”What’s going on here”?: A frame analysis of a pilot project to examine why the use of appreciative inquiry, storytelling, and painting is difficult to integrate into the culture of schooling

Kristen Snyder & Karen Cooper
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Innehåll

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Introduction

We would like you to take a minute and think back to your childhood and your school days. How would you describe your experience in school? Was it positive? Did you feel supported by your teachers and peers? Were you stimulated and motivated to learn? Or were you among those who struggled in school or found school to be under stimulating and boring? Did you feel left out, or feel like you didn’t get the kind of support from teachers or peers that you needed to feel good about yourself or to succeed academically or socially? Perhaps you dropped out or disengaged for a period of time, maybe not physically, but mentally, spiritually, or socially. The number of students who have trouble in school academically and socially is a continuing problem in most western countries, despite the numerous efforts to understand the phenomenon. The Canadian Council on Learning (2010) reports that while in many countries the rate is decreasing, there are still troubling trends that require a continued effort to understand the phenomena and develop effective responses. It is well known that those who do not complete high school are more likely to end up in a life of crime and drugs than those who graduate. Understanding what causes one student to opt out of school while another remains is still a quest to understand.

As we will present in this report, the risk and prevention specialists suggest the need to understand the individual and their personal situation as an indicator for poor achievement and potential at-risk for dropping out. Contrary to this, resiliency experts argue that all persons have the possibility to overcome their own obstacles with a supportive environment. Towards this end, a number of programs and projects have been implemented to introduce the arts as a way for youth to develop voice and community and develop within a strengths-based caring environment. Such projects have documented evidence about the power of the arts for engaging youth in participatory practice, to help them to develop a sense of self-esteem and self worth, as well as to care for others. Moreover, the research demonstrates significant relationships between the arts and learning. Given the success rate of using the arts to engage and help at-risk youth develop resiliency, we raise the question, “why are the arts not more integrated within the general programming and pedagogy of schools?”. One could maintain a thesis that if schools were to embrace the arts and creativity more, the dropout rate among students would decrease since learning would be more student generated, participatory and therefore meaningful for students. What
is it in the culture of schooling\(^1\) that keeps schools from developing stimulating learning environments to engage youth?

In this report, we present a meta-analysis of a project that we implemented in a special program for youth who were given extra academic and social support to complete middle school in preparation for entering high school. Our project intended to utilize storytelling and painting to engage youth in developing their own voice and to explore different ways to express their ideas and thoughts. The project was intended to integrate with the language curriculum in the school program so as to be seen as an arm of the subject rather than an external project. We did not succeed with our project as originally intended, and instead experienced a number of obstacles during our six-week workshop presence in the school program. Using a cultural theoretical lens (Schein, 1985) with a focus on the role of language and culture, we examine why our project failed and also aim to understand the deeper culture of schooling to shed light on the question: why are schools reluctant to fully embrace the arts as pedagogy, despite the strong research base to suggest its positive potential for learning and human development.

**Organization of the report**

The report begins with a review of the different perspectives about why youth dropout, followed by a presentation of studies on creativity, brain based learning and the arts. As well, we provide examples of programs for at-risk youth that are centered on the arts and the significance that they show for the development of youth and possibilities for “recapturing” them. This background is then followed by a presentation of our project and the methodological approach that we used to analyze why our project was not successful in its implementation. We suggest that there are important lessons to be learned from our experience to help answer the question: why have schools not yet integrated fully the arts and creativity into the culture of schooling?

\(^1\) Cultural theorists, such as Seymour Sarason (1971) and Per Dalin (1993) use the term culture to reflect the behavioral patterns, rhetoric, values, norms, customs and ethical codes that are identified and experienced within the formal and informal structures of the school. This theoretical framework is the basis of considerable research in the field of school development in which these authors as well as Snyder, Acker-Hocevar and Snyder (2001) argue that for change to occur one must understand the culture of the environment in order to shape new patterns of work, behavior, attitude, norms and values.
Understanding the phenomenon

The National Dropout Center at Clemson University reports that the most cited reasons for leaving school are: did not like school, job related, pregnancy (Woloszky, 1996). More significantly, researchers have found that dropping out is a process, not an event; it doesn’t happen overnight. Whitted (2011) suggests that the events can begin as early as kindergarten if children have negative experiences with their teachers, thus building a negative relationship between childhood development, school and organized learning. She found that "the quality of interactions with adults during early childhood can either promote the development of skills needed for school success or lead to developmental skills deficits that can be detrimental to school success" (Whitted, 2011, p. 12).

Understanding the reasons why some children do not succeed in school has been under debate for many years, and depending on the perspective from which one comes, the explanations can be quite different as the phenomenon is complex (Bernard, 1997; Woloszky, 1996). The health care model, which dominated for years, attempted to explain the phenomenon more often from a risk perspective, which is individually oriented. Proponents of this perspective argue that students who do not succeed in school, or have great difficulties are surrounded by a variety of factors that are considered risk variables for non-success (Bernard, 1991; 2000). Among these are single parent homes, parents who are drug addicts, low socio-economic status, belonging to a minority race (Woloszky, 1996). Yet contrary research has shown that students belonging to one or many of these risk categories does not place them at any greater odds for success in school (Bernard, 1991; 1997). Moreover, by viewing students as at-risk based on their private situation, schools and other social agencies perpetuate a "failure model" by perceiving such children and youth as less capable. Bernard states that,

"Most dangerous of all, this deficit approach has encouraged teachers and other helping professionals to see, identify, and name children and families only through a deficit lens. This "glass-as-half-full" perspective blocks our vision to see capacity and strength, to see the whole person and hear the "real story," thus creating stereotypes or "myths" about who people really are." (Bernard, 1991, p. 19)
In response to risk and prevention specialists, new models have been developed to balance the deficit model and give hope for youth to overcome the circumstances in to which they are born and raised. Building on a strengths-based approach, the resiliency model and research has made considerable contributions for helping parents and teachers develop new responses to youth in need of additional academic and emotional support. The resiliency approach has strong pedagogical connections to social learning theory, offering teachers and schools tools, principles and theories for building integrated learning environments for all children and youth.

**A Strengths-based approach**

Proponents of the resiliency perspective contend that children and youth, no matter their background, have the potential to succeed with the right kind of support structures that demonstrate a positive belief in them to succeed in school (Bernard, 1997; Tyson & Bauffor, 2004). According to Tyson and Bauffor (2004) “the strengths based perspective is an orientation that emphasizes client capabilities to assist in solving their own problems. At the core of the strengths perspective is the assumption that all people are valuable and can find strengths that may or may not have known they possess or rediscover abilities they had lost touch with” (Tyson & Bauffor, 2004: p 214). Necessary then are parents, teacher and adult role models that share this belief and relate to youth (no matter their struggles) with a positive attitude and helping hand. According to a number of research studies, teachers are key to tipping the scale from risk to resiliency.

Masten and Powell (2003) claim that resiliency is absorbed by children who learn in an environment that is supportive, challenging and involving, in which the innate potential of each child is believed in and nurtured, and in which the wellbeing of staff as much as students is fostered through a health-promoting environment. Such schools not only promote resiliency, but they can truly be characterized as ‘resilient schools’. Not only will students have better mental health staff will have better job satisfaction, less stress and better capacity to cope with change, and the school’s links with parents and the general community will be healthy and strong.

Bernard (1997) identified three key benchmarks that reflect resilient learning environments: 1) caring, 2) high expectations, 3) opportunities for participation and contribution. Further research supports these benchmarks indicating that students who are actively engaged in shaping their
Understanding the phenomenon

learning are less likely to engage in antisocial or disruptive behaviors (Hughes & Adera, 2006). Wyn (2009; 2012) suggests the need to differentiate between attitudes toward youth and pedagogy. She argues that many of the resilient models focus on an attitude and do not develop pedagogical practices that embrace and stimulate youth. The Youth Research Centre in Australia is working to shape a pedagogical approach by helping educators to see the diversity within students rather than risks or deficiencies. This model promotes participatory practices that engage youth, suggesting that youth need to be seen as partners in education. The pedagogy is seeing youth as partners in learning, co-creators and collaborators of information and knowledge.

The development of the resilient learning model, and moreover the injection of a focus on diversity in learning from Australian educators has contributed significantly to changes in the way that educators can think about meeting the needs of at-risk youth. We would like to extend this development even further, and incorporate perspectives from creativity and the arts, as well as learning styles. There is strong evidence to suggest that the arts have been successful in engaging and motivating youth who find themselves more comfortable outside the classroom. Unfortunately, such programming occurs most often outside of the school, perpetuating the divide between different groups of students. We propose the need to understand what role the arts can play as an integrated dimension in the general pedagogy for creating spaces for learning that stimulate, engage and motivate children and youth to want to be in school and to be excited about learning. Supported by learning styles research and Pink’s introduction to the concept of a whole new mind (Pink, 2005), we propose that learning from and with the arts can help schools to balance the left-brain dominated model of learning and help youth prepare for a global society in which both the right and left brain will need to work in partnership to solve problems and develop society, and in which students are seen as partners in learning.

