I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY!

YOUNG PEOPLE RESEARCH, ANALYZE AND TAKE ACTION

ON THEIR HOMELESS LIFEWORLDS

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

Working in a homeless youth shelter in a major Eastern Canadian city, 35 homeless males and females, aged 16-24, engaged in a participatory action research (PAR) project over a one-year period. In the study, the participants systematically brainstormed 107 potential research themes pertaining to their experiences, concerns, and interests in youth homelessness. From these themes, the youth prioritized stereotyping and stigmatization, issues that they wanted to better understand, address and take action on in their various lifeworlds. After the youth considered a variety of representative art forms and artworks from participants in the study, they selected a theatre script, “The Other Side of the Door,” to represent their research findings. From this play, the youth selected ‘who is a homeless youth,’ and the relationship of parenting to youth homelessness as key themes. By including and analyzing the youths’ decisions and ideas about their research priorities and findings, new insights and understandings are contributed to scholarly research about youth homelessness.
Acknowledgments:

* Dedicated to the young men and women who opened their hearts and minds to this project. Thank you for your courage, honesty and passion. *

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This dissertation would not have been possible without Professor Richard Volpe’s courses on the psychology of trauma, abuse and prevention. Through his curriculum and my subsequent research, I became better acquainted with physical, emotional and sexual abuse—and my own reactions to these behaviors. Simply put, Professor
Volpe’s courses helped me “imagine the unimaginable.” Accordingly, I designed protocols to safeguard the young people as much as possible as they disclosed at times of their discretion some of their traumatic life experiences.

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The youth theorize marginalization and stereotyping.

Change Through Participatory Action Research

Conclusion

PAR: Research, Education and Action

Research.

Education.

Open-mindedness in education.

Action: a critical aspect of participatory action research.

Conclusion

Authenticity of PAR Projects

PAR research: in name only.

Who benefits from participatory action research?

PAR: a “workshop in agency” or “participatory agency research.”

Youth use agency to define “I” based research themes.

Participatory Action Research in Practice

Launching a PAR project.

Role of a researcher-facilitator.

PAR: Research, Education and Action

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The youth theorize marginalization and stereotyping.

The Epistemology of PAR

Critiques of positivism:

Disrespected knowledge.

Holistic versus reductionist approaches.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project with 35 Homeless Youth

To be a good [participatory researcher] means above all to have faith in people; to believe in the possibility that they can create and change things.

Paulo Freire

This participatory action research (PAR) project with 35 homeless youth began when I observed the young peoples' capabilities and potential in a weekly arts-based workshop that I designed and facilitated prior to this present project. I volunteered this program over several years in a youth shelter in a major eastern Canadian city. Based on my interactions with these young people in my workshops, I thought that they could become effective contributors to a participatory action research project that would be shaped by their interests, goals and design. I was confident that their ideas and priorities would illuminate scholarly research into their homeless lifeworlds, and help generate public attention and change to the issues they cared most deeply about.

In this chapter, I outline my earlier workshops with these youth that inspired my participatory action research (PAR) project with them. A research rationale explains the significance of centering homeless youth research around the ideas and priorities of young people living in homelessness. I discuss the need to build trust with young people in the context of researching their often sensitive and traumatic histories.
Context: Facilitating Arts Workshops to This Present PAR Project

This present research project took several years of prior engagement with these young people, especially since “PAR depends on a careful initial building of relationships” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 92). As an outsider to youth homelessness, I had to build trust with the youth, learn about their lifeworlds, and find mutual avenues of connection, communication, and trust. Accordingly, before this project, I developed and facilitated a weekly arts-based educational program for homeless males and females, aged 16-24, in a youth crisis shelter in a major eastern Canadian city. Over a two-and-a-half year period, I designed and facilitated more than one hundred workshops for these young people using short stories, graphic novels, rap, spoken word, poetry, and visual art.

An arts-based curriculum offered significant benefits. First, these forms were popular with the youth, who actively engaged with the content. Indeed, many of the youth had memorized the lyrics to favourite rap songs, and insightfully shared why this content spoke so powerfully to them. Some youth felt “safer” discussing others’ experiences as depicted by artists in their lyrics or in their stories, rather than articulating some of their own traumatizing experiences. By responding to their favourite artists, the youth could better understand some of their own struggles. Finally, these artworks served as both curriculum for the program and as catalysts for the youth’s self-expression.

During the workshops, I became better acquainted with the struggles of these young people and with their distressing lack of financial resources, affordable housing, and employment opportunities. Working with many hundreds of homeless
youth, I came to better understand how a large number viewed their situations—and themselves. Many of these youth lacked mentorship and support from a stable, safe, and reliable adult, a situation that compounded their difficulties exiting homelessness. As I pondered the young peoples’ lack of resources and “structured” opportunities for research and intellectual growth, the seeds of this current project were born. I wanted to offer a participatory action research project that might address these young peoples’ needs, concerns, and priorities as they defined them. I mused about how a PAR project might serve as an empowering resource to these young people.

As I began this project, some doubts ran through my mind. Given the youths’ transience I had observed in my workshops, I wondered how long they might participate in this current PAR project. Would they take it seriously? What might it take for them to feel invested in the process? What possible outcomes might arise from it? Finally, I wondered if the artistic representation from the research and subsequent action that the youth formulated might inspire some measure of social change, ideally at a societal level but at the very least among the participants themselves.

To address my concerns, I reflected on what I knew of these young people from my workshops. A number of youth shared that adults expect little of them, particularly academically, so this PAR project could give the youth an opportunity to prove otherwise. On a personal level, I also believed that these youth would respond favourably to my belief in their abilities. In contrast with stereotypes that project them as disinterested and wayward, with little to offer, I saw how much they had to
contribute when they felt passionately about an idea or an issue. While reflecting on their lived experiences\(^1\) in my workshops, the youth shared profound insights which they had derived from keen observation and intelligence, two qualities that inform sound research. In sum, I concluded that these young people lacked a systematic opportunity to reflect on, “name”, research, represent, and take action on their lifeworlds. I wanted this PAR project to serve as that opportunity.

To deepen my understanding of participatory action research and improve my effectiveness as a facilitator, I studied PAR’s philosophy, projects, and outcomes from the accounts of practitioners and scholars. I gleaned how PAR empowers oppressed groups to identify and prioritize their concerns, and articulate them in artistic and political ways that at a minimum garner attention, and hopefully provoke some to rethink their attitudes and behaviors towards oppressed groups. As will be shown in this dissertation, the young people were especially motivated to represent their findings artistically, in the hopes that their work would engage—and potentially change—larger audiences.

I felt confident that some of the youth might want to contribute to this project because of their desire to share their ideas and thoughts with others who know so little about them. Responding to “Whose faces do we see and what roles do they play in our community?” (Lund & Carr, 2013, p. 118) many young people in this study complained about how “invisible” they felt; more specifically, how little the public knows of how they became homeless, who they are as individuals, and how

\(^1\) Cooper and White (2004) define lived experience as the “raw experience that occurs prior to interpretation” (p. xxi).
they cope with their circumstances once on their own. The young people summarized these themes that focused on themselves as “who is a homeless youth?”

Seldom, if ever, are issues of youth homelessness raised in public discourse, and homeless youth issues and beings are virtually erased in film, popular music, and print and mainstream electronic media.

Through the young people’s contributions to PAR projects such as this, “the invisible” can become visible, since the findings of a PAR project can thrust “hidden or invisible relations, mechanisms and underlying structures of power” (Maguire, 2006, p. 66) into public discourse. Through an analysis of stereotyping and stigmatization in Chapter 4, this study unpacks “hidden or invisible relations, mechanisms and underlying structures of power” that constrain the life prospects of these young people. The study also examines disadvantages faced by young people in family units that are often physically dangerous or psychologically abusive, and from which they eventually are ‘thrown away’ or run away. The participants labeled this theme as “parenting and youth homelessness.” While describing their own accounts of dangerous and abusive parenting, some youth shared that their own behavior was problematic, and exacerbated an already tense home environment.

This study helps redress the dearth of opportunities for these young people to be heard, since many marginalized groups have scant access to institutions that can help present their concerns and their knowledge: “rarely seen are institutions that produce the knowledge to serve the interests of the poor and the powerless” (Gaventa, 1993, p. 27). Some youth in this study said that the opportunity to tell their stories through their artistic representations could be instructive to other
young people facing homelessness, and help them make better decisions about how—or even if, they should choose homelessness.

**Research Design and Procedures**

The following explains how foregrounding youths’ ideas about their situations and priorities contribute significant insights into homeless youth research. Details are provided of the research design, including participant recruitment, and data collection, particularly in the context of youths’ sensitivities about disclosing personal information. The nature of the participants and the setting is also discussed.

**Research rationale.** Short-term and narrowly focused research has done little to present the holistic perspectives of homeless youth and how they understand their complex lifeworlds (Rice et al., 2013; Smith, 2008; Kidd & Davidson, 2007), the issues they prioritize, and how they might act to address their concerns. This current PAR study attempts to address these gaps from the perspectives of the 35 homeless youth who participated in this study. By including and analyzing the youths’ decisions and ideas about their research priorities, findings, and artistic representations, the young people “living the problem” contribute new insights and understandings to scholarly research about youth homelessness.

Given the transience of many homeless youth and their separation from parent(s) and guardian(s), schools, stable housing, fulfilling careers, and many social
institutions, I chose participatory action research as a means of connection and empowerment for these young people. More specifically, PAR helps youth identify and act on the priorities that emerge through their own investigation into their lived experiences in homelessness (Goldberg, 2013). Such an approach contrasts with much academic research into youth homelessness, which, because of the transient lifestyle of these young people, is short-term and narrowly focused on a specific issue or problem as defined by the researcher. In homeless youth research, Whitmore and McKee (2001) note the divide that often characterizes ‘expert’ researchers and homeless youth, “The [research] questions are often framed by ‘experts’ who have limited understanding of street culture” (p. 399). With an insufficient understanding of the felt challenges and problems of homeless youth, an external ‘expert’ can design a study that insufficiently addresses the participants’ needs as they themselves define them, particularly since certain key problems may remain undisclosed and subsequently ignored. Moreover external ‘experts’ typically pre-frame the research study, goals, and questions, and disseminate their findings in discourses and communities that the young people are not a part of and cannot access or contribute to.

With externally-led academic research, the gap between the researcher and the researched is exemplified by “a researcher who has all the ideas”... and solely “contributes the thinking that goes into the project” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179). Such research can lack relevance for the participants since “there is often very little connection between the researcher’s thinking and the concerns and experiences of the people who are involved” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179). Not
only do marginalized groups lack involvement in academically-driven research, truly collaborative research between academically-trained researchers and community members is uncommon (Hall, 1993; Pain & Francis, 2003) and particularly rare with young people acting as “co-researchers or partners” (Kim, 2016, p. 38; Powers & Tiffany, 2006).

The lack of involvement of young people in studies about their lives contradicts a 1959 United Nations decree affirming the social right of children to engage in decision-making that pertains to their lives, schools, and communities (Checkoway, 2011). Elaborating on the necessity of participation, and its life-affirming properties, Wicks, Reason, and Bradbury (2008/09) note, “life is not a spectator sport but that participation is fundamental to the nature of our being, or an ontological given” (p. 18, italics in original). A number of youth in my study commented that they had never had the opportunity to systematically reflect on, analyze, and articulate their circumstances in homelessness, and that this opportunity inspired their participation in the study.

Research that has little input from the youth exacerbates their lack of agency: “traditional methods of research...may reinforce passivity of powerless groups, through making them the objects of another’s inquiry, rather than subjects of their own” (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001, p. 74). Accordingly, in this study, youth used their agency to decide how they wanted the research to serve their interests and priorities. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) details the passiveness of an ‘object’ in a research context: “An object has no life force, no humanity, no spirit of its own, so therefore ‘it’ cannot make an active contribution” (p. 61). To redress the lack of agency of
‘objects’ in much academic research, Fals-Borda & Rahman, (1991) insist that research relationships be transformed from subject-object to subject-subject, a central tenet of participatory action research.

Without having participants’ input into research pertaining to their own lives, their issues can remain unattended to—and unresolved. Acting as an ‘expert’ Wadsworth (2006) shares her misgivings about appropriating the voice of research ‘subjects’:

My discomfort grew, during the early years of my career, with the mantle of the scientific ‘We’ and the presumptive and ultimately unscientific ventriloquism that it authorized: of speaking for the lives and realities of ‘our’ subjects without them being actively present in the process (p. 322).

This PAR study addresses Wadsworth’s concerns about researcher “ventriloquism” since the findings in it are based on the participants’ research, discussions, and theorizing. Emphasizing the centrality of voice in PAR, Hall (1993) notes, “Participatory research fundamentally is about the right to speak” (p. xvii). Paul (2011) notes the power of voice when it has been liberated: “… when the marginalized use their voice, they often respond by speaking out against that which truly oppresses” (cited in Lund & Paul, p. 258). Accordingly, throughout this dissertation, youth speak in their own words about the PAR process, their research themes and priorities, and findings. The young peoples’ words and ideas are also evident regarding their artistic representation at the heart of this study.

**Recruitment and data collection.** This study utilized a convenience sample and recruited readily accessible research participants (Creswell, 2013) at the
homeless shelter where I had run my earlier programs and workshops. Administrators recommended participants based on my criteria for self-reflective and articulate youth of varying ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and with a range of time spent in homelessness.

The ethics protocol, approved by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board, stressed that participation in any activity was voluntary, youth could withdraw from the study at any time without sanction, and pseudonyms would conceal their identity; the shelter and city of the research would not be revealed, and all of the youths’ disclosures would be held in strict confidence. Participants had a choice of having the ethics protocol read aloud or reading it themselves. They were invited to ask any questions or to discuss any concerns. All the participants signed the protocol.

The ethics protocol was especially important in this study because of the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of the participants regarding disclosures of some of their lived experiences. In my workshops, a number of youth complained about prying and personal questions asked by gatekeepers to shelters and to social and medical services. They said that these questions felt intrusive, and could trigger difficult or traumatic feelings about their family histories, housing difficulties, and current struggles in homelessness. In a context of pervasive and often demeaning stereotyping and stigmatization about homeless youth, as discussed in Chapter 4, the young people said that these personal questions about their circumstances felt invasive. For the youth to explore their often-traumatic pasts, as part of the research into their homeless lifeworlds, building trust between the participants and myself as
the researcher-facilitator was essential. Kim (2016) elaborates: “Mutual trust between researchers and youth participants is a significant factor for the successful outcomes of PAR” (p. 45). By using the ethics protocol that was discussed with and among the youth, and establishing safety and respect around disclosures, I tried to foster trust between the participants and myself, and between the participants and each other.

Since building trust takes time, I chose not to start my relationship with newcomers to this project by prying into sensitive biographical information, especially since in these initial meetings the young people had only partial understanding of the project, its purpose, and me. As well, I had no way to predict how long each youth would stay in the research, so asking these young people about their life histories at the outset could jeopardize trust. As a result, questions of a personal nature such as age, number of siblings, time in homelessness, or reasons for it, were not asked.

Over time, however, when a measure of trust had been established, and the youth felt a degree of safety and confidence about personal disclosures, a number of them did share information about their experiences of homelessness, which appears throughout the dissertation. Notably, the youth controlled such disclosures at all times. Disclosures were also facilitated by another measure that was discussed when each member joined the project: participants were welcome to divulge what they wanted and when they wanted, with the assurance that neither other youth nor I would follow up with probing questions about traumatic matters.
As a result, throughout the research, youth would not feel pressured to disclose anything more than what they felt comfortable sharing.

All the data in this study are based on the ideas generated in dialogue by the participants and me in group meetings that were usually several hours in duration. Data generated in a group context is central to PAR, since “participatory action research is in principle a group activity” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 170). Group activity is vital to the dialectical and critical discussions that ensue about the young peoples’ research themes that they surfaced, prioritized and further researched. Park (1993) emphasizes the centrality of dialogue in PAR:

Through dialogue people come together and participate in all crucial aspects of investigation and collective action. This cannot be achieved through the exercise of merely answering questions in a conventional questionnaire or a formalized interview, because these techniques do not allow the respondent to speak in a full voice (p. 12).

“Speak[ing] in a full voice” with mind, body and spirit is central to agency and empowerment in participatory action research. Out of the year-long study, there were only a few times where the research did not occur in a group context, such as when I met privately with a participant who shared a suicide attempt that occurred months before the present study, and in another instance when I spoke with a youth who acted disruptively in the study.

**Participants and setting.** This weekly study was conducted in a 35-bed shelter for male and female homeless youth in a major eastern Canadian city. Shelter administrators supported the study because of my past experience
designing and facilitating the arts-based program mentioned previously, and their interest in the empowering aspects of PAR. Although I had worked with many hundreds of youth in my programs prior to starting my research, due to the transient nature of youth in the shelter system, I knew only one of the 35 youth who joined this PAR study. Each youth received $15.00/meeting in this self-financed study².

The number of participants in this study fluctuated over time, a reflection of the young peoples’ transience through unstable housing and frequent moves. Most research meetings had five to six youth, a few had seven to nine. One youth attended almost all of the meetings over the year; three attended for six months; most of the others attended for one to three months. All meetings were audio recorded and transcribed. Over the one-year duration of the research, 22 males and 13 females participated, representing various ethnicities: Caribbean, 12; White 7; Vietnamese, 4; African, 3; Mixed, 2; Algerian, 1; Guyanese, 1; Mexican, 1; Israeli, 1; Greek, 1; Pakistani, 1; Sri Lankan, 1.

The Organization of this Dissertation

Serving as a literature review, Chapter 2, “An examination of factors of youth homelessness,” is divided into three sections: dysfunctional homes, risks in homelessness, and protective resources. In Chapter 3, the participatory action research methodology is analyzed. Chapter 4 explores the effects of pervasive

² Issues of compensation are detailed in Chapter 6 in a section entitled “Study Considerations.”
stereotyping and stigmatization on the youths’ various lifeworlds, and their coping strategies to deal with these social constructs. Chapter 5, the lengthiest one, analyzes the play “The Other Side of the Door” that the participants utilized to represent this study. This chapter shares some key scenes of the script, as well as the insights of three professors whom the youth interviewed. The conclusion summarizes the project, the significance of its findings and includes three recommendations. An Epilogue contains a short interview with Kofi, the playwright of “The Other Side of the Door.

The Appendix contains the theatre script “The Other Side of the Door;” the 107 research themes that the youth conceived; the primary research questions that the youth originated and asked of their interviewees; the approved University of Toronto Research Board Ethics Protocol letter of consent; the recruitment poster; and a short questionnaire for youth who wanted to join the project.
Chapter 2: Dysfunctional Homes, Risks in Homelessness and Protective Resources

A homeless youth has no roof over his head, nowhere to go, and nobody to turn to.

Rasheed, a participant in this study

You can’t do anything if you don’t know where you’re going to sleep.

Derek, a participant in this study

To prepare myself for this comprehensive PAR study, which the youth might steer in any number of directions according to their research interests and priorities, my preparatory research was wide-ranging. Accordingly, I proceeded to learn as much as possible about the youths’ situations: the homes they came from, how they came to leave them at an early age, the risks they face on their own, and possible resources to help them. This extensive approach utilizes Herr and Anderson’s (2005) advice that a PAR researcher-facilitator\(^3\) should “anticipate directions the research might take” (p. 71) and prepare accordingly.

My preparation for this project was also informed by Park’s (1993) synthesis of ideas from Freire’s seminal text “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” and “Creating Alternative Research Methods,” an article Freire wrote in 1982. Park (1993) writes,

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\(^3\) I originated and use the term “researcher-facilitator” to describe the multifaceted nature of this role in a PAR project. This term is more fully explained in Chapter 3.
The researcher who undertakes participatory research must know the community personally as well as scientifically before starting the participatory research work. This means that he or she must learn everything that can be found out about the community and its members both historically and sociologically through available records, interviews, observation, and participation in the life of the community (p. 9).

Following Freire’s and Park’s advice about conducting comprehensive study of the community in a PAR project, this chapter follows the “timespan” of a homeless youth by examining some key factors in dysfunctional homes, risks in homelessness and protective resources. The chapter interweaves scholarly literature, with the young people’s own words regarding their expertise and insights about these topics. In turn, governments, policy makers, educators, scholars, service providers, and members of the public may be better informed about some central issues pertaining to youth homelessness as researched by scholars and analyzed from the lived experience, words and accounts of 35 sheltered youth aged 16-24 living in a major eastern Canadian city.

The chapter starts by briefly detailing the numbers of youth involved in North American homelessness and then utilizes the broad categories of “throwaway” or “runaway” to depict how youth prematurely leave their homes.

**Overview and Scale of Youth Homelessness**

Youth homelessness is an entrenched, multi-faceted, and growing problem. A dysfunctional home, characterized by a complex dynamic of parental abuse and neglect, or intense and unresolved family conflicts, can culminate in a youth
fleeing to the streets. In a minority of instances, a youth’s transgressive behaviours and decisions can defy a parent or guardian’s rules and lead to rupture from home. On the streets, survival is at stake for these young people, especially with a transient and unpredictable lifestyle, meagre resources, and difficult daily challenges.

Governments at all levels attempt to estimate the numbers of homeless youth. High-end estimates project about 2 million in the United States (Edidin et al., 2012) and about 150,000 in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). These are substantial figures, especially when one considers that these estimates suggest there are more homeless youth in the United States than there are residents of a major city such as Philadelphia, which had a population of 1.6 million in 2013 (World Population Review, 2015; retrieved from http://worldpopulationreview.com). Moreover, this population of young people is increasing (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2010, cited in Kidd, 2012).

Since this group of young people must adapt fluidly to any number of temporary and semi-permanent living conditions, researchers debate exactly what constitutes youth homelessness. There is, however, scholarly consensus about some characteristics of this population. The Inter-NGO states that homeless youth are individuals “for whom the street more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults” (Shukla, 2005, p. 22). With the scantest of resources to support them, these youth’s living conditions are generally not “secure, stable or
safe” (Barker, 2013, p. 363). Stormont and McCathren (2008) provide helpful insights into what constitutes youth homelessness:

Regardless of how homelessness is defined, being homeless means more than not having a fixed place to sleep. People who are homeless have nowhere to put the things they cherish, things that connect them to their past (p. 436).

The isolation of these young people, as the authors note above, is exacerbated by their dearth of cherished possessions, further distancing them from their families—and their histories. Moreover, under pervasive stereotyping and stigmatization (see Chapter 4), these youth devise strategies to “disappear” so as to avoid feelings of shame and Otherness. The challenges of being Othered and “not belonging” are reinforced when they seek a place to live: if they are minors, it is difficult for them to secure fixed accommodations; they cannot legally sign a lease, and many lack a reliable, well-meaning adult to assist them (Haber & Toro, 2004).

**Who is a homeless youth?** Given their varied paths to homelessness, and their disparate living arrangements once on their own, participants were keen to define what constitutes a homeless youth. As one of their prioritized research themes, the youth shortened this title to “who is a homeless youth.” Both Rasheed and Derek, participants in this study, depict the precarious and vulnerable state of youth living on their own. Rasheed says: “A homeless youth has no roof over his head, nowhere to go, and nobody to turn to.” Derek explains how the uncertainty of homelessness constrains a youth’s possibilities: “You can’t do anything if you
don’t know where you’re going to sleep.” A number of the young people shared that they could relate to Rasheed and Derek’s descriptions of youth homelessness, especially the stark isolation of separation from family and community resulting from early departure from the home.

**Becoming Homeless**

Becoming homeless is a gradual process, and is often characterized by parents and guardians who engage in outright physical, emotional, or sexual abuse of their children (Ferguson, 2009; Tyler & Cauce, 2002; Wilson & Widom, 2010), or others who neglect their child’s needs and wants (Tyler, 2006; Zerger, Strehlow & Gundlapalli, 2008). Depending on parental beliefs and/or religious context, LGBTQ youth are at heightened risk for homelessness (Choi, et al., 2015; Rosario, Scrimshaw & Hunter, 2012). In this study, some youth attributed their homelessness to authoritarian, controlling parents who demanded compliance with all their rules and whims. While authoritarian and abusive parents can push a youth into homelessness, in a minority of instances a youth’s defiant behaviour, choice of peers, or poor decisions can lead to an early departure from home.

