I have always looked for opportunities to involve students in music, art and sport activities, always believing that programs like these offer outlets for students' energy, emotion regulation, and provide experiences for youth to be engaged positively in the community.

Currently, I am a school counsellor at an alternate school. I have the privilege of working with amazing youth who are 12-16 years old. Students attending this alternate program are referred because of their lack of experiencing success in mainstream schools. The British Columbia Ministry of Education defines alternative education programs as programs that meet the special requirements of students who may be unable to adjust to the requirements of regular schools (British Columbia Ministry of Education, para. 13). Reasons for my students' referrals include requiring extra supports for learning difficulties, attendance issues, social anxiety and behavioural issues. The staff is dedicated to building positive relationships with all students believing that having a close connection to the school will help them succeed. Small class sizes and a high adult-to-student ratio create an environment that is more conducive to building these all-important connections.

Even though the students felt connected with the school and had positive relationships with the staff, I could see that many of my students were struggling with the challenges in their lives, with emotion regulation, substance misuse, and mental health issues that were obstacles in the way of their learning.

Why this is a Significant Issue

Youth who attend this alternate school are considered at-risk because they face numerous challenges in their lives, including trauma, poverty, neglect, anxiety, academic struggles, mental health issues, separation from parents, insecure attachments to caregivers, family addictions, domestic and community violence, racism, and discrimination. As counsellor, I could see how my students were affected by these challenges. Students would come to school dealing with strong emotions: anger, sadness, feeling alone, feeling stressed, anxious, depressed, confused, and tired. I knew that many of my students were trying to regulate their emotions by responding as best they could, but I was deeply concerned that many of their response strategies were harmful. Substance misuse leading to addiction, bruised knuckles and broken hand bones from punching walls and brick buildings, cuts on their bodies from self-harm, hours on social media or video games for distraction with little sleep, refusing to come to school because they were too anxious and hence isolating themselves, or couch surfing[1], not wanting to be in their own homes.

[1] Couch-surfing: a common term-of-art among the homeless youth community and means that a young person finds temporary shelter with friends, acquaintances, or, less often, family members, but lack a permanent or stable home.(https://www.nn4youth.org/learn/definitions/, par.1)

As a school, we have very little control over what happens in our students' lives outside of school. Within our control, however, is the school environment. The question became how do we make a difference and what do we need to change to do this? I started to wonder *what can the school do differently to help youth respond to these challenges? What types of programs might students engage in that would provide them with adaptive ways of responding? How would the students find these programs meaningful?*

School Programs Aim to Encourage Adaptive Ways of Responding

The alternate school started a few different programs designed to provide the students with alternate ways of responding to life's stressors. These programs were based on current research of interventions that involve the mind and body in treatment that promote positive mental health such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, meditation, and arts therapy (Spinazzola et al., 2011).

OASIS

The first program we created was OASIS [2] or "Open Art Studio In School". We turned an unused area of the school into an art area and stocked the room with art supplies. OASIS is an expressive art group that meets during lunch hour once a week to do art in the community of others. In this group we use art not only as a way to express ideas, thoughts and feelings, but also as a way to build relationships with each other. The basic thinking is that art is for all, not just for the artist, and that whatever media one chooses to work with, whatever one creates, will be okay. We welcome students to create "in the moment", with the knowledge that spontaneous art making encourages the creative side of the teen, enhances self-esteem and self-awareness, and

[2] O.A.S.I.S. or Open Art Studio In School is the brainchild of my friend and colleague Donna Donald from Winnipeg, Manitoba. She created this concept and it is borrowed with her permission.

allows a deeper, healthy communication with themselves. Making art in this unconditionally accepting environment promotes connection with self, each other, and the world around them. When teens live in a negative environment, they may develop a "can't do" life attitude. Art is a "can do." Engaging the creative process lets in the imagination and a sense of play. Art making offers them control, yet creates a safe space and the freedom to explore their stories, their hurts, frustrations, curiosities and passions. The art space environment is set up so that materials and music are all there. Staff and students are given a generous invite to get comfortable. They make their choices on their own, selecting from a wide variety of art supplies and activities.

Yoga

In my own life, I had started to attend yoga classes and found that this practice helped me decrease my stress, be more mindful, and stay more active. If yoga was bringing these positive aspects to my life and I was seeing a difference, how much more might my students benefit from a yoga program? I suggested this idea to my yoga instructor and she agreed to volunteer her services to teach yoga to the students once a week. We purchased a set of yoga mats and began to offer yoga once a week on Friday mornings to any students who were interested in participating.

Chill Out Room

This space was created to support the students who are in crisis. The Chill Out Room provides students with a safe place to calm down or self-regulate using positive multi-sensory therapies when experiencing emotional distress. The Chill Out Room is painted "soft cloud" blue to promote relaxation, stocked with colourful and interesting art and photography books, and has a music library to help trigger positive emotion and memories to promote relaxation. The tables are set up with fresh clay and other art medium such as pastels, paint, and crayons to provide

students the option to express themselves. There is also a guitar, a keyboard with headphones, and a small bongo drum. The space has comfortable furniture, plants, and soft lighting from floor lamps. The purpose of the Chill Out Room is to provide students with a space to self-regulate, relax and calm down, and regulate their emotions. Students have the time and space to work through feelings of anxiety, anger, and sadness, to stop and think about options, and make positive choices. Students can access the Chill Out Room at any time by first checking with a staff member. There is only one or two students allowed in the space at the same time. Students' time in the Chill Out Room ranges from 15 minutes to longer depending on how much time the student needs. A staff member checks in on the student and there is follow up with the student by myself, the counsellor, if required.

Questioning the Meaningfulness of the School Programs

Students began to participate in OASIS, yoga, and the Chill Out Room. On average, up to eight students were participating in OASIS weekly; a core group of 8-10 students participated in yoga each week; and on average, up to five students were asking to use the Chill Out Room each day when they were feeling sad, angry, anxious, or just needing some time alone. As a school staff, we initiated these school programs because *we* thought these programs would be helpful to students by providing them with opportunities to regulate their emotions thereby teaching them adaptive ways of responding. As the counsellor, I wanted to know what *the students* thought about the programs. *Did they find the programs meaningful? Were the programs helping them with their intense emotions? Were they using what they were learning in OASIS, yoga, and the Chill Out Room when they were outside of school? Were these new adaptive ways of responding replacing some of the harmful, maladaptive ways of responding that I was seeing as the counsellor?* And the idea for an action research project was born.

Background information

Alternate education programs focus on educational, social, and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. An alternate education program provides its support through differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery, and enhanced counselling services based on students' needs (Government of B.C., 2009).

Students who attend alternate education programs are often the most vulnerable population in the school system. Alternate education programs have disproportionate number of children and youth in care, Indigenous students, children and youth living in poverty or the street, gifted children who have difficulty in social situations, children and youth involved in drugs, alcohol and the sex trade, and youth with mental health concerns. Alternate education programs offer an opportunity for these vulnerable and at-risk students to experience success (Government of B.C., 2009).

Risk is frequently considered along a continuum that may take into account any combination of factors that may involve individual family, peer, school, social, community, and socio-cultural aspects (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). In general, youth are considered to be at-risk if they are exposed to factors revolving around home life, including experiences of homelessness, unstable or poor living conditions, single parenthood, unemployed or underemployed parents, abusive or violent environments, and physical and emotional neglect (Centre for Research on Youth at Risk, 2012; Noble, 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Other factors include: school and education related risk issues such as poor attendance and performance, as well as inadequately supportive school environments (Centre for Research on Youth at Risk, 2012; Moore, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2000); health related concerns, including mental health issues, lack of access to health care, sexual activity, and alcohol and drug misuse (Canadian Homelessness Research

Network, 2010; Moore, 2006; Noble 2012); and incidents of trauma. At-risk youth are facing many challenges in their lives, which can lead to harmful substance use, self-harm and other at-risk behaviour. Their trauma and loss, exposure to sexual and physical abuse and other types of violence, experiences of stigma and racism, as well as their risk for psychological disorders may increase their chances of victimization and make coping with subsequent trauma more challenging (CCSA 2007). There is, however, growing evidence that that protective factors and assets in the lives of at-risk youth may buffer their risk and support resilience and healing.

Research tells us that connectedness to school and positive relationships with caring adults within the school reduces the likelihood of the distress and difficulties in coping that leads to substance use, self-harm, and other at-risk behaviour (CCSA, 2007). Our schools can be nurturing places where youth can learn new ways to respond to life's challenges. In order to reduce problem substance use, potential of self-harm, and other at-risk behaviour, we need to recognize the potent influences of trauma, violence, and neurophysiological vulnerability on the risk for chronic substance abuse (CCSA, 2007). Beyond prevention, we need culturally relevant interventions that help teens heal from trauma, learn healthy ways of responding to chronic stress and distress, and stay connected to protective resources in their lives (CCSA, 2007)

Key Terms and Phrases

At-risk youth: There are many definitions of at-risk youth, but I believe that any child who grows up in this world is at risk in some way due to: stress in our fast paced society, challenging home situations, socio-emotional issues, or being exposed to violence or other trauma, substance abuse and other negative influences at a very young age. Youth can be at-risk despite their ethnicity, gender, age, or family background. The phrase at-risk youth is used in this

thesis to refer to teens who are struggling with the complex challenges that can be seen as a response to peers, family members, difficult social environments, or mental health challenges.

Alternate Schools: Schools designed to support students identified by the school system who are struggling with the complex challenges that can be seen as a response to peers, family members, difficult social environments, and mental health challenges.

Co-Occurring Disorders: When an individual has a substance use disorder and suffers from a mental health condition such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or bipolar disorder (Bellum, 2012).

Equine therapy: The utilization of a horse by a certified professional to reach a therapeutic goal as identified by the needs of the client (Wilkie, Germain, & Theule, 2016a).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): identifies the student's specific learning expectations and outlines how the school will address these expectations through appropriate accommodations, program modifications and/or alternative programs as well as specific instructional and assessment strategies (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/individu.html)

McCreary Centre Society: is a non-government not-for-profit committed to improving the health of B.C. youth through research, evaluation, and community-based projects. Founded in 1977, the Society engages in a wide range of activities and research to identify and address the health needs of young people in the province (http://www.mcs.bc.ca/about_us, 2017)

Photovoice: is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique (Wang, 1997)

Self-harm: The act of deliberately harming one's own body, such as cutting or burning oneself. It's typically not meant as a suicide attempt. Rather, self-injury is an unhealthy way to cope with emotional pain, intense anger and frustration (Mayo Clinic, 2012).

Self-regulation: The unconscious and conscious processes that affect the ability to control responses (Bandy & Moore, 2010)

Self-soothing: One of the distress tolerance skills in dialectical behavior therapy, also known as DBT. Self-soothing is when one treats oneself with compassion, kindness, and care – similar to the way a good parent treats an upset child (Lin, 2015).

Suicidal Ideation: Having thoughts about suicidal acts and can encompass a range of degrees of intent and detail in regard to those thoughts (Law Branch, Attorney General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, 2005).

Trauma: The inability of an individual or community to respond in a healthy way (physically, emotionally, and/or mentally) to heal from acute or chronic stress (Wolpow et al., 2011).

Youth agreement: An alternative to bringing a youth into care and is put into place with the goal of assisting the youth in achieving independence or providing a measure of support and ensuring safety and well-being while efforts are underway to return the youth to the family home. YAGs are an option for youth ages 16 to 19 as an alternative to government care, which allows youth to live independently. (Representative for Children and Youth , 2012)

Roadmap for the Reader

In the next chapter, I will summarize the literature on the issues faced by at-risk youth and their maladaptive ways of responding to life's challenges from trauma including substance use and misuse, self-harm and other risky behaviour. The literature review contains relevant research on self-regulation, yoga, art, and mindfulness programs that help youth in positive ways. In Chapter three I develop a research methodology that explores the question, "how do youth from alternate schools respond to the daily challenges in their lives and how do the school programs play a role in the way they respond?" In Chapter four, I discuss my findings. Chapter five contains my conclusions, the implications of my findings and how they might be applied, as well as my recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Part One

"The mere sight of a child touches the very essence of our humanity. A child draws from within us the inclination and instinct for kindness, gentleness, generosity, and love. Accordingly, there is nothing more revolting to our humanity than cruelty to children. These truths we knew at one time and, somehow, subsequently forgot"

(Vilakazi, 1993)

Challenges Faced by Youth At-Risk

At-risk youth face many challenges in their lives. For the purpose of this literature review, I provide relevant information and research findings on youth at-risk and their experiences of poverty, unstable home environments, mental health issues, and effects of trauma. Section one of the literature review concludes with maladaptive ways of responding that include self-harm, suicidal ideation, and substance use and misuse. Section two of the literature review is a collection of the current research on adaptive ways of responding that include self-regulation, yoga, art, and mindfulness.

Poverty. Poverty and hunger have been shown to negatively affect learning and concentration. In the 2008 Alternate Education Survey data collected by the McCreary Centre Society, more than 1 in 5 youth reported going hungry because they or their parents did not have enough money to buy food, with 11% reporting this at least once a week, and 48% going hungry once a week or more (Smith et al., 2008). The impact of poverty can be significant in the lives of at-risk youth. According to the youth who completed the survey, many were reliant on money they received from outside their family. Within the past month, 32% had worked at a legal job, although only 27% reported getting paid and 20% had received money from illegal or street level

activities. Many of these youths' families are unemployed or in low income or seasonal employment, and they struggle to provide their children with enough food and appropriate clothing for school, such as a warm winter jacket and footwear for Physical Education classes. The shame and humiliation experienced as a result can lead youth to disengage from school (Smith et al., 2008).

The 2013 figures from Statistics Canada continue to show that too many B.C. children, 1 in 5, are growing up in poverty. Our child poverty rate continues to exceed the Canadian average and B.C. remains among the provinces taking the least amount of action to reduce child poverty (2015 Child Poverty BC Report Card, 2015).

Unstable Home Environment. The McCreary Centre Society (Smith et al., 2008) reports that youth attending alternate programs reported a number of challenging family situations. "Many youth in alternative education programs live in unstable home environments, with parents or guardians who may be experiencing challenges such as addictions, illness or domestic violence which can impact youths' ability to succeed" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 17). 33% of youth within alternative programs reported that a family member had tried to commit suicide and this event had happened within the last year for a third of these youth (Smith et al., 2008). Indigenous youth were around 1.8 times more likely to have had someone in their family attempt or commit suicide compared to non-Indigenous youth (Smith et al., 2008). Child maltreatment, including abuse and neglect, has serious short-term and long-term implications and may have physical and emotional impacts on the health, development and survival of victims (Burczycka & Conroy, 2017). Over half of the youth in the McCreary survey reported having been physically abused or mistreated with 28% reported having been sexually abused, and 6%

reported having been sexually exploited for drugs and alcohol, shelter, or food. Fifty-four percent of youth had witnessed someone in their family being abused or mistreated (Smith et al., 2008).

Having a stable home has been shown to be a protective factor in the lives of youth. In 2013, 10% of youth in Fraser East had run away in the past year. 21% of Fraser East students had moved from one home to another in the past year, and 4% had moved three or four times (Poon et al., 2013). Findings from the B.C. Adolescent Health Survey (McCreary, 2013) have shown that youth who live in unstable or challenging home environments often experience interruptions to their education which can lead them to fall behind academically and subsequently become disengaged from school. Among the youth in alternative education programs who participated in the 2008 survey, 42% reported living at their current address for one year or less, while 26% reported living at their current address for six months or less. Approximately one in three (29%) had experienced living in precarious housing at some point (staying in an abandoned building, squat, tent, car or on the street). Half of the youth (51%) reported that they had run away from home at least once and 37% reported that they had been kicked out (Smith et al., 2008).

Youth at-risk can also end up on the streets. In 2015, the McCreary Centre Society released statistics on homeless and street-involved youth identifying them as one of the most vulnerable populations in Canada and who experience significant health inequities. According to the survey, youth across British Columbia most commonly first became homeless or street-involved when they were 13 or 14 years of age, with Indigenous youth over-represented at 53%. These youth reported high incidences of family challenges including a family history of government care, mental health challenges, substance use problems, and among youth an intergenerational history of residential school placements (Smith et al., 2015).

The McCreary Centre (2015) also reported that 51% of youth who were homeless or street-involved, had lived in a foster home or group home at some point in their lives and 14% were currently in one of these placements. Some youth had lived in more than one type of government care or on a Youth Agreement[3]. Among the youth who had stayed in a foster home, group home, or on a Youth Agreement, over half had a family member who had also been in government care. This included 19% whose parents had been through the care system and 1% whose grandparents had.

In 2013, the B.C. adolescent health survey reported 3% of students reported living in a foster home or group home at some point in their lives, with a little over 2% having lived in foster care, and a little under 2% having stayed in a group home. One percent of students reported currently living in foster care or a group home (Smith et al., 2013).

Mental Health Issues. The McCreary Centre Society (Smith et al., 2008) reports that a significant number of youth attending alternate programs reported serious mental health issues. For example, "14% tried killing themselves in the past year, with females more likely than males to have attempted suicide" (Smith et al., 2008, p.58). The most common problems that health professionals told them they had were "difficulties with anger (22%), depression (21%), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; 18%), a learning disability (14%) and addictions (13%)" (Smith et al, 2008, p. 30). Un-diagnosed mental health issues also are a challenge for youth and the alternate schools they attend, as the youths' behaviours and school performance are difficult to address (Smith et al., 2008). Key findings in the 2013 BC

[3] Youth Agreement - is an alternative to bringing a youth into care and is put into place with the goal of assisting the youth in achieving independence or providing a measure of support and ensuring safety and well-being while efforts are underway to return the youth to the family home. YAGs are an option for youth ages 16 to 19 an alternative to government care, which allows youth to live independently. (Representative for Children and Youth , 2012)

Adolescent Health Survey for Fraser East, revealed that in the past year, 13% of students reported not accessing mental health services when they thought they needed to (Poon et al., 2013). Most students (82%) reported feeling stressed in the past month and that girls were more likely than boys to experience extreme stress that prevented them from functioning properly. When students were asked the extent to which they felt so sad, discouraged, or hopeless that they wondered if anything was worthwhile, fifty-three percent reported feeling at least some level of despair in the past month (Smith et al., 2013).