Creativity, whole brain learning and the arts

Learning style researchers have concluded that schools, in general, are left-brain dominated and therefore fail to meet the holistic needs of all students, and the needs of those dominated by right-brain thinking patterns (Respress & Lufti, 2006). Given much of the research on learning, creativity and at-risk youth we would be wise to understand more how to create learn-
“What’s going on here”?

ning spaces that embrace both the right and left-brain. Silverman (2004) has studied children with a right-brain dominated learning style and found that often these children have difficulty in school. She states that

The school curriculum is sequential, the textbooks are sequential, the workbooks are sequential, and most teachers learn sequentially. Children are graded on their mastery of sequential subjects: reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic. Sequential children feel smart, and non-sequential children feel dumb. They dread long division, spelling, showing their work, step-by-step instruction when they don’t know where it’s leading, handwriting, rote memorization, drill and repetition. (Silverman, 2004, p. 2)

Further, she found a strong tendency for teachers to perceive right brain dominated students as underachievers, despite their strong higher order thinking and communication abilities. Rather than developing a whole brain oriented learning environment, students are left to struggle with linear-sequential work, becoming disengaged and at-risk for antisocial behaviors. Levels of disengagement have been shown to have a direct correlation with anti-social behavior regardless of the background of the student (Silverman, 2004). Silverman also found that students who engage in creative interests such as the arts are able to reverse patterns of underachievement.

Daniel Pink (2005) claims that society is engaged in a paradigm shift from a focus on the left-brain to a focus on the whole new mind, in which the left and right brain work in partnership with each other. The heavy emphasis on productivity and effectiveness in the industrial age, he suggests, is being replaced by a need among humans to have greater social connections, spirituality and creativity. He, and others (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2008) suggest that the jobs of the future will be more focused on artistry, empathy, emotion, design, invention, counseling, ethnography, networking, and global. These jobs incorporate right brain activities, including, design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning (Pink, 2005). However, research on learning styles would suggest that schools in general are not prepared at this moment to meet the future demands of work that call for a balance between the right and left-brain for they are too driven by left-brain thought and didactics (Cochrane, 1999; Silverman, 2004).

Instead creativity is reserved for extra-curricular programming. Interestingly enough, research examining extra-curricular art programs has demonstrated a strong relationship between achievement and behavior
that is well worth noting. Repress and Lufti (2006) report several studies that found a strong correlation between the arts, achievement and emotional and behavioral stabilities. According to one study by Franklin, et al., (2004) "participation in the arts ... reduce stress, improve learning outcomes, enhance intrinsic motivation, regulate brain chemistry, augment body memory and literally renew neural pathways" (p. 24-25, as cited in Respress & Lufti, 2006). In another study Walker (1995) found that students who participated in the arts had a greater commitment to schooling and achieved better grades, regardless of their minority status or other risk factors associated with their circumstances.

The arts, achievement and at-risk youth

According to Respress and Lufti (2006) "the arts pay off most expansively in basic reading skills, language development, and writing skills. Increases in general academic skills also show up and appear to reinforce these specific literacy-related developments. These skills emphasize focus and concentration, skills in expression, persistence, imagination, creativity and inclinations to tackle problems." (Respress & Lufti, 2006, p. 26). According to Dickinson (2002) studies have demonstrated interesting relationships between different art forms and thinking and reasoning. For example, music has a strong correlation to spatial reasoning, which is used in mathematics, while drama helps stimulate problem solving, concentration and analytical reasoning. And dance increases self-confidence, tolerance and appreciation for others.

Many educators working with at-risk youth recognize the power of the arts to help youth give voice to their experiences. In a number of projects around the world youth have demonstrated both the importance of storytelling for helping them to develop their voice and feel empowered. Examples of such youth empowerment projects include Finding Voices, Bridges to Understanding, and Freedom Writers Diary. These projects demonstrate powerful resiliency among youth as they share their stories through a variety of mediums. The Freedom Writers Diary (1999), for example, is a collection of stories written by high school students who were born into a family of poverty, minority status, often living in crime-filled communities. The daily writing from the students gave way to personal transformation and self-agency, altering an entire class from being perceived as underachievers and school failures to success stories. Finding Voice (www.findingvoi-
cepproject.org) is a program designed to help refugee youth develop their literacy and language skills by "researching, photographing, and speaking out about critical social issues in their lives and communities". Bridges to Understanding (www.bridgesweb.org) is a digital community designed for youth to build a collective understanding about global issues through storytelling. The stories that are told are personal and locally situated, yet shared globally.

Research has also demonstrated the power of storytelling as a tool for transformation. Nelson, et al. (2008) report of a study from 2003 that demonstrated how storytelling helped reduce drug abuse among 12-15 year olds, while Balmer et al. (2002) reported increased sexual self-efficacy among 13-14 year old youth in Kenya. In a separate study, storytelling, according to Nelson, et al. (ibid) has been shown to help youth clarify their own values that help them make decisions about their own self-destructive behavior.

In other research studies examining the benefits of the arts with youth at-risk, Tyson and Baffour (2004) "found that many youth have a tendency to use arts-based methods of coping with the struggles of their daily lives. Some youth play musical instruments, while others use various forms of writing and artwork. Another interesting aspect of this study is that a narrative approach, which itself is an arts-based method, yielded additional arts-based methods of coping with potential struggles." (Tyson & Bauffor, 2004, p. 223). Wallace-Digarbo and Hill (2006) reported on a similar project called Arts as Agency, that was a community based intervention that integrated life skills into the creation of a shared art experience that culminated in the painting of a mural. The process engaged youth in community building and identity and demonstrated a statistically significant positive outcome for the participating youth.

These are but a few of the many examples that have helped youth learn skills in self-expression, creativity, high-order thinking, communication and collaboration. Many of these programs invite the use of multiple art forms, including dance, painting, photo, film and storytelling. Given the positive track record of such programs, we suggest the need to rethink the general pedagogy in schools to incorporate the arts as part of the didactical approach that is used daily, thereby developing a balanced learning environment that stimulates the whole brain and being, and creates space for diversity, appreciation and caring among students, educators and the
community. In the fall of 2011, we received the opportunity to field-test a pedagogical pilot project in a program designed for youth who do not meet the requirements to enter high school. The intervention included the use of storytelling, painting, and dialogue techniques, and was conducted within the language portion of the school curriculum.
Project purpose and design

The pedagogical pilot project that we field-tested was part of a sub-intervention within a larger nationally funded initiative to examine the ways in which schools can develop healthy learning environments to support the health and well-being of all students (Warne, Snyder, & Gillander-Gådin, in press). The main research study aimed to understand factors that youth identified as important for their own well-being. Methods, such as photovoice, were introduced both as educational tools, as well as data collection among middle school classes in a school community in Sweden. In comparison, our pilot was initiated as a pedagogical intervention with high school students to explore the ways in which similar approaches to healthy learning environments could be introduced at the high school level from a pedagogical perspective. Contrary to the nationally funded project, ours was a pedagogical intervention rather than a research study.

The purpose of the project was to introduce the use of dialogic storytelling and collaborative painting into the teaching and learning environment within a school program designed to work with youth at-risk of dropping out of high school. The project had three main goals:

1. Provide students with the opportunity to develop skills in representing their own voice and perspectives through story and painting
2. Introduce storytelling and painting as tools for exploring, identifying and communicating ideas through creative processes that could be applied in a range of context and subject areas
3. Help students develop skills in dialogue and collaboration using a variety of techniques drawn from clean language, appreciative inquiry, circle conversation

The case

The pilot project took place in a school situated in a mid-sized community, of approximately 70,000 inhabitants, in Sweden (we chose not to reveal the location to assure anonymity). In dialogue with school district personnel and one of the principals of the local high school we were offered to work with students in one of the individual programs designed for youth who were in need of extra academic and social support. Of the two programs from which we could choose, one appeared to be more academically orient-
Project purpose and design

ted, while the other program addressed social development needs of youth in addition to academic support. We chose the latter program with the purpose to introduce the use of storytelling for both giving voice to youth, as well as helping them develop skills for addressing social issues with which they struggled. While we recognized the applicability of our work to both classroom settings, we perceived that our work could potentially have greater impact with youth who were identified as in need of social support as well as academic support.

The school program, which we have named, Lakeview, was designed in 2001 to meet the needs of students who have met the middle school requirements, yet for whom there remain incomplete assignments in one or several subjects. In most cases, students also demonstrate the need to develop better social skills, or sense of wellbeing, or academic proficiency, sufficient enough to perform well in high school. A total of six students are accepted within any given year and acceptance is based on meeting a range of criteria. Students are required to test the program for one week to see if it can serve their needs. They must demonstrate the need for social support, as well as academic support, and demonstrate a clear commitment to the program and to moving forward in their lives. The caregivers and family for each child must also agree to the conditions of the program. Students in the past were often involved in drugs and crime. This trend has changed, and the typical student is one who has difficulty attending school for a variety of reasons: they have been referred to as “home stayers”. The reasons why they stay home vary, with the majority finding the school environment uncomfortable or threatening. The pedagogical approach for this program was articulated in the program document as “consequence pedagogy”\textsuperscript{2}, with an emphasis on helping the youth take responsibility for their actions and see themselves as survivors, rather than victims. The importance, according to the program document, is not what actions a person has taken, but what one does with their actions.