Dr. Clare Brett, with a background in applied cognitive science, was interviewed by the youth in this study for their primary research. She shares insights on parenting styles and how the developing adolescent brain can exacerbate conflict in dysfunctional homes. Regardless of how youth leave home, they can be broadly characterized as runaways or throwaways. These categories
are not mutually exclusive, since dangerous and volatile circumstances in abusive and violent homes can dictate if the young person runs away or is “thrown” away.

Runaways and “throwaways.” Some young people run away from homes for a variety of reasons involving their physical, psychological and emotional safety. More specifically, they flee violence, abuse, and other major stressors (Busen & Engebretson, 2008; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000) including intense, unresolved and potentially violent family conflicts, alcoholic parent/s, sexual abuse (Schaffner, 1999/2013) and difficulties adapting to reconfigured families, particularly with new parental figures (Hyde, 2005; Slesnick, Meyers, Meade & Segelken, 2000). Without a chance to resolve conflicts with authoritarian parent(s), as was the case with Devon and some of the other youth in this study, smaller crises can erupt into an explosive confrontations, where the youth typically is thrown out of the home, or in other instances runs away.

Janus et al., 1987, explain how some youth use running away as a survival strategy:

When the chronicity of running results from abusive treatment in the home, it signals that the child or adolescent does not have any other strategy for coping with or avoiding the abuse except to flee to the streets, to friends, or to another adult’s protection (p. 36).

Amber, a youth in this study, explains the urgency of running: “If you’re under 16, you’re running from Child Services, you’re running from your parents, you’re running from the police. You don’t want to be brought home.” Amber shared her history of constant running from the police and social services to avoid returning
to a home which she said was run by a mother she could not trust or whose
judgment she had no confidence in.

Unlike Amber who ran from her home, a small minority of youth runs to the
streets seeking independence, excitement, (Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006) and
an imagined life with less structure and routine. Most commonly, though, as
evidenced from discussions with youth in my more than 100 workshops and in
this PAR project, and as corroborated in the scholarly literature, a parent or
guardian initiates a youth’s departure from home, or a young person flees a
dangerous and unsafe home.

“Throwaways” are evicted from their family dwelling by a parental figure
or guardian. Devon, a youth in this study who was a “throwaway” divulged his
premonition that he would eventually leave home: “my mom and me always got
into arguments. I knew that eventually I would leave, so I used to pack up all my
things like my underwear and stuff and leave them at the door.” Devon explained
that when he was very young, his mother would travel out of the country and leave
him alone for long periods of time, imperilling his safety. He shared that she would
brook no discussion about her parenting style either.

Devon recalls being thrown out of his home: “My mother, this big roaring
lioness started cussing me and threw me out.” She said, ‘Your stuff is in garbage
bags in front of the door. Take them away.’” Although Devon had anticipated
homelessness by packing a bag, when his mother threw him out, the finality of it all
left him in shock—and disbelief. Devon recalls the moment: “I’m like ‘What?’”
Reflecting on the enormity of being thrown out of his home, Devon recalls his mental state at that time as “a big confusing mess.”

Devon describes feelings of futility many youth have in homes with parent(s) who brook no dissent, “youth are kicked out of their homes because of a conflict they can’t do a thing about.” Complicating conflict resolution, some parents or caregivers may be ill-equipped emotionally or intellectually to deal with discipline or behavioral challenges with their child (Schmitz & Tyler, 2015).

In her interview with the youth as part of their primary research, Dr. Brett delved into issues of an authoritarian parent’s need for control:

Sometimes parents behave as if they own their kids, or because they gave birth to them, they have a right to do anything with, or to them. They order them around and impose unrealistic expectations on them. Some parents are unable to recognize their children as independent human beings with their own needs. Instead, the child is seen as a possession to be bossed around and controlled.

A number of youth in the study shared accounts of difficulties and stress living with authoritarian and abusive parent(s). Citing Baumrind’s model, Kipke et al., (1997) elaborate on this parenting style: “Authoritarian parenting is highly demanding and controlling but is also punitive. Authoritarian parents are autocratic and nonresponsive, with little respect for their child as an independent decision maker” (p. 417). “The Other Side of the Door” in Chapter 5 explores the consequences of such parenting, by providing an intimate look at Wonda, Steve’s mother, whose authoritarian, uncompromising and punitive parenting leaves her son no other option but to flee into homelessness.
As with Devon’s mother discussed earlier, and Wonda, an abusive mother in “The Other Side of the Door,” a parent or guardian who cannot, or will not devise new strategies to mitigate conflict can instead terminate conflict by “throwing” the child away (Hyde, 2005; Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys, 2005). Youth who are “thrown away” exhibit increased mental-health challenges compared to those who voluntarily depart their homes (Kidd & Shahar, 2008).

Parental or guardian abuse and neglect. Parental abuse and neglect inflict physical and emotional harm on children, jeopardizing their opportunities for healthy development (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002) and leading many young people to run away. In this study, some youth disclosed emotional and physical abuse, and extreme neglect by a parent or guardian in their family dwelling. Recounting his emotional abuse that led to his homelessness, Amir, a participant in this study says: “My parents used to cuss at me. ‘You’re a piece of shit, go fuck yourself little kid. You’re an asshole. You’re pathetic.’” Amir shares his response, “it [the abuse] just made me cry.” Reflecting on the years of physical abuse he suffered, one youth said: “My dad was a disrespectful prick. He hit me all the time.” Youth in these situations described their anger and conflicted feelings about physically harming, and in some instances, even murdering an abusive parent.

In contrast with physical or sexual abuse, which usually involves specific incidents, neglect typically occurs more frequently (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). However, in the absence of physical evidence, neglect can be harder to prove. From a material standpoint, a parent or guardian neglects a child by withholding
financial support and access to housing and food (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). In this study, one young female recounted how she and her younger brother were left to fend for themselves in her mother’s apartment after her mother moved out to live with her boyfriend. Every few weeks, the mother visited and left them nothing but packages of hotdogs, which she insisted her daughter boil for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In sum, neglect occurs when children “receive minimal attention to their basic needs” (Toth, Cicchetti, Macfie, & Emde, 1997, p. 792). Throughout the research, a number of young people disclosed incidents where they suffered parental neglect or outright harm that was inflicted on them by parent(s) and guardian(s), and led them to run away, or to being “thrown away” as a result.

Parental neglect, through lack of responsiveness and emotional support on the part of a parental figure often precede youth homelessness (Tavecchio, Thomeer, & Meeus, 1999), leading some youth to feel profoundly disconnected from their parent(s) and families, increasing the possibilities of premature departure from the home. In a study of 40 homeless male and females aged 19-21, for instance, 44% divulged feeling like outsiders in their family unit (Schmitz & Tyler, 2015). Adrieekah, a youth in this study, elaborates on feeling like an “outsider” in her home: “You’re living at a house, but you don’t really communicate with your family. You try to be involved, but they don’t pay you any mind. So you ask, ‘Why am I here?’ You feel like you don’t belong and become homeless.” There can be few options for youth to advocate for themselves in these situations, since they may not have developed the “skills and language” to discuss their needs and
concerns with an authoritarian, abusive, or neglectful parent or parental figure (Aviles de Bradley, 2011, p. 164).

In situations of extreme neglect, such as described above, youth may run away from the family residence to seek a better and safer future couch-surfing with friends or struggling with the unknowns of the street. Steve, a participant, summarizes the extent of animosity in these homes: “Your family despises you.” One study participant summed up why young people run away from an abusive or neglectful home: “We want a greater good.”

**Youth behaviour leading to homelessness.** Besides abusive or inadequate parenting, in some cases, parent(s) and guardian(s) repudiate their children over such issues as “substance use, gang activity, and runaway behavior” (Busen & Engebretson, 2008, p. 570). Other sources of conflict can involve a youth’s poor performance at school (Montgomery, Thompson, Barczyk, 2011; Walsh & Donaldson, 2010), discipline challenges, (Kipke et al., 1997) perceived lack of motivation, teen pregnancy (Thompson et al., 2008; Weitzman, 1989) and a parent’s disapproval of peer relationships (Safyer et al., 2004) A youth’s constant drug use can also lead to a life on the streets (Hudson et al., 2009; Schmitz & Tyler, 2015; Thompson, et al., 2010).

With their growing brains and focus on the present, Dr. Brett explains why some youth can become “locked” into their behaviours, and lack the flexibility to adopt other ones that might help reduce some of the tension in dysfunctional households. She shares how the physiological development of the adolescent brain
evokes a type of mind-blindedness, whereby a youth becomes “locked into” the present, driven by the intense feelings that are characteristic of this age. She notes,

The intense feelings of youth are biological as well. It’s brain development, hormones and growth. The brain is growing; it’s an actual physiological part of what happens. Recent research shows that in these growing brains there’s no sense of future; everything is in the present. A sense of future becomes more prevalent in early adulthood.

After Brett’s explanation, a few youth sighed. One shared, “that says a lot about how I was feeling in those crazy days.”

Transience and Unpredictability on the Streets

Once leaving home, these young peoples’ lives are filled with risks, uncertainty, and difficulties at every turn. Friends’ couches become unavailable, emergency crisis shelters only provide temporary respite, and safe and affordable housing is scarce. In public places, these youth are typically removed from preferred locations, forcing them into less desirable, and potentially dangerous ones.

Nomadic lifestyle. The dysfunction and instability experienced by many homeless youth in their family dwellings often continues in a chaotic homeless lifestyle (see also Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Slesnick, et al., 2000; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). Amidst a transient lifestyle, and without an exit strategy to leave the streets, chaos can abound for these young people, which is exacerbated by their separation from family and community.
The chaos many of these young people struggle with is related to their circumstances. Prior to their homelessness, for instance, many youth lack the experience, maturity, resources, and adult assistance to anticipate—or plan for— their future education, employment, and housing needs. Once on their own, the necessity to address daily challenges, and the lack of well-meaning and reliable adults to help them, can preclude long-term planning. Over six years in homelessness, Derek thought often about getting off the streets. He shares, “to get off the streets, you need focus—and a money plan.” Without such a plan, youth often “bounce around” between family and friends until these networks become unavailable (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010).

Characterizing the upheaval in a transient lifestyle, most of the 40 homeless youth in Tyler’s 2006 study reported living in a single location for 3 months or less. Tia, a youth in this present study, elaborates on the impact of transience in a shelter, “Friendships in a shelter don’t last very long… you see someone, you get along with them for a bit – friend – and then they’re gone.” An uncertain, nomadic lifestyle forces youth to focus on immediate, short-term survival that often diverts them from a long-term exit strategy.

A female in my study describes the emotional turmoil of a transient lifestyle: “Not knowing where you’re going to sleep causes anxiety and moping. It brings you down.” Homeless youth remain anxious about accommodations, since most emergency crisis shelters impose time restrictions on the length of stays in them. In the shelter that I conducted this research in, for example, the majority of youth could stay as long as three months, but this timeline was shortened by
discharges, mental illness, and the general upheaval in these young people’s lives. The three month limit was extended by a matter of months, however, for youth who were making demonstrable progress at school, in an apprentice program, or in the workplace.

**Challenges for homeless youth in public spaces.** Personal safety for homeless youth is jeopardized since they are often curtailed from sitting, resting, and sleeping in their preferred public spaces and are instead displaced to potentially dangerous ones near to criminals or ill-intentioned individuals (Gaetz, 2004). Youth on the streets are subject to assault, robbery, sexual abuse, and other types of exploitation; their age, relative inexperience, and in some instances naiveté can predispose them to victimization by older adults (Slesnick, et al., 2008; Tyler et al., 2000). Based on his experience, Derek cautions, “There are a lot of older people on the streets who use youth for their own gain.” Without a place of their own, youth cannot easily conceal or protect themselves behind a closed door (Gaetz, 2004).

Derek notes that street life is unavoidable for homeless youth, even for those living in shelters. He says, “Ninety percent of shelter youth spend time on the streets after being discharged [from the shelter] and from frequently moving.” In these quickly changing, chaotic, and at times dangerous environments, wary youth can become stressed and hypervigilant (Mutere et al., 2014). Aleysha, another study participant, elaborates on how dislocation in unfamiliar spaces can make her anxious: “Dislocation is somewhere you’re not used to: you’re around
people you don’t know or feel safe with.” While the streets can be dangerous for both males and females, the latter group is particularly wary about being alone on them at night. Females sleeping alone in remote areas such as parks or ravines are at further risk.

**Risks for Homeless Youth**

Youth on their own confront various physical and psychological risks which increase their susceptibility to mental health problems. They may resort to drugs and other illicit substances, or engage in risky sexual behaviors as a means of escape or to numb themselves from their trauma and hazardous circumstances. The mortality rates of homeless youth are significantly higher than these rates in the general youth population.

**Trauma.** The experiences of homeless youth, both in the family home and on the streets, often qualify as “traumatic” as defined by the American Psychiatric Association 2000 (APA). The DSM-IV defines a traumatic event as one “in which both of the following were present: (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (APA 2000, cited in Martijn & Sharpe, 2006, p. 4). Individuals exposed to traumatic events often feel a lessening of emotional control afterwards (Bender et al., 2010) that can undermine their sense of self-efficacy (Benight & Harper, 2002). Derek observes
that some shelter youth conceal traumatic pasts when they become “closed and defensive.” In these situations, he adds, “they just shut down.” Coping with elevated levels of threat and danger can unsettle a young person’s sense of social competence, provoking anxiety, fear, or sadness that may result in elevated rates of substance use, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and other dangerous behaviours (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys & Averill, 2010). One young man, who had suffered years of beatings from his father, shared with me a profound consequence of his trauma: the abuse diminished his ability to trust others, even with his intimate partners. He simply stated, “I don’t feel anything with anybody.”

In Bender et al.’s (2010) study of 146 homeless youth, approximately 57% reported that they had experienced a traumatic event. Traumatized youth may manifest a lack of impulse control that ignores immediate and long-term consequences (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). A female in this study divulges how the toll of dealing with past trauma: “Um…from personal experience…it hurts to…for some things to be brought back up, like... Sometimes it feels like it’s happening all over again, that’s how fresh it becomes to the memory.” Dealing with rupture from family and community, and with challenges to mind, body, and spirit on the streets, homelessness itself is a form of psychological trauma (Goodman, Saxe & Harvey, 1991).

**Mental health.** Youth with low self-esteem often neglect themselves (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006); as examples, they may cut themselves, maintain poor
hygiene, or feel undeserving of success and sabotage their opportunities. Yasmin, a participant in this present study, describes how the gloom of homelessness can turn to despair and futility: “When you’re homeless, you have no hope, like there’s no hope for you.” Research has consistently found increased levels of psychiatric problems among homeless youth, including “depression, anxiety, substance use, posttraumatic stress disorder, and psychosis” (Edidin et al., 2012, p. 362).

Depicting how cynicism among some of her peers can spiral into depression, Aleysha notes, “Some youth who have been in shelters a long time can be really negative. They tell you how horrible the food, shelter, and their lives are. It’s a domino effect, and they bring you right down with them.” A study found that incidents of major depression and posttraumatic stress disorder are three times higher in youth who runaway in comparison to youth living at home (Robertson & Toro, 1998, cited in Ferguson & Xie, 2008).

Frequent abuse or neglect by a parental figure or guardian correlates with a youth’s mental health challenges and increases the risk of further victimization on the street (Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Smith, 2008; see also Busen & Engebretson, 2008). A participant in this study divulged that mental health problems can also originate in children of immigrants whose parents’ mental health needs remain unaddressed in their new country. This youth shares the outcome of being raised by parents in such circumstances: “there was a lack of connection with my parents, which made it difficult for me to connect with others.” Another participant said that homeless youth in general have difficulties connecting with others. He said, “that’s why we’re homeless in the first place.”
Unpredictable and unsafe streets exacerbate stress, a risk factor for mental health; accordingly, these youth experience a disproportionate number of mental health problems (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Haley & Roy, 1999). Since many homeless youth have experienced trauma both in and out of their homes, it can be difficult to establish whether mental illness caused homelessness, or the stresses and dangers of homelessness caused mental illness. As the data from this study shows, the deleterious impact on mental health and self-esteem correlate with stigmatization and stereotyping (see Chapter 4). Of consequence to homeless youth with elevated risks to mental health, participatory action research has been successfully utilized by survivors in the mental health community, particularly as a means of advocating alternative treatment plans and how services should be planned and provided (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006).

**Sexual activity on the street and in shelters.** Extensive research since the 1980s finds that by comparison to housed youth, street youth participate in more risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected and exchange sex (Rice et al., 2013; Thompson, Bender, Lewis, & Watkins, 2008; Tyler et al. 2000). Because homelessness precludes the opportunity for normative adolescent behaviors, many young people on the street are forced to adopt survival roles (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Wilson & Wadim, 2010). Youth who engage in sex to survive, or who become revictimized sexually when homeless, have often experienced earlier sexual abuse (Feldmann & Middleman, 2003; Tyler et al., 2000; Wilson & Wadim, 2010).
In this present study, one female who had lived with her divorced father reported how vulnerable she felt due to a lack of protection when she was sexually harassed by family members: “It’s unfair that my Dad didn’t protect me from my uncles when they were sexually harassing me. And it was also unfair that I couldn’t tell my family members about it because they never believed me.” Without any adult assistance to prevent sexual abuse by her older family members, and no other options to protect herself, this young female fled into homelessness. In Sherman’s (1992) study involving 214 homeless youth, 62% of those who disclosed a background of sexual abuse also reported having had feelings of depression.

Regarding sex in the shelter, Aleysha shares, “There are economics behind coupling: two of us can work together; combine our welfare cheques. In a crappy situation, it can feel like the right thing to do.” She elaborates about shelter sex:

Although the shelter has separate male and female quarters, and cameras everywhere, you can get around it. You have to know when the office staff isn’t monitoring the cameras. When the power went out everyone charged into each other’s rooms. You suspect that homeless youth are dirty and gross but some are very attractive; a few have money; a few have cars. But you don’t know their health status—some don’t have health cards since they use free clinics and ignore doctors in the regular system. Girls having sex depends on the girl, some girls come in from other shelters and carry a reputation. Kofi adds:

There’s a lot of sex in the shelter system. Youth become creative and find places to do it outside: parks, forests, bridges, public washrooms. Contact is based on circumstance. A lot of girls in the shelter system are lonely. And the fact that they are in a shelter, and not elsewhere means they aren’t
in a relationship. They want attention. The same people wouldn’t get as much sex outside the shelter system.

A number of participants agreed when a female said that sex fulfills the need for comfort and connectedness, particularly in the isolating—and depressing circumstances of homelessness. Shelters do provide relative safety from sexual victimization, unlike public spaces where youth may be victimized in exchange for food, money, drugs, accommodation, or other basic necessities (Rice et al., 2013). However, many LGBTQ youth, anxious about stigmatization in a shelter, prefer to stay in a public place or with strangers (Rice et al., 2013) despite the elevated risks of violence and victimization.

**Substance abuse.** Alcohol, recreational drugs, and other intoxicants help these young people cope with and numb their pre-homeless trauma and the stressful challenges of homelessness itself (Bender et al., 2010; Feldmann & Middleman, 2003; Gomez, Thompson & Barczyk, 2010; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Large- and small-scale studies in the 1990s and early 2000s found that 70% to 97% of homeless youth use alcohol and illegal drugs (or both) excessively, and that usage rises with age and length of homelessness (Zerger, Strehlow, & Gundlapalli, 2008). Aleysha details how her drinking helped numb the pain of her situation:

> On a freezing cold day, a few friends and I downed a bottle of rum and coke. I didn’t drink water or eat anything. I didn’t feel the cold; I didn’t feel anything. I drank until I was almost unconscious; afterwards I didn’t remember a thing. Luckily, my boyfriend was there; otherwise I could have been raped.
A number of other youth shared instances of using drugs and alcohol to numb themselves from their circumstances. Accounts of youth drinking and getting high are also depicted in the theatre play, “The Other Side of the Door.” Devon correlates alcohol use to the precariousness of homelessness: “The youth I hang around with drink because of the stress of being homeless. They don’t know what tomorrow’s going to be like, they don’t even know if tomorrow will come.” Some participants fell quiet as they considered Devon’s words.

As substance abuse can both precede and result from homelessness, street youth have elevated rates of engaging in this behaviour (Kulik, Gaetz, Crowe & Ford-Jones, 2011), often as polysubstance abuse (Busen & Engebretson, 2008; Zerger et al., 2008). Some homeless youth report using “uppers” as a means of staying awake during the night on dangerous and unsafe streets (Thompson et al., 2010).

Youth also report that substance use engenders feelings of well-being, happiness, and social connection within a substance-using peer group (Tyler & Johnson 2006). A study of 54 male and female homeless youth, for instance, found that marijuana was perceived as “benign and therapeutic in its calming effects for depression” (Mutere et al., 2014, p. 276). Identifying how curiosity triggered his drug use, Karim, a youth in the study says, “A lot of youth experiment, so there’d be marijuana right off the bat, for a lot of people you know, it’s a beginner drug.” Youth passionately debated whether marijuana was indeed “a beginner drug.” Some defended marijuana as their drug of choice and stated that they would use marijuana in homelessness—or out of it. They said that marijuana enhanced their
emotional well-being while helping them manage the stresses of homelessness. Other youth noted how much they benefitted from the calming effects of the drug. As marijuana is a naturally growing substance, a youth argued that it should be as legal as tea, another product grown in nature. Some also attacked “hypocritical” laws that legalize alcohol which they argue has considerably more harmful effects than marijuana.

Some participants acknowledged the physical and emotional tolls of heavy drug use. Noting that the high cost of drugs to maintain a habit can precipitate homelessness, Adrieekah says, “People start taking drugs, spend money on them and they get addicted. Drugs becomes a big priority thing—more so than rent and food.” Derek reflects on how youth fall into drugs, particularly when they are under-employed or have poor job prospects, and notes the hazards of selling them:

There is so much pressure: from peers to get high, to steal, or to sell drugs especially if you don’t have a job. Surviving comes down to foresight: if you’re 18 and selling drugs you’ll end up dead or in prison. Better to make friends with your enemies and use that drug money to go to school.

Derek identifies aspects of resilience that are essential to surviving homelessness: the foresight to consider the consequences of one’s actions, and the necessity of devising a plan that surpasses immediate survival needs. Resilience will be addressed more fully later in this chapter.

**Mortality rates of homeless youth.** Numerous studies find that mortality rates of homeless youth are considerably higher than those of their non-homeless
peer group (Kulik et al., 2011; Roy et al., 2004). In one in-depth, longitudinal study of 1,013 homeless youth aged 14-25 in Montreal, 26 of the participants died during the study period of almost six years (Roy, et al., 2004). Thirteen died through suicide, 8 from drug overdoses, and 5 from other causes. The projected mortality rate from this study, 921 per 100,000 person years, is more than 11 times higher than the rate of youth mortality in the general population. Other research in American and Canadian cities similarly finds significantly higher mortality rates among populations of homeless youth (Abdalian, 2004). Key predictors of early mortality include recent homelessness, daily alcohol consumption, and intravenous drug use (Kulik et al., 2011).

Protective Elements for Homeless Youth

Despite the challenges of living on their own, homeless youth can often access protective resources from within themselves and from external resources. Internally, resilience helps these young people adapt to and cope with challenges of living homeless, and can impede feelings of depression or general malaise. Externally, emergency crisis shelters provide shelter and food, and can help these youth devise a plan to address their homelessness. Many of these young people face major obstacles to attend school regularly. Formal or informal employment provides these youth with much needed capital. Cellular telephone technology helps these youth build connections from afar and, if they are isolated, locate resources to assist them.
Resilience: an “extraordinary achievement.” The need for resilience starts early for many of these youth as they confront personal, familial, and social challenges (Edidin et al., 2012). Facing additional emotional, psychological, and physical risks on the street, these young people’s well-being, independence, and survival depends on their resilience: the ability to withstand new, challenging, and often unforeseen circumstances.