Mental health was also an area of concern in homeless and street-involved youth with 68% of youth reporting having at least one mental health condition, 42% had seriously considered suicide in the past year, and 31% had attempted suicide (Smith et al., 2015). Furthermore, youth with mental health challenges were more likely to have police contact. The McCreary Centre reported that 40% of youth with a mental health condition had been searched by police in the year prior to the survey, and that youth with FASD were more likely to have been arrested (Smith et al., 2015). When on the street, homeless youth exhibit a host of health risk behaviours including chronic substance use, injection drug use, survival sex work and criminal activity (Hein, 2011). Much of this behaviour is driven by survival needs, unstable mental health, and negative coping strategies (Krausz & Schuetz, 2011). Homeless youth are "six times more likely to meet criteria for two or more mental disorders and are 10 times more likely to attempt suicide than the general youth population" (Krausz & Schuetz, 2011).

Effects of Trauma on Youth. Trauma is an umbrella term denoting "the inability of an individual or community to respond in a healthy way (physically, emotionally, and/or mentally) to acute or chronic stress" (Wolpow et al., 2011, p.2). Trauma occurs "when the stress compromises the health and welfare of a victim and his/her community" (Wolpow et al., 2011, p.

2). Many youth have experienced trauma in their lives in one way or another. Trauma can take many forms including accidents, disasters, war, homelessness, family violence or abuse, sexual assault, medical trauma, traumatic losses, or vicarious trauma that we feel indirectly from our family or friends. Families who live in poverty have a much higher risk of exposure to repeated trauma, which can "lead to severe and chronic reactions in multiple family members with effects that ripple throughout the family system" (Kiser et al, 2010, p. 802).

Due to the prevalence of trauma, many youth face multiple threats to their physical and emotional safety throughout their lives. According to Emerson and Hopper (2011), in any given year, more than two million children in the United States experience significant physical or emotional neglect, and that emotional neglect can be as detrimental to a child as physical or sexual abuse. These authors hypothesize that the probability that a child will have been directly affected by interpersonal or community violence by age eighteen, is approximately one in four (Emerson & Hopper, 2011). In Canada, in 2015, police reported approximately 53,500 child and youth victims (under the age of 18) of police-reported violent crime in Canada. Children and youth represented 16% of all victims of violent crime (Burczycka & Conroy, 2017). Physical assault was the most common type of police-reported family violence against children and youth (a rate of 134 per 100,000 population), followed by sexual offences (72) such as sexual assault. Statistics Canada (2017) reports that "while rates of physical assault against children and youth perpetrated by a family member were similar for females and males, the rate of sexual offences against female children and youth was 4.5 times higher than that for their male counterparts" (Burczycka & Conroy, 2017, p.57).

Families living in urban communities are often surrounded by stressful events and are exposed to severe and chronic traumas including family violence, drug activity, incarceration of

family members, and personal victimization in the school and community. Consistent with a family systems framework, there is "strong empirical evidence that living under chronically harsh, traumatic circumstances negatively impacts individual family members, multiple family subsystems, and slowly erodes family unit processes including family structure, relations, and coping" (Kiser et al, 2010. p.802).

Children with traumatic stress are often operating within the mode of survival in the moment, when higher order brain functions are temporarily put on hold. The experience of the child affected by trauma is fear, threat, unpredictability, frustration, chaos, hunger and pain. Traumatic stress over-stimulates the brain, which alters the child's neurobiology to adapt to the high-stress pattern (Wolpow et al., 2016). *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success* is a resource designed by Washington State to provide innovative approaches and practical tools to help educators create compassionate classrooms to support children and youth dealing with trauma. This resource lists many possible neurological effects of traumatic stress in children and youth including anxiety, aggression, defiance, withdrawal, hyperactivity, reactivity, inability to calm down, melt downs, forgetfulness, problems with academic learning, sleep disturbances, poor judgment, impulsivity, and troubled peer relationships. It also suggests that trauma related behaviours are often confused with symptoms from other mental health issues or mood disorders including ADHD, bipolar, and depression (Wolpow et al., 2016).

Although some of the above mentioned symptoms are experienced as immediate consequences, the "full impact of childhood trauma more often does not manifest itself until years later, in adolescence and adulthood" (Emerson, Hopper, 2011. p.2). For many, exposure to trauma has a serious impact on health and well-being. Researchers at McMaster University in

Hamilton estimate that at any given time, 2.4 per cent of the population is experiencing PTSD. Based on a national survey (2008), altogether, 76.1 per cent of respondents reported exposure to at least one event sufficient to cause PTSD, such as the unexpected death of a loved one, sexual assault or seeing someone badly injured or killed (CBC News, 2008).

Traumatized children often lack the capacity to regulate their own physiology which leads to having trouble falling asleep or regulating their appetite (Downey, 2013). During adolescence, this becomes even more difficult and they are very likely to self-medicate to get some relief and also to establish some control. Drugs, alcohol, inhalants and other substances are frequently used by children and youth living with trauma. Children may also become addicted to high-stimulus activities such as computer games, dance, or sexual activity, or engage in high-risk behaviours, such as train surfing, or criminal activities in an attempt to regain a high feeling (Downey, 2013).

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, is a major research study that links adult health status to child abuse and household dysfunction experienced during childhood (Felitti et al., 1998). These studies found "that childhood trauma has a cumulative effect and is associated with a much higher risk of developing serious substance abuse or dependence, depression, and suicidality in adulthood" (Emerson & Hopper, 2011, p.4). The cumulative effects of childhood trauma are also connected to a "higher risk of a number of the leading causes of death in adults, including obesity, ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease" (Emerson & Hopper, 2011, p.4).

As noted in the section above, there are many challenges faced by at-risk youth. While youth facing these factors are likely to be considered at-risk overall, the experience of risk is different for each individual in her/his context. Many youth revolt against the context in which

they find themselves and resort to maladaptive responses to feel better. This can include participating in devious or delinquent behaviours such as substance abuse, school absenteeism, risky sexual encounters, violence, and gang activity (Cunningham et al., 2008). For the purposes of this literature review, I focus on research on these maladaptive responses: self-harm, suicidal ideation, and substance misuse.

Maladaptive Responses

Self-Harm. Thoughts of engaging in self-harm typically occur when the person is alone and experiencing negative thoughts or feelings in response to a stressful event. The presence of negative thoughts and feelings immediately prior to engaging in self-harm has been reported consistently across studies and supports the widely held belief that self-harm is performed in most cases as a means of self-soothing or of help-seeking (Nock, 2010). Self-harm has been associated with problems such as victimization by peers, parental emotional neglect, childhood sexual abuse, insecure attachment, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, poor school achievement, substance use, dissociative symptoms, and general psychopathology (Jutengren et al., 2011). Research suggests that adolescents may be more likely to engage in self-harm when close friends or other peers engage in similar behaviours (Prinstein et al., 2010).

Self-harm is a potentially risky response mechanism used by some youth to deal with stressful situations. In *Against the Odds: A profile of marginalized and street-involved youth in BC (2008),* The McCreary Centre reports over half of the females (56%) and a third of the males (34%) reported that they had deliberately cut or injured themselves one or more times. Among females who had deliberately cut or injured themselves the most common reasons for doing so was because they were feeling stressed (34%) or angry (31%). Among males, the most common reasons were that they were feeling angry (12%) or bored (10%), (Smith et al, 2008). Results of

the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey for Fraser East, were similar to the provincial rate, as 8% of males and 25% of females reported cutting or injuring themselves on purpose without trying to kill themselves in the past year (Poon et al., 2013).

Suicidal Ideation. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2013), suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst youth in B.C. and Canada. Eight percent of young males reported considering suicide in the past year, as opposed to 17% of females. Six percent of youth attempted suicide one or more times in the past year. Females were three times more likely to attempt suicide than males (9% vs. 3%), (Smith et al., 2016). However, other research has shown that males are generally more likely to die by suicide than females (Smith, et al., 2011).

Suicidal ideation also appears significantly higher among youth who drop out of school. This particular subpopulation of youth, disenfranchised by traditional social systems, is more likely to remain on the periphery, becoming more and more difficult to reach (Thompson et al., 2013). A large number of youth in the alternative education survey reported emotional and mental health concerns with 22% seriously considering attempting suicide in the past year, 14% had made a suicide attempt, and 9% had made multiple attempts. Regarding their families, 33% reported that a family member had attempted suicide and Indigenous youth were approximately 1.8 times more likely to have had someone in their family attempt or commit suicide compared to non-Indigenous youth (Smith et al., 2008).

Substance Use. Youth who participated in the alternative education survey reported high rates of substance use and many had started using at a young age. Statistics include: 78% of youth had their first alcoholic drink by the age of 14; 75% had tried marijuana by age 14, with 46% having tried it by 12 years of age; 69% of youth reported using marijuana in the past month, with 51% of youth reported using marijuana the day before (Smith et al., 2008). Special

populations of youth who are at an increased risk for heavy use of substances, poly-substance use, and substance abuse include: runaway and street-involved youth; youth in custody; adolescents with co-occurring disorders; sexually-abused and exploited youth; gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth; and First Nation, Inuit, and Metis youth (CCSA, 2007; Gaetz et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2016).

Certain individual characteristics have consistently been associated with a greater risk of substance use and misuse. Age is the strongest determinant as generally substance use increases with age during adolescence. Regarding gender, males and females were equally likely to report binge drinking in the past month, however, females were more likely to binge drink at younger ages (Smith et al., 2013).

Certain interpersonal factors in the family, among peers and at school, are connected with substance use. Inadequate monitoring, a low degree of bonding between parent and child, abuse, family conflict, family modelling of substance-using behaviours and lax parental attitudes toward substance use have all been associated with children's use (Lee et al., 2016). Researchers have found that parental drinking and parental drug use have strong effects on adolescent substance use (Chassin et al., 2016). For example, 13% of students who had used marijuana on 20 or more days in the past month obtained from an adult in their family (vs. 4% who used it on fewer than 20 days), and 49% got it from an adult outside their family (vs. 14%) (Smith et al., 2016).

Peer substance use has consistently found to be one of the strongest predictors of youth substance use. Studies suggest that peer influence on substance use is four times more potent than parental influence (Su & Supple, 2014). Associating with deviant peers and perceiving approval of drug-using behaviours among peers are also important risk factors (Bauman & Ennett, 2007). High levels of "peer delinquency prospectively predicted perceived peer approval

and use of alcohol and that peer approval and use of alcohol prospectively predicted initiation of alcohol use" (Trucco, Colder, & Wieczorek, 2011, p. 729).

Youth who experience school-related factors such as academic failure starting in late elementary school, lack of commitment to school, and low bonding with students and teachers tend to have increased delinquency and substance use over time (Rehm et al., 2005; Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

Research has found that youth with ADHD and other impulse control disorders are more vulnerable to developing substance abuse problems (Molina & Pelham, 2014). Their impulsivity and difficulty in anticipating outcomes may also put them at higher risk for sexual and physical abuse. These youth may self-medicate with substances to better focus their attention and manage their moods (Tercyak et al., 2007).

Additional research is needed to increase the understanding of the causes and consequences of adolescent substance use and misuse. Developing, implementing, and evaluating innovative school-based prevention and intervention programs, tailored to the needs of students, are important steps to identifying strategies that are effective (Stigler et al., 2011).

Literature Review: Part Two

"*Art and Music are the drugs of choice for millions of kids. If we expect them to just say no to a chemical high, we must recognize the healing alternative; their own creativity. Demand and support the real anti-drug program – Arts in Education."* ***- Fred Babb, artist.***

Adaptive Responses

This section of the literature review is a collection of the current research on self-regulation, yoga, art, and mindfulness, and how these adaptive responses can benefit at-risk youth in alternate school settings. For the purpose of this section of the literature review, each segment is organized by a discussion of the following questions:

1. What is self-regulation/yoga/art/mindfulness?
2. Is there any evidence that self-regulation/yoga/art/mindfulness is beneficial to youth at-risk and if so how?
3. Are schools using self-regulation/yoga/art/mindfulness with students, and if so how?

Self-regulation

One important protective factor that may help to prevent youth from engaging in risky behaviour, or help youth avoid outcomes connected with risky behaviour, is self-regulation (Moilanen, 2007). Increasingly, research is finding associations between young people's success in controlling their behaviour and emotions, and their social competence, school success, and healthy eating habits (Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2014). In contrast, research finds that youth who exhibit poor self-regulation skills are at greater risk for peer rejections, social problems, delinquency, and obesity (Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009). Youth who lack the internal capacity for self-regulation may be motivated to engage in externalizing activities, such as substance use, to

regulate their emotions (Lerner, Ohannessian, & Lerner, 2014). For these reasons, it is imperative to build and improve the capacity for self-regulation in youth.

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation refers to both "unconscious and conscious processes that affect the ability to control responses" (Bandy & Moore, 2010, par. 2). It is the ability to "flexibly activate, monitor, inhibit, persevere and/or adapt one's behaviour, attention, emotions, and cognitive strategies in response to direction from internal cues, environmental stimuli, and feedback from others, in an attempt to attain personally-relevant goals" (Moilanen, 2007, p. 835). Canada's leading expert on self-regulation, Stuart Shanker, defines self-regulation quite simply as referring to how efficiently a child deals with a stressor and then recovers. To deal with a stressor, the brain triggers the sympathetic nervous system to produce the energy needed and then applies the parasympathetic nervous system, in order to recover. In this way, the brain regulates the amount of energy that the youth expends on stress so that resources are freed up for other bodily functions, like digestion, maintaining a stable body temperature, cellular repair, or paying attention and learning. (Shanker, 2013).

Cognitive self-regulation is the degree to which youth can be self-reflective and can plan and think ahead. Youth with these strengths are in control of their thoughts, can monitor their behaviour, evaluate their abilities, and are able to adjust their behaviour if needed (Bandy & Moore, 2010). Social-emotional self-regulation is the ability to inhibit negative responses and delay gratification. A youth with this ability is able to control their emotional reactions to positive and negative situations (Bandy & Moore, 2010).

Is there any evidence that self-regulation is beneficial to youth at-risk and if so how?

Youth who do not regulate their emotions and behaviour are more likely to engage in risk-taking and unhealthy behaviours (Bandy & Moore, 2010). Low levels of self-regulation have been linked to higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problem behaviour in adolescence. This link has been consistently revealed in studies of antisocial behaviour or delinquency, substance use, and to overall hostility, anger and aggression (Moilanen, 2007).

There is research (Baummeister & Vohs, 2007), linking youth who are able to suppress impulsive behaviour and adjust behaviour as appropriate, to the following positive outcomes: higher academic achievement; school engagement; peer social acceptance; avoidance of negative behaviours; and healthy eating patterns. When youth are "calmly focused and alert, they are best able to modulate their emotions; pay attention; ignore distractions; inhibit their impulses, assess the consequences of an action; understand what others are thinking and feeling; and the effects of their own behaviours; or feel empathy for others" (Shanker, 2013, p.3).

Researchers tested the hypothesis that self-regulation serves as a resiliency factor in buffering youth from negative influences of peer deviance in youth. Their results indicate that interventions that target self-regulation skills can be expected to alleviate the risk for development of antisocial behaviour. This is "consistent with empirical and theoretical evidence for improved outcomes among children at-risk for emotional and behavioral problems in randomized prevention and intervention trials that target self-regulation" (Gardner, Dishion, Connell, 2008, p. 282).

Are schools using self-regulation with their students, and if so, how?

Self-regulation has increasingly been viewed as essential for enabling youth to respond effectively and efficiently to the challenges they face every day in and out of school. The better

we understand self-regulation, the more equipped we are to implement educational strategies that enhance students' capacity to learn and develop the skills necessary to deal with life's challenges (Shanker, 2012). A study examining relationships among emotional self-regulation, peer rejection, and anti-social behaviour of boys from low-income families was conducted in 2009. The authors' results support early intervention to prevent behaviour problems and recommend programs that include components that address adaptive self-regulation of emotion during early childhood (Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009). But what about the adolescents of today? What about the at-risk youth in our communities who need programs teaching them about emotional self-regulation?

Ideas connected with self-regulation and self-regulated learning are catching hold in B.C.'s schools. An example of this is The Ministry of Education's commitment to supporting students' development of self-regulation in the 2011 B.C. Education Plan (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2011). Educators know that learners are not equally effective at self-regulating and these differences lead to difficulties in school. Some youth have difficulty with emotion control or lack self and other awareness, motivation for learning, or knowledge of strategies that lead to success. School environments are critical contexts for supporting youth to develop socially, emotionally and academically, and for preparing them to lead successful and satisfying lives beyond school. To promote positive life outcomes for youth who have struggled in school, University of British Columbia is taking a closer look at alternative education programs and how they promote a sense of self-determination in students. Their research has three main goals: to understand what characteristics of alternate education environments meet students' needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence; to help teachers in these contexts to design activities and structure interactions with students to meet these needs; and to ask youth how they experience

autonomy, belonging, and competence in their alternative education programs. The researchers are partnering with teachers and students in alternative education programs to observe and conduct interviews. In the early stages of this research, their observations have shown that teachers are helping to meet students' needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence by: providing a clear structure for activities; giving students a part in program decision-making; encouraging active participation in the group; showing an interest in and support of students; and developing a close and harmonious bond with students. University of British Columbia plans future research in this area to include working with teachers to identify projects they can work on together to address particular needs in their classrooms for their students (UBC, 2012).