\textsuperscript{2} Even though the program documents articulated the use of Consequence Pedagogy, the personnel did not identify a particular pedagogy that supported their work in the program.
"What's going on here"?

According to the program description, each participating student must honor the following conditions:

- Come to the school well rested and on time, hopefully accompanied with a smile
- The work day is between 0900-1430 and each students is responsible for their own work and conversations
- Treat peers and school personnel with respect
- Participate in all activities, even those that are uncomfortable or difficult
- Listen, accept, and dare to change the things in you that are causing the most trouble

The programming in the school combines academic subjects, Swedish, English and Mathematics, that follow the national curriculum with social programming in which students work on developing social and behavior skills for success. These two foci receive equal time in the daily schedule. A staff of four works with the students regularly, of which two are subject area teachers and two are assistants trained in social and behavioral development. Students work independently from a program that is designed to meet their specific needs both academically and socially. Among the social competencies that are addressed include, self-regulation, responsibility, trustworthiness, respect, collaboration and susceptibility. A set of goals are established for each student that include, developing a future plan and vision, understanding how to engage in partnerships and group contexts, solving problems in a constructive way, demonstrating proficiency in each of the core subjects. The school day begins with a common breakfast in which staff and students work on social interaction skills, and then follows with academic studies. Each afternoon is devoted to social development, based on programming within the school and in the local community. Typically students remain in the school for up to one year, and have the option to return to the main high school earlier if appropriate. The maximum amount of time a person can enroll in the program is for a total of two years or until the age of 20.
Project organization and administration

**Scheduling**
The pilot project was conducted during a three-month period in the fall of 2011. To establish continuity and help to integrate the pedagogical pilot in the general work of the school program, the staff agreed to participate in the writing and dialogue process, as well as, assist the students in their work between workshops. This provided the staff the possibility to develop their own working knowledge of the process as well as decide how best to integrate it into their own school programming and curriculum. Six workshops were conducted in total during the three-month period, taking place during the time allocated for language development. Workshop occasions were chosen based on the program schedule and took place during the language curriculum space between 0945-1200. Depending on the week we met with the students on one or two occasions, beginning with breakfast so as to develop a sense of rapport with the students outside the classroom setting.

**Student group**
In our pilot group, we met with five students, two of whom left the program within the first weeks of our pilot to return to the main high school. Of the three with whom we worked during the entire six-week pilot, one was present at all sessions, leaving early on two occasions. Another student was absent from the first and fourth workshop, but present the rest. The third student was present all but one of the workshops.

**Identify project theme**
In preparation for the project, we met with the teachers at the main school building in town to learn about the youth whom we would be meeting and to decide upon a theme for the stories that we would work with during our upcoming six-week project. It was important for the students to work with a theme to which they could relate, without being too personal so as to make them uncomfortable. We chose to work with animals and experiences one has had with an animal as a way to both enter the world of dialogic storytelling, as well as explore metaphors of friendship through a study of the animals and their behaviors and symbols. By exploring another object, people often experience greater comfort talking and writing about the ob-
ject than themselves (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Preskill, 1995), and over time they become open for a dialogue about themselves.

**The writing process**

The writing process that we introduced was based on a traditional model of storytelling in which there is a beginning middle and end. The focus on process, rather than outcome gave way to non-traditional processes for unfolding the story, with the emphasis on finding new ways to see a problem as a possibility. The process began with an idea phase in which participants wrote about an event that happened. They were asked to write from the top of their head and not to care about spelling or complete thought as the story would continue to grow over time. When the first draft was completed (each person was given about 20 minutes to write) students read what they had written and their classmates could ask them questions to give inspiration for developing the story further. The reader was asked to refrain from answering the questions out loud and instead write them down and use them as a stimulus for continued writing. One could also offer ideas for further development, such as, description of the location, description of the characters, understandings about other things that happened around the event. The writing process could incorporate both pictures and text. Each writing session was followed by an appreciative inquiry reflection and inquiry process in which the listeners of the story would ask questions or offer reflections that could be used by the writer to further develop the story. The inquiry process took place without engaging in dialogue in order to leave space for reflection rather than to open up for a dialogue that often results in the writer trying to “explain or defend their words”.

The following themes and foci were developed to serve as the framework for each of the six workshops, during which each person's story could develop over time. The focus in the workshops was on process, rather than outcome. The specific phases of the storytelling process included:

1. Describing an event
2. Describing the characters in the event
3. Describing the surroundings or context
4. Finding metaphors in the story
5. Finding paradoxes in the story
Project purpose and design

6 Developing a turning point in the story

7 Re-writing the story from an appreciative perspective or another persons perspective

Workshop activities and content focus
The program schedule, including content and focus, was based on the writing process. Changes were made throughout the pilot to accommodate the needs of the students, their areas of interest, and to leave space for co-creation of the storytelling process. The following table reflects the main foci for each workshop and the different activities that ensued.

Table 1: Workshop series content and activity plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop 1</th>
<th>Content:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The power of stories</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Curiosity and investigating new ideas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Appreciative Inquiry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Storytelling model</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Individual Activity:</strong> Writing activity start- experience with an animal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Group Activity:</strong> dialogic questions and reflections from the stories</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Individual Assignment:</strong> Develop the story further from the dialogic questions and reflections you received</td>
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<th>Workshop 2</th>
<th>Content:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creativity and brain based learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The curriculum and storytelling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Receiving animal pictures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Storytelling model: actors and challenges</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Group dialogue:</strong> processing creative learning environments in relation to the students own schooling experience-choices and dilemmas</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Group Activity:</strong> Reading of the story unfolding</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Group Activity:</strong> dialogic questions and reflections from the stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Individual Assignment:</strong> Develop the story further from the dialogic questions and reflections you received and begin to incorporate pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Individual Assignment:</strong> study the animal, finding information about its characteristics and behaviors</td>
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**Workshop 3**

**Content:**
- Metaphor: what it is
- The power of metaphors as storytelling
- Storytelling model: paradoxes and turning points

**Group dialogue:** understanding our own experience

**Group Brainstorming Activity:** exploring metaphors

**Individual Activity:** Finding metaphors in your own story and in the information on your animal

**Individual Activity:** develop your metaphor in your story

**Individual Assignment:** Develop the story further from the dialogic questions and reflections you received and begin to incorporate pictures

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**Workshop 4**

**Content:**
- Painting as exploration, expression and representation

**Group activity:** Living workshop group painting

**Group Activity:** interpreting the paintings

**Individual activity:** selecting a painting or paintings that fit your story

**Group Activity:** reflection of the painting experience

**Individual Activity:** develop your story further incorporating the painting(s) from the living workshop

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**Workshop 5**

**Content:**
- Integrating the components of a story

**Group dialogue:** what does storytelling mean to you?

**Group Activity:** Reading of the story unfolding

**Group Activity:** Activity: dialogic questions and reflections from the stories

**Individual Activity:** putting your story together

**Assignment:** finalize your story incorporating the different questions, information and paintings that you have received or created during the project

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**Workshop 6**

**Presentation of the stories**

**Group reflection:** what has happened to you

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**Theoretical models and didactical tools**

The project framework was designed from a theoretical perspective of the strength-based approach to development, at the heart of which is language and its role as a tool for shaping meaning and identity in a social context.
The theoretical model draws from Wittgenstein’s philosophy of the culture of grammar and Vygotsky’s theory of social development, as well as the Appreciative Inquiry and the role storytelling as a change agent. To support our work, we included specific methods from dialogic storytelling, Clean Language metaphors, and the Living Workshop to create the pedagogical pilot.

**Language as culture and change agent**

Wittgenstein (1981) and Vygotsky (1986) both draw attention to otherwise unnoticed aspects of our behaviour, highlighting how language is chosen and used to construct meaning socially. The power of language lies in how it is embedded or interwoven into the rest of our activities; it is only in the stream of our thoughts or lives that our words have meaning and are given meaning by us. In other words language is contextualized and to understand meaning, we also need to study the words in their context. Vygotsky saw the relationship between talk and thought as emergent: “It emerges in the course of development, and it evolves” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.255). Pearce (1980) built on this thought and developed the notion that people live the stories they and others tell about them. He meant that people do not just exchange messages but act into the actions of the other and in so doing create who we are. This would suggest the need to develop awareness about how we use language to describe ourselves and others for the descriptions become intertwined in our actions. Through this we have the possibility to maintain particular perspectives of one of another, regardless if they are true or false.