Resilience, according to Hauser, Allen, and Golden (2008), is defined by the intersection of two criteria, “serious risk and good outcome” (p. 5). While risks are unpredictable—and multiple in youth homelessness, “good outcomes” can result from youth using their character—their intelligence, experience and intuition to stay safe and maintain health in risky situations. Shelters offering a prevention program that incorporates frank discussions about how to stay safe in stressful and dangerous situations on the streets can boost young people’s resilience.

With negligible family resources and support, these young people learn that they are solely responsible for their survival (Hyde, 2005). A youth elaborates on the need for resilience in homelessness: “At home you are sheltered. You’ve got your mom and your dad or whatever. Out here it is just you. You learn a lot of independence” (Kidd & Davidson, 2007, p. 225). Navigating street life poses challenges to self and spirit. Derek notes, “On your own, you have to keep yourself out of trouble, and you are forced to develop character quickly.” Other youth shared stories of tests to their resilience from some aggressive youth or bullies in the shelter system, as well as from police, passersbys, and ill-intentioned or criminally-orientated adults on the streets.
Some youth in this current study demonstrated resilience by contextualizing their current difficulties within a longer-term vision. “Homeless youth need to have more courage in themselves—no, not courage but faith,” says Devon. He adds, “It depends on what they [the youth] make of this situation. Where they are today isn’t where they’ll be tomorrow.” Kisha, another study participant, describes how resilience depends on maintaining a long-term perspective; she views homelessness is a temporary and reversible “setback.”

Nursing studies have found that the resilience of homeless youth correlates with their ability to use resources efficiently and to network effectively (Bender et al., 2007). Once on the street, for instance, homeless youth adapt by learning from others how to find non-traditional sources of food, clothing, and shelter. Kofi articulates the intellectual and psychological aspects of resilience: “A resilient person fights in homelessness. I don’t mean with fists but psychologically: with peers in a confined shelter, in conflict with rules and a system that resists you, and while fighting and struggling with yourself.” Kofi elaborates on the personal characteristics of resilience, “Can you overcome peer pressure? Can you remain emotionally stable on the streets? Part of resilience is confidence. Youth who don’t believe they’ll win the fight—won’t. In the end, less resilient youth follow the more resilient ones.” In some ways resilience seemed to manifest in young people like Steve in “The Other Side of the Door” who stayed true to self, even while risking exclusion and scorn. Other youth in the study, however, disclosed the consequences of having less resilience and falling prey to bullying figures like Brains in “The Other Side of the Door.”
After leaving home, resilience, Kofi says, comes down to a fight both with external factors in homelessness and with internal ones to maintain hope and avoid despair. For a number of personal and circumstantial reasons, some youth are unable to take advantage of available resources. In these cases, Aleysha observes, “some youth miss an opportunity—their anger gets in the way.” Derek took another route. Reflecting on how he survived in six years of homelessness, he says, “Resilience is something spiritual in you. It comes down to inner character, and motivation.” Resilience was not equally distributed among the young people I worked with however; some spiraled into depression and despair while others simply did not “rebound” from adversity as readily as some of their more resilient peers.

Given the magnitude of their adversity, obstacles, and stress, Earls and Carlson (1999) assert that for these young people, “resilience becomes not an expectable but an extraordinary achievement” (p. 75). In “The Other Side of the Door” discussed in Chapter 5, Steve’s resilience is based on his flexibility and adaptability in homelessness, and his adherence to his own values and principles, amidst unrelenting peer pressure to partake in a drug and drinking culture that he rejected.

**Youth shelters.** Shelters and drop-in centres provide essential services to homeless youth, serving as both providers of and “gateways” to various programs and interventions (De Rosa et al., 1999). A number of youth in the present study expressed their gratitude for shelters. Devon shares: “They’re the ones that give
you a bed. They open doors for you to help you move along in life. They’re basically like second parents.” Another youth notes the protective aspects of a shelter, particularly by safeguarding him from a father who continuously beat him: “By the time a youth is in a shelter there’s no choice. It’s better to be in a shelter with strangers than with someone who loves you but abuses you.” A number of youth concurred that emergency shelters provide a life-saving alternative from parents that are emotionally or physically dangerous and abusive.

Some shelters provide programs that address exit strategies for leaving homelessness, by helping youth obtain affordable housing or finding employment. However, insufficiently resourced shelters are ill-equipped to address youth with extensive trauma and related issues, which require a longer-term therapeutic engagement (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Slesnick et al., 2000). To increase participation in shelter programs and to develop policies that better align with participants’ interests, homeless youth should have a voice in the design and implementation of shelter programs (Abdalian, 2004; see also Ferguson, Kim & McCoy, 2011).

Conversely, shelters can generate conflict with residents when the youth have little input into policies and procedures and must follow stringent rules and codes of conduct (De Rosa et al., 1999; Hudson, Nyamathi & Sweat, 2008). In the following dialogue, participants vent their frustration with staff who insist on adherence to shelter rules at all times:

Ray: When I’m going to work, I need a few transit tokens. But the worker says, ‘I need proof you’re going to work.’ Like what do you mean? Like how do you want me to have proof that I’m going to work?
Aleysha: You can’t get a note from the employer saying, ‘I was here today.’

Ray: You know, some staff give a hard time. It’s like you’re trying to tackle a linebacker to get a couple of tokens to better yourself, right?

Aleysha: It’s true.

Ray: Sometimes like you want to say to the Ombudsman or to the head manager, why does this really matter to give out a token? Or if a youth [in the shelter] comes downstairs at like 2:30 in the morning and they’re super hungry, you know? Listen, I’m really hurting right now, like I’m very hungry, right? Like I know this isn’t supposed to happen all the time. When staff’s just like ‘no, no, no, no’—especially about something like hunger or employment or even illness, right? Like you know, getting youth out of bed to leave the shelter, even when they’re running a high fever right? But life isn’t just like... a box of chocolates.

Ray vents his frustration about the unwillingness of certain staff to empathize during times of unpredictable need, such as when youth feel low late at night and seek comfort from a snack, or from a worker who might demonstrate some empathy to their situation. Amber elaborates, “Like, the compassion is almost lost in this place for most people.” Nonetheless, Ray demonstrates maturity and insight about a shelter’s rules and regulations by acknowledging, “life isn’t just... a box of chocolates.” In contrast with Ray’s mature understanding of institutional living, a few other youth complained about the perceived inadequacies of the shelter, singling out the food’s lack of variety and quality, and sharing stories of how the shelter’s stringent policies and regulations seemed excessive and unfair.
Although shelters offer critical respite to these young people, they are nonetheless institutional settings. Once in them, with strict rules and policies that define sleeping, waking and eating times, and other compulsory activities or programs (for youth who choose to stay inside the shelter during the day) some of the young people said they lose a sense of home. As an example, Aleysha shared her inability, even for a single moment, to have uncovered feet in a shelter. Living with thirty-four other youth with varying hygienic standards, she disclosed that she never has bare feet, neither in the small bedroom she shares with two others, nor in the showers that she said were “gross.”

One of the youth’s research themes for this study was “falling into a shelter way of life.” Some youth shared that they felt tentative about leaving shelters, which they said served as a temporary refuge from their dangerous and abusive homes, as well as from the unknowns and perils of the streets. They characterized staying in shelters as “falling into a shelter way of life” since they knew that they could not stay in emergency shelters for long periods, and that by not forming and adhering to an exit plan, they were not moving forward with their lives as much as they might have hoped. Not yet ready to tackle the daunting challenges of homelessness on their own, some youth said that “falling into a shelter way of life” meant finding another youth crisis shelter to admit them when the current ones could no longer keep them.

**Service provider relationships with homeless youth.** Shelter staff can play influential roles in these young people’s lives; indeed, they are “often the first
positive experiences these youth encounter with adult role models” (Ferguson, Kim, McCoy, 2011; p. 1). Nonetheless, as people living on the street transgress societal norms (De Rosa et al., 1999), they are subject to widespread disapproval and stigmatization (see Chapter 4). Accordingly, some service providers, such as in the medical and nursing professions, and some staff in the shelter system itself may misunderstand or overlook the experiences leading up to homelessness and ignore the difficulties of surviving on one’s own.

In this study, many homeless youth said they are wary of providers, particularly those who ask intrusive and detailed family history and health questions. Aleysha shares her doubts about the value of advice of those who have not been homeless, “Some people have had things handed to them: parents, school, money, and a home. How can I know their advice will work when they weren’t in my situation?” In such cases, providers may act hostilely or disrespectfully to the street youth they serve.

Relationships are enhanced when service providers demonstrate some understanding of these young peoples’ family histories and challenges living on their own (Hudson et al., 2008). Providers might surmise, for instance, that seeking help or medical assistance can threaten the dignity and self-concept of homeless youth who regard themselves as independent and self-sufficient (Barker, 2013). Providers might also recognize that conspicuous acting out behavior may be a symptom of previous maltreatment (Powers, Jaklitsch, & Eckenrode, 1989), especially if a youth was previously victimized by an adult prior to homelessness or by an adult perpetrator on the streets (Hudson et. al, 2008).
Regardless of an adult’s attempts to build trust, young people may act cautiously around shelter workers and other providers, as they try to avoid the rejection they had previously received from adults who were close to them (see also Schmitz & Tyler, 2015). Hudson et al’s (2008) study of 54 homeless youth suggests that adult service providers can jeopardize a trusting and productive relationship if they adopt an authoritative or “one-way” communication style, or do not show empathy or respect (pp. 1285-6). Phoenix, a participant in this current study, demonstrates maturity and insight about dealing with difficult shelter staff:

From my experience, you avoid asking them for things, or you know, just approaching them in general. But you’ll have to deal with that person eventually. At some point, that will be the only person to open the laundry room door. And you might not be able to wait for the next person to come.

In this study, youth were quick to identify difficult, demanding, or overly controlling shelter staff. To build better relationships between service providers and homeless youth, the experiential gap in their respective life experiences should be redressed (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). To do that, one youth in a study said that providers should “shut[ting] up and listen[ing]” (Ensign & Panke, 2002, p. 172). Through careful listening, a provider can learn what the youth needs and determine how best to assist them (Kidd, et al., 2007).

Effective listening can be challenged by the distress that some of these young people might express about their situations. Reflecting on his own emotional upheavals in homelessness, Ray shares, “I notice that for me, not everything goes in a linear line of improvement. It’s kind of like a stock market
Instead of withdrawing or retreating at difficult junctures (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010) with youth who may act out or present discipline challenges, providers should offer these young people opportunities for skill development, service, and leadership (Abdalian, 2004).

**School and formal education.** Schools represent a potential source of hope, support, and stability for homeless youth (see also Rew & Horner, 2003). However, when young people are frequently moving due to unstable housing, compromised by inadequate nutrition, and unable to secure consistent funds from regular employment, they rarely have the opportunity to commit to school on a daily basis (see also Aviles de Bradley, 2011). Aleysha describes how her personal circumstances in homelessness compromised her schooling and compounded her isolation:

> After school, I hated when students talked about ‘going home, seeing their parents, having dinner, and hanging out with their sister, brother, and friends’. I could never tell anyone that after school, I had to go and live with people I didn’t know. I was always walking on eggshells. I would have to lie all the time [about living in a shelter], but I’m terrible at it. I was sure I would say something, and everyone would find out I was homeless. I couldn’t fake it anymore. I quit school.

For Aleysha, the dread of being found out as homeless, and her intuition that she would face “social death” as a result (see Chapter 4), forced her to drop out. Other youth in my study acknowledged the toll of an incomplete high school education. Amber, for instance, says, “We’re not free just because we’re not in school, like we lose out on a lot of opportunities from being out of school.” Although school
attendance was severely compromised in a homeless lifestyle, the desire to attain a high school diploma was spoken about by many of the youth with whom I worked.

Research based on the records of 95 homeless youth found that just 20% had completed high school (Busen & Engebretson, 2008), while other studies found that 30% of homeless participants had graduated from high school (Edidin et al., 2012). Amber pinpoints the difficulty of attending school: “Instead of going to school, we wake up and stress, ‘How are we going to eat? Where am I going to sleep tonight? I have to look for a job. I need to support myself’.” While I taught GED curriculum for youth working towards their high school diplomas, the unpredictable, chaotic and stressful nature of homelessness was reflected in their sporadic attendance.

A nomadic lifestyle makes it difficult for homeless youth to attend school in one particular location. Irregular classroom attendance is a key risk factor leading to other school problems and academic underachievement (Obradovic et al., 2009). A study of shelter children in Massachusetts found that 25% were in special classes, 43% had repeated a grade, and 42% were failing or achieving below-average grades (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001). Financial constraints also limit youth from furthering their education after they turn 18, since schooling is typically no longer “free or affordable” (Edidin et al., 2012, p. 359).

Some shelter youth were motivated by the encouragement of staff to return to school. In the following, some females compare their reactions to their parent’s
dictates to attend school with those of shelter staff. They also note the stigma of attending high school as a twenty-two year old.

Janise: Okay for two weeks I didn’t go to school, because I just really, really didn’t want to. But I noticed that when they [shelter staff] got on you about it, I had to go. It’s not like at home, when my mom says, ‘you have to go to school’, but I just skip every single class. But now it’s kind of like I go to school and I go to class... I don’t know, it’s different, I can’t really tell you why I go now.

Yasmin: Motivation. And your situation.

Amber: Um... I think you’re much more aware that now you need the education more.

Janise: That’s one thing. I don’t want to be there until I’m 22.

Janise: I see some people in my grade eleven class, and it’s like, I’m 20, what the heck are you doing in my class?

Janise: I’m in grade eleven, what are you doing in my class? It’s like, I don’t want to be, that’s shameful stuff, you know?

Some youth said that they felt personally and socially pressured to complete high school. Responding positively to the promptings of shelter staff may be due to the youths’ increasing maturity and reinforcement from peers in similar circumstances. Other youth shared that without attending school, or securing some type of meaningful employment, they might end up in “dangerous, disgusting and dirty” adult shelters.

**Employment.** Employers typically avoid individuals with partial schooling, unstable housing, little employment experience, and incomplete legal
documentation (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Karabanow et al., 2010). Given prevailing hostile attitudes in the workplace, many homeless youth feel anxious about seeking employment (Haldenby, Berman & Forchuk, 2007). In this present study, Amber describes the larger structural difficulties she and her peers face: “Some people say, ‘Just get a job.’ But to get a job, you need a phone, dress clothes, and a shower. And an address. Everything that relates to having a place to live.” Amber’s description of the necessities to attain employment resonated with the accounts from many of her peers.

Challenges aside, securing employment can be vital to young people exiting the streets, boosting their confidence and independence, and providing the means to pay for stable and safe accommodation. Adrieekah, who held several jobs concurrently in aesthetics and in food chains, elaborates on the importance of work: “With no money, I’d go crazy. I’d personally go crazy. You’re worthless, like you’re not doing anything for yourself.” Many youth in the shelter, like Adrieekah, took pride in securing full or part-time employment.

Besides their interest in securing employment, homeless youth confront numerous challenges finding and keeping a job. Kofi elaborates, “homelessness interferes with getting and keeping a job, because homelessness itself takes over everything: your schedule, mental health, energy and attitude.” Acknowledging these difficulties, one young male told me privately that his priority was to feed himself—at any cost. Simply put, he said, he would never let himself go hungry. Although he applied for entry-level jobs wherever possible, he was dejected and
angry about his inability to secure a position. He complained that he had no other option but to sell drugs, which he said was preferable to stealing.

For day-to-day survival, street youth have few options but to pursue “informal work” such as squeeging which is “short-term, dead-end” or “unregulated work on the margins of the economy” (Gaetz, 2004, p. 430). Street youth regard informal work as evidence of their ingenuity, independence, and entrepreneurship (see also Kidd & Davidson, 2007). They value the freedom to pursue informal work as they wish, in contrast with schedules and routines found in more regulated environments such as shelters. In sum, informal work provides youth with feelings of agency and control in their lives (MacDonald, 2013).

**Technology—Social connection at a distance.** Smartphones and other portable devices help facilitate communication with others, including parent(s) who may be “safely” contacted from a distance, and help homeless youth, a resource-challenged community, build social networks. As in the wider youth population, social networking technology has a significant presence in the lives of homeless youth. For example, according to a study of 169 homeless youth by Rice, Lee, and Taitt (2011), 85% accessed the Internet at least once a week. Aleshya provides insight about how homeless youth use different kinds of technology:

> With caller ID, looking for a job on a cell is better than using the shelter phone. You have more privacy on a cell than with a shelter phone where youth bug you to get off of it. Having the employer call back a cell is better than them calling a shelter. A cell helps you keep in touch with your friends in the system. While laptops and ipods go missing in the shelter, cells are harder to steal because they’re always on you. Some youth use their cell to

Kofi adds, “in the shelter, not everyone has a smart phone but most people have cell phones.” Cell phone ownership, however, is not homogenous among all categories of homeless youth, but is higher among shelter youth than among youth residing on the streets (Rice, Lee, & Taitt, 2011).

By facilitating social connections at a distance, mobile phones provide a safe and effective way for some youth to keep in occasional or more frequent contact with a parent or guardian (Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). These relatively inexpensive technologies also help facilitate relationships between these young people and their pre-homeless peers and other family members (Young & Rice, 2011), as well as with employers and potential landlords.

Mobile technology presents significant opportunities for intervention, prevention, and health management. By circumventing the need for landlines, cell phones help homeless youth to access “social support, case management and health professionals” (Rice, Lee, & Taitt, 2011, p. 1175) and information about sexually transmitted infections and testing sites. Applications such as Facebook might be modified so that youth, regardless of location, can access medical assistance, diagnostic tools, or treatment plans (Bender et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Much has been learned about the causes of youth homelessness and how these young people survive the challenging environments they find themselves in.
Problems typically start in a dysfunctional household characterised by neglect, and physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Excessive levels of conflict are often prevalent in these homes as well. Problems are exacerbated in these situations given the young people’s limited skills to advocate for themselves with authoritarian parent(s) and guardian(s) who brook little or no dissent, and who are often physically or emotionally punitive as well.

Many run away, as a youth put it in my study, for a “greater good.” The streets, however, open these young people to a host of psychological, physical and emotional challenges which can result in high levels of mental stress and anxiety, and increased substance and alcohol use. Many youth, though, rely on their resilience, determination, and ingenuity to survive. Protective resources such as shelters can assist these young people with short-term accommodation and a plan to help them move forward with their lives.

We have some key insights into how best to assist these young people move off the streets and into more secure lives. Consistent with a participatory action research ethos, these young people said they feel a sense of belonging when they are respected and valued, and when they contribute to the design, goals and outcomes of the various programs intended to help them. In a context where youth are empowered and exercise agency, service providers can glean a nuanced understanding of these young people’s capabilities and potential. Relatively affordable communication devices such as cell phones can provide useful options for a group that is often transient and isolated from others. School and work may also provide these young people with a sense of direction, optimism and hope.
Next, the dissertation addresses participatory action research, a means of helping contribute to the deficit of research literature depicting the young people's experiences in their lifeworlds, in their words and from their perspectives. To address these deficits, Edidin et al. (2012) propose: “Studies that implement innovative methodologies to better understand the experience of homeless youth” (p. 369). Participatory action research methodologies that engage with these young people and utilize their strengths, intellect, and research interests may be such a solution.

A participatory approach puts the focus on the youth themselves to brainstorm their problems and concerns, prioritize the most important ones, propose how to address them, and implement solutions that develop their leadership, sense of community, and connection to others (Goldberg, 2013). As shown in the next chapter, such an approach acknowledges and utilizes the expertise these youth have in matters touching their own lives.
Chapter 3: PAR—Research, Education and Action

We had to try to do research in a way that empowered people, not researchers.

Juliet Merrifield

Research does not merely report, it *instigates.*

Arthur W. Frank

As a methodology that foregrounded the youths’ experiences, ideas, and priorities about their homeless lifeworlds, participatory action research was central to this study. None of the young people in this project had ever heard of participatory action research; some were curious about it; most approached it with an open-mind. Some participants said that systematically “naming their worlds” was a rare and important opportunity to articulate their concerns and priorities about their homeless lifeworlds. Accordingly, a number of young people engaged in passionate debate about how PAR could best serve their interests and needs.

I drew inspiration for this PAR project from Finley's (2004) ideas about community education: “People need to learn to read their lived worlds, and responsible educators must construct social conditions that can empower people to act and grow” (Finley & Adams, 2004, p. 89). I viewed PAR as a means to create “construct[ive] social conditions” that would provide the young people a platform for their voice and their ideas. I also knew that studies such as this one help redress
an imbalance in resources and opportunities for these young people. In my workshops that I ran for homeless youth prior to this research, I observed the engagement of the young people in a participatory environment, in contrast with their challenges in homelessness where so much was beyond their control.

To assist the youth with the PAR process and phases, I studied PAR philosophy and pored over some key PAR projects. Since PAR proceeds from the Freirian concept of participants “learning to name, and read their lived worlds,” I thought it would be an ideal methodology for these young people to generate new and previously unarticulated raw insights about youth homelessness. The research literature has significant gaps in these areas (Edidin et al., 2012; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Paradise & Cauce, 2002) and from this present study policy makers, service providers, government officials, teachers and scholars are afforded rare “insider knowledge” to inform practice, policy, scholarship, and future research.

**The Forerunners: Lewin, Swantz and Freire**

This chapter introduces some seminal figures in participatory action research, commencing with Kurt Lewin, the originator of action research. Building on the practicality of action research to improve the lives of actors in their local environments, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Orlando Fals-Borda, Paulo Freire and others conceived of participatory action research in the late 1960s and early 1970’s as a means of political empowerment for marginalized and oppressed groups (Fals Borda, 2006; Ledwith & Springett, 2010). Key to Freire’s literacy work in Chile was “theme generation”: a means for low-literacy individuals to “read the word to read
the world.” These Freirian techniques subverted traditional “expert”-driven research practices by insisting that oppressed communities help design and fully participate in research studies about their lives and circumstances. Only then, PAR advocates argued, would enduring social problems be redressed.

By design, this chapter focuses on the early PAR thinkers because their ideas profoundly shaped PAR theory, thought, and practice. In this chapter, the voices and the ideas of the young participants in this study are included regarding PAR theory, practice and outcomes.

**Action Research**

Research that prioritizes people acting on a problem in their natural environment has roots in the political-economic ideas of Marx and Engels, who asserted that workers should direct their own history through their means of mental production rather than just through the means of material production under their control (Rahman, 2008/09). Kurt Lewin, a seminal figure in action research, utilized his training as a social psychologist to conceive new approaches to improve workplace environments.

**Kurt Lewin.** In 1933, Kurt Lewin, a Prussian-born Jew lecturing at the University of Berlin, emigrated to the United States under the sponsorship of John Dewey and Eleanor Roosevelt (Adelman, 1997). As a social psychologist, Lewin consulted on industrial relations, particularly on how to improve efficiencies, productivity, and morale in manufacturing facilities (Adelman, 1993). Lewin
introduced the concept of action research theory (Herr & Anderson, 2005) and the necessity of action that emanates from research. Somewhat sardonically, Lewin (1946) comments that research should have practical ends: “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (p. 35). Because people proved able to identify persistent problems in their local contexts and use their experience and insights to conceive solutions to them, Lewin (1951) declared that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169). Some youth in this present study said that the practical focus of PAR felt “grounding” to them.

Action research and participatory action research share the idea that actors in natural situations have the capacity to utilize research to improve their circumstances, somewhat uniting these approaches. Participatory action research, though, elaborates methods of fostering participation (Swantz, 2008/09) by prioritizing the systematized generation, research and analysis of participants’ ideas in a research context (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007). Noting the practical value of PAR to address social ills, Kemmis (1992) asserts that PAR unites theory and practice to “help people to analyze their suffering” (cited in McTaggart, 1994, p. 332) an important consideration for oppressed people struggling with the social, psychological and material effects of marginalization and disenfranchisement.