The self-regulation wave continues as school districts in B.C. are creating professional development opportunities for teachers in the area of self-regulation. In 2013, almost 800 educators from across the province gathered to learn about: the strategy of self-regulation, to help students, parents and educators understand the reasons why a child might be having trouble paying attention, ignoring distracters, inhibiting his impulses, modulating his emotions, and overall, maintaining a state of being calmly focused and alert (Sherlock, 2013). Educators are learning to create environments where students become self-aware and discover how they can achieve a state of calm, alert focus. Successful strategies have nothing to do with imposing external control to prevent 'bad' behaviour, which is considered counter-productive (Shanker, 2012). External punitive approaches often create negative emotions, such as fear, anger, frustration, and shame, which consume energy and impair concentration and attention. Shanker says "neurobiological research shows that when motivation is internally generated, the brain produces neurochemicals that actually provide fuel for the brain and give it energy" (Shanker, 2012, p.6).

A well-designed physical environment can help youth self-regulate more effectively. Shanker recommends that educators be aware of classroom environments having too much colour or too much noise that can over-stimulate and bombard some students' systems. These variables can overload a student's brain and block it from achieving the calm, focused and alert state needed for learning. A classroom containing tools that help soothe the nervous system, such as Thera-bands, Plasticine, or Koosh Balls is recommended, or a blanket draped over two desks with a mat on the floor for the student who is overloaded and needs some quiet refuge (Shanker, 2012). An exercise bike at the back of the classroom is useful for the student who needs to resolve anger or stress. With the support of private donors, a program called *Sparks Fly* placed child-sized spin bicycles into classrooms across Canada. The program was created to help stressed-out, distracted students focus and perform better in school. Students are encouraged to hop on a bike if they are having difficulty focusing on their lessons. The goal of this self-regulation tool is for students to learn to identify when they are having difficulty with attention and then use the physical activity as a stimulant to engage the parts of the brain that help with this cognitive skill (Bennett, 2014).

Yoga

Yoga is fast becoming one of the most popular complementary health practices with over 1.7 million children and teens practicing yoga – a number that has grown by 400,000 in the last decade (Wei, 2017). It is an intriguing time for yoga research, as more studies emerge that continue to shed light on how yoga is an effective way to help with many mental and physical health problems.

What is Yoga?

Yoga is a holistic system of multiple body practices for physical and mental health that include breathing techniques, physical postures and exercises, deep relaxation practices, awareness, mindfulness, and meditation. Yoga-based approaches use a series of postures and breathing techniques to build a sense of connection to the self. This body-based practice then has "a ripple effect on emotional and mental health, on relationships, and on one's experience of living in the world" (Emerson, Hopper, 2011, p.24). The components of traditional yoga generally include calm breathing, postures, and meditation. Calm breathing helps focus the mind and regulate the autonomic nervous system and as a result fosters relaxation. Physical poses include "standing balance, forward bend, back bend, and twisting poses which are thought to improve flexibility and strength; while relaxation and meditation are thought to calm down and help focus the mind" (Noggle et al., 2012, p.816).

Is there any evidence that yoga is beneficial to youth at-risk, and if so, how?

In reviews of studies on yoga and depression in adults, researchers have concluded that yoga-based interventions may have potentially beneficial effects on depressive disorders (Pilkington et al., 2005; Kramer et al., 2013). Also of note, is the more often participants practiced yoga, the greater their awareness of internal body sensations and the greater their well-being. Increased yoga practice was linked with more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions during a given week. Although much less studied, interventions involving yoga with youth have been reported to reduce stress, anxiety, and emotional and behavioural reactivity and improve self-awareness and sleep among youth (Mendelson et al, 2010). In the journal article, *Minding the Body: Yoga, Embodiment, and Well-Being,* (Impett et al., 2006), researchers reported positive findings for yoga as an effective alternate therapy for youth. For example, yoga

is associated with increased body awareness and body responsiveness as well as enhanced mood and reduced stress.

Authors Emerson and Hopper believe that for many people, trauma is a process of losing control of the body. When a traumatic event occurs, our bodies go into the fight or flight mode so we can fight off or escape an attack. Sometimes, the "traumatic event occurs despite the fact that everything we are – our physical, intellectual, emotional, and neurobiological selves – is trying to help us get away" (Emerson, Hopper, 2011, p.5). Traumatic memories and emotional pain can be stored in the body long after the exposure to a traumatic experience is over. This can create a great deal of discomfort and distress. This is where we can begin to understand how incredibly effective yoga can be when dealing with trauma, and in particular, with youth at-risk. Whereas conventional talk therapies can evoke emotions such as helplessness, fear, shame and rage from the previous trauma, yoga-based interventions "assimilate physical movement and restorative action patterns into treatment, and in doing so they endeavor to help trauma survivors build internal strengths and resources in an embodied manner" (Emerson, Hopper, 2011, p.18). Based on research conducted mainly with adults, yoga may also have the potential to enhance the regulatory capacities among chronically-stressed youth (Mendelson et al., 2010).

The Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute in Maine, has adapted a trauma-sensitive yoga intervention, which has shown a positive impact on the physical and mental well-being of trauma survivors. Through gentle breath and movement, this type of yoga offers trauma survivors an opportunity to cultivate a more positive relationship with their bodies and ease many of the traumatic stress symptoms they experience. Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, founder and medical director of the Trauma Center, believes there is a critical need for this type of trauma-focused intervention at residential treatment facilities, given the high prevalence of trauma

histories among the youth. Effective treatment depends on youth developing a sense of safety in their bodies and a sense of control over their emotions and behaviors (Spinazzola et al., 2011). A trauma-sensitive yoga practice can provide a structured approach that helps foster a youth's internal sense of safety, personal agency, and choice and that cultivates their capacity for self-awareness and self-regulation (Emerson, Hopper, 2011).

The Niroga Institute in California is a nonprofit organization that seeks to foster health and well-being and prevent violence in at-risk and underserved individuals, families, and communities through outreach, education, and research. Niroga created two pilot programs using yoga poses, breathing techniques, and meditation with at-risk and incarcerated youth. The two pilot studies provided promising evidence that a yoga-based program can produce positive transformation in vulnerable youth by decreasing stress, increasing self-control, facilitating conflict resolution in more adaptive ways, and improving self-awareness. The long-term beneficial outcomes of this type of programming, if widely implemented, include: reductions in juvenile crime, violence, and high school dropout rates (Ramadoss & Bose, 2010).

Are schools using yoga with students and if so how?

For the last decade, many urban schools have started to include yoga in physical education programs and teachers have reported "positive outcomes for their students, including improved self-esteem and increased attention span" (Impett et al, 2006, p. 46). In a 2014 study of students attending an alternative education school in an urban inner-city school district, students who participated in a universal yoga-based social-emotional wellness promotion program, *Transformative Life Skills,* demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety, depression, and global psychological distress. Significant "reductions in rumination, physical arousal, intrusive

thoughts, and emotional arousal" were also reported (Frank, Jennings, & Greenberg, 2014, p.29).

Reviews of recent literature (Chong et al., 2011) suggest that yoga is beneficial to adults by reducing stress levels. There are only a few studies that have examined the effect of yoga on stress in children and youth, and even fewer studies that have specifically focused on the effects of yoga within a school. In a preliminary randomized controlled trial to evaluate the potential mental health benefits of yoga for adolescents in secondary school (Khalsa et al, 2012), general observations, anecdotes, and spontaneous student comments were recorded by yoga instructors as related to mental state and behavior. For instance, "*students frequently commented on the relaxing effect of the yoga sessions and their learned ability to relax, such as: '…enjoyed being able to let go of everything, zone out and relax.*'; '*…felt like the class was a relaxing prep for the rest of the day*.'; *and 'Savasana (supine deep relaxation) made me relax and calmed me down.*'" (Khalsa et al, 2012, p. 87). The researchers of this study found that the preliminary results suggest that implementation of yoga is acceptable and feasible in a secondary school setting and has the potential of playing a protective or preventative role in maintaining mental health (Khalsa et al, 2012).

Schools offering yoga to students may affect emotion regulation positively, but research in this area is lacking. In a 2013 randomized controlled trial on the effects of yoga on stress reactivity in 6th graders, researchers concluded that a 15-week yoga program did not prove significant differences in stress reactivity compared to a physical education class (Daly et al., 2013). Conversely, in 2015, another randomized controlled trial studied 15-17 year olds because they are prone to increased risk taking and emotional instability. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the impact of a yoga intervention on the emotion regulation of high school students as

compared to physical education. Preliminary results suggest that yoga increases emotion regulation capacities of middle adolescents and provides benefits beyond that of physical education classes alone (Daly et al., 2015).

There are other examples of yoga being successful in schools. In 2012, teaching yoga to high school students across New Brunswick started to prompt schools across Canada to include yoga in their programming due to the impressive results they were seeing in and outside of the classroom. Youth were reportedly being kinder and more compassionate, which was changing the culture of schools (Huffington Post, 2012).

A health and wellness program that focuses on using mindfulness and movement to improve focus and body awareness of teens in Harlem is another example. The goal of the program was to give students the tools of mindfulness to use both inside and outside the classroom. The study concluded that a mindfulness-based program that included yoga may increase coping ability and decrease feelings of stress in high-risk urban adolescents (Braun et al., 2014). The practice "helped teens be able to take a step back before reacting to difficult situations outside the classroom" (Wei, 2015, par. 5). The researchers did state that larger studies were needed to confirm their findings and to determine whether these changes would ultimately impact adolescent behaviours (Braun et al., 2014).

Expressive Arts

The arts have been an integral part of life for humans throughout history. Shamans used the arts to heal their communities through the use of dreams, singing, dancing and stories and spiritual pursuits throughout history used song, dance and visual arts as a community activity. It has been only in recent times that we have become so separate from art, we began looking at art

rather than creating it ourselves. Expressive Arts offers a safe place to reconnect to our art making (Expressive Arts, 2017).

What are Expressive Arts?

Expressive arts use digital media or traditional arts and crafts materials to help clients express themselves more effectively. Therapists use art therapies in conjunction with traditional psychotherapy in clinical settings for clients of all ages to promote mental health. Writing, movement, drama, music and other forms of art are used as part of several integrative mental health interventions and complementary practices. The logic behind expressive art therapy is that people often find it easier to express themselves in symbols, pictures and movement. By allowing this artistic expression, clients can express their thoughts and emotions easily, while finding the path to transformation, recovery and wellness (Counselling BC, 2015). With expressive arts, one does not need to be an artist: the processes are simple and no previous art background is required. Simple art making can help open the senses and access our imagination so we can find our own resources that we hold within ourselves and that our art brings to us (Expressive Arts, 2017).

Is there any evidence that expressive arts are beneficial to youth at-risk and if so how?

For years, arts agencies across Canada and the U.S. have provided arts programs for youth at risk of juvenile delinquency and other behavioral problems, with the assumption that these programs can alter the course of troubled lives. A number of studies assessing arts-based programs for youth have reported positive benefits, including increased social skills, student creativity, and motivation to learn. Decreased aggression, violence, victimization, hyperactivity, and school dropout rates were also reported (Wright et. al, 2004). Studies designed to evaluate the impact of local arts programming for select youth populations from low income,

multicultural communities in five areas across Canada, as part of the National Arts and Youth Development Project, as well as the Edmonton Arts & Youth Feasibility Study in 2005, had results worth noting. Both studies show that after participating in a locally designed, structured after school youth arts program, participants demonstrated improved problem solving and social skills, a decrease in anti-social behaviour (such as substance abuse or aggression,) and improved artistic ability (Wright et al, 2004). More recently, data collected as part of the National Endowment for the Arts in their report, entitled *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies,* indicated that students who have arts-rich experiences in school do better academically, become more actively engaged students, are more likely to vote, volunteer, and participate at higher rates than their peers (Catterall et al., 2012).

Are schools using expressive arts with students, and if so how?

Arts Umbrella is a free arts program that brings creativity to schools, community centers, and daycares throughout Metro Vancouver, including the community's at-risk youth. *Arts Umbrella* removes the geographic, cultural, social, and financial barriers that can prevent children and teens from accessing the arts. They partner with neighbourhoods, schools, and community centres to focus on Metro Vancouver areas demonstrating high vulnerability, delivering programs where they are needed the most, to best help the children in each specific community, such as Vancouver's Downtown Eastside or Surrey's Newton (Arts Umbrella, 2017).

Another example is Children of the Street Society's *Youth Art Engagement Project*. This multi-session project engages high-risk youth within the Lower Mainland in the creation of an artistic project aimed at raising awareness about the issue of sexual exploitation while fostering youth leadership and youth voice. The program aims to engage a variety of high-risk youth

groups including: youth in alternative education programs, Indigenous youth, newcomer youth, youth of minority groups and youth who identify as LGBTQ2+. Youth participate in nine 2-hour sessions facilitated by Youth Facilitators who provide ongoing mentorship and guidance to participants. Each session includes one hour for activity-based learning and one hour for social justice art experimentation and creation. At the end of the sessions, youth share their project with peers and the community through a youth art gallery celebration. Showcasing the art celebrates the youths' work, enables youth to truly demonstrate their understanding of the issue of sexual exploitation to the greater community, and raises public awareness (Children of the Street Society, 2017).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness-based interventions have proven useful in improving stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms and quality of life in adults. There is a smaller, but growing number of clinical and nonclinical studies for children and youth that show the impact of mindfulness interventions on young people.

What is Mindfulness?

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). The key features of mindfulness include a focus on the breath, paying attention to the events occurring within one's mind and body, and bearing witness to one's own experience (Napoli et al., 2005). Mindfulness practices include mindful eating, body scan, sitting meditation, walking meditation, and mindfulness in everyday living. All of these practices typically take place in a quiet location, may involve the use of particular postures, and require an open, nonjudgmental attitude (Wisner et al., 2010).

Is there any evidence that mindfulness is beneficial to youth at-risk and if so how?

Studies have shown that the benefits of mindfulness interventions for youth include improved cognitive functioning, increased self-esteem and improvements in emotional self-regulation, self-control, emotional intelligence, and increased feelings of well-being. Studies also show reductions in behavioural problems, decreased anxiety, decreases in blood pressure and heart rate, improvements in sleep behaviour, increased internal locus of control and improved school climate (Wisner et al., 2010). For youth, mindfulness appears "to strengthen foundational skills in self-regulation, support the cognitive skills needed for learning, and expand the capacity for distress tolerance" (Broderick & Frank, 2014).

Are schools using mindfulness with students, and if so how?

There are many ways to teach mindfulness to youth. Within classrooms, taking a couple of minutes of silence at the beginning of class, reflective journaling, mindful listening to music, or movement, are all possibilities that have been used successfully with youth. Learning 2 BREATHE, (L2B), is a mindfulness-based universal prevention program for adolescents that was designed to be integrated into educational settings and be compatible with the school curricula. L2B is intended to enhance emotion regulation, strengthen attention and support academic performance, reduce stress, teach stress management, and help students integrate mindfulness into everyday life (Broderick & Frank, 2014). This program is inclusive, has a group-centered format, cultivates self-compassion and other positive emotions, and builds executive function. Students participating in L2B have demonstrated reductions in negative mood and improvements in calmness and self-acceptance, significant improvements in spatial working memory and social competence, and reductions in internalizing symptoms (Broderick & Frank, 2014).

Organizations such as *Mindfulness in Education* and *The Still Quiet Place*, serve as models and resources for integrating mindfulness in school settings (Wisner et al., 2010). *The Mindfulness in Schools Programme* (MiSP) has been developed as a universal intervention for youth in secondary schools. It is designed to fit into the school curriculum and is taught by teachers who have been trained in the program (Kuyken et al., 2013). The Crisis Centre of B.C. offers school sessions, including alternative programs, for youth grades 6-12, twice weekly for eight weeks, facilitated by trained Crisis Centre mindfulness facilitators. This program is based on a curriculum developed by Mindful Schools, a non-profit organization in California (Crisis Centre, 2017).

Schools in B.C. are promoting the *Mindshift* App for their students. *Mindshift* features relaxation exercises, visualizations, and other mindfulness strategies designed to help teens and young adults deal with anxiety. MindShift is the work of a joint collaboration between AnxietyBC, a non-profit organization devoted to increasing the public's awareness and access to evidence-based resources on anxiety disorders, and B.C. Children's Hospital, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority (AnxietyBC, 2017).

Chapter Summary

This literature review focused on the challenges faced by at-risk youth including poverty, unstable home environment, mental health issues, the effects of trauma, and their maladaptive responses: self-harm, suicidal ideation, and substance use. The literature review also contained a collection of the current research on self-regulation, yoga, expressive arts, and mindfulness, and how these adaptive responses can benefit at-risk youth in alternate school settings. Since schools are places where youth spend much of their time, school-based interventions may provide the tools at-risk youth need to help them with the challenges they face in their lives.

In the following chapter I outline the methodology I adopted to address my research question. I will show that this action research project is a qualitative study used to understand how youth respond to life's challenges and how programs provided by the school play a role in how they respond. This action research project reflects what youth see as helpful ways to respond and whether or not they include the programs offered at the school.

Chapter 3

"Photographs are footprints of our minds, mirrors of our lives, reflections from our hearts, frozen memories we can hold in silent stillness in our hands – forever, if we wish. They document not only where we may have been but also point the way to where we might perhaps be going, whether we know it yet or not. We should converse with them often and listen well to the secrets their lives can tell" (Weiser, 2001, p. 1)

In this chapter, I will outline, describe, and explain how I came to choose to apply Photovoice methodology in this action research project. I will describe the research site, my own subjectivity and assumptions as the researcher, the limitations of this action research project, description of the participants, method, and any ethical considerations of the research project.