To change a behavior thus requires that we change how we describe ourselves and how we describe others. In situations where teachers work with difficult children a lot of attention is focused on what does not work and how to correct the child’s behaviour. Instead, the recommendation from the language theory would be for teachers to develop a new culture of language that focuses on asking questions to understand their students, rather than using words that judge or label. In so doing, the teacher, the family and the child can develop fully in school both educationally and as individuals. This perspective of action being embedded in interaction and meaning being shaped by way in which we use language is central to seeing new ways of developing cultures of learning that become meaningful for all (McAdam & Lang, 2003).
Appreciative inquiry: a strengths-based change process

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organizational change method that was developed in the 1980s (Cooperider & Srivastva, 1987). Considered an action research method, AI engages members of an organization in a process of identifying areas of change and helps them to imagine new possibilities. The method focuses on strengths, rather than on problems, which is considered key in helping to bring about change. All too often we get locked in a negative focus within a situation, never to see new doors for change. Appreciative inquiry focuses on helping us to see those new doors by asking questions, describing and imaging change.

To move away from “problem thinking” and to see possible ways to move forward is a caring act for schools. In system’s theory (Snyder, K.J., Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, K. M., 2008) context is a very important focus and it means that you include the young person’s special network, relatives and relations when working to find new ways. Everyone who is important to the context is included in the work, for instance peer groups, whole school, family and other significant persons, etc. It is about the possibility to understand everything –understand patterns and concepts, using language as a way forward to create new images and begin to imagine what is possible. Problems that one experiences is not derived from something inside oneself, but created through interaction with others. When schools are able to connect to each individual with curiosity, care, wonder and a feeling of respect and admiration for their unique way of living it is possible to shape a new future (Cooper, 1997). Cooper (1997) as well as, McAdam and Lang (2003) suggests that behind every problem is a frustrated dream and through language we can shape change by asking such questions as: “What is the dream?”, “Who is involved?”, and “What in your experience has made you wiser, stronger or more empathetic that can help you to achieve your dream?”.

Storytelling

Storytelling has been a powerful tool for centuries used in different cultures to share history and experiences (Grainger, et al., 2005). Much of our childhood is spent hearing of myths and legends, from which we build a sense of understanding of ourselves, and the world to which we belong. It is through stories that children develop a sense of belief and a value system at an early age. Stories enable us to communicate ideas that go beyond the
rational and structural; they help us to imagine and represent the difficult (Kornberger, 2008). Among those who find themselves living in a repressed situation, storytelling helps to empower people to change. Greene (1991) writes that "not only are voices free to speak to others and among others in live classrooms and counseling centers; they resonate with a sense of seeking, struggling to name, striving to find language for what was repressed and suppressed over the years" (Greene, 1991, p. x). Witherell (1991) writes that, "the creative use of story and dialogue lends power to educational and therapeutic experiences because of their capacity to expand our horizons of understanding and provide rich contextual information about human actors, intentions and experience" (Witherell, 1991, p. 79). Within the Native American Indian tradition stories are ceremonies that support healing (Mehl-Madrona, 2005). The kinds of stories we tell and how we tell our stories are critical for us to make sense out of experience and move on. We can choose to tell our stories of victimization, a common theme within the experience of discrimination. Or we can choose to tell stories of empowerment where we see ourselves as change agents, not as victims. Mehl-Madrona (2005) contends that it is through hearing other people’s stories of transformation that we are able to tap into our own powers of transformation to inspire us to see new options, which is half the battle.

Storytelling is a social process through which we give shape to our world and identity. How we tell a story and the words we choose as well as the angle has a deep connection to what and how we experience our stories. Shotter (1999) distinguishes between monological-retrospective-objective writing and dialogical-prospective-relational writing. In the former, we are writers who objectify or distance ourselves from the subject or event. We might tell the story of something that happened in the past, keeping it as a past event. In the latter dialogical style we write from a space embedded within a context, non-judging, yet descriptive. We are less interested in explaining ourselves, or a situation, and instead more interested in representing it. By giving an account of an event we are able to see relationships between events and actors, and experience the experience. We remain open to exploring and understanding, rather than closing off in judgment.

Even though the Swedish Curriculum (Skolverket, 2010) articulates that all students should display the ability to write a story, many students instead, in our experience, submit reports, demonstrating their ability to seek answers to questions. We were interested in introducing a dialogical
form of storytelling in the curriculum as a tool for exploring, communicating and representing youth’s understanding and ideas about what they are learning and help create a partnership climate with students as co-creators. The integration of dialogic storytelling as a didactical approach, we believed could help teachers build learning environments that resonate with resilient classrooms, and support diversity and engage students as partners in learning and knowledge creation.

**Clean language**

Clean Language is a method developed to help youth learn new skills for approaching learning by examining life and situations through new lenses (Tompkins & Lawley, 2002). David Grove, a psychotherapist, who observed that his patients described events through the use of metaphors and that by using metaphors they were able to see the events differently, developed clean language. By asking questions about the metaphors, clients were able to see new ways of understanding their experience and identity. At the heart of clean language is a focus on understanding how we use language to describe events, and ourselves and therefore, have the opportunity to select the words and metaphors to re-write our stories and identity.

**The living workshop**

The dialogic storytelling model was supported by a pedagogy adapted from “levande verkstad”, the living workshop, which is a process-oriented method in which students explore ideas together through paintings and gestalt. The process builds on the premise that through art we can explore our own ideas and forms of expression by testing different materials and techniques. At the end of each painting session a reflective dialogue is facilitated in which all the participants talk about what they see in the paintings and how they might incorporate it into other work that they were doing (Boström, 1975). Gaylean (1983) also promotes the power of imagery for learning and expressing, suggesting its effective role in stimulating creativity and meaning making. Given that the dialogic storytelling process would integrate both writing and dialogue, we thought the live painting workshop would provide the students with an additional exploratory exercise to stimulate creativity and build story. The painting workshop was introduced
in the middle of the storytelling model to help enhance the development of the metaphors that students would be working with.

**Frame analysis as methodology**

The project, as reported earlier (Snyder and Cooper, 2012), was not completely successful in relation to the specified goals. There were many events during the three-month engagement that caused us to change both focus and execution. At the same time, we did achieve some positive results that speak to the power and appropriateness of the project focus in general for youth and learning environments. By the end of our six week project stay we had created a new communication with three of the five students who remained in the program; a development that gives hope to schools for seeing how they have the possibility within their means to create conditions for all students. The positive developments, combined with the challenges to succeed in our program implementation caused us to reflect on our experience from another lens. Rather than seeking ways to frame our project as a success, we chose to use our experience to ask questions about what is going on in the culture of schooling that makes innovation difficult to achieve. Toward this end, the results that we share should be interpreted as an example of a broader culture of schooling, and not as an evaluation of the particular school program in which we participated. The staff and students with whom we worked are reflectors of a larger institutional culture of schooling and society from which we all have derived and developed our roles and identities and language that we use to create meaning.

As school developers and researchers, we have contributed many years to understanding the phenomena of change and bring to this analysis a series of experiences and knowledge that stimulated our desire to understand “what is going on” in the schools that keeps the culture of education from embracing systemic change with regards to pedagogy, and in the case of this analysis, at-risk youth. The point of departure for this examination is the literature on resiliency, creative arts education and change theory, in particular Appreciative Inquiry. These three foci have a common element

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3 The total number of students who started the program during our pilot initiative was five. Of those five, two returned to the main school program, ending their stay in the special program within the first several weeks.
in that they focus on strengths and identifying paths to improvement. The intent with our project was to introduce a pedagogical approach that embraced these three dimensions. In so doing, we assumed the need for change in the school environment (based on strong evidence), which we believe to be the tipping point for why our project did not succeed.

To assist us, we have chosen to conduct a frame analysis based on the sociologist Goffman (1974), who's methods aimed to "transform the study of interactions from a grab bag of empirical illustrations" (Berger, 1974, p. Xiii) to a holistic understanding of what happens within an experience. A "frame", according to Goffman, is a technique for contextualizing interactions within an environment or perspective so as to better understand how to interpret and derive meaning from the observations. Goffman's thesis was based on the notion that in any one situation one faces the question: "what is going on here". To help answer this, he developed a framework, which he calls frame analysis. The focus of an analysis can range from concrete forms and structures, rules and regulations, to the abstract, based in perspectives and approaches. Regardless, Goffman argues, each frame provides the analyst with a set of guidelines in which to "locate, perceive, identify and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (Goffman, 1974, p.21).

Understanding and explaining a set of interactions, which Goffman calls "strips of activity" requires that one sees the strips of activity as organizationally situated, derived from both perception and how the activity is organized. Merely perceiving, based on ones own viewpoint, then is not sufficient to understand a situation. One needs to understand how the activity is organized and carried out within a context to give it meaning. He offers the example of animals in play that at first glance could be perceived as fighting as their play is so hard. This we see with Siberian Husky dogs, for example, who develop their pack relations through play, based on fight. At first glance, one might perceive the showing of teeth as aggression, but when studying the angle of the tail, ears and position of the bodies to each other it is possible to determine between play and fight. Understanding, "what's going on here?" calls for us to both perceive the play, and as well see how the play is organized studying its complexity in action.