**Swantz and Freire: Pioneers in Participatory Action Research**

**Marja-Liisa Swantz.** Working in Tanzania in rural communities, Marja-Liisa Swantz played an important role in the development of PAR, as did Paolo Freire with his pioneering literacy work in Chile. While the phrase ‘participatory action
research’ is commonly attributed to Orlando Fals Borda, a sociologist educated in the United States who later became a professor and dean of the National University of Colombia, Marja-Liisa Swantz previously employed this phrase in the early 1970s in presentations to university communities in Tanzania (Hall, 1993; Hall, 2001). Swantz (2008/09) elaborates how her PAR projects in Tanzania in 1965-1970 both involved and benefitted the community: “From the start PAR aimed at making research an agent of transformation in the rural community. It had to be of immediate interest to the people in the studied community, involving them in formulating the study problems and finding solutions” (p. 33). Swantz’s work was predicated on participants utilizing their experience, agency and insights to solve their problems. Unlike externally led, “expert” research, the residents’ interests and perspectives were central to the process—and the outcomes. When rural residents engaged in such work, the result, Swantz (2008/09) notes, was “transformation.”

Utilizing the participants’ lived experience and expertise while researching their circumstances and problems, Swantz asserts, produces “living knowledge — knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself” (cited in Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 1). To help facilitate “living knowledge” in this PAR study, I showed confidence in the young participants by respecting them as individuals, listening carefully to what they had to say, and adhering to their decisions regarding their research priorities and how they wanted to shape the process. In this study, the rigorous processes of discussion, secondary research in libraries and on the Internet, and primary research which the youth conducted when they interviewed administrators and staff, other homeless youth and
professors with a questionnaire of their design, combined with their artworks that represented their findings, indeed produced “living knowledge” for the participants and for me.

**Paulo Freire: “Read the word to read the world”**. After fleeing the Brazilian military coup in 1964, Freire took exile in Chile. Freire’s literacy initiatives in Chile in the late 1960s and early 1970s were instrumental to participatory action research (Herr & Anderson, 2005). During that time, Freire and fellow Chilean literacy teachers launched “thematic research collaborations” with community members which influenced how the research themes are generated at the outset of a PAR project. Herr and Anderson (2005) explain:

> Freire (1970) views thematic research as a highly inductive process in which research is seen as a form of social action. In this type of research, generative themes, or issues of vital importance to community members, are identified and used as a basis for literacy instruction and also studied in a collaborative fashion (italics in original, p. 15).

By ‘naming their world’ as part of their theme generation, participants utilized their agency to critically address issues of import to them. Succinctly stated, by using Freirean techniques to investigate their experiences, people learn to read the word to read the world (Herr & Anderson, 2005). A number of youth said that the transformative nature of their work became apparent during their primary research when they interviewed shelter staff, administrators, youth and professors, and when they performed key scenes of “The Other Side of the Door” to shelter staff, administrators, youth and the board of directors. The participants said during these
times they felt empowered—that they and their ideas mattered. In these
encounters, the shelter staff and administrators—the “authority figures”—were
attentive to the young peoples’ priorities in their lifeworlds. Jasmin, a participant,
said that she felt “right inside the conversation” during these times.

Enduring Social Ills Unchanged by “Expert” Research

Participatory action research contests the lack of improvements in
communities on whose behalf “expert” research is conducted. As will be shown, PAR
proponents argue that “experts” themselves, and the research methods they utilize,
are significant reasons why social ills remain unchanged. Moreover, PAR challenges
the idea of what research is, who should be involved in it, who should frame a study
and conceive the central questions in it, what the research should accomplish, who
should decide on the dissemination of the findings, and who should benefit from the
research. In all these instances, PAR proponents assert that the participants
themselves should be at the forefront of the research pertaining to their lives and
experiences, and the beneficiaries of such research as well.

PAR’s insistence that entrenched social ills be addressed from the “inside-
out” diverge from traditional research practices, which as Lincoln (2001) notes,
rarely solve the long-standing problems of aggrieved populations. Moreover,
traditional research lacks an action orientation, since the focus of much
conventional research is “representation of the world rather than action within it”
(Greenwood & Levin, 2001, cited in Reason, 2006, p. 188). The deficit of action in a
research context is of particular concern, since through research-informed action
enduring social ills such as “racism, maldistribution of social, economic and material goods (leading to poverty and its negative social effects), illiteracy, crime, environmental degradation” (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, cited in Lincoln, 2001, p. 125, parentheses in original) might be redressed.

A research-informed action orientation is especially relevant to the enduring issue of homelessness, which the Canadian government (2016) notes is a chronic problem: “Despite many successes in addressing homelessness over the past decade, homelessness remains a persistent issue” (retrieved from Employment and Social Development Canada, www.esdc.gc.ca). I observed the significant extent of youth homelessness in the weekly programs I facilitated over a 2.5 year period in the shelter prior to this PAR research project. I found it disconcerting that every week, throughout the entire duration that I ran the program, I met numbers of youth I had never seen before, evidence of both the transience of these young people and the numbers of them in shelters. The Executive Director of the shelter in the major Canadian city where I conducted my research shared that increasing numbers of homeless youth are straining the limited capacity of shelters.

The Epistemology of PAR

This section is based on the following definition of epistemology: “The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge and how we obtain knowledge” (Spafford, Pesce & Grosser, 1998, p. 95). PAR proponents criticized positivists for their study of social problems, without an equivalent emphasis on strategies and actions to redress these social ills. Moreover, key PAR thinkers
objected morally and intellectually to the disrespect that was meted out to the ideas and experiences of oppressed groups. Challenging such disrespect was a focal point of The Highlander Research and Education Centre, which adopted the term “participatory action research” in the 1970s and conducted workshops on its use. Proponents argued for critical thinking in PAR projects, to assure rigor, criticality and validity of the findings. Oppressed communities holistically articulating their concerns in their lifeworlds can be liberating to the participants, and contrasts with the disrespect their knowledge is accorded in mainstream communities and discourses. Finally, as agency is central to participatory action research, such work may fruitfully be called “participatory agency research.” The youth used their agency in this project to delve into deeply personal, “I” based matters as their research themes, in contrast with other PAR studies that typically deal with larger, community-wide problems.

**Critiques of positivism:** Participatory action research came to the fore in the intellectually tumultuous periods of the late 1960s and early 1970s. PAR theorists challenged positivism’s failure to redress enduring social problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, and widespread poverty in oppressed communities. As well, PAR proponents contested the position that the only valid knowledge was framed, observed, generated and disseminated by “experts.”

Rather than liberating the agency and utilizing the priorities of subjects in a research context, positivism was challenged for “objectifying others, making them

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4 Issues of validity are addressed in the conclusion under “Study Considerations.”
data, who, as the objects of another's inquiry, are denied the position of subjects who can act, create and observe for themselves” (Gaventa, 1993, pp. 29-30).

Without their agency into academic and scientific research design, goals and outcomes, and with no influence over how findings may be distributed and to whom, research “subjects” are effectively “objects” in the research process. hooks (1989) details how a passive object is determined by others: “Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others (p. 12). Such a process of objectification of disenfranchised groups in academic research perpetuates the oppression and subjugation of them by more powerful ones in mainstream society (Maguire, 1987).

Besides the inability of subjects experiencing problems to contribute solutions to them in a research context, positivism was also critiqued for its passive approach to social ills: positivism “affirms a social world that is meant to be gazed upon but not challenged or transformed” (Roman, 1992, cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 51). Accordingly, PAR, a new research paradigm was conceived to increase subject participation, and focus on the Lewinian tradition of practical outcomes for organizations and communities (Kidd & Krall, 2005).

With the supposed “subjects” of the research sidelined by research they have no influence or control over, they effectively remain in an ignorant state (Gergen & Gergen, 2008/09). Participatory action research, however, seeks to transform entrenched social problems from the “inside out,” empowering oppressed communities to seek their own solutions to their problems.
In our discussions about empowerment and PAR, Devon says: “I feel empowered with this project, because I know I’m actually helping somebody.” By advancing their own agenda through articulating, defining, and prioritizing their problems, a number of youth in this present study reported feeling a sense of accomplishment, possibility, and excitement about their ability to act in the world. When participants “name their world” and design research-informed action accordingly, they became agents acting on their own behalf rather than waiting passively to serve as objects in a study of someone else’s design and purpose.

**Disrespected knowledge.** Acknowledging that the voices, ideas and priorities of oppressed groups are disrespected and virtually absent as guiding factors in academic research and scientific studies about their lives and problems, PAR principles assert that such ideas be central in research about these groups. Under conventional research, the experiences and insights of the oppressed are often overlooked, discounted, or poorly comprehended by external “experts” who are often removed from these communities and their problems (Merrifield, 1993). As a result, “expert”-driven research exacerbates disenfranchisement of marginalized communities, since members with the most acute understanding of the impacts of a problem are unable to exercise their agency by designing and implementing changes to improve their lives (Hall, 1978; Goldberg, 2013). The practice of dismissing “disrespected knowledge” in a research context is inimical to Freire’s ideas that oppressed peoples’ “name their world to read their world,” and research and act on their priorities as they define them.
Prior to this present study, for instance, the young people said that they had never articulated their ideas about research design, goals, objectives, dissemination and outcomes, nor were they shown how to conduct such research on their own behalf. Maxine Greene (2008) elaborates on the impact of such exclusionary practices: “Made to feel inferior, stigmatized, invisible as a living person, no one can feel worthy enough to pose her/his own questioning or act to initiate her/his own learning” (p. 46). In such a context of stigmatization and exclusion, “community knowledge” is devalued in contrast with that of external scientists and “expert” researchers.

From a research perspective, Fine (2009) asserts the necessity of surfacing disrespected knowledge from marginalized communities: “Across venues and continents, participatory action research (PAR) assumes that critical expertise lies in those most oppressed” (p. 2, italics in original). Such a perspective shifts power from “experts” and scientists who are seldom preoccupied with the problems of critical importance to the oppressed and the poor (Merrifield, 1993). Moreover, the oppressed are disadvantaged in a research context since “power is usually only held by those with the most research experience” (Tuck et al., 2008, p. 50). To avoid the disjuncture between the struggles of oppressed communities and the research of external “experts” and scientists, participants must engage in research for themselves (McTaggart, 1991; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Accordingly, this PAR project helped empower the youth, by enabling them as researchers and supporting their priorities and ideas.
In this PAR study, by generating ideas and hypotheses about their circumstances in homelessness, the youth articulated “a more accurate, critical reflection of social reality” (Healy, 2001, p. 95). The opportunity to articulate their “disrespected knowledge” in both research and in affiliated discourses that emanate from this study inspired a number of the youth in this project.

**Holistic versus reductionist approaches.** Rather than outside “experts” pre-framing ideas on behalf of oppressed groups, PAR views a holistic approach as necessary for individuals whose ideas are traditionally disrespected, ignored—and “hidden” as a consequence. When subjects brainstorm their concerns at the outset of a participatory action research project, they holistically reflect on and analyze their lifeworlds (Park, 1993) before prioritizing the themes and issues they wish to address. The term holistic, Miller (1988/2007) explains, is derived from the Greek word 'holon' and “refers to a universe made up of integrated wholes that cannot simply be reduced to the sum of its parts” (p. 6). Lewin in the mid 1940s explicitly endorsed a holistic approach, and argued for its adoption in the academy:

> Psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology each have begun to realize that without the help of the other neither will be able to proceed very far. During the last five years first timidly, now very clearly, a desire for an integrated approach has become articulated... the next decade will doubtless witness serious attempts of an integrated approach to social research” (Lewin, 1946, p. 36).

Lewin’s (1946) appeal for a unified, cross-disciplinary approach, contrasts with the “institutionalization of expertise” that Gaventa (1993) argues divides knowledge in the academy into specialties and subspecialties, each arranged into disciplines.
With a fragmented approach to knowledge, Gaventa (1993) adds, “Little attention is given to the cumulative or interactive effects of related problems, or to the problem which consists of the sum of the various parts” (p. 28). An overly specialized study in areas such as youth homelessness can be problematic since the problems these young people face are typically long-term, inter-connected and complex.

Heaney (1993) elaborates on how a reductionist academic approach may impede the development of solutions to large-scale social problems: “The rigors of academic discipline and the diversion of mental energy into narrowly defined and discrete fields of expertise keep broader social consequences of research from view” (p. 43). Afflicted communities, however, continue to struggle with the full impact of problems and their “economic, social, political and psychological” dimensions, but piecemeal attempts to redress them are limited and ineffective (Gaventa, 1993, p. 28). With participants using their agency to holistically “name their worlds,” PAR contests reductionist framing of the research by individuals external to the particular community under study. Furthermore, by investigating an individual problem in isolation, root causes may be overlooked, ignored, or neglected.

This present PAR study employs a holistic approach based on the young people exercising their agency to “name their worlds” according to their experiences, interests and priorities. Had I imposed a frame on the young people such as drugs, resilience, or abuse, the holistic nature of a PAR study would have been subverted, and the young people would have been objects of my subjective
interests. In this study, the young people were particularly keen on utilizing a holistic approach to generate their research themes. A number of them said that the “freedom” with this approach was not merely “academic” to them, but one that helped them establish “a big-picture look” into their situations, experiences and lives.

**Highlander: “empowering people not researchers.”** Surfacing the “disrespected knowledge” of oppressed communities for the insights it provides to inform action and change was a catalyst for the Highlander Research and Education Center. Myles Horton started the Highlander Folk School by in 1932 in Tennessee to provide adult education for social and economic justice to oppressed groups in Appalachia and in the South. Horton elaborates on a key principle of PAR and adult education philosophy: “[one must] respect people’s abilities to learn and to act and to shape their own lives.” Horton adds, “You can’t say respect people if you don’t respect their experience” (cited in Ayers, 2004, p. 112). Horton’s ideas contest the notion that the experiences and ideas of the oppressed and marginalized should be disrespected and largely unavailable in shaping research studies that are conducted ostensibly on their behalf.

Using Horton’s principles of empowering learners by honoring their experience, Highlander offered educational programs to help individuals learn to research the origins of their problems and their causes (Glen, 1988). The term ‘participatory research’ was adapted at Highlander in the 1970s (Lewis, 2006). The Rhodes Scholar and political sociologist John Gaventa and Juliet Merrifield served as...
co-directors of research at Highlander. Merrifield summarizes Highlander’s approach: “We had to try to do research in a way that empowered people not researchers” (retrieved from www.ncsall.net/?id=479). Generating knowledge from the “bottom-up” experience of people instead of from external “experts” collides with traditional research practices: “Community residents may be the first to know something is wrong, but the last to have their story accepted by scientists and officials” (Merrifield, 1993, p. 67). Accordingly, Highlander advocated that systemic change come from “within”—derived from solutions of people living with problems and affected by attempts to redress them (Lewis, 2006). A 19 year old homeless female captures the value of “inside knowledge” to address problems that outsiders can only guess at:

> So many people don’t get that we know what is going on, and coming from the outside, you can’t really know what is happening. You might have ideas, but the only people who know what is really going to work and how to get at what is really going on is us (Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 187).

Insiders using research to design solutions and action is a significant departure from academic research that investigates and theorizes problems, but rarely solves them (Pain & Francis, 2003).

**Critical thinking in PAR projects.** To contribute to scholarly research and influence change, the thinking in PAR projects should be as rigorous as possible. To understand complex problems and design effective action to redress them, Freire (1993) asserts that participatory researchers should become critical thinkers, or “masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world” (p. x).
“Underlying causes” implies “unpacking” the forces and structures that facilitate actions and behaviours that are detrimental to the health and well-being of the communities involved. Freire (1982) elaborates on criticality in participatory research:

If I am interested in knowing the people’s way of thinking and levels of perception, then the people have to think about their thinking and not be only the objects of my thinking. This method of investigation which involves study—and criticism of the study—by people at the same time is a learning process. Through this process of investigation, examination, criticism and reinvestigation, the level of critical thinking is raised among all those involved (p. 30, cited in McTaggart, 1991, pp. 183-4).

In this study, to ensure rigor and criticality, we tried to “think about our thinking.” More specifically, thoughts and ideas were helpful starting points, but through more pointed questioning youth came to clearer understandings of their ideas. McTaggart (1991) depicts this process: “Participatory action research establishes self-critical communities of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process” (p. 176, italics mine). Sometimes the youth spoke in generalities, or made large truth claims, so to further the rigor of our thinking, where appropriate, ideas were clarified, as described below.

Criticality in this study transpired when the young people brought their ideas into clearer understanding through a dialectical process of questioning, clarifying, and refining initial ideas and hypotheses. While I avoided contributing content, (for instance, by not suggesting a theme, or how a theme should be interpreted) where appropriate I asked youth to clarify their thinking by asking them how many were involved, the time or place something happened, and why and how it happened.
Park (1993) describes this process as exploring “the magnitude and the contours” of a problem (p. 11). Pursuing these clarifications, or questions that arose in the discussions, youth conducted secondary research on their themes on the Internet and in libraries. Ideas were further clarified from the discussions when the youth presented their research findings to the larger group. Later, they conducted primary research by interviewing shelter administrators, youth workers, other homeless youth and professors using a questionnaire of their own design, in an interview that they conducted themselves. With these processes, “the magnitude and contours” of a problem became clearer by considering research themes and findings through multiple audiences, vantage points and discussion.

Gaventa (1991) elaborates on the outcome of criticality in PAR: participants may come to challenge dogma and taken-for-granted scientific “truths.” He says, “People may learn that the “scientific” foundation upon which regulations are made, and through which their own experiences are discounted, are not so solid, that they are subject to fallibility, conflicting viewpoints, misinterpretation and plain falsification” (p. 126). In other words, Gaventa asserts, commonly accepted ideas that scientific “truths” are infallible, fixed, and unerring can and must be called into question in PAR work. Fals Borda (2006) elaborates on how science can be manipulated to buttress those in power: “We started to appreciate in fact that science is socially constructed, therefore it is subject to reinterpretation, revision and enrichment” (p. 29). Gaventa (1991) and Fals Borda (2006) assert that participants in PAR projects recognize that scientific studies may selectively
present data that is shaped, or “reinterpret[ed] or revis[ed]” to obscure practices that may jeopardize a community's agency, health, and prospects.

**PAR: a “workshop in agency” or “participatory agency research.”** In a research context, agency—based on valuing, accessing, and exercising one’s subjectivity—is essential for disenfranchised communities to conceive research-informed action to redress enduring social ills. Given the paramount importance of agency to this work, participatory action research can also be aptly titled participatory agency research. Indeed, without agency among the members in a PAR study, there is a potential for the project to be appropriated by a few aggressive participants or sabotaged by outsiders who wish to impose their agendas on the participants.

Throughout this study, I emphasized to the young people that their agency was welcome and essential to the outcome of the project. I shared with the youth that I would assist with the process, but that they were responsible for the content—the actual “data”—themselves, as well as to determine a process that would work for them. This study would not have succeeded if only a few youth exercised agency while the majority were mere spectators (see also Kidd & Kral, 2005). When the youth accessed their agency in this project, many of them shifted from being tentative about their ideas and knowledge to feeling confident that they “had something to say.”

Bracher (2006) defines agency as “the sense of oneself as a force that matters in the world” (p. 5). This study aside, some youth complained that they have little
agency in a rule-bound shelter, and shared they feel a lack of agency more generally since most are not “rooted” in career, formal education, or stable housing. Accordingly, one youth asked: “how am I supposed to feel ‘agency’ when I’m in limbo all the time?” With obstacles to “take root” in their multiple lifeworlds, these young people’s agency—their ability to be a “force in the world” is constrained.

Park (1993) asserts that agency helps oppressed groups become “self-reliant, self-assertive, and self-determinative” (p. 2) qualities that are indispensable to PAR work. Baum et al. (2006) elaborate, “When communities seek control of research agendas, and seek to be active in research, they are establishing themselves as more powerful agents” (p. 855). In this project, the young people were provided ample opportunities to exercise their agency as evidenced in their primary research when they solely conducted the research with their interviewees with a questionnaire of their own that was determined by their interests and priorities (see Appendix A3). Each participant used agency to determine which art form to represent the project with, and how this preferred artwork should be disseminated. Another way that the youth exercised agency in this study was when they holistically “named their worlds” according to their priorities and interests. Indeed, the magnitude of 107 research themes, and their critical thinking about them, is a testament to the agency of all the youth to holistically inform, and then refine the project according to their needs and interests. As will be shown in the next section that describes the “I” based

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5 I observed all the primary research meetings that the youth conducted. I introduced a number of interviewees; on a handful of occasions I helped clarify issues about process. The youth asked all the questions and the subsequent dialogue transpired between the youth and the interviewees.
nature of their research themes, the young people also used their agency to modify traditional PAR practices.

In the following, some youth elaborate about how they used their agency in this study to empower themselves intellectually and personally. Aleysha says, “We were empowered because we were given control over our research. We worked hard because we felt that our ideas and knowledge could help youth in similar situations.” Kofi, the playwright who wrote “The Other Side of the Door” to represent the findings in this research, adds: “I felt empowered in the study. I felt valued and that my thoughts and ideas mattered. I was given responsibilities and encouraged to show leadership, like in the arts phase when I helped others.” Reflecting the level of agency, inclusion and participation they experienced in the project, some young people shared that they did not feel homeless in this research project.

Although this study sought to foster agency in its participants, Freire (1974/2013) asserts that the lack of agency is systemic for many. He declares that the “greatest tragedy of modern man” is that “the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator” (p. 5). Since knowledge is often controlled, designed and disseminated by “experts” who objectify research “subjects,” PAR plays a significant role in creating “bottom-up” knowledge that contests such practices.

The young people’s increasing confidence in their agency was exciting to behold. As they proceeded with the PAR study, they became more confident about thinking through ideas, problems, and solutions for themselves and designing the
process to work for them. Gaventa (1991) elaborates on the shift in self-perception and self-concept of the participants: “Attitudes of dependency begin to move towards ones of self-reliance” (p. 126). This agency manifested through the youths’ reflection and discussion of more than 100 research themes and their subsequent research and representation of their prioritized themes, and their decisions about how to shape the project to suit their needs. Many of the young people participated in social change as they saw the impact of their agency—and their ideas on the participants in the room, on themselves, and on me.

**Youth use agency to define “I” based research themes.** In this study, the youth used their agency to articulate themes of concern in their lifeworlds, many of which were of a deeply personal nature. This contrasts with many other PAR projects where participants name community-level problems such as toxic waste, elevated crime rates, prevalence of drugs, or substandard schools. These “I” focused themes underline that these young people had only themselves to rely on for survival; accordingly, some youth said that they wanted to research more about their themes as a means of enhancing their self-awareness and personal understanding of their situations. In the following, the young people discuss the impacts of surfacing their memories, experiences, and feelings in their lifeworlds:

Aleysha: There was always—you always feel comfortable [in this project] about saying things that you’d probably never say to the people that you’re closest to, like things I wouldn’t even say to my own family members, I’ll tell people here. And it’s always been like that from the beginning. Everyone always said things that we never said before. And crying, like
there’s been some crying that’s happened. And usually I’m not one to
crie, I don’t like to do it.
Derek: You don’t like to see it?
Kofi: It happens.
Aleysha: (Laughing)
In here it happened quite a bit.
DG: Yeah.
Aleysha: It did. We all said things that we have to go back, way back into some
things.
Devon: Times we didn’t want to revisit.

Knowing that their ideas would benefit homeless youth research, and benefit other
youth in similar situations, a number of participants courageously mined their
lifeworlds, especially when confronting difficult or traumatic material. Maguire
(1987) notes that participatory research “validates people’s perceptions of their
reality” (p. 101) creating a conducive environment for participants to reflect on and
name their lifeworlds. The confidentiality measures and ethics protocol that we
regularly discussed also helped a number of youth feel sufficiently safe, at times of
their choosing, to disclose difficult issues of self and other. Many of the young
peoples’ themes evoked their precarious psychological states, physical isolation
from others, and their corresponding needs for self-reliance—and resilience.

The “I” focused themes reflected a spectrum of concerns in homelessness
(see Appendix A2 for complete list of themes). Positive themes helped the youth
maintain a hopeful outlook while others reflected pessimism and despair. The
youths’ affirmative themes included optimism and hope; will my life get better; self-
help; being helped [by others]; faith; giving [to others]; growth; music; and
strategies to keep young people in their homes. Other of the youths’ themes
depicted struggles with the uncertainties and perils of homelessness, including: loss; helplessness, drugs; depression; suicide; [need for] protection/security; feeling stuck/futility; self-sabotage, and falling into a shelter way of life. Reflecting the shocking nature of homelessness, in the early weeks of this project, a participant proposed: “did you ever dream you’d end up homeless” as a research theme. Some of the youth silently reflected on the bittersweet nature of these words.