Method

Description of Research Site

The school involved in this action research project is a rural school in British Columbia. It is an alternate middle school for students Grades 7-9, ages ranging from 11-16 years old. It is a unique student population that has not experienced success in the mainstream school system. Small class sizes and a high adult to student ratio make for an environment that is more conducive to building all-important connections. The school has many community partnerships as well as local businesses and employers to support the students. Students are supported by a team of educators consisting of: Two Classroom Teachers, a Learning-Assistance Teacher, a

School Counsellor, a part-time Youth Care Worker, five Educational Assistants, two Aboriginal Cultural Educational Assistants, and a Vice-Principal. The school's focus is to support the students' academic, social, emotional, and mental well-being. Every student has an individualized education plan that is unique to their needs as well as a transition plan, which helps build a roadmap of how each student continues to the next educational level.

Researcher Subjectivity

"Art and Music are the drugs of choice for millions of kids. If we expect them to just say no to a chemical high, we must recognize the healing alternative: their own creativity. Demand and support the real anti-drug program - Arts in Education." (Fred Babbs, 2015). A poster with this quote has travelled with me and has been displayed on the classroom or office door of every school I have ever worked in for the past 26 years. I have always believed this quote to be true and hoped others would share this belief with me.

This action research project allowed me the opportunity to collect data to support this belief. I have spent the majority of my career working with at-risk students in different schools and in different communities, both as a music education teacher and as a counsellor. Presently, I am the counsellor of the alternate school described in this action research project. Working with vulnerable children and teens has always been my passion. I have always looked for opportunities to involve students in music, art and sport activities, continuing to believe that programs like these offer outlets for students' energy and emotion regulation, and provide experiences for youth to be engaged positively in the community. Over my career as a counsellor, I have sought out professional development opportunities to learn more about trauma, anxiety, mental health, self-regulation and mindfulness. I believe in a strength-based counselling perspective to support my students and build capacity in my school community.

Participants

Six youth, ages 12-16 were purposely chosen to include both girls and boys. The six students were chosen from the group of students who regularly participate in the art, self-regulation, mindfulness and yoga programs at the school. Students were offered the opportunity to participate in the Photovoice research project when I saw them at school, in their classes, at break time, or in the counselling office.

Design

This action research project is a qualitative study to understand how youth respond to life's challenges and how programs provided by the school play a role in the way they respond. This action research project reflects what youth see as helpful ways to respond, and whether or not they include the programs offered at the school.

A participatory research methodology called Photovoice was used. Photovoice was developed by Caroline Wang and colleagues in 1992. Its theoretical basis combines Paulo Freire's theories on participatory education, feminist theory focusing on giving voice to the disadvantaged, and documentary photography techniques representing societal realities (Given, Opryshko, Julien, & Smith, 2011). Photovoice has emerged as a research method that facilitates participant involvement at all stages of the research process. It is a participatory research method that keeps pace with the social reality created by the Web 2.0 world in which we live (Given et al., 2011). By incorporating participant-generated visual data in research practices, researchers are able to interpret and understand phenomena through participants' eyes (Given et al., 2011). Innovative photovoice projects grounded in youth participation and youth culture have been initiated around the world demonstrating the view of youth as competent citizens and active participants in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives (Wang, 2006).

I used Photovoice to collect data for this action research project because it is based on the understanding that people are experts on their own lives. In practice, Photovoice provides people with cameras so they can record and represent their everyday realities and uses those pictures to promote critical group discussion about personal and community issues and assets. Photovoice is also designed to reach and touch policymakers. "By having people who live in the community take photographs and describe the meaning of their images to policymakers and community leaders, Photovoice embraces the basic principles that images carry a message, pictures can influence policy, and citizens ought to participate in creating and defining the images that make healthful public policy" (Wang et al., 2004).

There were several advantages to using Photovoice in this action research project. Photovoice allows the participants to contribute to understanding ways of responding by using their own perspectives. This is especially meaningful for studies that focus on disadvantaged or marginalized members of groups in society. Photovoice empowers the participants to become more aware of their surroundings. Youth see themselves as researchers collecting the data, analyzing the data, and doing something with the data to help solve problems. Photovoice requires the images used in the interviews be participant generated thereby empowering "participants to engage more deeply in the research process by being in control of the images used in the study" (Given et al., 2002, p.1). Also, when youth are in the community taking pictures, an opportunity is created for interaction with non-participants and a discussion of the activity. This can "promote the research to a wider audience than can be reached in a study confined to the four walls of a laboratory" (Given et al., 2002, p.3). Photovoice has also proven to be a method for engaging those who may have difficulty articulating their views in traditional

research, such as youth, homeless, and second language learners, thereby increasing the scope of possible participants (Given et al., 2011).

Procedure

The researcher invited students to participate in the Photovoice project with the following script: *"I am looking for volunteers to participate in a research project that I am doing for my homework for university. My project is trying to learn more about how students respond when life gets tough. I will give everyone who participates a disposable camera and ask you to take pictures of things you do when you are dealing with life's challenges, when life gets tough, or just to relax. No one will see the pictures except for me and you. Afterwards, we will look at the pictures together and you can explain to me why you took the pictures you did. Please do not take pictures of other people as they will not be used in this project. Would you be willing to participate in my project?".* Participants who wanted to be involved in the project, were given disposable cameras, received instructions for operating the camera, and were educated in the aims of the study and ethical considerations of picture taking in the community before they used the cameras. "Protecting privacy, personal safety, and ensuring accurate representation are factors that need to be considered by both participants and researchers to ensure ethically sound data" (Given et al., 2002, p.2). I explained to the participants that they cannot take pictures of people's faces or include any identifiers in their photos. This encouraged participants to think and act critically as they explored the Photovoice process. Students were asked to return cameras to the researcher at the end of the week. The researcher then scheduled one-on-one interviews with each student. Because action research always aims to be educational, the interviews were informal discussions rather than formal interviews. The interview process provided rich data as the researcher was allowed to follow freely where the participant led as long as it was within the

general framework (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Interviews took place at the end of the day at 3:00 p.m., at the school, a local coffee shop, or restaurant with parent permission. The researcher developed the photographs and brought them to the interview. In the interview, the researcher prompted students to explain their photos with the following interview questions: "*Tell me about this photo. Why did you take this picture? Is there anything else you do to relax or feel better when life is challenging, that you did not take a picture of? Can you tell me more about those things?*

In order for myself as the researcher to conduct successful interviews, I aimed to: document the interview unobtrusively with the use of a notebook and audiotape recording; be clear about the ethics of interviewing by telling the youth what the interview is about; use good listening skills by controlling my body language so that the youth knows I am interested and value what they say; and give verbal and visual cues to encourage the youth to talk freely. I also aimed to: sense when to feed back what the youth is saying in order to help them maintain their flow; show that I empathize with the youth's position so that they feel confident to expand on what they are saying; and use clarifying questions or context-specific questions to check something that the youth has said (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). As mentioned, an audio recording of each interview was taken for the purposes of accurate data collection.

Analysis

Each participant's interview was taped with an audio recording device. Taped interviews were transcribed, coded, sorted, and matched with the corresponding photographs. Once the data was sorted, categorized, and compiled, I analyzed the data prior to interpreting it. All the data was reorganized to identify trends or any emergent patterns within them. The data was sorted into categories of: maladaptive ways to respond, including substance misuse and self-harm; and

adaptive ways to respond, including art, self-regulation/mindfulness, and yoga, if indicated by the participants. Photovoice offers an "innovative way to triangulate research results as multiple streams of information gathering are used: visual verbal information, group discussion, and individual reflection in taking photos" (Given et al., 2002, p.3). The data collected in this action research project was looked at from a range of perspectives including interviews with the youth, audio recordings, and the photographs they took.

Ethical Considerations

As previously mentioned, I invited students to participate in the Photovoice project with a script explaining the project (Appendix). Students who were willing to participate in the research project signed a consent form. I contacted the participants' parents by phone and used a similar invitation outlining the project and obtained a signed parent consent form.

Discussing their personal methods of responding could have brought up some emotional times for the students. If this would have happened, I would have reminded them that I was their counsellor and anything they said would be held in confidence unless they told me they were not in a safe place, they were going to hurt themselves or someone else, or someone was hurting them. In that situation, I would have reminded them they need to trust me to find the right person to help us with the problem. Any students who required referrals to outside agencies for support were referred with the student's knowledge.

All of the interview material is confidential. The photos were only used to facilitate the interview process. If I choose to mobilize the knowledge produced from this study, no names or identifiers will be used. I plan to not use the photographs in any knowledge mobilization, unless permission is granted from the photographer. No pictures with faces or other identifiers (sweatshirt logos, etc.) were used. I did not use students' real names in their records, or attach

their real names to any information collected from them. All transcriptions of the interviews are are stored in password-protected files on work and home computers. My work computer is for my personal use and is password protected.

Limitations

Several limitations of this action research project should be acknowledged. This method required a substantial time commitment from the participants and the researcher. The cost of the camera equipment, processing fees, and time needed for interviews dictated that only a small sample of participants were involved. This study relied on the participants' full participation to take photos, return the camera for processing and be able to participate fully during the interview. This project also relied on the participants' ability to be completely honest in their data collection, that the pictures they took were genuine, and they were able to discuss them with the researcher. Another limitation is that when participants were out in the community taking pictures, the researcher could not control what they ultimately did. To avoid potential harm, I needed to adequately educate the participants of the ethics involved in proper research.

Assumptions of the Researcher

I predicted that although some youth choose ways of responding to life's challenges such as self-harm or substance use, once they were exposed to alternative ways to respond that include art, mindfulness, self-regulation strategies, and yoga, they would consider these healthy alternatives. The participants may begin to replace their maladaptive ways of responding with adaptive ways to respond. I predicted that the programs provided by the school will support the youth in their emotion regulation thereby decreasing their substance misuse and desire to self-harm.

Possible outcomes of this research are: the students will gain a deeper understanding of how they respond to life's challenges; the findings can be shared with the administrator and staff of the school to better understand the students; the use of Photovoice will illustrate participants' perspective by allowing an audience to not just hear their words, but also experience the world the way they see it. If my prediction is supported, and the student generated photos and interviews include the school provided programs of adaptive ways to respond, there will be evidence to continue the programs at the school. The school can then look for further opportunities to apply for more funding for the programs with policy makers. Future implications of this research are the promotion of art, self-regulation, mindfulness, and yoga programs in alternate school settings. "Informed by its theoretical background, Photovoice places a large emphasis on the potential for action-oriented results where the researchers and participants can take the data and insights gained from the process and use them to affect policy and social change" (Given et al., 2002, p.3).

Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the methodology used in this action research project. In the following chapter, the findings of this action research project are presented. I include my interpretations and conceptual analyses of any qualitative findings, the significance of the findings, and make connections to the programs being offered at the school as well as any programming that the school may want to consider offering in the future.

Chapter 4

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." — Margaret Mead

(https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/margaretme100502.html)

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the action research project that illustrate the participants' various ways of responding from the themes and sub-themes that emerged in data analysis. Interviews with the participants assisted the researcher with the clarification of the interpretation of noted themes. During the interviews, additional probing questions were also utilized. All interviews were transcribed from the exact words and language of the participants, the transcript data was examined for emergent themes, and all sub-themes were identified, coded, and linked to connected quotes from the participants.

By analyzing the photos and interviews of youth attending an alternate school, this study sought to understand how youth respond to the daily challenges in their lives and explore how school programs can play a more contributing role in the ways they respond. This chapter begins with a description of the participants, a collective analysis, and then a presentation of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this study.

Data Analysis and Research Findings

After each participant handed in their camera, the photos were developed, and an interview conducted with each participant using the following questions:

1. *Tell me about this photo. Why did you take this picture?*
2. *Is there anything else you do to relax or feel better when life is challenging, that you did not take a picture of?*

3. *Can you tell me more about those things?*

Once the data was collected from the participants, a total of 103 photographs were developed. After assembling all the research, the data revealed ten themes. Themes were categorized as either maladaptive or adaptive. There are two themes within the research that demonstrated maladaptive ways to respond: (1) self-harm; and (2) substance use, specifically, cigarettes and drugs. The eight themes that demonstrated adaptive ways to respond are as follows: (1) self-regulation; (2) physical activity; (3) expressive art; (4) spending time with animals or pets; (5) interests and hobbies; (6) media use; (7) self-soothing activities; and (8) being in nature. The data also revealed that the use of school programs, including yoga, art, and self-regulation/mindfulness practices, did factor into the youths' ways of responding to the challenges in their lives.

Self-Harm

Two out of six youth identified self-harm as a way of responding to the challenges in their lives. Neither youth included photos of self-harm in their photovoice project. When asked the question, "*Is there anything else you do to relax or feel better when life is challenging, that you did not take a picture of?* one youth responded, *"There are some things, but its stuff that's really not good for you but at the same time it does help me cope. I'm trying not to anymore, but cutting was one of the major things. That's part of the reason I didn't take a picture of it because I'm trying to stop".* The researcher noted that the youth expressed the desire to stop self-harming because they knew it was maladaptive ("*its stuff that's really not good for you").* This youth expressed many adaptive ways of responding within the rest of their photovoice project. This youth also responded that they use an alternate strategy to help them stop self-harming, although they did not take a photo of it, "*Lately, I wear an elastic band on my wrist and I snap it and it's*

the same amount of pain but it doesn't scar". As previously mentioned in the literature, youth who intentionally hurt their own bodies with sharp objects or any physical means typically report that the act of self-harm brings relief from emotional distress (Wilcox et al., 2012). Thoughts of engaging in self-harm typically occur when the person is alone and experiencing negative thoughts or feelings in response to a stressful event. The presence of negative thoughts and feelings immediately prior to engaging in self-harm has been reported consistently across studies and supports the widely held belief that self-harm is performed in most cases as a means of self-soothing or of help seeking (Nock, 2010). Self-harm has been associated with problems such as victimization by peers, parental emotional neglect, childhood sexual abuse, insecure attachment, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, poor school achievement, substance use, dissociative symptoms, and general psychopathology (Jutengren et al., 2011).

Another youth responded to the question "*Is there anything else you do to relax or feel better when life is challenging, that you did not take a picture of?* with this response: "*Self-harming – it was just, I don't know, when you do it, it takes all the pain away. It's hard to explain. I don't do that anymore. Cutting my arm. Because of a safety contract, I don't do that anymore. My friend and I flushed our blades.*" Research also suggests that adolescents may be more likely to engage in self-harm when close friends or other peers engage in similar behaviours (O'Connor, Rasmussen, & Hawton, 2012). It is of note that in this case, peer influence also supported this youth to stop self-harming.

Substance Use

One third of the participants acknowledged that they use substances to help them relax or feel better when life gets challenging and included pictures of some of the substances. Smoking

cigarettes, marijuana, and cocaine were the substances discussed in the interviews, and are the sub-themes in this data analysis.

Cigarettes

One youth included a photo of smoking cigarettes, and gave this response: "*This one's a cigarette…With me, smoking a cigarette, it relaxes me so much. And I feel more at peace…it makes me less agitated".* This response is consistent with literature on smoking and adolescents who are coping with stress. According to the 2013 B.C. Adolescent Health Survey, conducted by the McCreary Centre Society, daily smoking is associated with youth mental health. For example, youth were more likely to smoke daily when they reported poor or fair mental health and more prevalent among those who did not feel good about themselves. Youth who reported that they felt so sad, discouraged, or hopeless in the past month that they could not function properly were more likely to smoke daily as were those who felt extremely stressed in the past month. In addition, youth with a mental health condition or behavioural condition were more likely to be daily smokers (Smith et al., 2013).

Marijuana

Another youth included a photo of paraphernalia used for smoking marijuana. *"This is a bong. I don't really smoke anymore. It just felt like release. I felt like I had confidence and everything would be better. But just like, for a little bit until I was sober again. I thought it was going to make me stable. But now I've come out of it and I don't have cravings for it. I used to do it every day. It was helping me cope at the time."* This response is consistent in the literature on youth and marijuana use. According to Blunt Talk, a 2016 report by the McCreary society examining marijuana use in youth in B.C., youth who lived in challenging circumstances or had experienced stressful life events were more likely to have been using marijuana frequently

(Smith et al., 2016). The McCreary report also examined youths' reasons for using substances the last time they had done so: "Almost a quarter of youth used marijuana because of stress. There were no gender differences except females were more likely than males to report using marijuana because they felt down or sad (21% vs. 10%)" (Smith et al., 2016, p.39).

Cocaine

When asked "*Is there anything else you do to relax or feel better when life is challenging, that you did not take a picture of?"* the student quoted above also acknowledged using cocaine. Current literature suggests there is a link between recent marijuana use and the use of other substances. For example, a "greater number of days of using marijuana was associated with a higher likelihood of ever using substances such as hallucinogens, cocaine, or prescription pills without a doctor's consent" (Smith et al., 2016, p. 28.). Adolescents who used marijuana on 20 or more days were at greatest risk of using other substances or engaging in heavy sessional drinking. These patterns were generally consistent for youth of all ages (Smith et al., 2016).

As previously mentioned in the literature review, there are many challenges faced by at-risk youth. Many youth revolt against the context in which they find themselves and resort to maladaptive ways of coping to feel better (Cunningham et al., 2008). Half of the youth in this study did acknowledge that they self-harm, smoke cigarettes or use other substances to help them relax or feel better when life is challenging for them. It is of note, however, that only two photographs were submitted depicting maladaptive ways of responding and an equally small representation discussed in the interviews. In comparison, the remainder of the photos were examples of adaptive ways of responding submitted by the participants. The significance of this finding will be discussed further in the next chapter.