Interpreting these more subtle contextual meanings is done with the help of what Goffman refers to as Keying: a metaphorical process for exploring and representing a strip of activities through which the ability to
Frame analysis as methodology

understand what is going on becomes more visible. There are five types of keying according to Goffman’s (1974) model:

1. **Make Believe**: an activity in which all participants know that nothing will result from the strip activities: one participates in a fantasy to achieve satisfaction from the doing, but they know the fantasy will never become a reality.

2. **Contest**: fighting of a kind in which the rules of the sport supply restrictions of the degree and mode of aggression

3. **Ceremony**: a strip activity in which participants play a role based on their real selves for a period in time. This is distinguished from theatre in which actors play a role other than themselves. Typically the ceremony reflects an event

4. **Technical Redoings**: a trial run for an event outside of its usual context which is conducted for utilitarian purposes (i.e. rehearsals, dry runs, simulation)

5. **Regroundings**: performance or participation of a person outside their normal sphere of activity. i.e. millionaire who works in a soup kitchen. Labor on Sundays is o.k. since it is considered the work of the lord

Goffman’s frame analysis has many overtones that relate to theater. He is well known for his dramaturgical analysis of the "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (Goffman, 1959), in which he puts forth an examination of social life to illustrate how we are all actors presenting ourselves to others through our activities. We see elements of this thesis in organizational change theory (Dalin, 1993), in which the theorists argue that transformation is not found in the policies alone, but also in the intentions and interactions of its people that play out the script of the school reflecting its assumptions and values. Like Goffman, they focus on the social interactions of each and every person and argue, among other things, that it is the human resource dimension that holds the key to change. A significant contributor to this field of study is the cultural theorist Schein (1985), who contends that studying the culture of an organization helps to identify and understand the priorities and agendas at play, which may or may not be evident or intended, yet which impact change within the organization.
Culture has many dimensions, including rules, philosophy, values, and climate. Yet the most important dimension to examine, according to Schein, is the deeper aspect of the basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by the members of the organization. Schein writes culture is,

“Basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘take-for-granted’ fashion and organization’s view of itself and its environment. These assumptions and beliefs are learned responses to groups’ problems of survival and its external environment and its problems of internal integration (Schein, 1985, p.6).

He goes on to explain that culture is rooted more in the dynamics of groups than in anthropological theories of how cultures evolve. It is from this place that social interactions play out and become the presentation of self within the organization, to borrow from Goffman. Understanding and studying culture includes both and examination of the language used and the kinds of exchanges and symbol systems that are present within a group. Given that our project was based on storytelling and language, we chose to approach the frame analysis with the help of metaphors that emerged from exchanges with students, observations in the school culture, and our analysis of the school documents in relation to observed practice. Metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) are powerful tools for creating a kaleidoscope effect on a situation to help us see an observed phenomenon from another angle. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), contrary to what many people believe, metaphor “is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (p. 3). They go on to suggest that despite this, most people are not aware of the role that metaphor plays in our daily thought and actions. We travel throughout the day automatically, rarely seeing the implications of our thoughts and actions in a larger sense. Through examination of language and metaphor we can develop a better awareness about our actions and thought. Given the abstract nature of culture, in which people move through exchanges unaware of this conceptual system to which Lakoff and Johnson refer, we suggest that using metaphor in our analysis assists in developing an awareness about what is going on in the culture of schooling.
Metaphors and analytical themes found in the culture of the learning environment

In this next section we present a series of metaphors that serve as analytical themes identified in the pilot project. Each theme reflects an important dimension of the school culture that we perceive to be central to answering the question: what’s going on here. As we mentioned in the beginning of the report, cultural studies examines the norms, behaviors, attitudes and formal and informal structures of human interaction and work within a given context. The metaphors that we have chosen were identified from the culture of the context in which the pilot project was situated, and reflect actual rhetoric, behaviors, norms and values that we observed during the pilot. We chose to use metaphors as a model for identifying analytical themes since metaphors were a significant part of our work with students in the storytelling process. In the next section, we examine these metaphors in relation to Goffman’s Frame Analysis.

Opaque Communication

The original project proposal was designed to work with youth to represent their own perspectives and experiences with school and society today using a combination of storytelling, digital media and forms of art and music. The stories could then serve as the basis for a second project in which the youth would work with a musical theater composer to take their stories and turn them into a performance. The project was proposed as a two-part endeavor in the event that the stories would not generate sufficient content for a musical theater, or if the students were not interested in this kind of a project. At a minimum, we agreed with the school staff to work with storytelling, drama, and digital media in the classroom, using existing resources in the school context.

Central to this first proposed concept was the importance of helping students to learn to work both independently and collectively. Through use of a blog, students would develop their stories over time in a digital blog space. The blog would include both aesthetic elements, such as pictures and designs, as well as text. Each student would have their own blog, in which they would write a portion of their story each day. Students would then
read each others blog posting and write at least one comment or question following the guidelines from Appreciative Inquiry in which one asks questions that focus on strengths and curiosity. Toward the end of the project, students would work together to write a collective story from the individual stories. This model built on a range of skills and competencies, including aesthetic communication, collaboration, dialogic storytelling, appreciative inquiry, digital competence, critical thinking, and language for representing and understanding thought and meaning.

To assist in this process we were offered to work with a drama teacher who was being let go from the school at the end of the year. According to the school leadership, this person needed an assignment for the remainder of their time. Seeing wonderful possibilities that a drama teacher could offer, we expanded the project concept. The drama teacher would read the blogs as they developed, and perform a gestalt of the content periodically throughout the project, followed by a group dialog of the gestalt and the blog content. As project leaders, we would work with the students hands-on for the first three workshops and then externally from a distance, reading the blogs and participating in the appreciative inquiry dialog online. During this time, the drama teacher would have a more central role working with the students. We would return for the last three workshops to help the students incorporate art and build a common story.

To support the teachers in their own development in working with storytelling and art, we agreed that they would participate in the process with the students, using the project as a kind of integrated in-service teacher training. Additionally, the teachers would work with the students on their stories in between workshop sessions to build continuity and maximize the three-month time span. Rather than students having six workshops in storytelling, they would have three months in which to integrate the use of storytelling with their other schoolwork.

After waiting for the district to help us connect with the drama teacher, we contacted the staff member ourselves with the permission of the school leader, only to learn that no one had communicated anything to them, and for obvious reasons they declined to participate. Their lack of interest in being “cast off” to a project without being consulted, coupled with the fact that they were being let go at the end of the year, was a healthy breeding ground for disdain and resistance. This would be the first of level at which
we would observe that communication and information was not transpa-
rent in the culture, which we have termed: *Opaque communication*.

The second level of opaque communication was between the school
personnel and students. We arrived at the school for our first workshop
and learned that the students had not been informed about the project in
which they would participate. They had been told that two people would
be coming to the school, but nothing more. We understood the teachers
reasoning not to tell the students ahead of time for fear that they would
not show up. At the same time, students attending the school must agree
to the conditions, of which one is “to participate in all activities, even the
ones that are difficult”. We had assumed that students would have been
informed about the scope of the project and how it fit in with the program
goals and curriculum. Consequently, we had not prepared the introduction
to address these dimensions; a mistake that we understood needed to be
rectified for the second workshop.

The next strip activity of opaque communication took place between
us and the teachers. We want to point out that we do not interpret any of
these “strips of activity” as intentional, merely reflectors of a school cul-
ture that signal opportunities for change. When we met initially with the
school personnel they were gracious in sharing about the kind of students
who attended the program. We specifically asked not to receive any details
about the individual students, both for ethical reasons, as well as to not
influence how we perceived the students when we first met them. During
the second workshop it was evident that two of the participating students
were struggling with the storytelling theme of working with animals. We
offered them the opportunity to choose a different topic, one that was of
interest to them. In addition, we wrote them an individual email to explore
different ways with them to write about the animal that they had chosen
in the event that they wanted to continue writing about it. Since the pro-
ject timeline was short, we agreed with the teachers to develop an email
communication between the students, which the teachers would facilitate.
With this, we sent the two emails to the teachers and asked them to share
them with the students and chose a path for continued writing. The emails
were never delivered, and the students never were informed that we had
written to them or took the time to consider their perspectives.

As we met the students, one-by one, and implemented the project, tradi-
tions in the culture of schooling and social roles and identity became stron-
What's going on here? gly prevalent, as gatekeepers of change. Among the themes that emerged were: 1) stereotyping and the power of perception; Learning and the role of learning; 3) Engaged learners. These themes are elaborated further below.