Although the young people selected themes based on their individual experiences and concerns, their research priorities and findings have larger social implications. In this PAR study, for instance, the youth prioritized a social problem that afflicts them locally, but that also impacts homeless youth communities in many places: stereotyping and stigmatization, which regardless of context or location, compounds feelings of estrangement and isolation, and designates these young people as Other (see Chapter 4). The other themes that the youth spotlighted: “who is a homeless youth” and parenting and youth homelessness are also significant concerns for homeless youth in broader communities and social circumstances.

**Participatory Action Research in Practice**

In the following, I outline how PAR projects originate from the needs of a community and its members to address localized problems, and from researchers who can help facilitate the process and the project. I originated the term researcher-facilitator to account for the dual roles of such an individual in a PAR project. Some reasons are advanced for researchers fallaciously claiming that their work utilizes
participatory action research. The section concludes with a means of distinguishing a valid participatory action research project: benefits to the subjects themselves.

**Launching a PAR project.** Participatory action research typically emanates in a local community from “an imperfectly understood felt concern and a desire to take action” (McTaggart, 1994, p. 316). For example, citizens may be uncertain about how to address complex issues such as rampant drug use, elevated violence, failing schools, lack of meaningful employment, and toxic dumping in their community. Although desirous of change, they may be unaware, as were the 35 youth in this current project, of how to proceed with PAR to better understand, define, and address their problems (Park, 1993) by generating “living knowledge” and research-informed action.

With lack of knowledge of participatory action research in many oppressed communities, a PAR researcher acting as an “external change agent” (Park, 1993, p. 9) can help the group organize themselves to address their problems. An “agent,” Park notes, may represent diverse institutions: a university, a local development agency, an organized religion; or the agent may be an independent researcher who proposes a PAR project to a particular community or group.

**Role of a researcher-facilitator.** I conceived of and utilize the term researcher-facilitator in this dissertation since it is a more accurate reflection of the “two-fold” roles assisting in PAR work. Throughout this project, I was present as a researcher, helping elicit the youths’ ideas, experiences and insights about their
homeless lifeworlds as they defined and prioritized them. In another role, I helped facilitate a PAR project with young people who were newcomers to this approach. In this context, I helped participants understand the process and outcomes of PAR, explained the different purposes of the phases, and helped the participants assume greater tasks and responsibilities in the project. PAR work is also personal, engaging the young peoples’ intellect and passions, so at times I mediated disputes and differences.

As discussed previously, a facilitator also helps participants with critical thinking to help clarify and further refine the ideas. As a facilitator, to help the youth derive a broader context of PAR, several months into the project I asked them if they were curious about its history. When they expressed interest, I focused my discussion on Kurt Lewin, Paolo Freire, and Highlander and shared some examples of PAR projects. I also discussed issues of agency that are central to participatory action research. In sum, as a facilitator, I functioned as a “tour guide” about the PAR process itself, by helping the young people better navigate where they told me they wanted to go.

I tried to abide by Kidd and Kral’s (2005) idea of “bringing rather than imposing knowledge” (p. 189). Accordingly, I used terminology with the youth that promoted their agency and leadership including: “I would like to propose this”; “here’s something you might consider”; “this might be helpful”; “how does this sound”; or “what do you think?” By design, these questions invite the youth to utilize their agency to shape the project according to their needs and interests. There were times, however, where the energy sank, and the project stalled, so I
volunteered some ideas to get things moving. The youth responded favorably to my researcher-facilitator role. Amber said, “your approach was good; you never told us what to think.”

A researcher-facilitator in PAR projects should be open to different facets of experience (Kidd & Kral, 2005), especially since as discussed earlier in this chapter much disrespected and submerged knowledge surfaces in this work. In this study, for instance, some youth shared at times of their choosing distressing physical, emotional and sexual abuse. A researcher-facilitator needs to not only anticipate such disclosures when working with some traumatized groups, but should try to maintain equanimity while conveying compassion and care to the participants. My composure was aided by my previous research into trauma and abuse before this project, providing me the opportunity to reflect on and process my own reactions to these troubling behaviors.

During the youths’ disclosures about these matters, I tried to monitor the words and “body language” of the participants. After especially troubling revelations in this study, a number of youth asked for a cigarette break. Upon reassembling, I did a “safety check” and asked each youth if they had a friend, family member or adult they might talk to if they had any issues to discuss that may have been triggered from our work. I also shared outside helplines, shelter personnel, and other resources which might prove supportive.

As another example of trauma being disclosed in the study, I was concerned when a youth privately detailed to me his suicide attempt months before this current PAR study. To prepare me for such disclosures, Dr. Kidd helpfully shared a
suicide prevention protocol which I used to ascertain that this young person was as safe and professionally supported as possible.

An effective researcher-facilitator helps ensure that a project stays focused. During disagreements, a researcher-facilitator can mediate by hearing the participants and synthesizing the differences between the opposing views. The researcher-facilitator can then ask participants to articulate “connections” to help mitigate disputes about goals, directions, and potential outcomes. As a facilitator, I had to intervene when several youth of different cultures were in conflict and disparaged each other’s contributions. I separated the youth from each other in small group work; although this animosity was apparent to me, the larger group proceeded with their tasks. Overall, however, the group functioned well and relatively harmoniously.

As Swantz articulates above, cohesion between the research, participants, and facilitator in a natural setting ideally defines the research method in PAR. Ledwith and Springett (2010) assert that effective facilitation helps participants “feel confident and trusting in the process” (p. 142) so that they might feel safe enough to “name their worlds” without fear of reproach or disapproval. A climate of confidence and trust in PAR helps ensure the “process is in effect the method” (Kidd and Kral, 2005 p. 189). Accordingly, in PAR, the research process itself intertwines with the data; both unfold in a naturalistic, performative manner (Trifonas, conversation, June 2016). Indeed, throughout this dissertation, all the research themes, data, and findings unfold in “real time” according to the PAR process.
**Authenticity of PAR Projects**

Given the wide scope of activities that PAR engages in, researchers can misleadingly apply the term PAR to some aspect of their study, without engaging in the full spectrum of research activities that constitute an actual PAR project. Determining the beneficiaries—and the benefits of such research are other means of evaluating the validity of projects that call themselves participatory action research.

**PAR research: in name only.** The terms “participatory action research” and PAR are often utilized in qualitative research involving youth but the article entitled “Youth Involvement in Participatory Action Research (PAR): Challenges and Barriers” notes: “Few studies involved youth as equal partners in all phases of the research process” (Kim, 2016, p. 48). Indeed, a number of studies claim to be “participatory action research” but only utilize a limited aspect of the methodology, which precludes the full impact of and benefits to members of a community brainstorming, prioritizing, researching, representing (through political and/or artistic means), and disseminating its findings.

While researching doctoral dissertations that used PAR with homeless youth, I found virtually all the studies that claimed to be participatory action research failed to use the full array of PAR activities as mentioned above. Some, for instance, utilized questions that the researcher formulated in advance, but claimed that the research subjects used participatory action research methods to answer. This approach is inimical to participatory action research principles, and in effect makes
the research “subjects” the “objects” of the researcher’s inquiry, since the participants were not involved in “naming their world,” the foundation of generating PAR research themes as delineated by Freire’s thematic literacy research practices and Lewin’s principles of local actors defining and solving their own problems.

In PAR, McTaggart (1991) explicitly asserts that the research questions, design and process be participant determined: “Participatory action research is NOT [sic] a method or technique for policy implementation. It does not accept truths created outside the community or truths created by researchers working inside the community who treat the community as an object for research” (p. 181). PAR is only authentic when the participants name their lifeworlds to surface their research themes, prioritize them, conduct further research, and take action on them. It is the participants who must exercise their agency on their own behalf, instead of using their “agency” to fulfill another researcher’s mandate.

McTaggart (1991) distinguishes research that claims to be participatory, but in fact perpetuates “cooption and exploitation.” He notes,

Authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualized, practiced and brought to bear in the life-world. It means ownership—responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice. Mere involvement implies none of this and creates the risk of cooption and exploitation of people in the plans of others...

People are often involved in research, but rarely are they participants with real ownership of research theory and practice (p. 171, italics mine).

Issues of “ownership” surfaced in this present study, which deviated from most PAR studies where the participants come to a fairly timely agreement about a research theme(s) of pressing urgency that they wish to prioritize and redress. Had I
insisted for instance, that in the interests of time and efficiency, that the youth immediately prioritize the 107 research themes they had, and collectively decide on one or two of them, I would have interfered with their process as it unfolded. I observed from their engagement and participation in the theme generation phase that their research themes were important to them. Indeed, a number of youth said that they wanted to delve deeper into their research themes; some said that their lives and their well being depended on it.

The young people designed a process to accommodate each participant’s significant investment in a research theme. Although each theme had previously been discussed by the group when it was conceived, each youth wanted to research his or her theme further, return to the group with a presentation, and then after discussion of each individual theme, collectively decide which theme(s) to prioritize. This approach deviated from many PAR projects where participants reach a timely consensus about an overriding issue confronting their community. The young peoples’ decision to proceed in this manner added considerable time and complexity to the study, but the process in a true participatory action research project must be defined according to the interests and needs of the participants. The young peoples’ modification of a typical PAR process is a testament to the ownership of the project by the young people themselves.

In some instances, PAR “researchers” co-opt the participants by framing a study ahead of time and then asking the participants to use “PAR” for an agenda they had no input into. Lund (2011) describes how such actions jeopardize the validity of a project, since the “participatory research may not be performing what is
actually needed or wanted by a community” (in Lund & Paul; p. 264). Kidd and Kral (2005) propose an underlying reason for such practices. More recently, communities such as North American Aboriginals oppose research that they have little or no input into, leaving them disengaged with the process and disinterested in the results. To assuage such opposition, these authors note that some researchers inaccurately use the term participatory action research in their proposals.

Misleading practices aside, there are genuine factors that can impede a full-scale participatory action research project: restricted funding, limited timelines to complete the project, insufficient “buy-in” from the participants, dissent among the participants about which themes to prioritize and research further, and a disconnect between the researcher-facilitator and the participants.

**Who benefits from participatory action research?** To establish the integrity of a PAR project, one should determine who benefits from it—and how. Unlike externally-led research, with PAR, the participants themselves should be the beneficiaries of their research and findings (Rahman, 2008/09). In this study, the participants benefited in numerous ways. The young people exercised leadership throughout the project: they contributed to, researched, analyzed and prioritized their themes, and they helped shape the process to suit their priorities and needs. Some youth who had engaged in acting out behaviors prior to the research grew in confidence and maturity from their engagement and leadership in the research. Some of the participants’ self-concepts changed, as they took pride in the positive impact of their ideas and research on themselves, their peers, and on me. Some
shelter staff observed that with a renewed sense of purpose, some of these young people's behaviors improved. A number of youth said that the study gave them a rare opportunity to develop both their minds and their artistic sensibilities, which they said helped them temporarily divert their attention from the stresses of homelessness.

Many youth developed their public speaking skills from presenting their research findings to their peers in the study. In their presentations, and indeed throughout the study, a number of youth sharpened their analytical and critical thinking skills. During their primary research interviews with shelter staff, administrators, shelter youth who had not participated in the study, and professors, each youth asked a question and entered into dialogue in a “go-around” fashion with an interviewee, honing their interview and conversational skills. Due to transience, new participants entered the research fairly regularly, providing opportunities for the youth to exercise leadership, and enhance their communication and interpersonal skills by mentoring newcomers. Participants both provided and received constructive feedback from their peers on their artwork. They exercised agency by deciding on how and where it would be disseminated to best serve their interests.

By building on their successes in this project, and with mentorship and encouragement from myself and a few others, three young people from this PAR study have left homelessness behind. These youth said that their confidence in themselves and their abilities grew in the research and served as a “springboard” to help them exit homelessness. These young people are flourishing: one youth
finished high school with a high standing in the 90s and is now enrolled in a college social work program, another created an effective social enterprise pertaining to empowering the voices and agency of homeless youth, while a third is succeeding in the construction industry and in a related apprentice program.

**PAR: Research, Education and Action**

Hall (1993) asserts that an amalgam of “research, education, and action” distinguishes participatory research from other types of research (p. xiv). As will be elaborated in the following, Hall’s (1993) model provides a useful framework for this study. In sum, with its systemized means of researching and taking collective action to redress oppressive conditions, PAR transcends traditional academic research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991).

**Research.** In this phase, the youth readily brainstormed themes pertaining to youth homelessness. They researched the meaning and significance of a theme to themselves, their peers, and this project. The following dialogue evokes how the youth proceeded with their research themes:

Female: Is there any topic that is inappropriate or appropriate?
Male: Like what kind of a topic, though? Like what’s a topic? Smoking cigarettes—is that a topic?
Male: I’m just going to put that in. Cigarettes.
Female: What if it’s about intimacy?
D.G: Okay, but it must relate to homelessness.
As described in chapter 2, a holistic “picture” of youth homelessness emerged from the 107 research themes the youth generated. After brainstorming and “unpacking” these themes, it became apparent that themes were “connection points” to meaningful, unresolved, or ongoing experiences in their lifeworlds, especially as they pertained to youth homelessness. A number of youth said that a theme was more thoroughly understood after discussion and analysis incorporated the different vantage points of the participants in the room.

The following theme of smoking cigarettes illustrates how the youth developed a research theme. They spoke with insight and depth over several hours about the multi-faceted meanings and associations of smoking. At the start, a number of youth described purchasing a package of cigarettes at a discount store with a small allowance from the government. They shared how quickly the pack is consumed after countless youth in the shelter ask them for a cigarette. Some said they were so peeved by their peers’ constant pleading for a cigarette that they abandoned smoking altogether. Others spoke disparagingly of youth who light up used butts that they scrounge for on the streets or in alleys. Some said that the tobacco companies played them as “marks,” since the manufacturers intentionally included addictive ingredients to their products.

Some youth acknowledged the “cool factor” they felt when they lit up a cigarette. Smoking cigarettes, some said, was a relaxing “time-out,” a temporary and welcome relief from the stresses in homelessness. Many agreed that amidst the chaos, unpredictability and stresses of homelessness, smoking is one of the few “crutches” they can rely on. As virtually everyone volunteered an opinion about
smoking, their passion for this topic was evident. Although “cigarettes” might on the surface seem less “substantial” than the other themes, the young people felt more connected to and in control of the research when they considered all the facets of their lifeworlds that mattered to them.

Besides the theme of smoking, in our discussions, the youth “opened up” the other research themes to reveal many different strands. As an example, the youth shared that depression, for instance, had many aspects that “led them into a funk” such as: dealing with the loss of home; difficulties taking root in formal education, career and housing; rampant stereotyping and stigmatization (see Chapter 4); lack of meaningful mentors and mentorship; high levels of anxiety and stress, and poverty.

With 1,500 pages of data generated from the holistic approach to youth homelessness, I was cognizant of the scope and the array of data traversing discourses and disciplines, and mused that many of the youths’ research themes themselves could have been worthy subjects of their own dissertation. The magnitude of the themes, however, was considerably mitigated when the youth prioritized stereotyping and stigmatization as the key theme of this research (as detailed in Chapter 4), and when they selected “who is a homeless youth” and parenting and youth homelessness as key themes in the theatre play “The Other Side of The Door” that are discussed in Chapter Five.

**Education.** With a collaborative approach based on wide-ranging discussion, shared research, and a dialectical approach to knowledge generation, participatory
action research is “profoundly educational” (Park, 1993, p. 3). The emergent process of participatory action research, with particular actors and facilitator(s) working in tandem to address localized problems and issues, adheres to Dewey’s principle that “education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives” (Dewey, 1929, p. 74). Such a framework is essential to creating new knowledge in a localized context from the “bottom-up”, and adheres to Lewin’s philosophy of actors in a particular setting improving their situation through their research, insights and experience.

Since findings from PAR projects are based on a marginalized community’s “raw and unformed data” that is typically concealed from larger society... “a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality” emerges (Hall, 2001, p. 173). The “invisible” nature of the data and findings from this study are reflected in the scant accounts in the research literature about stereotyping and stigmatization as experienced and articulated by homeless youth in their various lifeworlds (Edidin et al., 2012; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Paradise & Cauce, 2002).

In contrast with the “didactic transmission of knowledge” Park (1993) notes that education in participatory research results from participants learning by doing, more specifically “learning by searching, or researching” (p. 3). Indeed, the education in this PAR project was defined by its activity-based nature, requiring engagement, agency and participation of all its members to name their lifeworlds—and mine their priorities and interests. In such a pedagogical context, PAR “uses the views of others to engage their own experience and to discipline their own subjective interpretations” (McTaggart, 1994, p. 327). Several youth said that by
deepening the dialogue in a context of dialectically-based discussion, research, and theorizing, they arrived at new understandings and awareness of “life issues”—and of themselves in the process.

Derek describes how this PAR study educated him, “Through listening to others talk about their situations, I learned more about me. I developed a better sense of what I had to do.” At various times in the study, Derek shared the ways he sought to enhance his self-sufficiency and his independence in the context of formulating a plan to leave homelessness. Based on his reflection in the research, and how he applied his learning in it to his situation, Derek is one of three youth in this study who has fully left homelessness behind.

By reflecting on, discussing and analyzing their experiences, participants began to believe in their knowledge. Freire (1973) elaborates on how a transformative educative process shifts a learner’s self-perception: “one of its main tasks [is] to invite people to believe in themselves. It should invite people to believe that they have knowledge” (p. 80). The “people’s knowledge” contests and resists knowledge that “represent[s] the interests of the powerful and serve[s] to reinforce their positions in society” (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006, p. 854). In this present study, Frank, a participant, said it was powerful for him to “twist” stereotypes that he said were “ignorant simplifications” about him and his peers.

Depicting the trajectory of educational growth in a group context, Trifonas (2006) states that the educational task is “the completion of the subject, what it is and what it could be, in its self and in its relations with others” (p. 104, italics in original). To “complete” themselves, youth used this study as an educational
laboratory to analyze their own situations. Their “materials” were their life experiences, needs and interests. At stake was the potential for transformation of self, peers and broader communities.

Some youth commented on how their “educational laboratory” led them to deeper learning about their issues of interest. In the context of extreme transience in a youth shelter, for instance, a large number of participants shared that they knew very little about the lived circumstances of most of their peers in the shelter. Devon, a participant, elaborates, “I minded my business here [in the shelter]. I had no idea that youth homelessness is so complex. Hearing the different ways people got here [to the shelter] shook me.”

McTaggart (1991) notes that participatory action research “involves a systematic learning process in which people act deliberately, though remaining open to surprises and responsive to opportunities” (p. 176). A few youth, however, clung to their beliefs even in the context of competing ideas. One youth who was physically abused by his father, for instance, was adamant that physical punishment produces a disciplined young person. Some of his peers contested this and provided lived examples of physical discipline veering into abuse, while others shared non-physical means of disciplining children; nonetheless this young man would not budge from his belief. Most, however, were keen on using the research as a tool to discover new ideas and evidence from their peers, their experience, and from their own research.
**Open-mindedness in education.** To be effective researchers in a PAR project, the young people discussed the quality of mind researchers should have. When Rasheed asserted that effective researchers need “an open mind” to avoid conducting biased “research” a number of youth nodded their heads in agreement. The young peoples’ open-mindedness was particularly evident when they explored the theme of parenting and youth homelessness. Although many of the youth had, in varying degrees and combinations, suffered physical and emotional abuse and neglect from parents, they remained open-minded while exploring this topic. They did not prejudice parents and guardians as uniformly abusive, or as even solely responsible for youth homelessness. The youth did not, however, excuse or mitigate parent(s)’ physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and neglect, but a number of young people did reflect on and share how their own behavior may have exacerbated conflict in dysfunctional homes. As an example, a number of youth in the study came from single parent homes, and while thinking about “parenting and youth homelessness” they began to reflect on and discuss the stresses of their mothers regarding managing work and caring for children on their own.

McTaggart (1994) elaborates on a central outcome of action research and indeed of education: the possibility to act “differently as a result of progressively learning from experience” (p. 315). A number of the young people changed after participating in this project; more specifically, they were more aware of their ability to act on the world based on their own interests, research and insights. As the three young people in this study who left homelessness behind shared, the study helped
them connect their imagination with possibility, which they said was valuable as they strived to move forward with their lives.

After partaking in this intensive study, a number of youth shared that they had a much deeper education about a spectrum of issues confronting homeless youth, including dysfunctional homes and myriad risks to health, body, and spirit when on the streets, and a better understanding of the protective resources available to them. Derek summarizes, “The research developed my mind. By hearing about so many different issues in homelessness we were exposed to a lot more life experience in the research than outside of it.” The study indeed proved to be an educational laboratory.

**Action: a critical aspect of participatory action research.** With research-informed action as an outcome of its process, PAR differentiates itself from other forms of academic research. Describing the inextricable coupling of research and action when subjects systematically investigate their lifeworlds, Rahman (2008/09) notes that in PAR “action unites, organically, with research” (p. 49). Maguire (1987) details PAR’s emphasis on action: “the purpose of participatory research is not merely to describe and interpret social reality, but to radically change it” (p. 28). In PAR, when the participants determine through reflection, discussion, and research which problems most oppress them, they want to act. Consistent with Lewin’s theory, a major goal of a PAR project is action: to actualize some type of “improvement or change” to a group or to a social situation.
(McTaggart, 1991, p. 170) based on the research participants acting as agents of their own improvement.

There is a two-fold nature of change for participants in PAR that is premised on “changing both individuals and the cultures of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 172). Derek comments on the changes in himself from this PAR project: “As I heard how others dealt with their struggles in homelessness, I developed a deeper understanding of the world and how to cope better in it.” A few youth said that before they could change anyone else, they had to change themselves. “It’s more believable that way,” Amir, a participant said. With the potential for profound levels of change to transpire, particularly at the individual level, rushing a PAR project could undermine the organic nature of this work. Imposing an external timeline on a project contests whom the project belongs to, and can breed cynicism among the participants.

In the social sciences, the turn to action as a central research outcome is elucidated by Reason (2006):

To make the action turn is to revision our view of the nature and purpose of social science. Because all human beings are participating actors in their world, the purpose of inquiry is not primarily to describe or interpret our world, to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, to deconstruct taken-for-granted realities, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action so that inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the ecosystems of which they are a part (p. 188).

As Reason (2006) asserts, the focus of conventional social science should be to serve the “flourishing of humans and communities” through action, rather than
merely describ[ing] or interpret[ing] our world.” Reason (2006) suggests a need for new approaches such as participatory action research that is utilized in this present study.

A number of long-standing problems that jeopardize homeless youths’ lives and well-being have been well documented. Given the gravity of these problems, there is a necessity to turn to an action orientation that incorporates the youths’ voices and ideas regarding problems such as: suicide attempt rates of 20-40% (Kidd, 2003); mortality rates that are 11 times higher than their non-homeless peer group (Roy et al., 2004) and high rates of depression and mental health challenges (Edidin et al., 2012; Kidd & Carroll, 2007). With the well-being and lives of these young people at stake, there is urgency to utilize new research-informed action that incorporates the youths’ agency, engagement and insights.

In PAR, participants use an “inside out” approach to generate action strategies that are governed by their needs, interests and priorities. Freire (1970/2006) elaborates on the transformative nature of such an approach: “Subjects [who] meet to name the world in order to transform it” (p. 167, italics in original). After prioritizing their themes and researching them further, and interviewing individuals who could add insight to their research, the young people took action by generating artistic responses to their preferred research themes. They chose to represent their findings with the play “The Other Side of the Door,” written by one participant during this study and providing one of the focal points of this research (as detailed in Chapter 5).
During their consideration of which artform to choose, the youth assessed its potential for inspiring action that might lead to social change among broader publics. Amber, a participant said that she and her peers felt “out of community,” and they desired to use an artwork that could help them feel “more in community.” More specifically, the youth said that if the public learned more about them, and how they became homeless, and their subsequent difficulties, perhaps some might alter their stereotypes and stigmatizing behaviors. They also wanted an action strategy that would maximize the amount of youth involved in producing the artwork, which they said could help improve their lives and situations.