As noted earlier, eight themes appear to be adaptive ways of responding found in the data collected through photovoice and subsequent interviews with the participants. They are self-regulation strategies, physical activity, expressive art, spending time with animals or pets, interests and hobbies, media use, self-soothing activities involving various senses, and being in nature.

Self-Regulation Strategies

All participants included examples of self-regulation either with photos or during their interviews. Positive affirmations, releasing tension by screaming into a pillow, mindful breathing, meditative prayer, taking a shower, and use of the Chill Out Room at school are all sub-themes within the theme of self-regulation.

Positive Affirmations

One student created a space on her bedroom wall to post positive affirmations that were given to her by the school counsellor to help her self-regulate. She described the photo: "*This is the wall where I put all the treasures you give me. So when I'm thinking negatively, I look at them and read them and then think of a way that describes the way I'm feeling, and I pick out certain ones all over again".*

Positive affirmations are positive statements that describe a desired situation. They are positive words to improve one's life. Saying affirmations may seem insignificant, but over time, they can have a powerful effect (Arise, 2017). A study in the Annual Review of Psychology (2014), explains that people have a basic need to maintain the integrity of the self, or a global sense of personal adequacy. Events that threaten our self-integrity arouse stress and self-protective defenses that can hamper performance and growth. Self-affirmations are an intervention that can curb these negative outcomes. "Self-affirmations can have lasting benefits

when they touch off a cycle of adaptive potential, a positive feedback loop between the self-system and the social system that propagates adaptive outcomes over time" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p.333). Positive affirmations can help a youth keep the focus on their desired future. Self-talk and positive affirmations can influence a youth's entire sense of self, and can contribute to a healthy attitude and prosocial behaviors (Phoenix, 2015).

Releasing Tension

When asked, "*Is there anything else you do to relax or feel better when life is challenging, that you did not take a picture of?"* a student gave this example: *"Screaming into my pillow – I feel like I'm letting all my negative thoughts and words into my pillow and it just stays there. I scream into it. And then it's all gone, and I can move on with my day".* Releasing tension in this way, by screaming into a pillow, is often suggested as a coping strategy for youth dealing with self-harm. Using self-harm to express the strong desire to escape from a conflict of unhappiness and difficult feelings, and developing ways of understanding and dealing with the underlying emotions and beliefs is helpful and necessary (Rotherham, 2010).

Screaming into a pillow is also a strategy used to self-regulate when feeling angry. When an emotion feels too intense, or when the environment feels unlikely to support the emotion, anger is a way to stop that difficult feeling from taking over. Some common underlying emotions are fear, grief, insecurity, jealousy, and shame (Young, 2017).

Mindful Breathing

Two participants discussed using mindfulness strategies they learned in school to self-regulate. One youth described the breathing exercises taught in school: *"I'll do breathing exercises like box breathing… in 4 seconds, hold 4 seconds, and out 4 seconds and hold 4 seconds again. And colour breathing – breathing in a colour and out a colour. I learned it here*

at school. It calms me down a lot. I know because when my heart is racing, it slows my heart down, slows my breathing down". As indicated in the literature review, students participating in mindful breathing programs have demonstrated reductions in negative mood and improvements in calmness and self-acceptance, and reductions in internalizing symptoms (Broderick & Frank, 2014).

Another student expressed how practicing mindful breathing techniques are important: "*Mindfulness programs help people cope. Not enough people know about mindfulness. And if they do, they don't understand it so they don't care about it. Or they don't try it properly and they think it doesn't work and they write it off. As someone who writes stuff off quite a bit, and for the first little while, I didn't think mindfulness helped. But if you give it maybe a week, you'll start to get it. You'll start to get in the swing of things and start to understand it. Then it actually starts to help. Don't do just one day of it and then never do it again. If you want it to work you have to do it consistently".*

There are a plethora of websites and apps available to youth that teach calm breathing techniques such as box breathing or colour breathing. Anxietybc.com promotes calm breathing as a technique that teaches children and youth to how to slow down their breathing when feeling stressed or anxious. Their website suggests that until youth are comfortable with this skill, they should practice it at least twice a day, doing 10 calm breaths in a row. When practicing calm breathing, a youth needs to start when they are relaxed, before they are feeling anxious. They need to be comfortable breathing this way when feeling calm and once comfortable with this technique, he or she can start using it in situations that cause anxiety or stress (AnxietyBC, 2017).

During his interview, one participant shared how he used mindful breathing to help him deal with the stress of being injected with needles: "*Mindfulness exercises are really helpful. You just have to try. It does work. You have to try it. You have to practice it. Basically I have a massive fear of needles. I had to get blood tests for a situation and I had to do it every month for six months. I was learning mindfulness at school and how it helps. So I was doing mindful breathing to help with the needle thing and my mom was really impressed considering I hadn't had needles in years. That was my first time in years that I had needles".* When asked if there were other times he used mindful breathing, he said, "*Stressful situations in general. Like worrying about a lot of stuff and also whenever you are angry too. It's good for anger situations. Sitting there and breathing. Focusing on your breath, helps with that."* As the literature suggests, mindfulness appears "to strengthen foundational skills in self-regulation, support the cognitive skills needed for learning, and expand the capacity for distress tolerance" (Broderick & Frank, 2014, p.33) in youth.

Meditative Prayer

Another participant showed a picture of a field behind the school. She described the photo saying, *"I like to look at it and see the mountains, the fields, it brings back memories. I was praying. Someone came out and asked me what I was doing and I said just praying".* When asked "*Do you pray to help you feel better?",* the youth responded, *"Yeah. My mom told me to do it to make me stronger. I say the serenity prayer. I have it on sayings in my home. I grew up with it in my home".* Prayer, like meditation, is a contemplative practice. Empirical studies of many groups dealing with major life stressors such as natural disaster, illness, loss of loved ones, divorce and serious mental illness, show that religion and spirituality are generally helpful to

people in coping, especially people with the fewest resources facing the most uncontrollable of problems (Pargament, 2013).

Taking a Shower

Two participants identified taking a shower as a self-regulation tool during their interviews. *"This is a picture of my shower. Because, like, one of the techniques I was taught was that if I'm getting upset is to take a really nice warm shower and then if I'm depressed turn it really cold before I get out".* Choosing to turn the shower to cold also was a replacement strategy for self-harm for another youth: "*Showering and turning the water to cold. It gives you a rush without harming yourself".* Exposure to cold is known to activate the sympathetic nervous system and increase the blood level of beta-endorphin and noradrenaline and to increase synaptic release of noradrenaline in the brain (Mooventhan & Nivethitha, 2014; Shevchuk, 2008). Additionally, "due to the high density of cold receptors in the skin, a cold shower is expected to send an overwhelming amount of electrical impulses from peripheral nerve endings to the brain, which could result in an anti-depressive effect" (Shevchuk, 2008, p.995).

Chill Out Room

Although the participants did not include pictures of the self-regulation space designed by the school, known as the Chill Out Room, they spoke favorably of it during the interviews. When asked if the Chill Out Room helped them cope when life was challenging, the participants responded with the following statements: "*The Chill Out Room was awesome"; "I played guitar and did art. It's like napping. It distracts me. It helps me get ready for learning. My stress doesn't have to affect me here";* "*The Chill Out Room gives kids a chance to be there for other things. Having the options to help people to cope. Collect their thoughts. Relax, nap".* Another student described the Chill Out Room like this: "*I used The Chill Out Room quite a bit. You*

could play guitar there, a keyboard, you could do art, you could do mindfulness there, there was a nice little water feature there that made sounds. It was helpful. It was a nice room with comfy couches you could lie down on. It was nice to sit in there with a friend, or just think about stuff". These statements lead the researcher to conclude that the participants did find that the Chill Out Room helped them to self-regulate during stressful or challenging times.

Physical Activity/Sports

Every participant included photos of engaging in physical activity or organized sport in the photovoice project. There were ten photos in total depicting weights, biking, swimming, golf, rollerblading, canoe pulling, snowshoeing, and walking. Physical activity is widely accepted as a key part of healthy living. Being active has many physical, social, emotional and mental health benefits and is necessary for normal growth and development in youth. Physical activity can also play an important role in the treatment of mental health concerns in children and youth. In a study of physical activity and sedentary behavior patterns and selected adolescent health risk behaviours, researchers found that active teens who engaged in sports with parents were less likely to have low self-esteem and more likely to have higher grades (Esteban-Cornejo et al., 2015).

<u>Working out with Weights</u>

Two participants included photos of weights with these descriptions: "*Working out keeps my mind on healthy choices – because working out is something you should do. It's very calming and independent. I can do it on my own when I want to. When I feel mad, I work out. I keep weights at my house. Sometimes I work out at school"* and *"The weight room. It helps me cope so I can just release serotonin. Working out helps me cope".*

Cycling

Riding a bike was also a sub-theme within the theme of physical activity and was part of one participant's photovoice project. "*When I'm stressed at home and I can't find the cat, or the dog's not there or the birds don't want me to touch them, I'll either go down to the garage, bring the bikes that I have in or a bike that needs work and I'll start taking it apart and that really calms me down. Or I'll take my bike and take it out for a bike ride, and see if there's any kinks that need to be worked out of it. It's the building and the riding that helps".*

Swimming

Two participants submitted photos of swimming as a way of responding to life's challenges: "*This is a picture of the downtown wave pool. And because when I get depressed sometimes, I'll go relax in the sauna, or swim laps. It basically gets my mind off of it. So I basically do anything I can to get my mind off it";* and "*This is a picture of the pool we have in the backyard each summer. I really like swimming when I'm stressed out."* In this next example from an interview, the participant describes a situation when he was feeling stressed and used being in the lake to calm himself: "*If I'm near the river or at the lake, I'll run down the dock and jump in or I'll swim in my pool. Cuz when I'm underwater, it's really quiet, and I like it down there. Like a few summers ago, I was at the lake with my friends and we got into a big fight about who was going to go buy the ice cream. So I jumped in the lake and just kind of floated down to the bottom and sat down there cross-legged. Just let the bubbles float up for about 30 secs. And just broke the water slowly. I was calmer but not fully calmed down".*

Golf

One of the participants submitted a picture of a golf set with this description: *"This is a picture of my golf set that I got for my birthday this year. Whenever I'm anxious or stressed out*

or stuff, I'll grab a golf club and hit a practice ball around the yard or go to the driving range or whatever, and just hit balls around. I kind of picture the face of stress on the ball and then beat the ball as hard as I can and watch it sailing away". In this example, the youth combines the physical activity of swinging a golf club with the visualization of the "*face of stress on the ball".* Rather than using destructive force on walls or property, this youth is choosing to let go of his stressful feelings in a productive way.

Roller Derby

Another participant included a photo of her roller derby team uniform explaining "*Because, like, even if I'm depressed or something, Roller Derby always gets me psyched up again and, like, hyped and, like, yeah".* Roller Derby is an aggressive, full-contact sport with hip checking, elbowing, blocking and even tripping others to gain points for their team. In a 2016 CBC article about roller derby in Sudbury, Ontario, teen girls felt that roller derby helped build their self-esteem and promoted team building and a sense of belonging (Gemmill, 2016).

Canoe Pulling

A picture of a canoe was submitted by a youth whose family participates in canoe pulling/canoe races as part of their Indigenous culture. She described the photo in this way: *"Canoe pulling, I used to do that. I don't really anymore…I'm planning on doing that this year though. But this year I want to do it for my uncle because he always said keep pulling. When I'm pulling I think about dedication and like they're all supporting me and stuff and we're all together. We never gave up on the canoe, we always paddled on the same stroke".* Canoe Pulling or paddling is a crucial part of the Sto:lo Nation's history and culture and appears important to this youth and keeps her in touch with her cultural practices.

Walking

Five out of six participants described walking as one of the ways they respond when life gets challenging: "*Whenever I'm stressed out I like walking in nature";* "*I go once or twice a week. It helps me cope".* Two participants included several photos of their neighborhoods where they walk as this helps them deal with conflict at home: *"This picture is in my neighborhood area. And it's because these two pictures are on my walks that I went on at one point. I basically walk and talk myself through it. And well, think about it this way, things could be worse. I go for a walk because my dad agitates me a lot, so I go for walks to get away from my dad. Basically a self-regulate kind of thing and like that";* and "*this trail I used to always go there every day in the summer. I'm thinking about arguments I had with my mom or dad. Or if I don't want to spend any time with anyone".*

Yoga Program

When asked about pictures they did not take, five out of six participants named the yoga program at the school. They stated that they enjoyed the program and that it did help them deal with life's stressors. "*Yoga, because it's really relaxing, and with all the people around and being calm. All the calm energy being around you relaxes you".* Three of the participants who attended the school yoga program regularly, described how yoga helped them stay in the present moment and prevented them from thinking about their problems. "*Yoga helped me or changed me on tough days because I had time to not think about the problem and being in the calm state and I just wanted to be there".* "*Yoga helped me because I was thinking about everything all the time and it helped me to focus on just one thing like the stretches, the last time I went there it was hard for me because I was thinking about the summer. But I need to get back into it".* Another youth described yoga like this, "*You lie on the mat for a bit and do mindfulness stuff, and some*

yoga. Yoga is a form of exercise, and exercise helps with stress. It's very good for your body". As stated in the literature review, increased yoga practice is linked with emotions that are more positive, and fewer negative emotions during a given week. Interventions involving yoga with youth have been reported to reduce stress, anxiety, and emotional and behavioural reactivity and improve self-awareness and sleep among youth (Butzer et al., 2016; Khalsa et al., 2012; Mendelson et al., 2013).

Another participant stated that the reason she attended yoga was to help her with some physical pain: "*Yoga didn't help me relax but it made my body feel better when I had back pain. It helped me with stretching it out. I don't take time to do this and yoga helps me work it out".* As previously mentioned in the literature, researchers reported positive findings for yoga as an effective alternate therapy for youth as it is associated with increased body awareness and body responsiveness as well as enhanced mood and reduced stress (Daly et al., 2015).

Expressive Art

Examples of expressive art featured in the photovoice project for every participant either through photographs or during the interviews. Each youth identified that by doing art, looking at art, writing songs, or journaling, they were able to calm down and deal with stressful situations in their lives.

Creating Art

"I used to always do art last year... I'm not really into art anymore. I miss doing art. I should get back into it"; also, *"When I feel agitated during class, all of a sudden, I'll just go straight to sketching on an art pad".* Another participant stated that he didn't like doing art but admitted that it does help him when he is feeling stressed: *"Sometimes when I'm stressed out I'll sketch but it's probably the last thing I do. I'm not sure why I do that but I randomly start*

sketching. I'm a terrible artist, and I hate drawing, with a passion, but it calms me down". Another participant answered this question: *"Is there another photo that you can think of that didn't get taken?"* with this response: *"I can draw and it's very calming"*. Another youth enjoyed looking at art: "*I'm not good at art but I love the look of art. I love people's artwork. Not only is it an expression of yourself, it's really nice to look at, but it's also really soothing to look at. It's painting a story."*

The data collected from the participants is consistent with the literature review in this paper. A number of studies assessing arts-based programs for youth have reported positive benefits, including increased social skills, student creativity, and motivation to learn, as well as decreased aggression, violence, victimization, hyperactivity, and school dropout rates (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2016). The *Institute for Community Development and the Arts* and *Americans for the Arts* have identified exciting results for at-risk students that participate in arts programs. Findings indicate that youths who participate in the arts increased their ability to express anger appropriately, and they learned to cooperate and communicate better with peers and adults. They have a decrease in delinquent behavior and show improvement in attitude toward school, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Arts and At-Risk Youth Program, 1998). Arts-based recreation appears to be a "promising alternative for a number of youth, but a great deal of research still needs to be conducted in order to better determine what aspects of such programs work best in specific settings and how best to maintain any positive benefits associated with them" (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2016).

OASIS Program

Four of the participants talked about the school program OASIS in their interviews, but did not include any pictures in their photovoice project. As described in chapter one of this action research project, OASIS is an expressive art group that meets during lunch hour once a week to do art in the community of others. In this group, art is used not only as a way to express ideas, thoughts and feelings, but also as a way to build relationships with each other. One participant felt that by doing art she was able to express herself: *"Whenever I draw, it gives a reason to express myself and it's just like, that's me, it's my expression".* This idea of self-expression is linked to another participant's response about the school program OASIS*: "It's your own ideas you are creating. Having the choices to do it. Felt like it gave me choice. At that time in my life I didn't have many choices in my life. OASIS gave me choice. Power to choose. Whatever way you decide to go with the drawing is like a decision you have to make in life. One time I was drawing, and was kind of drawing a line but, whatever way it went was a decision".* Making art in OASIS offers the students control, yet creates a safe space and the freedom to explore their stories, their hurts, frustrations, curiosities and passions. They make their choices on their own, selecting from a wide variety of art supplies and activities. Another participant expressed that doing art in OASIS helped her deal with life's stressors and prepared her for learning: "*In OASIS I did art. It's like napping. It distracts me. It helps me get ready for learning. Stress doesn't have to affect me here".* Another youth who volunteered each week to set up the OASIS program, stated *"I set it up, and I made a few pictures in it. Even by setting it up each day, I felt I was helping people with their stress. I found that it helped me because I like helping out in programs. It gave me a nice feeling".*

Journaling/Song Writing

Journaling and song writing were also sub-themes within the theme of expressive arts as indicated by two participants. Expressive writing in songs and journaling emphasizes feelings more than the events, memories, objects, or people in the contents of a narrative. Although this participant did not include a picture of journaling, she described in the interview how her grandmother encouraged her to journal: "*My grandma told me that you write a lot when you're sad and she used to burn hers and it gives release. And I burned a lot of my stuff, my songs and stuff".* Another participant described how she used her cell phone to journal: *"If I'm really depressed or there is a lot of drama going on, I put it on airplane mode and write poetry on my phone. It makes me feel better because I am expressing myself".*

Journaling is an effective stress relief exercise, with physical and emotional benefits (McCoy, 2010). One recent study found that people diagnosed with depression and were instructed to let out their emotions through expressive writing, experienced greater reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Krpan et al., 2013). Another study, featured in an online article, *Journal Your Way to Stress Relief*, showed that expressive writing was associated with significant decreases in anxiety, worry and depression (McCoy, 2010).