Stereotyping and the power of perception
The first theme that emerged related to the ways in which early experiences in school can follow a student across the years, serving as both a stereotype and a gatekeeper for change. As was the case with one of the students in our pilot, the experience of not being good enough or capable of writing was so deeply ingrained in this person that it became a form identity about who they are as a learner. Another student began the project with a past experience that followed them over the years, yet as their story showed, they were able to transform their identity and move to a new place. The third metaphor reflects the notion of perception, and how we often perceive things on the surface and miss the chance to look deeper. If we do see through the surface we often come to deeper understandings of a person and their experience or situation.

"I can't write, the teacher told me so"
Kim sat comfortably at the table, at home in this social context, speaking with an easy tone, and secure in his/her words and ideas. When Kim spoke his/her eyes shined. All that changed when we entered the classroom setting: Kim's body language was retracted and pained, bent forward and head looking downward. What was it that changed this person so dramatically in just a couple of minutes from a social butterfly to a hidden soul? We would later learn, from both Kim and the teachers, that years of hearing how Kim was not bright had affected his/her self-esteem. This would challenge us through the whole project. During the writing portions of our meetings, Kim refused to write, and instead drew pictures of different animals: owl, parrot, other birds, crocodile, snakes, turtle, and other water animals, as well as a dog. The pictures were detailed and true to form, not fantasy figures. And all these animals, in detail, had been drawn in the 15-20 minutes that others wrote their first idea. Of all the animals Kim drew, the dog was the center of the collage.

When we initiated the dialogue process, Kim withdrew, head down on the table, answering, "I don't know" to every question we asked. Since Kim
was resistant to writing, we created opportunities to work with each student individually for a portion of the workshop time. It was during the first session that Kim told us he/she couldn’t write. “How do you know that”, we asked. “Because the teachers told me so; not the teachers here, but others. The teachers here believe in me.” We spent time with Kim talking about the writing process, and how it can be difficult because it takes longer to write than speak. We offered to write down the stories that he/she shared to help Kim see how the story that he/she tells can be the same in written form. Kim’s story began to develop and was about a workshop that he/she liked to spend time in. Later on, during the painting workshop, Kim found a picture of a flame that he/she chose to fit with the story of the workshop. Unfortunately, the story was never finished. Kim was offered extra support from us to work one-on-one with the story as the teachers didn’t have time, but that support was never accepted. Instead, Kim returned to the picture of the dog, which was used as the focus of the verbal dialogue around storytelling.

During the group dialogues Kim remained silent, hugging the words: “I don’t know” when asked a question. On the last day, we saw Kim sitting silently with the picture of the dog as we shared the final stories. Kim had written some text around the dog. Perhaps our message did get through anyway. Since completing this we have had contact with the teachers and learned that Kim has completed the program and has begun to write.

“Getting back on the horse again”
Charlie sat buried in layers of pain. Our first impression was of a person with walls built so high and a guard so strong. Charlie, we suspected would be hard to connect with. Yet, when we entered the classroom, a new person emerged from Charlie, making eye contact with us and soaking in every word. Charlie was one of the few to welcome the writing process, even though the focus of the story was of a painful personal experience of a horse about which he/she chose to write. Charlie shared with us a story of a horse that was a good friend for several years, and then one day threw Charlie into the air. The event was unexpected and made Charlie very angry. The first day, Charlie was uncomfortable reading the story, and instead chose to share with us a picture that he/she had begun to draw. It was a picture of an eye with a reflection of a horse embedded within (unfortuna-
“What’s going on here”? 

tely it is not clearly visible in the printed copy). This picture would soon be followed by second picture of a horse dancing in the wind.

During the dialog process, Charlie wrote down the questions from classmates and teachers with care, not to miss a thing. Overtime, we witnessed the integration of the different questions and perspectives as Charlie worked through a difficult trauma in the story. As well, the pictures began to develop and we were soon to see the full horse, with an accompanying metaphor. Charlie was the only one of the students to embrace the entire process, using both the dialogues and painting sessions to bring the story to life. From the group painting event, Charlie spotted a picture of a dragon that Kim had mainly painted. Charlie asked Kim if he/she could use it in his/her story to represent the fear of being thrown from a horse.

During the last day, he/she shared with us that the process, although difficult, had been very useful, and that he/she was eager to start riding again: a 360 degree turn of events had occurred through the storytelling process, moving from fear to openness. The final product was introduced with a new picture of a person riding a horse, representing the inner transformation that had occurred during the writing process.

“See me through my anger”

Robin didn’t come the school program until the third workshop. The teachers had shared with us earlier that he/she was a tough person with a strong attitude, which we experienced as well. He/she had a body language that demonstrated both an inner strength as well has high integrity, which could also be easily interpreted as bitter and aggressive. Robin was in control, and we were challenged to meet the conditions. From the first meeting with Robin, he/she refused to read his/her story for it was not completed. Instead, he/she demanded time to finish it. At this point in the project we had already recognized the need to work one on one with some of the students and chose to use this opportunity to create such a space. Robin would get his/her wish to finish the story and we could meet with each student individually. This decision paid off as two students who had been refusing to write began to generate a text. Both worked more comfortably at the computer and one chose to have music playing while working. Giving them the opportunity to voice their own workspace needs also created a better sense of trust and open communication with the students.
Learning and the role of the learner

This next section highlights a theme about learning theory in practice. Even one may have knowledge and intention about the kind of learning space that they perceive to be important, sometimes an outside eye reveals another kind of dynamic at play. In the case of our pilot project, we observed the paradox between the formal structures of the classroom that was arranged for connection juxtaposed with a silence on the part of the students to engage in any kind of collaborative dialogue. Moreover, the value of the grade its significance for deciding what happens in the classroom was highlighted by the words of the students who refused to engage in the storytelling process unless they received a grade for it. The bargaining and negotiating model exceeded pedagogical practice changing the culture of schooling from a place of exploration and testing of ideas to one of deal making.

“The cloud of silence in a space of togetherness”

As we learned more about each of the students and how best to connect with them, we also gained insight into the strength the traditional school culture has had on shaping behaviors for teaching and learning and expectations of the student’s role in the learning process. The dynamics of youth engaged in conversation that we observed in the breakfast room at the beginning of each workshop was in strong contrast to the resistance that we experienced in the classroom setting. Here is a glimpse into what we call, the cloud of silence.

The room was rather small, most likely the original living room in the house before the building became a school. In the middle of the room were several tables interconnected, around which we all sat. The walls were sparsely decorated with a whiteboard and a flow chart. One of the walls was lined with bookshelves, which housed the students’ resources, including fact books, art supplies, magazines and games. On another wall was a bookshelf in which students could store their work. In the corner was a single computer without Internet connection, marking the control of the teaching staff to prevent students from being “disrupted” during the lessons. The internet connection was reserved for upstairs (away from the formal classroom), raising an interesting question about what it takes to help teachers see the potential for innovative learning through technology,
rather than to fear it as a distracter. Back at the table, we anticipated that students would be comfortable communicating with each other because of the dialogue formation of the tables. As we quickly learned, the students’ inner discomfort with sharing was strong enough to create isolated islands within the shared space. What a marked difference this was from the openness we experienced in the kitchen where they begin their day together eating breakfast.

When we introduced the dialogue portion of the storytelling process and asked, “Who would like to begin?” The room was dead silent, and all eyes were focused inward. We gave the room a chance to come alive, but no one dared to do. Finally, one of the teachers, who also participated in the process, volunteered to read their story first. We tried to use this opportunity to mirror how the process is done and demonstrate that the questions could be open and caring. No bite! the room remained silent, except for the teacher who read his/her story. Kim was completely silent, almost without contact, lying with head down on the table. Charlie sat with his/her knees raised up to his/her chest, and Robin had a look of disgust on his/her face. It was clear that these students did not dare to ask each other questions; the student code of silence was strong and we would have to find another way to engage them in collaboration and dialogue.

“I’ll do it only if it counts towards my grades”

Wanting to create a trusting environment, we returned to the second workshop prepared to help students understand “why” they might want to develop their dialogic storytelling skills. Wanting to show respect for their capacity to learn and understand, we presented a research base about the connection between creativity, learning and future job preparation. As well, they learned about right brain and left-brain learning, and the dominance of left-brain activities in school. It was our hope that we would paint a picture in which they would recognize themselves, as well as see the possibilities that their lack of interest in schools may not only reside with them. When we had presented the research, we asked them to respond to it. A dialogue began to take shape as students shared with us that they could relate to the left-brain dominated schooling, and even experienced on many occasions that their own preferences for learning were not supported by their previous schools. The cloud of silence had been lifted slightly and we used the opportunity to ask new questions: This time we asked them about
their experience with the first workshop: 1) What did you experience last time? 2) Did you experience something that surprised you or frustrated you? 3) What would you like to do differently in the future, and 4) What are you curious about now?