In this present study, youth pored over different possibilities for action, such as presenting “The Other Side of The Door” in a number of different venues including schools, as detailed in chapter 5. They hoped their artwork and subsequent discussions about it would serve as protective resources to young people in their struggles to change their life circumstances. More specifically, they said that performing the play to youth shelters, secondary schools, parents, law schools, schools of social work, psychology and criminology, juvenile courts and corrections services, community agencies, religious organizations and other diverse publics could mitigate some of the stereotypes and stigma they regularly confront, and help them build social capital as well. As will be shown in the arts chapter, the young people also took action by presenting key scenes in the play to the youth, staff, and board of directors at the shelter where the research was conducted.

Unlike other participatory action research groups where members may have some geographical proximity to one another, facilitating sustained action, in this
study, the youth have disbanded. In a transient state of homelessness, other than the three young people I mentor, none have left any forwarding information. This impacts the ability for continued action; nonetheless, I am in contact with the playwright and we have attracted a producer and a director to help ensure that with appropriate resources and funding “The Other Side of the Door” is staged.

**Conclusion**

Participatory action research served as an empowering methodology for the young people in this study. The activity of the youth in it helped facilitate their intellectual, personal, and interpersonal growth. By their own desire, they generated “living knowledge” in three central areas regarding youth homelessness, including courageously sharing how they identify and cope with the stereotyping and stigmatization in their various lifeworlds. Based on the play “The Other Side of the Door” and their work throughout this project, they also focused on “who is a homeless youth” and the relationship of parenting to youth homelessness.

The larger significance of this study demonstrates not that these youth are incapable or unmotivated, but that they lack the systemic, structured and accessible resources to help them move forward with their lives. Hall’s model of PAR that represents “research, education and action” is one that engaged the youth, and they seized the opportunity to embark in PAR work in these three areas.

In this PAR project, youth did much more than contribute to prearranged topics that might benefit the researcher, but not themselves. The participants seriously reflected on their lifeworlds, prioritized their research themes, and
carefully considered the action from their research findings and artworks. Their research “gaze” contributes new insights into how they perceive and cope with stereotyping and stigmatization in their various lifeworlds, which is the focus of the next chapter. In it, the young people share their theories and ideas about stereotyping and stigmatization, and imagine some ways that others might act differently to them, based on a better understanding of who they are as individuals while they struggle for dignity, respect and inclusion.
Chapter 4: They Think We’re “Scum”—Homeless Youth Analyze Their Experiences of Stereotyping and Stigmatization

They did a study on the perceptions of society for homeless people and it didn’t look good. Like they do not perceive people who are in bad situations as deserving. They’re like, ‘yeah we should help them but we think they're scum.’ That’s pretty much what the report said.6

*Amber, a participant in the present study, commenting on a report about public perceptions of homeless people.*

Homeless youth are multiply marginalized in their various lifeworlds, confronting stereotyping and stigmatization within their families, at school, in the community, at work, while applying for housing, and sometimes even at the shelters in which they stay. Indeed, the stereotypes are so persuasive—and pervasive that some youth in this current study subscribed to them before they too found themselves in homelessness. Besides struggling with the effects of these demeaning social constructs, these youth are then re-victimized as responsible for their homelessness—a circular process that compounds their estrangement.

In this PAR study, youth generated scores of research themes but prioritized stereotyping and stigmatization, social constructs and behaviours which they reflected on, researched, and theorized about in their multiple lifeworlds. Because of the damaging impact of these social constructs on their life chances and prospects,

6 Amber’s quotation is more fully discussed on page 103.
these young people were motivated to alter these widely held views about them. Accordingly, in this PAR project, the youth theorized the causes of stereotyping and stigmatization, and conceived ideas to try and mitigate them at source.

The young people’s choice of stereotyping and stigmatization as their prioritized research theme emerged out of a rigorous process, with progressively more advanced forms of research in a context of critical conversations amongst the youth themselves, secondary research they conducted, culminating in primary research when the youth interviewed experts as part of their primary research. Stereotyping and stigmatization realize a key outcome of participatory action research: surfacing the prioritized, intimate, “felt” and “hidden” experiences of homeless young people in their various lifeworlds. This “new knowledge” underpins a broader goal of PAR: to try and effect social change through the youths’ research-informed action strategies.

Metaphorically speaking, each theme that the young participants generated created an individual piece of a jigsaw puzzle. The 107 themes they conceived formed a holistic picture of their varied lifeworlds. They then voted on a single “piece”—a theme that had the most urgency to them. They showed courage in selecting stereotyping and stigmatization. At a time of their choosing, a number of young people recalled painful memories and stressful emotional states as they “unpacked” and analyzed these social constructs and stigmatizing behaviors. By sharing how these social constructs made them feel Othered, demeaned, and “less than,” the youth explored arduous emotional terrain.
The chapter utilizes a dialogue between the actual words of the youth, and scholars who have theorized the mechanisms, social function, and coping mechanisms of the stereotyped and stigmatized.

**Stereotyping and Stigmatization: A Gap in the Literature**

The research literature is virtually devoid of homeless youth’s thoughts about stereotyping and stigmatization as generated in a participatory study defined by these young people’s ideas, interests, and goals. Kidd (2007) notes, “Despite the powerful and pervasive social stigma faced by homeless youth, it remains an overlooked topic in the research literature” (p. 292). More generally, existing research says little about how homeless youth experience and understand their worlds and how these experiences affect their coping strategies (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). As well, little has been written of the relationships that characterize these young people’s social lives (Paradise & Cauce, 2002) or of their “behavior, psychiatric functioning... and social networks” (Edidin et al., 2012, p. 369). In other words, there is scant scholarly literature exploring how these young people perceive and deal with negative social constructs and behaviors of mainstream societies towards them. The data and findings of this study help address these gaps in the research literature.

Rayburn and Guittar (2013) contend that academic research should prioritize the lived experience of the homeless from the perspective of the homeless themselves. Accordingly, this current study utilizes the participant’s own words as they share their personal and seldom-discussed thoughts and reflections about
stereotyping and stigmatization in their various lifeworlds. Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009) prioritize addressing stereotyping and stigmatization from “unpacking” larger-scale macro forces: “[T]he unique social and cultural processes that create stigma in the lived worlds of the stigmatized should be the first focus of our efforts to combat stigma” (p. 418). In this chapter, the youth “unpack” the “social and cultural processes” fostering stereotyping and stigmatization, while detailing the effects of these social constructs on them. They share their coping strategies, and actions they think might mitigate these social constructs.

**Stereotyping and Stigmatizing Homeless Youth**

In the quotation cited at the beginning of this chapter, Amber, a youth in the research study, relates a key mechanism of stigmatization—shunning the Other. The term stigma is derived from a practice in ancient Greece in which a “slave, a criminal, or a traitor” was cut or burnt on the skin (Goffman, 1963). These visible marks signified the stigmatized person’s danger to the community, warning the public of a potential threat. A person so “polluted” should be shunned, especially in public spaces. Kleinman (2010) notes that individuals who breach “social norms and obligations” are stigmatized and designated an “other” or a “non-person” (The Harvard Mental Health Letter, p. 7). Amber, in the quotation above, explains how stigmatization enforces Otherness: although the homeless are in “bad situations,” mainstream groups, by refusing to assist them, perpetuate their marginalization.

The concept of stereotype derives from two Greek words—stereos conveying “solid,” and typos, signifying “the mark of a blow” or more commonly “a model.”
Stereotypes are essentially “solid models” (Schneider, 2004, p. 8) or a means of projecting adverse qualities onto others (Schneider, 2004), or unfavourable qualities that we fear or reject in ourselves but ascribe to others (Allport (1954/1979). In an educational context, Lund (2011) defines stereotypes as “harmful labels placed on young people”... that “stand unproblematically for a simple and convenient grouping of any number of complex social characteristics or demographic qualities” (p. 256). A youth in the study spoke of stereotypes as a kind of “shorthand for people who don’t want to jumble their brains too much.”

In our discussion of stereotyping, Amber, a participant, provides a succinct definition “a stereotype is like applying what they believe that you are, just based on a situation or your race or your sex.” A number of youth nodded in agreement to Amber’s description; many of the young people cited instances where they encountered stereotypes that were projected onto them from unknowing or ignorant others. The chapter explores how the young people resist and contest these attitudes and behaviors, as well as other instances when they have limited resources, options and emotional resources to try and mitigate these disparaging social constructs.

“Crude and rude.” The stereotypes that the youth encountered spared no aspect of their characters or being—including their health, hygiene, physical bodies, personal appearance, motivations, moral standards, and character. As a means of resistance, in the following dialogue from the study, the youth strived to position themselves “outside” of the stereotypes by referring to themselves with the third
person “they” rather than the more inclusive “we.” In the following, the young people provide an in-depth, personal account of the stereotypes with which many members of the public regard them in their various lifeworlds:

Kisha: It’s that homeless are supposed to look and be a certain way. It’s like you actually have to look homeless.

Kisha: They don’t listen.

Aleysha: Because they’re rebellious

Kisha: They’re rebellious yeah.

Amber: They have it easy.

Adrieekah: Huh?

Amber: They have it easy.

Adrieekah: The looks—like the way they present themselves.

Adrieekah: Like homeless people have an eating disorder.

Amber: Or like anemic.

Adrieekah: Not anemic, I mean anorexic.

Amber: Yeah, like you look bones.

Adrieekah: They’re all drug users and alcoholics. Well, that’s the reason they became homeless.

Kofi: Dropout.

Frank: They’re lazy.

Amber: What about panhandlers?

Frank: And committing crimes.

Adrieekah: Like there’s lack of education.

Amber: Maybe their mental capacity?

Adrieekah: They have a mental illness, they’re going mental.

Frank: We’re crude, we’re rude.

Adrieekah: Yeah, rude.

Frank: No manners.

Adrieekah: Um… homeless people are mentally ill.

Adrieekah: Homeless people, they’re the result of poor choices.

DG: Poor choices?
Adrieekah: Many teens that get kicked out, it’s always their own fault.
Adrieekah: They deserve it.
DG: Hmmm.
Adrieekah: Homeless people choose not to work.
DG: Oh.
Adrieekah: And homelessness is freedom and a life of leisure.

The magnitude of the stereotypes in so many facets of these youths’ lives took me aback. The youth said that the stereotypes cast responsibility on themselves for their homelessness, due to projected inadequacies and deficits. They are imagined to be irresponsible—lacking not only intelligence, but also the self-respect or self-control to care for themselves properly. Blaming the victim for homelessness, however, ignores dangerous and long-established factors in the home that can overwhelm a youth’s ability to cope or trigger the youth’s active rejection of the home situation (Kulik et al., 2011).

Unlike the stereotypes that youth flee the streets for a life of freedom, or because of their own inability to cope, youth abandon their homes for various complex reasons (Altena, Kater & Wolf, 2010; Haber & Toro, 2004), many of which are prompted by the family, rather than from individual circumstances. They may escape from parental figures who are physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive (Bender, et al., 2010; Hudson, Nyamathi & Sweat, 2008; Kelly & Caputo, 2007), rigid and intolerant (Alvi, Scott & Stanyon, 2010), or who are incarcerated (Tyler, 2006). Many youth have difficulty adjusting to a new, blended family (Mallett et al., 2010) particularly one with violence and abuse (McRee, 2008). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth are sometimes evicted from their homes, or
believe flight is their only recourse (Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2012). In my experience working with many hundreds of homeless youth, and as corroborated in the research literature, in a minority of instances, a youth’s “behavioral problems... present enormous challenges to parenting” (Haber & Toro, 2004, p. 134) and provoke an early exit from home.

The stereotypes that the youth cited above—being “crude and rude,” lazy, mentally limited, and wayward—were not demonstrated during this study. Instead, the participants used their agency, creativity and intelligence to research, analyze, and act on the themes they prioritized. Had the stereotypes been applicable, these youth, who were mostly out of school, would have struggled in a rigorous, complex PAR project that depended on their participation, their primary and secondary research and their insights. Had these youth embodied the stereotypes about themselves, they might have lost interest, acted out, or denigrated the process, other participants, or me. Instead, the participants seized the opportunity to present their personal views and experiences—their lifeworlds—and articulated five major stereotypes about youth homelessness, including some held by shelter staff, and others they held themselves, both before and after becoming homeless.

Dirty appearance. Clichés of the filthy and unkempt street person are enduring constructs in the public imagination, as Adrieekah, a talented fashion-designer relates: “Someone homeless would probably come up as someone wearing rags, you know. Their shoes have holes, or they’re not wearing shoes.
They smell, there’s dirt on their skin, their hair is uncombed.” Their physical appearance—just one element in a spectrum of stereotypes about this population—is found wanting and unsanitary. In the city of my research, however, shelters have abundant donations of clothing that they offer to their young residents. Many of these youth exhibited personal flair, and were perplexed by stereotypes about their appearance. “Am I supposed to wear holes in my T---shirt, sit down in the corner begging for money?” asks Kisha.

Kisha protests the stereotype that characterizes her and her peers as “begg[ars]” who are so displaced that they sit on a public street that people use their bodies, bicycles, skateboards or cars to move on. According to this stereotype, passive youth are dislocated and marginalized in physical space, dependent for their survival on a passing stranger’s whim. Contrary to the stereotype of the unemployed homeless, dependent on others to survive, in this study, a number of the young people had part-time, or in some instances full-time employment.

**Sleeping like cattle in a barn.** The scope of stereotypes that the youth articulated extends to their sleeping habits as well. The following dialogue captures the youths’ resentment and shame about the stereotype that they sleep in a single large room, housed like cattle in a barn. Note that the shelter where this PAR project was conducted in and others around the city are subdivided into rooms that sleep two or three.

Aleysha: People always say stupid things like “Do you guys sleep in a big gym together?”

Devon: Dead.
Aleysha: Are you serious?
Kofi: Some people are ignorant still.
Aleysha: I don’t really want to talk to this person because I really don’t want to hear the bullshit, so.
Devon: That’s why I can’t tell anybody [that I’m homeless]— because I’m going to get laughed at. You know how embarrassing that is?
Aleysha: Embarrassing.

To deal with someone who perpetuates such a stereotype, Aleysha says she doesn’t “really want to talk to this person” signifying a type of reverse marginalization. While the mainstream marginalizes these youth through stereotypes, the youth choose to ignore those who talk “bullshit” about their situation and circumstances. Even in this context, Aleysha speaks with trepidation: “I don’t really want to talk to this person” (italics mine). Link and Phelan (2001) elucidate the relationship of power to enforce and perpetuate stigmatization:

… stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination (p. 367).

Reverse marginalization amounts to these youth withdrawing from those who offend them, since they lack adequate power to stigmatize those who aggrieve them (see also Kidd, 2007). Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) define the consequences of this powerlessness: “Because stigmatized individuals lack power, their ability to protect their sense of self may be severely compromised” (p. 25). Accordingly, many
young people spoke of devising strategies to try to minimize stigmatizing encounters.

**Laziness and apathy.** Youth contested the stereotype that they do nothing and lead a life of leisure. Kisha, a commission winning designer says, “... some people are just hard-headed. They don’t care. They look at youths like they’re lazy, and don’t want to do anything for ourselves, when we’re really talented. And they haven’t seen that.” Under a stereotype of being “talent[less],” these youths’ self-worth is questioned, assailing their potential to actualize themselves—their basis for optimism and hope. Cooper and White (2004) note that homogeneous stereotypes become “institutionalized” and are accordingly “accepted unquestioningly by members of society” (p. 111). The youth in this study were realistic, however, about the “hard-headed” people who promulgate these stereotypes and who are unlikely to change their views either.

Since few members of society have sustained contact with these young people, the general public might well understand them in terms of a more familiar “type,” such as homeless adults, who may exhibit substance abuse problems, mental illness (Haber & Toro, 2004), criminal behavior, or seeming disinterest and indolence. Such “traits” support general stereotypes about homeless populations that can be projected onto homeless youth. Disparaging judgments about the homeless also prevail since the homeless in public have difficulty concealing behaviors that would otherwise remain hidden in the privacy of their homes (Parsell, 2011). Amidst the paltry knowledge of these young people among many in
the public, and negligible representations in mainstream discourse and media, there are scant opportunities for counter-narratives to these stereotypes and stigma.

The participants were particularly irked by the leisure stereotype since they resided at a shelter which enforced a code of conduct, mandatory chores, and firm rules about waking and sleeping times. In the following dialogue, they vent their frustration:

Frank: We’re run on a schedule. They tell us when we eat, they tell us when to go outside.
Adrieekah: Yeah, it’s not freedom.
Frank: They tell us when to sleep, when to use the computer, when to turn on the TV, when to do whatever we want. With this structure, there is no freedom.
Yasmin: I do more chores here [in the shelter] than I ever did at home.

Strict shelter rules may contrast with the chaotic and dysfunctional environment some of these youth experienced at home (Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Paradise & Cauce, 2002; Schaffner, 1999/2013). Contrary to the life-of-leisure stereotype, young people in a shelter must tangibly demonstrate to their caseworkers their plans to move forward with work or school. The stereotype of indolence contradicts the resilience, courage, and effort these young people display in coping with often overwhelming life circumstances.

The youth delved further into what underpins the laziness stereotype.

Yasmin says,

When people say homeless people are too lazy, that mostly derives in older people that see something on the streets that never changes. When I was younger I thought, ‘why can’t they get a job? Why can’t they get an
apartment? But now that I’m in the streets I see it’s not just that they’re lazy, they just have their own stuff; they have their own reasons. But other people outside the shelter system don’t understand that.

While articulating the shifts in her own perspective, Yasmin shares that one has to be on the inside to understand what people can’t—or won’t see from the outside. Ray, who completed two years of university, pursues a similar line of thought while reflecting on the stereotype of wayward homeless youth keen on partying:

Like you’re just some nomad of the street, going from party to couch to the shelter for meals and stuff. People outside the shelter system don’t recognize that people are in it for the long haul and are trying to do things with their lives.

In contrast with the laziness and apathy stereotypes, Ray asserts that many youth pursuing some kind of long-term plan to address education and career goals. The youth’s attempts to improve his or her circumstances challenge stereotypes that characterize a supposedly fixed person—someone who is condemned to have a “spoiled” identity (Goffman, 1963). Beliefs based on a cursory, decontextualized glimpse into these people’s lives disregard the fact that these youth are homeless at present, a situation that they object to strongly. None of the young people I have met romanticize it, either.

**Shelter staff stereotyping youth.** The stereotypes these youth face are pervasive, and are even held by some who work in a supervisory capacity with these youth in a crisis-relief shelter:
Adrieekah: A lot of stereotyping has gone on in this shelter.
Amber: Celeste⁷ used to talk down to us like children.
Frank: That’s a stereotype.
Amber: Yeah. But most of us are like in our twenties, so that’s...
Frank: Ridiculous.
Amber: Inappropriate.

I have observed some shelter staff who have a good rapport with the youth; they are typically adept at balancing respect and compassion while modelling clear boundaries. Some others, though, have authoritarian personalities, which may evoke inflexible and unyielding parents or guardians with whom the youth felt unsafe (Abdalian, 2004). An authoritarian worker can be dismissive of these young people as individuals with particular needs, interests, and personalities. Accordingly, Frank and Amber scorn Celeste’s exclusionary, and insulting discourse of “talk[ing] down [to us] ... like children” as “ridiculous” and “inappropriate.” Some youth added that certain staff “played games” with them such as pretending to be busy, when they were in need of transit tokens to get to their work or medical appointments on time. By having to wait, and possibly be late for their appointments, the youth shared that they felt “helpless, inadequate and lesser.”

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⁷ Celeste is a pseudonym for a shelter staff
**Participants stereotype other homeless people.** A number of youth themselves held derogatory stereotypes of homeless people, and were forthcoming admitting them. Amir, for instance, subscribed to stereotypical views that mirrored those propagated by his “affluent parents” whom Amir said “felt superior to others.” He says,

> My whole life I looked down upon it [homelessness]. I said, look at me, I had tons of money. Homeless people are like poor; they’re a piece of shit. That’s what I thought, but I’m completely different now. I know it’s not like that.

For Amir, becoming homeless provided him a context and an opportunity to re-evaluate his stereotypes about the capabilities and value of a population he once scorned. His reflections on his experiences in his new homeless lifeworlds forced him to re-evaluate his family’s beliefs. He said he was “shocked” when he realized that if he clung to his parents’ beliefs, he would be disrespecting himself—and his peers.

Stacey, of smaller stature, had to confront her stereotypes of being attacked in a shelter: “When I first thought of a shelter, I freaked out—all these crazy people who want to fight. I only heard of a shelter before that two times. But my first night was ten times better than I thought.” Based on her fears, Stacey dreaded being physically confronted by other shelter youth, but after having spent a night at a shelter, her fears subsided. As with the case of Amir above, Stacey’s narrative of diminished fear and dispelled stereotypes is replicated among many who meet and interact with those they previously marginalized (Alexander & Link, 2003; LeBel, 2008).
Once homeless, these youth began to experience, and reflect on the structural impediments constraining their opportunities. They realized that homeless youth are not an exotic Other, but individuals who struggle with circumstances that can befall anyone. Adrieekah shares her more nuanced understanding: “I used to judge without knowing homeless people, like stereotype. And now that I see what it’s... I’ve learned not to stereotype anymore. I know what it really means to be homeless.” Several other youth related how their own circumstances in homelessness forced them to rethink their ideas about the people who comprise this population. Jasmin said, “I never imagined I’d actually be homeless so I had no clue about the people in it. I did a lot of learning—and quick.”

Not all stereotypes about homeless youth held by the young participants disappeared when they found themselves homeless. Fuelled by these youths’ internalization of stereotyping and stigmatization (Parker & Aggleton, 2003), some participants clung to dismissive attitudes towards their own peer group. Devon, for instance, says, “I feel so guilty for some reason. Like how do I know all these people that you think you shouldn’t know?” (itals mine). By using “you” instead of the first-person pronoun, Devon speaks “outside” of himself and appropriates the voice of a stigmatizer. With this discourse, he internalizes—and perpetuates the stigma that as the marginalized ‘Other,’ homeless youth are not worth knowing.

Beyond Devon’s guilty feelings about his peer group and himself, these youth also held demeaning stereotypes of others.
Kofi: When I look at Natives, I assume they drink.

Amber: I assume panhandlers will buy drugs if you give them money. They can’t buy drugs on food, that’s why I feed them.

For individuals who struggle with demeaning stereotypes, disparaging others provides a means to enhance self-esteem by “placing others lower than themselves in the social hierarchy” (Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004, p. 37). Many youth with a West Indies cultural background in this study, for example, promulgated strident and demeaning stereotypes about gays and lesbians that they claimed originated in the Bible.

In sum, the young people articulated some of the common stereotypes and misperceptions about them: they are dirty; sleep in quarters suitable for cattle; are lazy and apathetic; and criminally orientated or afflicted with mental health problems. Even some shelter staff perpetuate stereotypes and act as if they are dealing with “children” instead of with young adults. Stereotypes about homeless youth are largely unchallenged in mainstream discourse; indeed, they are so pervasive that some of these young people themselves also propagate them prior to fleeing home. Finally, some of these young people themselves perpetuate stereotypes about other marginalized groups or those whom are Othered.

**Consequences of Stereotypes**

Stereotypes about homeless youth affect many aspects of these young people’s personal and social worlds, both before and during their homelessness. These youths’ attempts to re-unite with family can be compromised, and their
emotional upheaval often reflects their tenuous circumstances being accepted by others, and at times, by themselves. With social inclusion at stake, the youth devised strategies to conceal their status in public, the workplace and in school. Amidst pervasive stereotyping by landlords, securing affordable and safe housing is especially problematic, a situation that mires these young people further in homelessness.