Dance

Dance is another sub-theme within the expressive arts theme. During an interview, one participant talked about how dance helped her deal with her anxiety: "*Dancing…the movement is calming, and just being able to move, it helps with my anxiety, dancing in front of other people it helps. It's a huge thing. It's almost like strength building. Like building your courage to get up*

and do something like that. And being able to make a mistake and it's a huge thing because not caring what other people think. I go dancing once a week". Music, art, and dance/movement may be helpful in tapping the body's relaxation response, a calm and confident state of being associated with perceptions of health, wellness, and happiness (Malchiodi, 2005). Perhaps this is the reason why this youth also felt that dance should be offered at the school: *"I would go every day. I would spend my time dancing, moving, improving my flexibility".*

The literature on expressive therapies helps us understand why each of the participants identifies expressive arts. "The experience of doing, making, and creating can actually energize individuals, redirect attention and focus, and alleviate emotional stress, allowing clients to fully concentrate on issues, goals, and behaviors (Malchiodi, 2005, p.10). In addition to promoting active participation, expressive therapies are also sensory in nature. "Many or all of the senses are utilized in one way or another when a person engages in art making, music playing or listening, dancing or moving, enacting, or playing. These types of activities and experiences redirect awareness to visual, tactile, and auditory channels" (Malchiodi, 2005, p.11).

Spending Time with Animals or Pets

Four of the participants included photos of animals or pets in the photovoice project. They identified the time they spent with animals or pets as a significant way of responding to life's challenges. Eleven pictures of animals/pets were taken which included six photos of horses, two photos of dogs, one photo of a cat, two birds in one photo, and one photo of geese. Possibly, because I am not a pet owner, this researcher did not anticipate the amount of photos taken of animals and pets for the project. One youth in particular was responsible for eight of the eleven pictures of animals.

Cats and Dogs

One participant described a photograph of a cat connected to feelings she had for her mom*: "This is my mom's cat. When I'm feeling sad, I hang out with her. And it's like she knows when I'm feeling sad. Because sometimes she's like "leave me alone". But when she knows I'm feeling sad, she comes up to me and she nudges me, tries to get my attention. And I think it's also a big thing because it's my mom's cat, and when I miss my mom I see her. And that's a really big part for me".* People perceive pets as important, supportive parts of their lives, and behavioral benefits are associated with those perceptions (Allen et al., 2002; McConnell et al., 2011)

Pictures of dogs also found their place in the photovoice projects of the participants. "*When I'm feeling stressed out, and if my sister's out with her dog, I'll sit down the dog and he'll put his head in my lap or he'll lick me and it calms me down".* This youth also shared how a dog helped him in the counselling office at his last school. "*When I was in Grade 7 I had a lot of issues at the other school and there was a dog there and it really helped me out and calmed me down. I would go to the counsellor's office and see the dog and pet her and stuff".*

A doctor at UBC Okanagan used a highly trained therapy dog to understand approximations of learning in children. This therapy dog's presence added to a positive, social and low-stress learning environment. Across studies, spending time with therapy dogs has proven to have social, emotional, and physical benefits to children and youth (Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, 2014).

Therapy dogs are just one of many animals being used by a growing number of clinicians and therapists to assist youth with behavioral, developmental, and learning challenges. Dogs have been trained for many different roles including: helping reluctant readers, who feel more comfortable reading aloud to a patient nonjudgmental animal; to providing comfort to those who

have been through a disaster. Some courts are using dogs trained to comfort abused children facing the ordeal of testifying—and to give them a positive memory to have of the experience (Arky, 2017). This youth described how walking dogs improved his mood: "*Animals are amazing. I love animals. And there's a reason people have service animals for anxiety and stuff. Animals are amazing and I love them. I started out in a bland mood today and I was kind of tired, and wasn't focusing, and was kind of annoyed. Then I got to go dog walking and my mood went from a 5 to a 10. I go every Wednesday for dog walking. I look forward to it every week".*

Horses

One of the participants took photos of six different horses and shared how spending time with horses improved her emotional state: *"Riding horses or just petting them. Just being with horses, is a kind of a huge kind of therapy for me. Just being around them makes me forget about everything, and I just think about the horse and how you connect with the horse".* This youth seemed to have a special relationship with each horse. She identified how being with a specific horse brought her into the present moment, helping her to forget about life's challenges: *"This horse, I've rode her bareback and barefoot. It's a whole different level of therapy. It's amazing to be able to touch your horse with your feet and just feel. It's like you can actually feel the energy. Even being around her, just with this particular horse, I can feel her energy. It's a really big thing. I'm in my own world and nothing else matters, we could ride into the mountains together…This horse has a totally different connection than all the other horses. I'm the only person that can ride this horse bareback. Not even his owner. It's like a really big connection".*

Equine therapy is the utilization of a horse by a certified professional to reach a therapeutic goal as identified by the needs of the client (Wilkie et al., 2016). Researchers examining the efficacy of equine therapy among at-risk youth population found that equine

therapy is a viable alternative to conventional intervention strategies among at-risk youth (Wilkie et al., 2016). This certainly seems to be true for this participant: *"I spend more than the average person brushing this horse. Because it's a really good way to connect. And how grateful I am that I can have a connection with a horse. And you can talk to it and it won't judge you because it can't say anything back".*

Researchers have discovered that youth with behavior, learning, and adjustment disorders benefited from 12 weekly sessions of equine therapy in several domains of adaptive functioning (Trotter et al., 2008). Also of note, equine therapy was successful in increasing the social, psychological, and school functioning of children with mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from intra-family violence (Wilkie et al., 2016).

Cynthia Chandler, a counseling professor at the University of North Texas, at The Center for Animal-Assisted Therapy, believes that therapy animals have also returned the positive benefits of touch to counseling. "Touch has been understandably removed from therapy, especially with counseling youth, but at a cost. Therapy animals also provide a purely nonjudgmental space for individuals to work out their problems…Sometimes it's petting an animal itself or their ability to teach us in the present moment what we find too difficult to learn on our own. But it's also the sheer presence of an animal, their acceptance and admirable ability to express themselves without holding anything back that makes animal-assisted therapy so powerful" (Chandler, 2008). This is evident in this youth's experience: "*This one - I don't ride her a lot. I mostly just talk to her, or sit on her back and spend time brushing her. Sometimes for two hours, just talking to her, lying on her, and building the connection with the horse. And you just get into it, brushing, and your mind just does it by yourself".*

Hobbies and Interests

One third of the participants included photographs of their hobbies or interests in the photovoice project. Two sub-themes are identified: building bikes and cooking/baking.

Building Bikes

One participant (quoted earlier in the physical activity sub-theme) described this as his favourite photo in the whole project: "*This is probably my favourite picture. This is a picture of my bike that I built by hand. One of the staff handed me a frame one day and said 'Build a bike out of this' and I said 'Ok'. I started finding all the parts I needed and I took it home. It was the probably hardest thing I've done but it was the most rewarding because I now I have an awesome BMX. And it's really fun to ride. When I'm stressed at home and I can't find the cat, or the dog's not there or the birds don't want me to touch them, I'll either go down to the garage, bring the bikes that I have in or a bike that needs work and I'll start taking it apart and that really calms me down. Or I'll take my bike and take it out for a bike ride, and see if there's any kinks that need to be worked out of it. It's the building and the riding that helps".* By spending time following his interest and developing a hobby, this participant found it helped him respond to life's challenges.

Cooking/Baking

Another participant described a photo of the stove in her home: "*This one is of the stove. That day I actually cleaned it and it was really nice and clean and I took it because I like to cook and cooking makes me feel less depressed a lot of the time".* Cooking and baking may be a helpful way to respond to stress. Cooking can have: a calming, meditative quality, as it takes one's whole attention; stimulates the senses, which in turn increases endorphins; nourishes ourselves and others; and promotes creative expression and overall wellbeing (Goldberg, 2013).

Media Use

Five out of six participants included types of media use in their photovoice projects. The sub-themes include use of cell phones, video games, and watching television.

Cell Phones

The participants used cell phones as a way of responding to life's challenges in the following ways: to play games, write poetry, look at photos, look up inspiring quotes on the internet, read poems, listen to music, and to talk with friends or family. This participant was quoted earlier in the expressive arts sub-theme: "*These are my cell phones. The reason is a lot of the times if I'm really depressed or there is a lot of drama going on, I put it on airplane mode and play games or write poetry on my phone. It makes me feel better because I am expressing myself".* She also included a picture of her mom's cell phone: "*This is a picture of my other mom's phone. Same reason as the other phone pictures. It was so I can go on her phone so I can go through her old pictures and see the pictures of my nephews and I call them 'my boys'. They are important to me. They're close to me".* For this participant, being able to see pictures of close family members saved on a cell phone seemed to help her deal with stress in her life.

Another participant used her cell phone to respond to life's challenges in another way: "*I can look up inspiring things or I can read poems, or I could talk to someone. Just having it makes me feel relaxed, like ok, I know where my phone is, I'm all good".* Just being able to distract herself with reading poems or inspirational quotes seemed to help this participant relax during stressful times. Also using her cell phone to talk to a friend or family member helped her deal with life's challenges.

Video Games

Two youth included photographs of video games in the photovoice project as a way of responding. During his interview, one participant identified playing certain types of video games as a way to relieve stress: "*Video games – not the really violent ones, but the ones where you're thrown in to a battle and you can really go to town with a machine gun blowing everyone away. It's a really good stress reliever. Am I going to pull the trigger? Am I not going to? And I do it and Bam! It's a really good stress reliever".*

Television

Two students identified watching cartoons on television as a way to respond to life's challenges: "*I watch SpongeBob with my sister because she always makes me laugh. I've always watched SpongeBob and Inspector Gadget".* Identifying this as a way of responding could partly be because of the comical nature of the cartoon and the joyful act of laughing with her younger sibling. Another student said simply "*Cartoons are fantastic. Looney tunes is great".*

Self-Soothing Activities

Half of the participants included photos identified within the theme of self-soothing activities. Self-soothing is one of the distress tolerance skills in dialectical behavior therapy, also known as DBT. Self-soothing is when one treats oneself with compassion, kindness, and care – similar to the way a good parent treats an upset child. Self-soothing also builds resilience by making it easier to bounce back from difficult time (Lin, 2015).

Self-soothing involves the sense of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste, as well as the kinesthetic sense (the sense of movement and body position that controls physical activities). Enjoyable sensory experiences signal the brain that there is no emergency and that everything is

going to be okay (Lin, 2015). Within the theme of self-soothing activities, several sub-themes emerged that include taste, touch, sound, and smell.

Taste

Four of the participants included the following photos in their photovoice projects that are identified within the sub-theme of taste: chocolate, sushi, energy drinks, tea, and home baked cookies. One participant included a photo of a chocolate egg: *"You know when you're all depressed and you eat chocolate and you automatically feel better? This is what this photo is. It's a 'Kinder egg'. It makes me feel happy when I eat it and it makes me feel energized kind of like an energy drink but it's not. It's just chocolate".* Although studies directly examining the association between chocolate consumption and mood in humans remain scarce, chocolate consumption is generally considered to attribute to improved mood (Rose,et al., 2010). Chocolate is "usually consumed in pleasant situations and many people find it delicious because chocolate has a characteristic texture, dissolves in the mouth, and has a nice aroma and a slightly bittersweet taste" (Balboa-Castillo et al., 2015, p.2).

Another participant included two photographs of sushi prepared in a sushi restaurant with this explanation: *"This is from the inside of sushi restaurant. I like to make things basically. I like making lots of things, and I really like sushi and I can't be depressed when I'm eating sushi. I don't think of things, just food, I just like sushi and I'm happy.* She also included a picture of sushi she made at home explaining that she experimented with making sushi*: "This is my own creation".* There could be many reasons why this participant feels that sushi lifts her mood. Sushi is a quick and easy source of protein, which can have 20 or more grams of protein per roll. The omega-3 fatty acids found in fish benefit cardiovascular health, and are natural anti-inflammatory compounds that play a role in brain function (Tremblay, 2017). Creatively

constructing the sushi could increase her mood. Alternatively, perhaps this youth enjoys sushi because it is one of her favourite foods.

One participant included a photo of his mother's home baked cookies and described eating them like this: *"They taste so good and you just melt and you just forget what you were thinking about".* One participant identified two beverages that help her to respond to life's challenging times, energy drinks and tea. "*This is a picture of a Monster can. Same kind of reason like the sushi. I get really hyper and don't focus. Makes me hyper and then the ADHD kicks in even more".* The researcher prompted the participant with this question, *"Then you're not focusing on the other stuff and it distracts you?".* The youth answered, "*Yeah".* She also identified drinking tea as a relaxing self-soothing activity: "*This one is a cup of tea. Because sometimes it just helps me relax and drink a cup of tea".* Drinking tea is one of several self-soothing strategies that may serve to reduce distress and enhance moment-to-moment safety for some. Identifying self-soothing strategies is important because in the midst of experiencing difficulties, using an identified list may help keep one safe. (Bein, 2013.)

Sound

One participant identified listening to her radio as a way to respond: "*My radio. Listening to music is very calming and it's like, depending whether it is sad or happy, it's something I can listen to".* Another youth used his cell phone to listen to music to help him focus in school and also to deal with stressful situations with others. He described it in this way: "*I use my phone to listen to music. Music is a really good way to focus. You put in your headphones, turn it up and listen to the music, think about the music and don't think about anything else. And then that helps calm you. It's very calming. If you want to avoid getting into a fight with someone, and they're yelling and screaming at you, and you're in a school situation, put both your head*

phones in and walk away. It's happened to me before. There were plenty of situations when I wish I just had something loud in my ears like music so I could just ignore someone and not want to feel so angry towards someone when they piss me off in those situations. And now that I have access to music it is really nice". The soothing power of music is well established. It has a unique link to our emotions, so can be a remarkably effective stress management strategy. Listening to music can have a very relaxing effect on our minds and bodies. As music can absorb our attention, it acts as a distraction at the same time it helps to explore emotions (Collingwood, 2016).

Touch

Two participants included photographs of stuffed animals in their photovoice project. Having a stuffed animal is another way to engage in self-soothing behaviour in dialectal behaviour therapy (Rathus & Miller, 2014). One participant took a photo of the stuffed dog that was bought to resemble her own dog that she did not have anymore, "*Harley Junior – a stuffy. Cuz when I'm feeling sad about Harley, I look at Harley junior and it makes me feel better"*. Another participant discussed a photo of her sock monkey stuffed animal in her interview: *"This is a picture of my monkey. I sleep with him all the time. I don't bring him to school anymore. Kind of growing out of it. I talk to it when I'm having a tough time. I can talk to it about whatever I don't want talk to anyone else about. It's been there through everything. It's a good luck charm too".*

Smell

One participant included a photo of his mother's flowers in their home. *"Smelling flowers, and stuff like that, is also really therapeutic. Certain flowers have different aromas, and*

it's really helpful to relax me. And they are really beautiful." Smelling floral scents seems to put people in a good mood and make them feel less anxious (Augustin, 2013). In a recent study in the journal of Hortechnology, patients in hospital rooms with plants and flowers, found lower ratings of pain, anxiety, and fatigue, and more positive feelings and higher satisfaction about their rooms, among other findings, when compared with patients in the control group (Park & Mattson, 2017).

The different ways to self-soothe that were used by the participants can also be found in online resources. For example, AnxietyBC suggests some ways to self-soothe on the youth section of their website *How to Chill.* They recommend to youth who are feeling stressed, to build in some mini-breaks through the day, such as cuddling with a pet, phoning a friend, having a shower, or enjoying a cup of tea or hot chocolate (AnxietyBC, 2017).

Also included in the sub-theme of touch, is the act of applying make-up. One participant included two photos of make-up namely, mascara and nail polish. Her reasons included how she felt after applying the mascara: "*Mascara – because it makes me feel pretty. When you wake up, you have no make-up on, and you put some on and I automatically feel better. I feel like myself".* For this participant, the act of wearing make-up, boosted her self-esteem and in her words, made her "*feel pretty".* Painting her nails helped her respond to challenging times in her life because it was a distraction for her: "*Painting my nails. This is kind of a strange one but creative in its own way. It's kind of like, you have to really concentrate on it, it slows down the mind and calms yourself down. It's a really big thing and you're a lot more calm then, and it also makes me feel pretty."* Distracting oneself means to strategically divert your attention away from an emotional

situation to a more neutral activity. Distraction itself, can help one step aside and pause for a moment to observe how they are feeling (Albers, 2009).

Being In Nature

The final theme identified within the data collected for this action research project is being in nature. All youth took pictures of being outside in nature. In total, fifty-two pictures, (nearly half of the total amount of photos) depicting nature were developed, making this the most represented theme in all the data. The photographs included: pictures of the sky - clouds, and sunsets; greenery – including trees, forest, flowers, fields, and gardening; water – lakes, river; camping – campfire; and pictures of being out on walks outside. Youth overwhelmingly responded that being in nature helped them respond to challenging times.