The majority of students had difficulty expressing themselves, although several shared that they were uncomfortable reading aloud. Kim continued to answer with the typical, “I don’t know”, and Robin wondered if he/she would get a grade for this work. As Robin shared with us, “If I can’t get a grade for this, then it’s not worth my time”. Once again, we were transported back to the strength of the dominant schooling model that year after year continues to set more press on the grade, rather than on learning. We reached for the curriculum plan and national goals to show the students that everyone should possess and demonstrate the ability to write a story and to collaborate with others in the development process. The resistance around the table decreased slightly, while the number of questions in our own minds rose higher than the time before. When in the schooling experience do children become more focused on the grade then on learning? Why couldn’t the students be open to experiencing learning as fun? And why were they so resistant to cooperating and collaborating with one another in the classroom, when outside the classroom they were open? Curious about all of this, we regrouped after the second workshop and began to set our focus on helping students experience a sense of trust in collaboration and excitement in social learning.

**Engaged Learners**

While our pilot project was not as successful as was hoped for, there were several incidents that occurred that demonstrated our efforts had begun to make a difference. In this section we highlight the impact of turning point that occurred when we made changes in our programming to focus on engaging students. Drawing from learning style theory and brain based learning, students were given roles during the metaphor workshop, including group facilitator and recorder. As well, students engaged with information and each other that was posted around the room, requiring them to be physically active during the session. The dynamics between the students, and between the students and teachers was positively striking as we saw students get creative, take leadership, become daring, and energetic.
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Teachers confirmed later during the focus group, that they were beginning to see changes in students.

"Eureka, we have contact!"

Having observed that the students became frozen and almost catatonic when we sat around the table and dialogued with one another, we decided to get them active moving around the room and owning the process more. Working with learning styles, we wanted to offer opportunities for students to talk, write, move, touch, problem-solve and create as well as collaborate. The exercise was introduced during the workshop that focused on metaphors.

We came with pages of metaphors that the students hung around the room. Each person took time to read them and to select three that were meaningful to them. All of them were very hesitant from the beginning and it took some time to help them move into the task. We even heard some of them talking a bit about the different metaphors. Students were then asked to share what the metaphor meant to them. We then hung a series of verbs on the board and asked the students to brainstorm new metaphors and. One of the students, who preferred to move about, was given the task to write on the whiteboard what they heard from the group. Suddenly the room came alive and ideas were shouted out faster than Sam could write. Sometimes the metaphors came out in English, with a passing glance to us, proud in their ability to speak English. To end the exercise, we asked Kim (the one who couldn't write) to write down all of the metaphors and hang it on the wall so that they could continue to develop the list as new ideas came. Kim's hesitation reeked of questioning that anyone would ask him/her to write. Even the teachers appeared to be taken aback and demonstrated reservation that Kim would do what he/she was being asked. Instead of feeding the hesitation, we showed Kim where to get the paper and gave him/her a pen to start writing. The teachers began to steer where and how Kim wrote and soon allowed him/her to finish on his/her own. We never saw the sheet of paper with the metaphors hanging on the wall the next time we came to school, but we did witness another side to Kim who was willing to write when someone believed in him/her. We made contact! And the energy was rewarding.
“Signs of encouragement”

After completion of the pilot project, we conducted an hour-long interview with the three staff members to learn more about the program and how they perceived the pilot concept (the storytelling/arts-based model) as usefulness and effective for the learning environment. The teachers shared that they saw the strength of the approach for helping students develop skills in connecting and communicating with one another; something that many of the students struggled with, according to the teachers. Teachers also observed that the project stimulated students’ fantasy and gave them possibilities to develop their social skills, for example, waiting your turn and listening to others. The staff also shared that they were pleasantly surprised when the students began to open up and share their perspectives with us. This affirmed our experience and the importance of working with them alone, both separate from the teachers, and at times giving them their own space to work individually. It is too short for the teachers to see any measureable results, however we did learn that during the following term of study, Kim began to write; a development that we all perceive to speak positively for the project.
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**Frame analysis**

Drawing on Goffman's keying strategies, we examine elements of our experience to better understand the dynamics of the schools culture and why projects that embrace a strengths-based orientation to learning and development have a hard time integrating with the culture of schooling. As we conducted our six-week pilot project, focused on storytelling, we found ourselves players in a theater of a kind that revealed the tensions between two opposing assumptions of learning and the learner. In our analysis, we explore different “strips of activity” that emerged during our six-week pilot project. These strips are then understood with the help of the five keying categories described above: Make Believe, Contest, Ceremony, Technical Redoing, Regrouping.

**Make-Believe**

1. **Make Believe**: an activity in which all participants know that nothing will result from the strip activities.

   There were many strip activities that occurred throughout our project that help us to see how the project could be perceived as make believe. The cornerstone, we suggest, is derived from the juxtaposition between the theoretical underpinnings of our project and the institutional framework of school culture and the short time period for the project. Schein contends that it is the values and basic assumptions held by a community that makes up a culture. We, the outsiders, had strong values and assumptions about the importance of working with language and dialogue to build new cultures of identity and possibility. As well, we saw the importance of the role of the students as full partner, if not drivers, in the rewriting of the stories. This was juxtaposed with a program model that was designed to help students learn how to deal with the consequences of their actions. Nowhere in the program description did we see elements of engaging students in their own learning, nor in defining the conditions of a situation. They were asked to accept the conditions of someone else and learn how to “fit in”. For example, the teachers chose not to introduce the project to the students and clarify how it related to the rest of the school program. We perceive this to be one of the first strip activities to portray the pilot project as “make believe” in Goffman’s terms. It was not a part of the school curriculum in the eyes of the students, nor was an integrated part of the
pedagogy. Students reacted early in the workshop series displaying their disbelief through exclamations such as: I will not do this work if I can’t get a grade for my efforts. In other words, if it doesn’t count in the school, it is only make believe, and students didn’t want to participate in the theater of the make believe.

**Contest**

2. *Contest:* a kind of fighting, in which the rules of the sport supply restrictions of the degree and mode of aggression.

Strap activities in the name of contest were present in the words and actions of the students and teachers. The ground rules had been established by the school program, which all students were required to accept before gaining entry. Parallel to this outspoken set of criteria was a more silent culture of domination that is embedded in the traditions of student as receiver of knowledge and teacher as transmitter. While many classroom settings seek to engage youth in shaping learning, the research on school dropouts demonstrates a tendency toward student as passive learner. This institutionalized relationship between student and teacher can be understood in relation to Eisler's (1987) discussion of power, which results in two different types of cultures: partnership and dominator. Partnership cultures, she found are characterized by cooperation, nurturance, participation, sharing, spirituality, creative arts and balance between male and female. Contrary to this is the dominator culture, characterized by hierarchy, ranking, in-groups and out-groups, class difference, and violence. Returning briefly to the project's theoretical frames and the schooling model one can see the juxtaposition of the dominator culture found in schools with the partnership culture model of learning intended by the pilot project. We suggest then that contest is a keying factor to understand what is going on in the culture of schooling and why change to a pedagogy characterized by partnership is difficult to achieve.

We observed a dominator culture in the form of power plays at multiple levels from the leadership, to personnel staff and even among the students. The first contest that we experienced was during the planning phase in which the leadership of the school decided that it would be good for the drama teacher to work with us. Our orientation to this decision was one of collaboration and we saw immediately how drama could be incorporated
to the project and enhance its pedagogical and artistic dimensions. Unfortunately, the school leaders never contacted the drama teacher who was subsequently unaware that they had been assigned to work with us. In the teacher’s own power play, they refused to work with us; not because of the project, but because no one had respected them enough to engage them in a dialogue about their participation.

Strip activities of contest were also observed in the classroom setting by the students. One student showed their power play by leaving the room when we began the writing process on the first day. Another student claimed the need for more time to complete their work and refused to follow the workshop schedule until they were ready. Another student showed their power in their silence: a kind of refusal to participate. One student perhaps didn’t want to appear impolite, and instead answered all questions with the infamous: “I don’t know”; a verbal kind of silence one might suggest. Another student refused to read their paper until they had determined it was completed. They didn’t follow any criteria for this decision more than that they believed the story to be complete. This same student also refused to engage in any kind of dialogue, hiding behind the control to get time to finish working on his/her own story. The teachers took part in the contest themselves, engaging in the ceremony of playing out the standard roles between teacher telling the students how to behave and what was acceptable or out of line.

Ceremony

3 Ceremony: a strip activity in which participants play a role based on their real selves for a period in time. This is distinguished from theatre in which actors play a role other than themselves. Typically the ceremony reflects an event

Considering Goffman’s Ceremony, the drama teacher played the role of the laid off worker, refusing to give in to the leaders. The school leaders also played their own ceremonial role embedded within the hierarchical model of schooling in which leaders often are the ones to make the decision, highlighting the significance of the institutionalization of education based on a hierarchical model of decision-making and role relations.