**Pre-homeless markers of behavior.** In a perverse manner, these stereotypes are so widespread that they markedly influence the behavior of youth who are about to become homeless. Derek elaborates, “You suggest it to yourself your whole life that homeless youth are this way, so when you become a homeless youth you have a whole bunch of suggestions about what to do.” Derek’s reference to hearing these stereotypes “your whole life” suggests that their persuasiveness overshadows alternative narratives about homeless youth. Despite their speciousness, stereotypes seem irrefutable to adherents; they can always be “proved,” but are seldom disproved, even when contradicted by empirical evidence (Corrigan & Penn, 1999). Moreover, stereotypes affect both cognition and behavior; as Derek indicates: “you have a whole bunch of suggestions about what to do.”

**Marginalization from family.** Once on the street or in a shelter, the problems that led to the rupture with family typically remain unresolved; otherwise these youth would have some type of living arrangement with their families or maintain some form of contact with them (Gaetz, 2004). Furthermore, once these
youth are on the streets, communication with family can be emotionally volatile, and sporadic as a result. Ray placed much hope on finally speaking with his family who had shunned him, but failed to gain any understanding about his situation from his family and sister. He shares that his parents and sister were too steeped in stigmatizing views of the homeless to consider an alternative perspective of him. He says,

I've communicated with my family, even my middle sister, who's 22. There's just an unwillingness for them to understand. I can't hang onto that dream of them understanding what this is like. They just don't have that life skill, or those life experiences for them to understand.

Male: They can't understand, they can't hear, right? They're like, ‘we’re middle class and it’s your fault you put yourself in that position.’

To Ray, his parents and sister appear unwilling or unable to empathize with his homeless predicament. Such families can absolve themselves of blame by re-victimizing the homeless member, accusing him of “put[ting] yourself in that position.” Severed connections between homeless youth and their families may also result from families which strive to conceal their relationship with a stigmatized family member, or from their attempts to persuade that member to “cover” that condition (Phelan, Bromet & Link, 1998). Having lost their sense of “belonging” to and in a family, many youth shared that they tried to “cover” their homelessness in public, especially to avoid pervasive stereotyping and stigmatization.

**Emotional impact of stereotypes.** Ray’s story about the futility of trying to get his family to understand his circumstances in homelessness resonated with
many other participants. As a group, we decided to further explore the impact of these stereotypes, particularly their emotional toll:

DG: Can I role-play with you about some stereotypes?
Adrieekah: Yeah.
DG: If I say, hey Adrieekah... like you're X, you fill in the blank, whatever the ignorant stereotype is about homeless youth. How does this make you feel?
Adrieekah: If someone told me I'm stupid, they're just describing themselves. Like I really don’t care if someone...
DG: Okay. I meant more if I was using character traits or whatever, you know.
Adrieekah: I would probably be like really pissed off.
DG: I see.
Frank: ...they have different views on things or just laugh at society in general.
Amber: Embarrassment. Especially if someone overhears it... like, you don’t want them to come up with that kind of perception of you.
Adrieekah: And depression.

The youth describe disparate strategies to cope with these social constructs (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Adrieekah rebuts a stereotype that she is “stupid” as a more appropriate description of the accuser. Frank dismisses stereotypers as cynics who “laugh” off everything—and everyone. Coping mechanisms aside, stereotyping exacts a substantial emotional toll, including “embarrassment,” and depression, the latter from a youth internalizing and projecting contempt and hostility onto herself. Some youth said that they already feel “lousy” about being homeless, and that stereotyping and stigmatization makes them feel “even worse.”
The emotional impact of these labels is devastating, even on youth who report having a positive outlook. In the following, Phoenix describes how self-disparagement from his homelessness overshadowed everything else:

When I first came to the shelter, I felt like I let myself down, hit the bottom of the barrel. And I always think to look up. But like you are down. You feel at a loss with talking to family and friends.
You don’t feel really good towards getting a job. Like you want a job but you feel nobody will hire you because you feel embarrassed living in a shelter.

“Without options,” he added, “people feel lesser.” Phoenix divulges that the stereotypes and resulting stigma are so demeaning that even as a skilled and experienced construction worker, he feels reluctant applying for work. Even in public spaces away from the shelter, the stigma persists, he says, such that he says “nobody will hire you.” Paradoxically, in a context of trying to project confidence and competence while seeking employment, Phoenix, and other youth in similar situations, describe feelings of dread and anxiety about their homelessness being discovered. As a result, they say that they are “without options” and feel “lesser” as a result. Regardless of their abilities, aptitudes and experience, stereotyping and stigmatization assails the young people’s self-concept—their belief in their own worthiness as productive human beings.

**Concealment strategies.** Given their difficulties contesting stereotypes, and their damaging emotional impact on them, the young people devised strategies to conceal their homelessness. Goffman (1963) notes that a critical device in stigma management is to keep it “invisible” wherever feasible. Goffman also notes that
while many stigmatized individuals remain concealed from the general public, the “stigmatized community” often detects its members. One youth in this study, however suggests that recognition is not always welcome among other homeless youth. In this case, Devon revealed that he had stayed in several shelters, and when out in public occasionally encountered a youth who has stayed in the same ones. He describes such an encounter:

Acquaintance: Oh, don’t I know you from Shelter X?
Devon: No, no you don’t.
Acquaintance: Don’t I know you from Shelter Y?
Devon: No, no you don’t!

Devon sums up his feelings: “Sometimes you feel embarrassed walking down the street. Some [other shelter youth] aren’t afraid to say that they live in a shelter—in public. You’re in public!” The desire to conceal one’s plight from others suffering the same stigma is not unique to homeless youth. Goffman (1963) articulates the uncertainty facing the stigmatized: “To display or not display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where” (p. 42). In such instances, an individual determines his “social distance” to avoid or to interact with certain individuals (LeBel, 2008). In this study, Devon and other youth spoke of their dread about their homeless status being detected in public spaces. In these instances, they said that their Othered status makes it intolerable for them to even be seen.

These youth not only want to avoid peers from a shelter where they stayed, but virtually anyone, including previous high school acquaintances. Ray shares his fear about being “found out” by a former high school friend:
I saw somebody I went to high school with and I didn’t feel motivated, or bad about not saying ‘Hi’ to him. Because, it’s going to be, ‘Oh how have you been, the last thing I heard you were at this place, [a shelter] right?’ (italics mine)

Ray desperately wants to avoid a stigmatizing encounter, but detaching from or terminating long-standing acquaintances only exacerbates his isolation, entrenching him further in homelessness. Phoenix, a well-paid worker, also concealed his homelessness from a friend that he saw on a bus:

I didn’t want to tell one of my buddies what’s going on in my life, because my drug addiction—I haven’t been able to save money. He just bought a new house. I could have had one by now. It’s embarrassing. What do I tell my buddy who bought a house while I live in a shelter?

As Ray and Phoenix relate their responses, the disparity in their life circumstances as homeless youth make it distressing to communicate at any level with their pre-homeless friends and acquaintances. Oyserman & Swim, (2001) elaborate: “[the stigmatized] possess an attribute that disqualifies them from full acceptance in the eyes of outgroups or dominant society in general” (p. 2). Unable to address and redress pervasive demeaning constructs, these youth find themselves further alienated, depressed, and adrift from community.

Some youth took extreme measures to hide from others. Ray, who completed several years of post-secondary education, shares how he concealed himself from public recognition during his stay in a shelter located near a post-secondary institution. As he spoke, several participants murmured in agreement, corroborating his feelings of denial and shame:
Being seen in public downtown, outside of the shelter... like I was hiding from somebody. Like I would bust outside, put my hood on all the way up even if it wasn’t raining or snowing. I busted outside with the shades on, and in the courtyard, I would go and hide behind a wall. Someone I know seeing me outside the shelter, having a smoke? That just absolutely terrified me.

The invisibility Ray sought as a shelter resident contrasted with his days in school and university, when he shared a number of instances of his large circles of friends. Now, as part of his marginalization, he is cut off from family, pre-homeless friends, school and the general community around him. A fit and competitive athlete, he related how “terrified” he was to encounter somebody near the shelter he stayed at.

Addressing the material constraints on those who remove themselves from society, Harter et al. (2005) contend that for the hidden homeless “potentialities [are] too often suppressed rather than actualized” (p. 322). At a stage in their lives when young people can benefit from expanding their social networks and opportunities, the young people in this study describe how the shame of stereotyping and stigmatization forces them to retreat inward and hide.

“Passing” at school. While Ray describes his concealment strategies in public, Aleysha shares her strategy of “passing” at school. Goffman (1963) argues that passing is predicated on making one’s stigma invisible: to pass successfully, an individual must conceal her stigma from others except, perhaps, those with a similar stigma. As Aleysha recounts, the failure to pass has dire consequences:

Aleysha: It’s like when something bad happens [in the shelter]—when I go to school, it’s like I just want to sit down and probably look at a wall forever.

laughter from youth
Aleysha: I will sit in the cafeteria, and probably have my hood on because I can't talk to anybody. If there's something wrong, I can't be like, yeah, last night in the shelter, this happened. Because some people, you're in a shelter. Because it's exactly the same way I would think about it before I came here. It's like, 'Ewww, you're homeless.'

Ray: They'll try and step all over you.

Aleysha: Yeah.

Ray: And they'll find a reason to have a conflict. Some people jump on bandwagons. They say 'oh look at this person and look at how good I am, right?' People love to do those things.

Aleysha: I couldn't tell the school I'm at a shelter. They'd probably throw it in my face—if something happened, they'd probably throw it in my face. Like, 'I live at home and you don't.' I could see someone throwing it in your face (italics mine).

Notably in this context, Aleysha speaks three different times about an accusation being thrown in her face. The reference to “face” is significant, as the face is what sees and what is seen. Faces can betray vulnerability, a potentially ruinous cue from young people at risk of stigmatization by their peers. As “face” involves “embodied, physical, and affective process[es],” (Yang, Kleinman, Link, Phelan, Lee & Good, 2007, p. 1530) stigmatization of the bearer of that face can instigate exclusionary practices consistent with “social death.” Despite the personal nature of one’s face, Goffman (1967) argues that it is subject to social withdrawal in the context of stigmatization:

While his social face can be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it” (p. 10).
While trying to advance her education, Aleysha feels Othered and alone. Facing “social death,” she said that she could not “reveal” her homelessness to anyone, for fear of the ridicule and suspicion that would ensue. In a context of stigmatization and stereotyping, she is misunderstood; unable to trust, and stripped of social capital at this school, she “hides.” While “hiding,” she is constrained from building social capital, networks of individuals and peers who comprise close social interactions (Boydell, Goering & Morrell-Bellai, 2000). Commenting on the debilitating impact marginalization has on building social capital, Barker (2013) argues, “Homeless youth are consistently linked to disengagement with traditional social institutions and forms of support (such as family and school) and other pro social forms of social capital (such as community and peer groups)” (parentheses in original; pp. 359-60). Sitting by herself in the cafeteria, cloaked in a hoodie and staring at a blank wall, Aleysha is sealed off physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

The following narrative depicts how stereotyping and stigmatization forced Aleysha, a promising youth in this study to terminate her high school education. She abandoned her schooling not due to intellectual or cognitive deficits but to situational ones as a homeless youth, and identified stereotyping and stigmatization as a root cause. Her story illustrates the devastating impact of these social constructs on her schooling, self-concept, and her social networks.

Aleysha shared that if word ever leaked out to anyone about her homeless status at school, and serious behavioral transgressions occurred among the students at her school, pervasive stereotypes and stigma about homeless youth would make
her a target of accusation and blame by both administrators and peers. Being “singled out” in these ways, she said, was a form of “social death.”

Aleysha revealed another instance of how the stigma of homelessness at school excluded her from friends and community. At the end of each school day, students would excitedly throw out invitations: “come to my place”; others shouted “come to mine.” She said that this everyday ritual starkly reminded her that instead of living in a home with her family, she shared a dwelling with 35 young and often transient strangers, many of whom she barely knew. Before even hearing these invitations, she bolted out the school door, and due to shame and stigma, raced dozens of blocks away in the opposite direction of her shelter. Without anyone at all to confide in, she could no longer bear the cumulative stress and anxiety of hiding her homelessness. She said that she had no other option but to quit school.

Motivated by her leadership in this PAR study, and the keen insights about herself and her peers’ struggles in homelessness that she shared in this project, Aleysha’s long-held desire of finishing high school came into focus. With mentorship from myself and a few others, she eventually left homelessness behind. As part of her plan to leave homelessness, she worked full-time and weekend jobs, so she could have the finances to pay her expenses and finish high school. Of her three senior classes in the arts and sciences needed to graduate, her marks in her first two courses were in the 90s, while she earned 85 in her final subject. She has accepted a position in a credentialed social work program. Her ultimate goal is to become a forensic psychologist. As this narrative demonstrates, the effects of stereotyping and stigmatization forces talented youth, struggling in homelessness, to remain
completely isolated from peers and supports in school. Under the difficult psychological burdens of having to conceal and lie about their situations, they abandon their dreams—and their promising futures as well.

Squashing possibilities for these young people, a “bandwagon” mentality targets, stereotypes, and isolates the other. Ray elaborates, “Some people jump on bandwagons. They say ‘oh look at this person and look at how good I am, right?’ People love to do that.” Ray asserts that mainstream individuals aboard “a bandwagon” are a self-reinforcing entity repudiating Otherness. Trifonas (2003b) explicates how stereotypes fuel a “bandwagon” of belief through “the force of repetition.” Using semiotic discourse, he argues, “a sign can signify only through the force of repetition” (p. 227). Moreover, he says, “Master signs… are always protected within a self-enclosed system of truth and meaning” (p. 229). Functioning like a bandwagon, among a closed loop of “truth and meaning” stereotypes help shape, and reinforce an individual’s corrosive attitudes and exclusionary behavior towards the Other.

**Barriers to housing.** Homeless youth confront formidable challenges trying to leave the streets and shelters: income insecurity, suspicious landlords, and scant affordable and safe social housing. Describing the squalid conditions of what she could afford Amber says: “The places available to me to rent reek of sex and drugs. If I take a place like that, what does that say about me?” Another youth described her shock viewing an apartment in a building where a door to a tenant’s unit was
unhinged. Others protested the dirty and substandard conditions of the housing they viewed.

Kisha, who worked at two different jobs, recounts trying to negotiate a space from a landlord who said, “You’re from a shelter?” How will you pay? You just came from a shelter.” She adds, “They just slap that judgment on you.” “Slapping” evokes an aggressive, hostile physical action, applied to those requiring control, modification, or correction. From this youth’s perspective, the landlord views her stereotypically as an individual who cannot function in her own environment. The stereotype of the dysfunctional homeless is pervasive, as an emergency room doctor notes: “Losing all one’s possessions raises the suspicion that a person is somehow out of control in every way” (Ablow, 1991, p. WH9). Several young people in the study, feeling stuck in homelessness, shared how much they wanted to control something, particularly regarding their own living space.

The youth were dejected—and depressed—about securing low-income housing in a city with abundant expensive condominiums but virtually unattainable “affordable” housing units. Indeed, they connected their dearth of housing opportunities to prejudicial “not in my backyard” social attitudes.

Amber: Maybe people would be more understanding if public housing came up in their area. Maybe that would open up more opportunities so that we’re not afraid to say, ‘I need to be on assistance for now, but I’m planning on... but I’m homeless right now and I want this apartment. Like, they won’t be thinking, ‘this homeless person is going to bring trouble, they’re dirty and won’t pay their rent.’ It will open more opportunities and make us more comfortable actually being open about that.
Housing was a trying issue for these young people who said that their options were limited, and as Amber shared, were degrading and repulsive as well. Participatory action research helps participants imagine what can be; accordingly Amber pines for a landlord who might show some “compassion and understanding” by taking into account her future employment and life plans. In her presentation to her peers about housing, Amber was armed with extensive research from reports, policy papers, statistics and articles that proved how little was being done on the affordable housing front. Her findings resonated deeply with the lived experiences of the youth in the group regarding how little affordable housing is being built in this major eastern Canadian city.

“Breaking” the Stereotypes

Study participants named and then articulated individual responses to the stereotypes and stigmas that they encountered. Some participants asserted that these social constructs were fuelled by ignorance, and voiced their means of resistance to them. The youth then theorized the process of how stereotypes and stigmas are established, and the purposes they serve, before conceiving ideas to try and change them.

The youth theorize marginalization and stereotyping. Although the participants were keen to change stereotypes, they began by theorizing the process of marginalization. Ray encapsulated the exclusion and Otherness resulting from those who are marginalized. Accordingly, he contrasted two different categories—a
mainstream one, and an excluded one which he symbolized by pointing to a corner far from where we were all sat in a basement meeting room in the shelter. Describing the Other, he said, “those people [in the corner] are different than these people over here.” At the core of his definition of marginalization is exclusion, predicated on rudimentary categories of comprehension. Ray elaborates, “I think people want to understand how the world is and how life is. By categorizing things the world makes sense. When things are outside of these categories, the world becomes confusing.”

To Ray, categories are tools of understanding; they help people “make sense” of their world. Accordingly, people ignore disconfirming data about their categories of understanding, lest the world becomes “confusing.” Ray desperately wanted his family to “see him” by grasping his life on the streets, but when they spurned his plea, the family rupture seemed irreparable—and his homelessness inescapable. He could conceive of no other way for them to understand his situation, especially when he learned that stereotypes defined the “borders” of his family’s knowledge; images, beliefs, and concepts “inside the border” were deemed acceptable and reinforced, but those “on the outside” were misunderstood or ignored. “So the person who says the stereotype” Ray theorizes, “has like a way of comprehending things they don’t understand.” Ray, the son of immigrant parents, shared that his parents’ inability to “see him” and accept his version of things became intolerable, eventually leading to a bitter confrontation after which his father “threw” him “away.”
Once they had identified the mechanism of marginalization, the youth theorized the underpinnings and origins of these social constructs.

DG: So where do stereotypes come from? Do stereotypes serve a purpose?

Amber: Like, we brought this [homelessness] upon ourselves.

In summoning the ‘victimize the victim’ stereotype, Amber articulates a model for how stereotyping functions:

And that brings stereotypes about people they don’t interact with every day. I can make all kinds of assumptions about rich people that can’t be challenged because they’re so far removed from me. It’s the same thing in reverse—because they’re so far removed from the consequences of their actions, they just compose their own little thing about what we are as a population. It’s funny because we’re the majority.

Amber theorizes that social distance is an impetus for stereotyping; ignorance of one social group by another induces any number of stereotypes. But Amber notes an irony: although one might expect the majority group to shape public opinion and stereotypes about the marginalized, the reverse is often true: the minority group perpetuates its own stereotypes on those who are “the majority.”

To confront and mitigate these disparaging constructs, the youth brainstormed ideas and conceived some specific, practical strategies.

Amir: You know how I was saying like break the stereotypes?
DG: Yeah.
Amir: Maybe we could write like a list, like teachers, landlords, police, different groups of people and then figure out... What their stereotype might be so we can like help fix it.

Amir’s strategy to “break the stereotypes” implicitly recognizes that stereotypes are social constructions contextualized in time and in space. His proposed “list”
would identify specific stereotypes held by specific individuals such as a landlord, a teacher, or others, and then tailor specific approaches for each. A teacher, for example, may stereotypically project that a youth will have difficulty delivering assignments on time and whose absences may prove disruptive, while a landlord’s stereotype may anticipate sporadic employment.

Frank conceives a solution based on his view that stereotypes are rooted in ignorance and mischaracterizations. As Amir’s experience with homelessness and subsequent insights about this population forced him to alter his pejorative views of this group, so too does Frank’s solution involve an educative approach.

Frank: Stereotypes come from when people aren’t exactly too knowledgeable about what’s going on.

DG: A lack of knowledge.

Frank: So we can give them the knowledge they need to understand what the situation is.

Frank, Amir, and the other participants concurred with Amber’s model: accurate information and “knowledge” can bridge the divide between the “rich” and other groups which have limited understanding of each other’s lived experiences, fueling misunderstandings and misleading stereotypes. Given that these widespread and demeaning social constructs routinely disadvantaged these young people in their various lifeworlds, the youth prioritized these topics, and strived to change them.
Change Through Participatory Action Research

For the study participants, the participatory action research methodology utilized in this project is itself a means of change. Many participants felt respected and safe enough to divulge personal, private, and often difficult to disclose incidents such as those involving stereotyping and stigmatization. Aleysha says,

A lot of people come in here and share things that we never shared with each other and we never really thought we’d share with each other, like how we get here, or our fears, our dreams and hopes—all things that we want.

In PAR, participants may voice seldom-disclosed trauma, hopeful that the critical consciousness that arises from articulating and representing these experiences can inform broader change (Goldberg, 2013). Commenting on the impact of such disclosures among participants, Devon says, “I learned things in this research about youth homelessness that I would have never known.” A number of youth concurred that their understanding of themselves and their situations was profoundly deepened from their work in this project.

During their research into stereotyping and stigmatization, these youth courageously voiced their experiences as the Other. To do so, they critically unpacked “the assumptions undergirding everyday life” (Trifonas, 2003b, p. 223) on an individual and societal level, and critiqued the extreme and fallacious views held about them. As the youth participated in the dialectics of ideas, their self-concept transformed. Reflecting on the empowerment and inclusion he felt through his contributions to the research, Kofi said, “I don't at all feel homeless in this research.
Instead, I feel like an artist.” The project provided a safe space for the young people to imagine—and actualize different aspects of themselves and their situations.

In considering how social attitudes and opinions about homeless youth might change, it is instructive to examine the way the participants themselves reevaluated their own stereotypes. Stacey, for instance, was anxious about having to fight in the shelter, Amir had condemned homeless people as “shit,” and Yasmin harbored stereotypes based on what she, and others, had seen on the street. But the experience of homelessness challenged, and transformed, their pre-existing ideas.

Amber recounts,

Even though I’ve dealt with homeless youth a lot, I had negative stereotypes about them. That they could think so well and have these insights was good. They are more intelligent than I thought.

As with Amir, Yasmin, and Stacey, Amber’s experience in homelessness altered her understanding and her theorizing about this community. By witnessing the critical thinking of the participants in the study, she re-evaluated her views of her peer’s insights and intelligence.

Other measures towards change emerged from this study. Kofi wrote “The Other Side of the Door” a play based on the findings of the research, scenes of which were staged before an engaged audience of shelter youth, staff and board members. Initiatives are being undertaken to generate funds and resources to ensure that the play is performed in front of larger audiences. The staging of the theater play in high schools and in other public venues are other means that these youth have proposed to contest these widely held misconceptions and stereotypes of who they are, what their struggles are, and what they can achieve.
Conclusion

As the youth in this study strive to move forward in their lives, they confront pervasive and demeaning stereotyping and stigmatization at school, when applying for work and housing, and in their other lifeworlds. These social constructs denigrate their characters, intellect, bodies, and overall worth as human beings. To protect their self-esteem, these young people conceal their identities at school, on buses, on public streets, behind shelter walls, and when applying for jobs. For these youth, in such instances, anything is better than “being seen.”

Seeking refuge and solace in the safest place they know—where they are “invisible”—these youth are doubly marginalized. Their marginalization is not solely imposed by others; in hiding, they self-perpetuate their exclusion. At a time of youth struggling to exit homelessness, many of these youth, “feel lesser” and retreat inward and hide. This study has shown youth like Devon refusing to acknowledge a peer on the streets, Ray hiding behind a wall in a downtown shelter, Phoenix feeling too despondent to apply for a job, and Aleysha cloaked in a hoodie staring blankly at a wall in the school cafeteria. In effect, these young people retreat from potentially protective networks of education, housing, family, peers and friends, career and community.

In a context of stereotyping and stigmatization, transgressions against homeless youth have any number of manifestations. A young female in a different city from my research, for instance, recounted how some high-school students swore and threw rocks at her. Further research should investigate the diversity of, and cumulative effects of these transgressions in diverse social, economic and
geographic settings. The data, and findings, from this present study, though, are sufficiently distressing: the forms of marginalization that the youth recounted equate to “social death,” which Kleinman (2010) characterizes as the erasure, non-participation and “other[ness]” of the stigmatized (The Harvard Mental Health Letter, p. 7).