One participant, in particular, submitted fifteen photographs depicting nature, which was sixty percent of her total photos. She included pictures of geese, several pictures of clouds in the sky, flowers, trees, various walking trails, and the river. *"It was summer and I saw a family of geese and it was really green and had lots of nature in it. Just looking at the good things in life helps me to cope. There's a family of geese in the picture and it reminds me of my family".* She described another one of her pictures in this way: "*This is the field by the trail. I like the mountains and stuff. And I like when there's no clouds in the sky and you can see the sunset. I always try to bring my sister with me so I have someone with me to talk to".* Among her photos, there were four different pictures of clouds. She explains why she took the photos: "*I always look at the clouds and admire them because they are always in different shapes and different forms…I look at them when I'm walking or in the car".* When the participant was asked this follow up question, "*Do you look at the clouds when you are facing something tough?"* she responded affirmatively. As she described her photographs of clouds, the researcher observed

this youth smiling, and asked what she thought of when she looked at clouds. Her answer was *"Happiness".*

All participants predominantly featured walking out in nature in the photovoice projects. Statements from five of the youth describing why they took photos of nature include: "*I always go for walks and you can't really see them but there are purple-y flowers down there. I like to go for walks, cuz I can look at everything and get my mind off things"; "This is a picture of nature. I think this is a really big thing for self-regulation just going for a nature walk and staring at the sky. Like thinking about all the positive things and positive quotes"; "I like being close to nature";* "*Whenever I'm stressed out I like walking in nature";* and "*Going for a walk is a way to deal with my stress".* One student described walking in this way: "*You go on a walk and focus on your environment, on your surroundings. It helps you focus on other things. Helps you focus on how beautiful the world really is instead of how ugly it is".*

A recent article in the New York Times suggests that a walk in nature may soothe the mind and, in the process, change the workings of our brains in ways that improve our mental health (Reynolds, 2015). In a study of the physical effects on the brain of visiting nature, the results were very interesting. The research showed that participants who went on a 90-min walk through a natural environment reported "lower levels of rumination and showed reduced neural activity in an area of the brain linked to risk for mental illness compared with those who walked through an urban environment" (Bratman et al., 2015, p. 8567).

Sixty-six percent of another participant's photos were also pictures of nature. He described a photo taken on a school field trip in detail: "*A really cool spot we found that day about two and a half feet over the water. You could see out over the lake if you lifted the branches. No one could see if you were there but if you lifted the branches, you could see out.*

And I felt really secluded. I really like when I'm out in nature and I'm secluded like not being able to hear anything. The only thing you could hear was the lake water lapping in and out on the shoreline. I don't really like the bustling city I like being out in the countryside and on the dirt roads. I don't really like being in the city. I like being in the country where you can see everything like in the big field. I can see straight out to the mountains and up". In describing another photo, he seemed to capture how mindful he was in that moment: "*This is an old dirt road we found on the back tracks of the lake. There were no tire tracks and it looked like it hadn't been used in like a long, long, time. It was awesome. I was walking down the road and watching the dust clouds coming up from the people in front to of me walking, and wafting away. It was really calming because you could hear the lake water in the background and the hum of engines in the distance, and hear the people at the beach".* This same youth took several pictures of a lake and creek and described how the water was very calming for him: "*Best pic of the lake I took that day. We were standing out looking at the entire lake end to end. There was boats going at the one end of the lake, and people and then us. This was a part not many people go and we were in nature and looking out where the people were"; "Listening to the water rush down the rocks in the creek calms me down".*

Seventy-six percent of another participant's photos were also of nature. He described how looking outside at the sky and clouds helped him refocus on his work in school. *"Sometimes in class, I get up and look out the window and look at the clouds. What happens is that I get distracted a lot of the time. I get easily distracted, and when I look at my page, and I can't really do it, I get up and walk around outside or just look outside, and feel better. I think about the weather, or the clouds, and then I sit back down and get to work."* He went on to describe a photo of scenery taken on a school trip when he was feeling anxious. *"We were driving out to*

Squamish, and it was a really nice view. I was with another school and they were being really loud because they were all talking to each other. It was kind of relaxing to look out the window. I'm not too good with heights, and we were on a mountain. But it was really relaxing to look out the window. I found it calming".

One participant included two photos of camping outdoors with a fire pit: *"This is when I was camping this summer. Being in kind of a wildish area, I feel more connected with nature and calm"; "This is a picture of the fire. I feel so much more at peace when I'm near a fire, or camping and being warm by a fire. Makes me feel all warm and cozy".*

Participants submitted five photographs of trees that they identified as willow, cherry, chestnut, evergreen, and cedar trees. One participant stated that she compared herself to trees and this helped her feel she had purpose: "*It basically makes me think that that tree was placed there pretty much and I was put here for a reason. And that I'm not worthless. I compare myself to trees a lot".* Another participant took a picture of a cedar tree that had particular significance for personal reasons: "*It helps just looking all around being in nature. This cedar tree my dad planted in the back of my grandma's house over fifteen years ago. It's HUGE.* When asked to explain how this helps her cope, she responded: *"When I was younger, I'd talk to my uncle and tell him I'm bored. And he'd tell me to climb the cedar tree. And me and my friends would climb up to the top and chill. I like it, and I think about my dad. Cuz he's the one who planted it and my uncle waters it so it can keep growing. When you go to the top you can see all of the town".* Cedar trees also have cultural significance for this youth, as she explains: *"We use the cedar boughs to cleanse ourselves, get all the bad thoughts away. We use it for cultural purposes like for naming. When I got my Indian name they made me stand on cedar and there was this teenage*

thing it was a ceremony and these elders gave us teachings. My grandma told me to follow the voice in my heart and just be truthful".

One participant discussed how being in nature inspired her: "*This is another picture of nature, the forest. So it symbolizes the same thing. It's cool, kind of like when you are on a nature walk and you see a letter in nature, and you find an inspiring word and make up those letters. Like if you see a tree that looks like a certain letter, or a branch, or leaf, and you try to put the letters together to make up a word that inspires you. I like to go to the forest or on the mountain on a journey for my nature walks".*

One participant included a photograph of a flowerbed with this explanation: *"Gardening…I like to help my neighbor in her garden. It makes me feel better".* According the American Horticulture Therapy Association, there could be some good reasons why gardening does make one feel better, since plant-human relationships induce relaxation and reduce stress, fear and anger, blood pressure, and muscle tension (American Horticultural Therapy Association, 2017). Gardening has been reported as being beneficial for mental well-being for vulnerable populations since 2000 (Shiue, 2016). Cultivation activities trigger both illness prevention and healing responses. Health professionals use plants and gardening materials to help patients of diverse ages with mental illness improve social skills, self-esteem, and use of leisure time (Nicklett, Anderson, & Yen, 2016).

Significance of Findings

From the data collected, it is clear that youth from alternate schools have many ways of responding when life becomes challenging. While all of the participants provided examples of adaptive responses, half also gave examples of maladaptive responses. The most common forms of adaptive responses were: physical activity (100% of participants); expressive arts (100% of

participants); applying different forms of self-regulation (100% of participants); and spending time in nature (100% of participants); followed by media, (83% of participants); spending time with animals/pets (67%); various forms of self-soothing (67%); and finally, interests/hobbies 33%). As previously mentioned, 50% of the participants discussed their maladaptive ways of responding, which included substance use and self-harm.

The students, who participated in this study, also participated in the school programs OASIS, Yoga, and the Chill Out Room in their alternate school. These school programs were initiated because the staff thought these programs would be helpful to students by providing them with opportunities to regulate their emotions. The data collected helped this researcher understand what the students thought about the programs and that they found the programs meaningful. The students who participated in the OASIS art program reflected that the program gave them the opportunity for self-expression and choice, helped them respond to stressful times in their lives, and helped them get ready for learning. Even though the participants found the OASIS program helpful to them in school, only one third of the participants said that they used art as a response strategy when they were out of school. One possible reason could be a lack of art supplies at home. Comparatively, when students enter OASIS, all supplies are out and available for students' use. Further research is needed to investigate if youth had access to art supplies at home, would they choose to use them.

The students described the yoga program as relaxing and calm. The data collected in the interviews, showed that the yoga program was helping them with their intense emotions: "*Yoga helped me or changed me on tough days because I had time to not think about the problem and being in the calm state and I just wanted to be there".* Although yoga was helpful to the participants, it is of note that none of the youth participated in yoga programs outside of school

hours. Some possible reasons could be: limited or no access to youth programming; financial reasons; lack of transportation; time of yoga classes available; feeling uncomfortable or anxious about going to a yoga studio or with another yoga teacher; wanting to spend after school hours with friends or in unstructured activities; having family duties or chores after school; or perhaps not having parental support to attend yoga classes. One participant explained: "*I don't have enough room at my house to do yoga. My room is very small and I don't have much walking space. If I did have the space, I would do it".* More research is needed to discover ways to increase youth participation in yoga programs outside of school.

Although the participants did not include pictures of the self-regulation space designed by the school, known as the Chill Out Room, they spoke favorably of it during the interviews. When asked if the Chill Out Room helped them respond to challenges in their lives, the participants stated: "*The Chill Out Room was awesome"; "I played guitar and did art. It's like napping. It distracts me. It helps me get ready for learning. My stress doesn't have to affect me here";* and *"The Chill Out Room gives kids a chance to be there for other things. Having the options to help people to cope. Collect their thoughts. Relax, nap".* These statements lead the researcher to conclude that the participants did find that the Chill Out Room helped them to self-regulate during stressful or challenging times.

Chapter Summary

From the data collected, the participants' subjective experiences suggested that many programs might help youth respond to life's challenges, including yoga, OASIS, and the Chill Out Room. It is the hope of this researcher that these programs will continue to be offered at the alternate school, and supported financially by the administration. Based on the data collected, the

school should continue to teach mindfulness and self-regulation strategies, but on a larger scale and be part of the mission statement of the school. The data also suggests that new programs could be offered that would benefit youth and their adaptive ways of responding. These programs would include: nature programming, such as therapeutic gardens, and hiking; and programming that includes animals, such as equine therapy, animal shelters, dog walking programs, and therapy dogs in schools.

In the final chapter, I briefly summarize the action research project and the previous chapters. I will discuss the meanings and implications of the findings and show that the data collected did support my research question. The findings of this action research project have an impact on future programming in the alternate school within the school district. I will make several recommendations based on my findings not only for alternate school programming, but also for the education of all students.

Chapter 5

"Society looks to schools for help: to provide a secure environment for children, to foster appropriate learning experiences, and to attend to learning and emotional problems. Increasingly, schools teach essential life skills that families and churches taught in the past. The role of the school in the future…is critical" At-Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response (2017).

Project Summary

This action research project explored the topic of at-risk youth and the various ways they deal with life's challenges. This project also sought to understand if the school programs offered such as yoga, OASIS, and the Chill Out Room, are valuable and meaningful to youth identified as being at-risk. The research question "How do youth from alternate schools respond to the daily challenges in their lives and how can school programs play a more contributing role in the ways they respond?" drove this action research project.

I chose this research question because I have spent the majority of my teaching and counselling career working with at-risk youth. I am inspired by their resilience and passionate about their well-being. The students who attend this alternate school face numerous challenges in their lives including trauma, poverty, neglect, anxiety, academic struggles, mental health issues, domestic and community violence, racism, and discrimination. Although families want only the best for their children, these everyday struggles have a ripple effect on youth, at times leading to maladaptive responses including substance misuse and self-harm.

Three programs initiated by the alternate school to provide youth with adaptive ways of responding to life's challenges and support their emotion regulation are yoga, OASIS, and the Chill Out Room. To understand if these programs are valuable to youth, and to learn how youth

respond to the challenges in their lives, six participants were provided with cameras so they could record and represent their everyday realities of anything that helps them deal with life.

Within this participatory action research project, a total of 103 photographs were developed revealing ten themes, which were categorized as either maladaptive or adaptive. Two themes within the research demonstrating maladaptive responses were self-harm and substance use. Eight themes demonstrating adaptive responses were self-regulation, physical activity, expressive art, spending time with animals or pets, interests and hobbies, media use, self-soothing activities; and being in nature. The data also revealed that the use of the school programs, yoga, OASIS, and the Chill Out Room, did factor into the youths' ways of responding to the challenges in their lives.

Implications of Findings

Prior to collecting and analyzing the data, I predicted that there would be a significant number of photos of maladaptive responses. The data revealed that out of 103 photos, there was only one photo of cigarettes, one photo of marijuana paraphernalia, one interview discussion of harder drugs, and two interview discussions of self-harm. The participants, however, had an overwhelming number of photos of adaptive responses and were able to describe in detail how these methods helped them feel better when they were responding with life's challenges.

In the interview process, both participants who acknowledged self-harm also provided examples of adaptive responses such as releasing tension by screaming into a pillow, reading positive affirmations, snapping an elastic band on her wrist, and making a safety contract with a friend (flushing their blades together down the toilet).

The two participants who acknowledged substance use as a way of responding, also talked about not using anymore, expressing that although using substances made them feel stable

at the time, they did not want to use anymore. The participant who smoked cigarettes as a way of responding showed no sign of wanting to quit smoking as she felt it helped her "feel at peace" and "less agitated".

Each participant who included maladaptive responses either in the photos or during the interview process also provided a larger percentage of photos of adaptive responses. This demonstrates that although they have maladaptive ways of responding, they also have a greater number of adaptive responses to choose from when life becomes challenging.

This researcher hypothesized that if youth were exposed to adaptive strategies through participation in the school programs of yoga, OASIS, and the Chill Out Room, they would use these adaptive strategies to replace their maladaptive responses. All youth participated in the yoga, OASIS, and Chill Out Room programs at the school, and expressed that they valued each program and were keenly aware of how the programs helped them respond in a more positive way. The youth did not, however, provide examples of doing these activities *instead of* participating in maladaptive coping strategies. The data suggests though, that being exposed to these programs did seem to make a difference to the youth, and this was reflected in their interviews.

This researcher was impressed with the wide range of photos depicting adaptive responses that the youth included in the photovoice project. It became very clear that youth who attend alternate schools have a wide range of adaptive responses that include physical activity, spending time with animals and pets, self-soothing, interests and hobbies, media use, and spending time in nature. It was interesting to see the photos and listen to each participant take the time to discuss and describe each one in his or her own words during the interviews. Further implications of the data reveal that schools and communities should consider the benefits of

yoga, expressive arts, self-regulation and mindfulness programs for children and youth. There are several recommendations based on the data from this action research project for schools, communities, and local governments in the areas of yoga, expressive arts, self-regulation and mindfulness, physical activity, spending time with animals and pets, and spending time in nature. These recommendations will benefit not only at-risk youth who attend alternate schools, but all youth within a community.

Recommendations

Yoga Programs in Schools and Communities

Five out of six participants named the yoga program at the school as a helpful response when life is challenging. They stated that they enjoyed the program and that it helped them deal with life's stressors. As previously mentioned in chapters 2 and 4, researchers reported positive findings for yoga as an effective alternate therapy for youth as it is associated with increased body awareness and body responsiveness as well as enhanced mood and reduced stress (Daly et al., 2015). Yoga has been reported to reduce stress, anxiety, and emotional and behavioural reactivity and improve self-awareness and sleep among youth (Butzer et al., 2016; Khalsa et al., 2012; Mendelson et al., 2013). It is the recommendation of this researcher that the yoga program continue to operate in the alternate school. Yoga programs could be offered in all K-12 schools for increased awareness and for the benefit of all students. Currently the yoga program operates as a result of a volunteer yoga teacher. This researcher recommends that school districts allocate funds for yoga programs in schools.

Communities can also play a role in offering free yoga programs for youth during after-school hours. Although there are two free yoga programs for youth within this community, the students of the alternate school do not attend these programs. More studies are needed to identify

the barriers why at-risk youth are not attending such programs. This researcher hypothesizes that possible barriers are transportation, time of day yoga is offered, lack of parental or peer support, anxiety experienced by attending a new location with an unfamiliar yoga instructor, family chores, responsibility of looking after younger siblings, or competing time with peers. This researcher plans to meet with interested students to support their participation in the free community yoga program this upcoming fall.

Providing Expressive Arts Opportunities

Every participant included examples of expressive art in their photovoice projects. Each youth identified that by doing art, looking at art, writing songs, journaling, or participating in dance, they were able to regulate their emotions during stressful times in their lives. The data collected from the participants is consistent with the literature review in this paper. Arts-based programs for youth have reported positive benefits, including increased social skills, student creativity, and motivation to learn, as well as decreased aggression, violence, victimization, hyperactivity, and school dropout rates (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2016).

The OASIS drop-in art program at the alternate school is held once a week. This is the only art program currently offered at the alternate school due to staffing. Given that six out of six participants identified the value in creating art, journaling, or participating in dance, it is the recommendation of this researcher that an expressive art program be offered to the students of this alternate school. Allocating funds for expressive arts in schools would support students to participate in these activities.

Local government can also support free community arts programs. Thankfully, there are free arts programs for children and youth in larger centres, such as Arts Umbrella in Metro

Vancouver or Art City in Winnipeg (Arts Umbrella, 2017) (Arts City, 2017/). Small communities, like the one this alternate school is located in, and countless others, lack the funding to offer such rich expressive arts opportunities. Small communities could be funded to create not-for-profit community art studios dedicated to providing people of all ages, particularly youth, with innovative and professional art programming, free of charge. More research is needed to identify how communities with successful not-for-profit community art studios maintain their funding, and continue to offer rich programming free of charge. Although there is existing research on the benefits of arts programming for at-risk youth (Catterall et al., 2012), more studies are needed to identify the barriers for at-risk youth to attend such programs.