Another kind of ceremony was also present in the school culture: the ceremony of labeling. Midway into the project we inquired about one of
the students to understand from the teacher’s perspectives why the student was enrolled in the program. From our perspective, this student was a person who needed challenges rather than confinement. The response we received was: “Sam’ just has ADHD”. What was interesting to us was the quickness of this response, and the problem residing in the person, rather than any reference to their context or history with schooling. Perhaps, Sam does meet the clinical criteria for ADHD, but it still begs the question about what kind of learning environments can be developed to invite all students to the table, rather than reinforcing the ceremonial stigma associated with labels. We interpreted many of Sam’s behaviors as a response to the role that is assumed with the label of ADHD. Referring back to the focus on language and its power to shape meaning, we witnessed the ceremonial ritual of maintaining roles and identities. Similarly, another student, Kim refused to write, and the teacher perpetuated this non-verbally and perhaps even unintentionally, by engaging Kim in other kinds of activities other than writing. As well, they excused the lack of writing by saying such things as, “Kim doesn’t like to write”. While Kim was clear with us that it was teachers in other programs who didn’t think that he/she could write, we witnessed the presence of the stigma of the past that followed with Kim. During our interview with the teachers they also made it clear that the students enrolled in the program “were not mature like their age”. Consequently, the teachers shared, they had lower expectations of what the students were capable of doing. These are example of the subtle ways in which ceremony is performed in a culture and the power that it has to maintain roles and dynamics. This was interesting to us considering the articulated focus of the program to help students move forward.

**Technical Redoings**

4 **Technical Redoings** (a trial run for an event outside of its usual context which is conducted for utilitarian purposes (i.e. rehearsals, dry runs, simulation).

Seeking to understand both the ceremony and the institutionally grounded power struggles behind the contest, we turned to the pilot projects emphasis on dialogue and understanding and attempted to transform the dynamics toward Goffman’s last two keying strategies beginning with technical redoings. We hoped to mirror and model for the students’ ways
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to engage from a dialogic and collaborative perspective that empowered their needs and perspectives. The first technical redoing took place on the first day, when Sam left the room during the writing session. Rather than calling Sam back to the room, we waited several minutes then joined Sam in the kitchen. We asked questions about why Sam left the room and learned that he/she couldn’t find an experience with an animal about which to write. We took some time to brainstorm different topics with Sam from areas that interested him/her. We then invited Sam to join us again when he/she had time to think about what to write. For us, walking away did not need to be interpreted as retreated, or power play. Some people need time to think, and need to do that in a different space. Of course, this could have been a power play on the part of Sam, yet within about five minutes, Sam returned to the room and began to write. Sam had chosen the option to rehearse a different response then the ones that we had witnessed earlier in the day.

The second and third technical re-doings occurred during the third workshop when we introduced metaphor activity and engaged youth at the white board. This was the point in the pilot when the room came alive and we made contact with all participating students (all of whom were present that day). The focus of the redoing could be seen as a simulation for how students could participate in shared meaning making. The third technical redoing took place later during this same workshop. Two of the students were eager to have their own space to write the stories since they had not found the time in between the workshops. We embraced the request and saw it as an opportunity for the students to begin to own the process, as well as give us time to work with the students one on one. This was also a turning point in the project in which the teachers decided it might be most helpful if we worked with the students without them being present in the room. This could be seen as a dry run, a rehearsal of sorts for the students to test what it could be like to participate in shaping their own learning environment. Two students went to the computer and began to search on the Internet for more information about their animal and one even put on headphones, while they continued to work on their stories.
Regroundings

5 *Regroundings:* performance or participation of a person outside their normal sphere of activity. i.e. millionaire who works in a soup kitchen. Labor on Sundays is o.k. for it is considered the work of the lord.

The final keying category developed by Goffman is *regrounding.* One could see the entire school program in which we participated as a regrounding given that it was an educational space outside the mainstream aimed to help youth re-engage. Proponents of inclusive education models would suggest that this is unlikely to occur. The research on inclusive education is quite strong to suggest that when “problem” children are placed separately, they perpetuate a negative trend, and the divide between groups of student increases (Egelund, et. al. 2006). Instead they would suggest building an inclusive environment based on care, variety, diversity, patience, and a sense of believe in the capacity of the students (Bernard, 2000), from which all students can benefit. Egelund, et. al., (2006) suggests that segregation maintains a view of the individual as the problem rather than considering what’s going on in the system that contributes to student’s dissatisfaction with schooling. Our observations support these findings as we saw evidence of traditional role relations between teacher and students; evidence of the deficit model guiding the interactions between staff and students; evidence of past experiences becoming the identities of youth in a new setting. This, despite an articulated commitment to helping youth develop academic and social skills to return to the mainstream school program. As Schein (1985) suggests, it is not in the programming that change occurs, but rather in the basic assumptions and values of a culture.

To help bring about a change in behaviors and attitudes is easier said that done according to Wolozsky (1996). Language is a key factor. It is through our language and choice of words we create a reality that spreads every time we tell something. Bohm (1996) suggests that language can move us to change and connect us to things that matter or it can create greater divides. Embracing a new language and embedding it within our internal cultures of existence takes time. Many educators, for example, work hard to change their focus to a strength-based approach, yet their language lags behind. In our pilot project, one of the students was “explained” as being autistic when we sought to understand why such a bright and competent
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youth needed to be in the program. Rather than exploring the question with us (the student had only been in the school for a month or so which could have begged for more exploration from the school to understand the student), they chose a language that labeled the person. Interestingly, just a few weeks after joining the alternative program, the “autistic” student re-entered high school. He/she had a different picture of him/herself and chose to tell that story instead of the one that the school had chosen. This student demonstrated what Furman (1998) meant in his book “it’s never too late to have a happy childhood”: language is an important tool that we can use to create our own identity. Instead of focusing on deficits and problems we can choose a different story to tell about our possibilities.
Conclusion

Through our story we wanted to highlight several trends that we identified in the schooling environment related to the dialogic storytelling writing model and creativity. In particular, we witnessed the deep roots of a tradition embedded in the culture of schooling that motivates students through grades, perpetuates a climate of “doing the least to just get by”, and emphasizes judgment rather than supports diversity and curiosity. These are not necessarily characteristics found in the program in which we worked, but rather are trends that followed with the students from previous experiences that were so engrained that they had difficulty embracing something new. As well, the teachers, we experienced, were often held captive in a catch-22: needing to help these students re-enter high school and wanting to help them develop as humans, with the former dominating.

Among the students, we experienced a high capacity to communicate and reason, both verbally and in written form when presenting facts. Difficulties presented themselves when they were asked to be creative and to share their own thoughts and ideas. Despite the fact that the object of each story was an animal, most were uncomfortable writing from the beginning and expressing themselves. The stories appeared more like reports. The length of the stories and the judgment of when a story was complete were similar among them students, regardless of our efforts to help them develop the stories further from the questions they received.

Students appeared uncomfortable dialoging around the table. Yet when we moved the focus to the white board or the mural paper the mood changed and they connected. Students collaborated both in silence and open communication and the boundaries between isolated islands once present at the classroom table vanished when they worked on the mural paper. Feelings of fear or resistance were driven away. We experienced the possibilities that art offered the students for development a non-threatening collaborative environment.

Our experience with this group of students has left us with reflections and questions about the earlier learning environments in which they have been fostered; and the messages they have received about writing and creativity. Can their disinterest in writing and creative come from earlier negative experiences in school? Have they been invited to tell their stories, or to tell a story before? Has anyone listened? Have writing lessons been
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filled with meaningless exercises instead of giving students their own pen to hold? Kim, we later learned from the teachers, was an incredible oral storyteller. So why didn’t Kim believe that he/she could write? Our questions connect us back to the strength of the research on arts in education, as well as the dominance of left-brained learning environments in schools. From our short time with these students, we did manage to make a connection, stimulate a dialogue, and experience the creativity that lies beneath the surface. We wonder what our experience had been like had these students been given opportunities to work with creativity and the arts earlier, and to understand that learning is more than just a grade.

We want to conclude this paper with several questions that we believe need to be examined further. With regards to the sufficient amount of research on learning, motivation, and creativity, as well as dropouts and at-risk youth, one might expect to see greater developments within the school environment. The continued rate of school dropouts, suggest that this work hasn’t even touched the surface. As well, we have examined a number of studies that have followed concrete projects based on a resilient pedagogy in which social interaction creativity, participation and inclusion are key success factors. In the beginning of the report, we asked the question: given the extensive amount of research on this topic, what is it that keeps the research and the practice so far apart? Using Goffman’s frame analysis and Schein’s theory of culture, we suggest that the answer lies in part in the assumptions about what is learning, what is a student and what a the teacher. While programming may reflect a desire to engage youth differently in schooling, the stories that are told about who they are and what they do perpetuate a basic assumption that many are not good enough. Shifting the language of school to a partnership model is possible when educators and society take time to listen to the stories they tell and begin to write a new dialogue about education. Reframing our questions so that we ask, “who is the student”? rather than, “what is the student” is one part of this language shift. As well, educators need to understand their own role in perpetuating a theater of make believe so that they can one day achieve a re-grounding that becomes a new way of creating learning environments that are meaningful for all children and youth.
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