Self-regulation and Mindfulness Learning

Every participant gave positive statements about using the Chill Out Room, leading the researcher to conclude that the participants found this space helped them self-regulate during stressful or challenging times. This self-regulation space was created with very little funding and provides students with a safe place to calm down using mindfulness and self-regulation strategies when experiencing emotional distress.

Part of the success of the Chill Out room as a self-regulation space, is the continued teaching and learning about self-regulation and mindfulness in the alternate school. The school has partnered with AnxietyBC to learn strategies to help deal with stress and anxiety through student, staff, and parent workshops. All staff have attended professional training days learning about self-regulation and mindfulness, and have incorporated these practices in their classrooms, and throughout the school. The school has made changes to the physical space as well as their programming. Examples of these changes are: hallways with soft lighting, a water feature, and relaxing music playing; creation of a mindful garden with fresh herbs in main hallway and

classrooms; and café style classrooms emphasizing a comfortable environment. Teachers have incorporated these practices in their classrooms: mindful colouring sheets available when students arrive each morning; morning circle as part of the daily classroom routine; using mindfulness practices each day such as deep breathing, body scan, and visualizations; mindful walks for "brain breaks"; a calming box in each classroom, containing stress balls, Thera bands, and Plasticine; and installing the Mindshift App on the class iPads for student use.

The students of the alternate school are learning these mindfulness practices and self-regulation strategies because the staff has embraced the literature and research in these areas. When a student uses The Chill Out Room, they have a wide variety of breathing techniques and other mindfulness activities to help them self-regulate. As indicated in the literature review, students participating in mindful breathing programs, have demonstrated reductions in negative mood and improvements in calmness and self-acceptance, and reductions in internalizing symptoms (Broderick & Frank, 2014).

Educators, health professionals and policy makers alike have recognized the importance of mental health literacy. A recent Canadian survey on educators' perspectives of school mental health "demonstrated that they considered mental health to be extremely important, but lacked confidence in addressing it due to a lack of knowledge" (Mcluckie et al., 2014). It is the recommendation of this researcher that school districts continue to offer professional development opportunities for educators to further their learning about self-regulation and mindfulness practices and how these concepts support the mental health of students. Learning about mindfulness-based universal prevention programs for children and adolescents such as MindUp and Learn2Breathe will support educators as they integrate these practices into educational settings which are compatible with the school curricula. This professional

development would enhance educators' own mental health literacy, thereby benefitting students. This researcher recommends that the Ministry of Education recognize the value of mindfulness and self-regulation and create space in K-12 curriculum for it. The alternate school featured in this project could become a model for school design and change for the future. This includes necessary changes to physical space and the creation of self-regulation spaces in all schools.

Animals and Pets in Schools

This researcher did not predict the large number of photos of animals and pets that the participants included in their photovoice projects. Four of the participants included photos of animals and pets (total of eleven photos) and identified the time they spent with them as a significant ways to respond when life is challenging. I was quite struck by the emotion in the youth's voices as they described how spending time with their pets turned their mood around and helped them feel positive feelings when life was challenging. The literature supports this as therapy dogs are being used by a growing number of clinicians and therapists to assist youth with behavioral, developmental and learning challenges (Arky, 2017). This information, coupled with the data from the participants, leads this researcher to see the value of having a dog or other pet be part of a school. There are many ways to include this type of therapeutic approach within schools. An alternate school in North Vancouver allows their staff members to bring their dogs to school to interact with the students. On any given day, students who need support self-regulating have a choice of up to five dogs to take for a walk around the schoolyard. The principal of the school stated that he has seen a positive difference in students' moods after they have spent some time with one of the dogs. It is the recommendation of this researcher that the alternate school within this action research project explore the possibility of including animals in the students' school experiences. This could be accomplished through a partnership with an

animal shelter, having a dog visit the school regularly to interact with the students, and dog-walking. More studies are also needed examining the positive effects of having dogs be part of the regular school day to support at-risk youth with their emotion regulation.

The data provided by the youth who spent time regularly with horses was equally interesting. This youth seemed to light up when she talked about the time she spent with the horses. She described her connection to the horse in this way: "*It's amazing to be able to touch your horse with your feet and just feel. It's like you can actually feel the energy. Even being around her, just with this particular horse, I can feel her energy. It's a really big thing. I'm in my own world and nothing else matters".* Researchers examining the efficacy of equine therapy among at-risk youth population have found similar results. They found that equine therapy was successful in increasing the social, psychological, and school functioning of children with mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from intra-family violence (Wilkie et al., 2016). Since the alternate school is surrounded by farmlands, it is the recommendation of this researcher that the school inquire about equine therapy for the students. This would also be an incredible opportunity to conduct a study of the effects of equine therapy with the at-risk students attending the alternate school.

Equitable Physical Activity Opportunities

Although every participant included photos of engaging in physical activity or organized sport in the photovoice project, only two youth included photos of a school based physical activity – the weight room. All other photos were of physical activity initiated by the youth in their own time after school. One reason for this may be the fact that the alternate school does not have a gymnasium. Students, who chose gym as an elective, travel by school bus to a community gym three times a week. Once the travel time is taken into account, the students have less than 40

minutes for the physical education class. School districts and the Ministry of Education recognize that being active has many physical, social, emotional, and mental health benefits and is necessary for normal growth and development in youth. It is the recommendation of this researcher that the school district look for creative ways to fund equitable physical education for all students, including students who attend alternate schools, and ensure they have quality access to a gymnasium.

Physical activity is widely accepted as a key part of healthy living and communities have an important role to play in encouraging at-risk youth to be involved. This community does not have a community centre where youth can meet up and play sports. There are very few, if any, free sports opportunities available. Local government could partner with the community to build a community centre where at-risk youth could gather and engage in organized sport. This researcher also recognizes more studies are needed to identify ways to encourage at-risk youth to be actively involved in extra-curricular sports and recreational activities, as well as identify barriers to their participation.

Perhaps school districts and communities need to partner together to offer adventure programming to at-risk youth as a way to keep them actively involved in physical activity. This idea will be discussed in further detail in the section following.

Bringing Nature to Schools

Overwhelmingly, spending time in nature was the most represented theme in all the data with a total of fifty-two pictures, nearly half of the total amount of photos submitted for the action research project. The youth included many photographs of nature including the sky, trees, flowers, fields, gardens, lakes, and rivers in their community. In the interviews, participants described how spending time in nature by taking walks, camping, or gardening significantly

helped them respond during challenging or stressful times. Spending time outdoors helped them self-regulate, focus on other things, calmed them, decreased anxiety, and made them feel more peaceful.

It was surprising to see this theme among all participants and so overly represented. Upon collection of the data, it became apparent that the influence of nature on youth and their adaptive responses is extremely relevant to schools and communities. One possible way to increase at-risk youth participating in physical activity as well as provide youth with much needed time outdoors is with adventure programming.

Participation in adventure programs has become an increasingly popular prevention as well as intervention approach to working with youth on life-skills issues including communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and group cooperation (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Adventure-based activities and experiences include "excitement, risk taking, cooperation and competition, trust, communication, physical mental and emotional challenges, physical activity, problem-solving and creativity, group and individual skill development and fun" (Moote & Wodarski, 1997, p.150). The evidence to date suggests that adventure programs with "novel settings, challenging activities, and a supportive social environment can be effective for a diverse range of participants" (Deane & Harré, 2014, p.304).

An example of adventure-based programming in B.C. is the *Take a Hike Program* located in Vancouver, Burnaby, and West Kootenay. *Take a Hike* is a full-time alternative education program that engages at-risk youth through a unique combination of adventure-based learning, academics, therapy, and community involvement. Students in the *Take a Hike* program often struggle with issues that have inhibited their success such as drug and alcohol addiction, physical and mental abuse, criminal activity, low self-esteem, depression, and/or trauma. The

goals of the *Take a Hike* alternative education program are to minimize barriers to learning, address personal issues, and help students achieve a greater level of social and academic success (Take A Hike Youth At-Risk Foundation, 2016).

In Sooke, B.C. the alternate school, Phoenix Place, has its own outdoor education program. As part of this program, students began training in January 2016 for a four-day hike of the Juan Fuca Trail in May 2016. The supervising teacher reported that the students were pushed to their mental and physical limits, yet they all remained amazingly positive, which allowed them to succeed through extremely difficult parts of the journey. Their outdoor education program plans to continue into the future, with the hope that the hike will become an annual tradition, which will help to foster a sense of belonging and community in the alternative high school (Kallip, 2016).

Programs such as these provide great examples for the alternate school in this action research project. For years, the alternate school in this action research project has offered an amazing bike shop program where students learn the mechanics of bicycles and how to fix them. Students who participate in the bike shop program also go on afternoon bike rides with the staff member who teaches the program. The alternate school also takes a small group of students hiking once a week. Although these are two great examples of outdoor programming currently in place at the alternate school, the data from the photovoice project suggests that more opportunities for outdoor experiential learning is vital.

According to the David Suzuki Foundation, nearly half of Canadian youth surveyed feel they do not have enough time to join programs that get them out into nature (Zorzi & Gagne, 2012). With seventy percent of the youth surveyed reporting they spend only about an hour or less per day outdoors, schools have a crucial role to play in getting youth out into nature (Zorzi

& Gagne, 2012). The same survey revealed that youth 13-15 years of age are more interested in getting involved in outdoor activities to "have fun, adventure and excitement and to learn new skills" (Zorzi & Gagne, 2012, p. 4).

The findings from this project convey the importance for schools, in particular alternate schools, to find creative ways to combine nature with recreation, adventure, risk, freedom, and fun to the existing physical education and health curriculum and provide numerous opportunities for youth to participate. One recommendation is for the school to partner with community parks and recreation professionals who could complement what the school is already offering. The school district and local government would need to support this endeavor financially. Having parks and recreation professionals running outdoor recreation and adventure programs after school, on weekends, and during the summer would not only promote healthy lifestyle choices among youth, it would also provide them with somewhere to go after school and something enjoyable to do.

Cavett Eaton, a master's student in parks, recreation, and tourism at the University of Utah created a curriculum that uses an "outdoor adventure model with training and activities that challenge students with healthy risks an allow personal growth and development at their individual pace" (Schwab & Dustin, 2014, p.30). As he is a firm believer that youth need to learn physical activities they can engage in for the rest of their lives, Eaton incorporates low-impact activities such as biking, kayaking, swimming, hiking, camping, and slack lining because of their lifelong viability. These activities offer the students the opportunity to engage in problem solving, critical thinking, and technical skill building, while fulfilling the requirements of the state curriculum standards (Schwab & Dustin, 2014).

Following the above examples, the alternate school together with the school district and community could work collaboratively to create these outdoor experiential learning opportunities for students. It is the recommendation of this researcher that the alternate school pursue a community partnership to allow this possibility to become a reality.

Further Extension of the Findings

Perhaps one of the most significant findings within this action research project is the youth themselves. In my investigation, I uncovered many productive, creative responses of how at-risk youth manage their stress and deal with challenges in their lives. If I had not asked the question, we would not know. The data in this research project is rich with information that can influence how we as educators and counsellors can support students. The many positive ways that at-risk youth respond are often invisible, as we tend to focus on their maladaptive responses, such as self-harm or other at-risk behaviour. From a therapeutic standpoint, we also need to ask youth what else they are doing in response to stressful and challenging times. It is these adaptive ways of responding that we need to bring to the forefront in order to fully support our youth who are in crisis.

Conclusion

Students who attend alternate education programs are often the most vulnerable population in the school system with a disproportionate number of children and youth in care, Indigenous students, children and youth living in poverty or the street, gifted children who have difficulty in social situations, children and youth involved in drugs, alcohol and the sex trade, and youth with mental health concerns (Government of B.C., 2009). The alternate school featured within this action research project is no different. The youth who participated in this action research project face numerous challenges in their lives, including trauma, poverty,

neglect, anxiety, academic struggles, mental health issues, separation from parents, family addictions, domestic and community violence, racism, and discrimination. These youth are also incredibly resilient in the face of such adversity and this is reflected within the data collected for this action research project.

The findings from this research have provided a better understanding of how at-risk youth respond to life's challenges, and how school programs can play a supportive and active role in contributing to their responses. The data revealed that although a small proportion of the youth did have maladaptive responses involving substance misuse and self-harm, they had many more adaptive responses that included the programs offered by the school. Using photovoice in this action research project not only illustrated the participants' perspectives, but also allowed the audience to hear their words and experience the world the way they see it. The findings of this research project will be shared with the administrator and staff of the school to help them better understand the students.

Alternate education programs, school districts, and communities have a vital role to play in offering opportunities for vulnerable and at-risk students to experience success. This success can be supported through the recommendations made in this action research project: expanding the yoga and expressive arts programs; continuing to be leaders in the areas of self-regulation and mindfulness; and including adventure programming within the physical education program. These recommendations will benefit the students attending this alternate school, and may become the spark that will light a wildfire of change that will spread to other communities for the benefit of all youth.

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Appendix

Cover letter for parents/guardians

Monday, October 31, 2016

Dear Parents/Guardians:

As part of my Masters of School Counselling program, I am researching the ways that youth deal with life's challenges. Your child has expressed interest in helping me with this research project. To participate, I am asking your child to take photographs of things they do to cope or relax with a disposable camera. Afterwards, I will be meeting with your child to talk about the photographs they took. This conversation will be completely confidential.

If you have any questions about your child's participating, please call me at 604-845-0428. If you do not want your child to participate, please let me know by calling me by Wednesday, November 2, 2016.

Please sign the attached parent consent form if you agree to have your child participate in my research study and return to me by Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2016.

Sincerely,

Cathy Preibisch

CityUniversity of Seattle

School/Division of Chilliwack

CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____, agree to participate in the following research project to be conducted by Cathy Preibisch, ☐ faculty member or ☒ student, in the Masters of School Counselling Program. I understand this research study has been approved by the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form, signed by all persons involved. I further acknowledge that I have been provided an overview of the research protocol as well as a detailed explanation of the informed consent process.

Title of Project:
Using Photovoice to Capture Ways of Coping by Youth in Alternative Schools

Name and Title of Researcher(s):
Cathy Preibisch

For Faculty Researcher(s):
Department: _____
Telephone: _____
Email: _____
Immediate Supervisor: _____

For Student Researcher(s):
Faculty Supervisor: Jacqueline Walters
Department: Albright School of Education
Telephone: 604 689-2489
E-mail: Jackie@gulfislands.com

Program Coordinator (or Program Director):
Dr. Jill Taggart, Program Director

Sponsor, if any:
_____

Purpose of Study:
To understand the ways in which students cope with life's challenges, including the use of school programs, and to find out how students assess these programs.

Research Participation:

I understand I am being asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (the checked options below apply):

☐ Respond to in-person and/or telephone Interview questions;
☐ Answer written questionnaire(s);

☐ Participate in other data gathering activities, specifically, _____;
☒ Other, specifically, take photos at school and outside of school of things I do to cope when life gets tough .

I further understand that my involvement is voluntary and I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation at any time without negative consequences. I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

Confidentiality

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. ☐ All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for 5 years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Signatures

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research project at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

Participant's Name: _____
Please Print

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: Cathy Preibisch
Please Print

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated as a research participant, I may contact the following individual(s):
Jill Taggart, Program Coordinator (and/or Program Director), City University of Seattle, at
_____ (address, direct phone line and CityU email address).

CityUniversity of Seattle

School/Division of Chilliwack

CITYU RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT
FOR PARENT-LEGAL GUARDIAN OF PARTICIPANT

I, _____, the parent and/or legal guardian of _____ (hereafter referred to as "Participant") agree to allow him/her to participate in the following research project to be conducted by Cathy Preibisch, ☐ faculty member or ☒ student, in the Masters of School Counselling Program. I understand this research study has been approved by the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form, signed by all persons involved. I further acknowledge that I have been provided an overview of the research protocol as well as a detailed explanation of the informed consent process.

Title of Project:
Using Photovoice to Capture Ways of Coping by Youth in Alternative Schools

Name and Title of Researcher(s):
Cathy Preibisch

For Faculty Researcher(s):
Department: _____
Telephone: _____
Email: _____
Immediate Supervisor: _____

For Student Researcher(s):
Faculty Supervisor: Jacqueline Walters
Department: Albright School of Education
Telephone: 604 689-2489
E-mail: jackie@gulfislands.com

Program Coordinator (or Program Director): Dr. Jill Taggart

Sponsor, if any: _____

Purpose of Study: To understand the ways in which students cope with life's challenges, including the use of school programs, and to find out how students assess these programs.

Research Participation:

I understand that Participant is asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (the checked options below apply):

☐ Respond to in-person and/or telephone Interview questions;

☐ Answer written questionnaire(s);
☐ Participate in other data gathering activities, specifically, _____;
☒ Other, specifically, take photos at school and outside of school of things I do to cope when life gets tough.

I further understand that this involvement is voluntary and I may refuse to permit participation or withdraw my consent at any time without negative consequences to Participant or to me. I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

Confidentiality

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. ☐ All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for 5 years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Signatures

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my child's participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my child's participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to Participant's participation as a research subject.

My consent herein does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw consent from this research project at any time, and should I do so, Participant's participation will cease immediately. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information at any time during this research.

Parent/Legal Guardian's Name: _____
Please Print

Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: Cathy Preibisch
Please Print

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way Participant or I have been treated during this research, I may contact the following individual(s):

Script used with potential participants:

"I am looking for volunteers to participate in a research project that I am doing for my homework for university. My project is trying to learn more about how students respond when life gets tough. I will give everyone who participates a disposable camera and ask you to take pictures of things you do when you are dealing with life's challenges, when life gets tough, or just to relax. No one will see the pictures except for me and you. Afterwards, we will look at the pictures together and you can explain to me why you took the pictures you did. Please do not take pictures of other people as they will not be used in this project. Would you be willing to participate in my project?".

Poster on my office door