The participants’ insights and analysis in this study contest stereotypes that project miniscule expectations of the abilities of these youth. In this research, these youth identified, and investigated topics that they never mentioned in my previous work with them, indicating that the levels of trust in this study gave them “permission” to venture into the emotionally charged topics of stereotyping and stigmatization. As a result, the youths’ naming, research and analysis of these particular themes generated “surprise findings” and “bottom-up” insights into stereotyping and stigmatizing discourses that these young people urgently want addressed—and changed.

Bartolomé and Macedo (1997) provide moral grounds for a reconceptualization of our attitudes and our behavior to homeless young people and groups deemed the Other. They write, “… in our construction of the other we become intimately tied with each other ... by dehumanizing the other we become dehumanized ourselves” (p. 243). In this study, the youth articulated the damaging consequences to self and psyche from humiliating stereotypes and related stigma. Fed up in the margins of society, these youth seek understanding, opportunity, and respect. Many of these young people pine for another possibility in their relations
with others: inclusion. Jermaine, a youth in the study elaborates: “if you actually got to know us and what we go through, people might think of us differently.”
Chapter 5: “The Other Side of the Door”: An Ethnodrama About Youth Homelessness

“I want to perform “The Other Side of the Door” in schools, and talk to the audience of a certain age group, and to let them know, whatever may be going on at home, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Devon, a participant in this study

“I want to perform this play to the world.”

Kofi, the playwright of “The Other Side of the Door”

After a rigorous process of exploring 107 research themes in the young people’s lifeworlds, the youth further narrowed down these themes according to their interests and priorities. All the youth partook in the arts phase, and used artistic means and representation to represent their central findings. After assessing the various artworks, the participants utilized the script “The Other Side of the Door” written by Kofi, one of their peers, to represent their research findings. Their choice was carefully considered.

Although a single youth wrote the play, the participants said that the play held great meaning to them; they said they “saw themselves in it.” More specifically, they said that the characters’ thoughts, feelings, experiences, and language in the play “spoke” to them. In short, many youth said that the play was a valid depiction of

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8 The script of “The Other Side of the Door” is included in Appendix A1.
their lives in homelessness. The synchronicity of experience between fictional characters in the play and the lives of the youth in the study was intentional. Kofi, the playwright, shares that the play is an “amalgam” of his reflections and experiences during seven years of living homeless in a number of different cities and environments.

Since artistic representation of the research findings is a key aspect of participatory action research with youth (Kim, 2016, Wilson et al., 2007), I was heartened by the number of participants in the group who used the arts to express themselves. Most of the participants were enthusiastic about hip-hop and rap, while a few others were adept at painting and drawing. Some were poets and rhymers, while others flourished directing or acting in the dramatic role-plays that the youth performed as a means of exploring their lifeworlds. In this study, the arts were a valuable tool that helped the participants produce a multi-dimensional, “bottom-up” analysis of youth homelessness from those “inside the problem.” Simply put, the arts helped the young people connect to the meaning they were making.

To maximize the reach of their artwork, some participants said they wanted to avoid the narrow confines of academic research. Gray (2003) notes “[academic research] often doesn’t really make a difference in the world… It gets discussed, if it gets discussed at all, in small circles of academics” (p. 259). The young people’s engagement in this study peaked when they heard that their artwork might reach larger audiences. They said that this was an important motivation, since their efforts would not end up in another research file that served the researcher but not themselves.
In some of our research meetings, youth produced artworks of their choice, including drawings, sketches and short written pieces. Much of the youths’ artistic production was haunting: some submitted visual depictions of sad-eyed, thin young people wearing expressions of despair. Others produced stories, poetry, performance, and art about needles piercing flesh, monsters under beds and lurking in closets, separation from their own children who were in the care of others, and how they desperately sought a moment’s respite in alleys, stairwells, and coffee shops. Some youth said that by depicting their circumstances in their artworks, they felt seen—and heard. The young people hoped for some audience members who might be moved by their daily struggles for the necessities of life.

Complex artworks such as theatre plays, film scripts, and many of the performance pieces, however, were written by the youth outside of our meeting times. At significant stages in their work, youth brought their artworks to our meeting and shared them with peers. Kofi brought in “The Other Side of the Door” on individual pieces of paper, torn from a lined notebook, that he removed from his backpack. After sharing his progress with the group, a discussion followed where the youth explored the interpersonal dynamics at the heart of the play. There were animated discussions about how Wonda’s abusive behavior to Steve, her 16-year-old son forced him into homelessness, and how once on his own how Brains and his gang tried to peer-pressure Steve into taking drugs and alcohol, and lose his virginity. Youth were intrigued with Steve’s relationship with his girlfriend Ivy, and carefully pored over the details of Brain’s rivalry with Steve.
“The Other Side of the Door,” the theatre play at the core of this chapter, explores two principal themes that the youth singled out: parenting and youth homelessness, as depicted in the explosive dynamics between Wonda and her 16 year old son Steve. By spotlighting Steve’s dysfunctional home life, and his struggles in homelessness, the chapter also investigates another theme the youth prioritized: “who is a homeless youth?” By providing audiences with a “really real” account of how youth end up homeless, the play also contests stereotyping and stigmatization, the principal research theme that the youth prioritized.

Drama and Ethnodrama: Potential and Possibilities

This chapter explores how the “potential and possibilities” of drama and ethnodrama led the participants to chose these artforms over competing ones to represent their findings and reach larger-scale audiences. The “really real” in ethnodrama is briefly explored, particularly in relationship to youth who insisted that their experiences mattered and should be accurately represented. The youths’ interest in the project peaked when they learned that their ethnodrama would be performed to larger audiences; in contrast, some participants noted, with the scant interest shown to them by people in mainstream society.

The voices of the young participants are interwoven throughout so that readers may directly encounter their ideas, motivations, and insights about key aspects of “The Other Side of the Door” and the arts-informed process used to represent their findings.

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9 Ethnodrama is defined on page 143.
Drama: utilizing all the skills of the participants. The participants said that a key objective was to choose an artform that could involve many youth in a production, rather than just a few. To find the best medium to represent their findings artistically, the youth assessed the strengths and limitations of video, film, performance, poetry, rhyme, story and drama. Drama, they said, involves a significant number of youth in a production, and provides practical benefits to youth developing their skills and experience in an artistic medium.

In our meeting room, each youth vocalized a particular interest in helping to produce the play. They called out acting, directing, music and sound, costume, hair styling and makeup, choreography and movement, set design and construction, advertising, and publicity. Utilizing the dramatic artform, each youth was excited to make a unique contribution to the project, boosting morale and energizing the participants.

Having established that drama could encompass all of the youths’ talents, the group turned its attention to ensuring their production would reach its fullest potential.

DG: Acting is more than reading lines, okay? Acting...
Derek: Comes from your soul.
Devon: Acting is being in touch with your character.
DG: ...is creating a character. It's creating a fiction. It's more than going on stage and reading lines.
Devon: So you got to be a habitual liar.

Some youth teased each other about how well they “lied”—on stage or otherwise. Assuming the roles of coaches, youth cautioned each other about dramatic pitfalls, and proffered advice to make their drama succeed. Devon warned his peers about:
“Sloppy acting. No communication between the people acting out the script. What is this about, you know, not being on the same page as each other? Act with interest, people!” Derek stressed that great acting projects “soul,” which the youth summarized as the display of “passion, heart, and wit” on the stage. Fernando emphasized that a drama representing this research could serve as a prevention tool: “The play should be a story with a moral to it, that has prevention messages and gives options for youth in our situations.” “Options” for youth resonated deeply with the participants, who lamented that they had so few of them when they were contemplating homelessness, or when they became mired in it.

**Ethnodrama: uncovering the “really real.”** Through utilizing lived experience as a method of research, ethnodrama proved valuable to a group of young people exploring, making, and representing meaning (see also Goldstein, 2008) of their homeless experiences. The following is an instructive definition of ethnodrama:

Ethnodrama is an arts-based methodology for presenting participants’ personal stories which are often centered on social issues and traumatic, or significant events. An ethnodrama is the performance ‘text’ and when it is performed the descriptive term shifts to ethnotheatre. Johnny Saldana from Arizona State University is a leading author and practitioner of the method and he has described ethnodrama as “dramatizing the data.” Ethnodrama can be known through various other terms including performance ethnography, social drama and reality theatre. (retrieved from https://medanth.wikispaces.com/Ethnodrama).

The persuasive nature of “The Other Side of the Door” in “dramatizing the data” was a principal reason why the youth chose it to represent the findings of this study. In contemporary ethnography, truths generated from and by research
participants can uncover the “really real” (Behar, 2008, p. 530). “The Other Side of the Door” for instance, explores the “really real” by taking audiences inside a toxic mother son relationship, and by exposing the unrelenting peer pressure for Steve to partake in alcohol and drugs as entry into homeless youth culture. Through these “really real” accounts, ethnodrama generates vraisemblance, or “plausible accounts” of the everyday world that evoke both felt and actual experiences (Atkinson 1990, cited in Mienczakowski, 1995).

A means of connecting with audience. To help mitigate their isolation from community, the young people sought to connect their artwork—their voice and their creative expression—with diverse audiences. Ethnodrama offered exciting possibilities to youth wanting to represent their homeless lives in an arts-based research context. The young people saw “The Other Side of the Door” as a text that could invite audiences into their lifeworlds, since “the performance text is the single, most powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience” (Denzin, 1997, pp. 94-95). By depicting “insider’s experiences,” the participants expressed confidence that a theatrical production would enlighten audiences about youth homelessness in new and important ways.

A principal reason the youth decided on the dramatic medium is that the use of actors, action, movement and naturalistic emotion can draw audiences inside their worlds in a way that surpasses text (Norris, 2000). Elaborating on the enduring impact of the theatrical medium, Saldana (2008) notes that an audience “commit[s] to memory the impact and aesthetic of the event” and draws greater
meaning from an oral performance than from reading silent words on a page (p. 196).

While the youth role-played key scenes of the play, the participants were engaged with, and captivated by the representation of their lifeworlds. Indeed, the play “stuck” with the participants, and in subsequent meetings they asked Kofi about its progress. Goldstein (2007) notes how performed ethnography can both engage and “act on audience”: it [performed ethnography] should represent research subjects in a way that not only facilitates their truths but also matters to people who are going to be asked to listen to and act upon these truths. (p. 134). The youth said that “The Other Side of the Door” captured their struggles in homelessness, and that they hoped that audiences might come to a heightened appreciation of their situations as a result.

**Ethnodrama: Researching Lived Experience**

As participatory action research hinges on participants investigating their lived experiences, a number of youth were intrigued that ethnodrama also emphasizes “interrogating words and experiences.” The chapter outlines how the arts provides a forum for youth to express what they have difficulty verbalizing in other ways. Discussion turns to the liminal in the context of creating artworks. Embodiment, a central aspect of drama, is analyzed in terms of the special insights that it brings to awareness, and to performance. Finally, this section discusses the playwright’s facility with “particularity and dimensionality” as a means of more precisely depicting characters and the “really real.”
**Interrogating words and experience.** Drama is especially valuable for research because participants using this medium begin inquiry by interrogating words and experiences (Gallagher & Rivière, 2007). Kofi was self-reflexive about his interrogative process, and what he gained from writing the play:

> I feel by the way I contributed, I learned more about myself and my situation. While writing the play, you reflect on what you’re going through. And I think that the writing this play is the best way to learn, you know.

Kofi describes his interrogative process as “reflect[ing] on what you’re going through” to better come to terms with his experiences in homelessness. Through their development of different dramatic scenes to represent aspects of their lifeworlds that they prioritized, we discussed that social reality is a construction, which through subjective agency and creativity, may also be reconstructed (Conrad, 2005). Put differently, as the youth included certain scenes in their artwork, but bypassed others, they began to see more clearly the subjective intent that informs a construction of “reality.”

With these new understandings, we discussed how to better analyze the socio-political factors that underpin participatory drama, whereby “performative enactments... investigate the social arrangements that impede progressive change” (Quinlan, 2009, p. 117). The holistic approach used in this study facilitated the young people’s “interrogation of their experiences” towards factors that obstruct social change in their lives. “The Other Side of the Door” asserts that these impediments are toxic family relations, substance abuse, peer pressure, lack of social supports, and a dearth of safe and affordable housing.
**Surfacing traumatic experiences through drama.** “Interrogating words and experience” is especially powerful in participatory art projects since they provide an accessible therapeutic outlet for groups such as homeless youth with backgrounds of abuse and neglect (Prescott et al., 2008, p. 162). The arts afford traumatized youth a measure of emotional safety, since the young people can express things about a “fictional other” that they may otherwise be unable to vocalize about themselves. Indeed, the generativity of the arts helps uncover “the more submerged and difficult to articulate aspects of the issues involved” (Park, 2006, p. 84). Accordingly, the arts allowed the young people to surface thoughts and feelings about “fictional others” that some were uncomfortable admitting, or expressing about themselves.

By helping them feel heard, respecting their agency and supporting their leadership to define the project according to their interests, participatory projects help these empowered young people feel that they are citizens with a rightful place in the community (Goldberg, 2013). Derek, a keenly involved participant, felt this encouragement: “It’s weird, but I don’t at all feel homeless in this research.” Participatory action research can foster a culture of “autonomous self-actualization” (Trifonas, 2003a, p. 119) when disenfranchised groups utilize research to “interrogate their words and experiences,” and conceive appropriate action to improve their life-worlds.

**Exploring the liminal.** The youth in the study were drawn to ethnodrama’s emphasis on exploring their life-worlds to generate the content of the play. By
delving into embodied and imaginative worlds, arts-based research can utilize liminal spaces to explore “what is not yet” in a world that can potentially be improved from such discoveries (Finley, 2014, p. 532). Utilizing these insights, researchers are better able to interrogate the liminal: “unrecognized social realities” (Kamler, 2013, p. 109) and help audiences examine mechanisms of power in the social order that are typically unexamined or deemed immutable (Denzin, 2008).

Using lived experience for both dramatic creation and performance helps open up imaginative possibilities through exploring the liminal: “being between stages... in an indeterminate state, occupying yet questioning one’s own position” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 179). Recognizing the need to nurture ideas that are generated in liminal space, I tried to establish a “cocoon” where ideas, no matter how tentative, were respected. Constructive feedback from their peers helped the youth feel confident to express their voice, and their creativity. Accordingly, the youth felt more at ease in liminal space, imperative for those involved in artistic creation and processes. In this “new communicative space” (Reason, 2006, p. 198), the young people were excited to realize previously unimagined outcomes and configurations of possibilities in their artworks.

**Incorporating embodied processes in drama.** Utilizing embodiment in arts-based research helps to redress the Academy’s emphasis on the rational: “There has been a long tradition in the West of dichotomizing intellect and emotion, and more generally, mind and body, associating knowing with the former” (Park, 2006, p. 88). Of note, the arts have the power to reveal deeply held emotions and
perspectives and communicate powerful messages of social injustice in ways not achievable through rational, academic discourse (see also Higgs, 2008).

To “balance” mind and body in the research, we discussed and modeled gesture, movement and emotion to convey dramatic meaning. Reason (2006) elaborates on the mind body connection, “Human beings are not disembodied minds but embodied, acting beings who participate with each other” (p. 189). Drama presented an ideal means of incorporating both mental and physical processes, as the role playing we did was body-centred and focused on the range of characteristics and feelings that the body can project in a dramatic context.

Signifying the multi-faceted nature of research, Way (1997) says, “Research is an inherently relational process that involves shared stories, actual bodies and real voices” (p. 706). In the arts phase, participants proffered suggestions about how to make their embodied gestures more precise, or to imaginatively try a different approach altogether. Brady (2004) elaborates on embodied knowledge: “Meaning is body centered, anchored in the senses, and frequently about body conditions—a measure of how we are at any given moment, a platform for interpreting the “stuff” of our lives” (p. 624; italics in original). To reflect, think, and act in an embodied way, youth transcended the “rational” by drawing on their conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings, and by utilizing their whole beings, bodies and minds, as instruments to explore, enhance and project meaning.

To free themselves up to explore the “really real,” an embodied process is essential to performance art, whereby participants engage in “acting outside and beyond the expected” (Heath, 2000, p. 39). A few of the reserved youth went
“beyond the expected” with their own striking portrayals of some of the characters in the play, or by their acute direction of how youth should project specific qualities to improve a scene. By working in an embodied fashion, the arts can surface “unique expressions of psychological truths” that can be unattainable in conventional academic text (Higgs, 2008, p. 550). As the youth used body and mind to develop key scenes in “The Other Side of The Door,” some youth noted that Kofi’s characterizations of Wonda and Steve were “detailed and complex.”

David Booth, a drama and literacy professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, describes the reflective, embodied, and unconscious processes involved in writing a dramatic script as “opening up a playwright’s psyche, to reveal who he is—and who we are” (conversation, November, 2015). The goal, Booth (2003) says, is for participants and audiences to “enter their worlds more fully, to see more clearly, and feel and think all at once” (pp. 21-22). In this study, participants explored their bodies, voices, and histories in a liminal context of potential and possibility.

Trifonas (2006) asserts that innovative pedagogies generate “new knowledges and institutions which can enable the invention of new forms of seeing, listening and hearing the other within the differences that bind us in mind and body” (p. 106). To the young people in the study, the use of embodied processes was similar to opening a safety valve to “new knowledges” through exploration of their conscious and unconscious beings. As the youth engaged mind and body within the dramatic world of “The Other Side of The Door,” some participants said they used
their “heads and hearts” to become less invisible—both to themselves—and to others.

“Particularity and dimensionality.” Eisner (1997) elaborates on how skillful dramatists depict memorable characters. He says, “When done well, the situation and the people take on their own distinctive qualities. They acquire dimension. Particularity and dimensionality are conditions of something being ‘real’” (p. 8). Accordingly, Kofi uses vivid, witty, and poetic language in “The Other Side of the Door” to depict Brains’ dominance over his followers: “I’m just sayin... if everybody had a brain like Brains than everyone’s brain wouldn’t be so in...sane.” Some youth adopted Kofi’s terminology, and used it in casual conversation. It was particularly egregious when a youth accused a staff member, or a friend, of “pulling a Wonda,” or of “going Wonda.”

In contrast with academic studies that can generate “dehumanized... abstract constructs” (Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 2008, p. 216), thereby subsuming actual “flesh-and-blood” individuals, a play provides a platform for the “deeply felt,” bringing the youths’ full beings—minds, bodies, and voices into the text and the performance. To help viewers better understand the difficulties dealing with a mother like Wonda, “The Other Side of the Door” details scenes where she erupts into hostility and violence over situations she cannot control. Steve, along with his stepfather James, plead with Wonda to use a softer approach, but these overtures led to defensiveness and further hostility.
In contrast with abstract, theoretical constructs which can characterize academic research, arts-based research focuses on “complex characters with meaningful lives and singular voices, characters who are clearly seen and heard” (Barone, 1997, p. 114). Kofi, the playwright, artfully draws his characters with “particularity and dimensionality” by pushing them to their “breaking points” such as when Steve can no longer abide Wonda’s punishment that he stay cooped inside their apartment in the summer instead of being outside with his friends. Another conflict occurs in the final scene, when Wonda allows Steve back to live with her, but under stringent terms and conditions. Unintended circumstances lead Steve to defy all of Wonda’s edicts. The impending showdown between mother and son in all their “particularity and dimensionality” present riveting drama and help the audience further engage with the characters, the plot and the play.

**Ethnodrama: Mining Stereotypes and the Taboo**

The young people in this study said that social justice is “broken” for them especially since stereotypes and stigmatization compromise their ability to be seen—and included in mainstream society. As an instrument of the “really real,” the participants explored the “taboo” such as the heavy drug use amongst them so that they might more accurately depict their homeless circumstances.

**Contesting stereotypes with ethnodrama.** The participants in this study were intent on using the arts to give voice to the “really real,” especially since much of the public know little of homeless youth, or dismiss them stereotypically as “rif-
raff” as Amir, a participant says. The discussion with the young people turned to how an artwork can contest the paltry expectations about the capabilities—and potential of homeless youth:

Fernando: A good story should be compelling.
DG: Okay, what’s a compelling story?
Fernando: One that challenges my perceptions.
DG: Okay. So when you guys perform, what’s the audience’s expectations?
Amir: Low.
DG: How is that for you?
Derek: It’s an advantage. Anything that’s bad you can use to your advantage.
Amir: It’s an advantage because they’re going to think that we’re like know-nothing riffraff, but we’re actually highly intelligent people.

The young people were encouraged that pervasive stereotypes of marginalized groups can be contested through ethnography’s reframing of lived experience (Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008). In “The Other Side of the Door,” for instance, Steve must reframe his stereotypical thinking when he learns that Brains and his friends are homeless. Before Steve can offend his new friends with his stereotypes about them, Brains cuts him off:

Brains: We’re homeless too.
Steve: Really?
Brains: Yeah, we all live in the same shelter.
Steve: I had no idea.
Sarah: What did you expect?
Steve: You guys don’t look or dress like... I mean.
Brains: Shut up before you say something stupid.
In this instance, Steve broaches just one stereotype about homeless youth: their appearance (see Chapter 4). Acting as a “corrective” to common misperceptions, Maxine Greene (1995) argues that the arts provide “connective details” that contest the “fearful oversimplification” that underpins stereotypes (p. 95). As shown in the stereotyping and stigmatization analysis in Chapter 4, a spectrum of stereotypes detail these young people’s characters, appearance, motivation, and moral standing. Of note, the “connection and understanding” that emanate from artistic creation can contest “racist, bigoted, and otherwise ignorant ideas” (Kidd, 2009, p. 359).

Karim, a participant, theorizes about the pervasiveness of misconceptions about homeless youth, “It’s easy to stereotype us when people don’t know a thing about us.” Trifonas (2006) articulates how engagement in an artwork can contribute to social justice through provoking new understandings about the other: “We learn more about ourselves when we engage the other; we learn more about the other when we engage ourselves” (p. 105). Youth were inspired that through their “really real” depictions of their circumstances in homelessness, audiences might “engage the other” by challenging their stereotypical thinking about young people struggling on their own without the supports of family or home.

**Using the “taboo” to expose “invisible” social inequities.** Utilizing creative art forms in the research process results in “interpretative practices that make visible certain aspects of the social world” (Quinlan, 2009, p. 117). The resulting “insider art” and representation of alternate subjectivities of marginalized groups can give unique expression to social injustice. Accordingly, Denzin (2000) states that
art explore all aspects of the “taboo” including contentious issues such as “sexuality, sexual abuse... drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, murder, gang warfare, AIDS, dropping out of school” (p. 258). Through such representations in artistic forms, “social contradictions are made more visible and visceral” (Barndt, 2008, p. 355).

The youth heatedly debated what level of “taboo” to expose in “The Other Side of the Door” but they decided that a “really real” account would be more valuable than one that glossed over their troubles and experiences.

The young people were keen to use ethnodrama to bring outsiders into their lifeworlds by “uncovering” hidden issues that are typically undisclosed (Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008). Amir elaborates about the significance of “the hidden” in arts-informed research: “Our research can’t be boring. We need to tell audiences something they don’t know.” To ensure fidelity to their own lived experiences, youth analyzed the characters and the plot of “The Other Side of the Door.” They focused on aspects of the “taboo” such as the heavy substance use in the play, for instance, and debated how representative that was of their experience. While substance use is prevalent in the homeless youth community, Fernando said that is inaccurate to generalize such use for every homeless youth, and in every instance. Frank said that it would be useful if the audiences moved to another level of understanding by asking: “What is it about homeless youth culture that makes drugs so desirable?” Yasmin succinctly answers, “we don’t want to be in the shelter, or homeless, so we get high or drunk.”

Having reviewed key theory pertaining to ethnodrama and the use of embodied and liminal practices and the playwright’s craft to attain artistic insight
and depth, the chapter now turns specifically to some select scenes in the theatre
play “The Other Side of the Door.” These scenes are included verbatim, so that
readers may experience for themselves the playwright’s craft of writing, language,
character development and plot. The voices of the young participants are included
to illustrate both their insights about the play and possible “unintended
consequences” from young people viewing it. As an “outsider-insider” (through my
workshops prior to the PAR research and this present project), I contribute a “voice-
over” dialogue in the text to help illuminate the research process and “The Other
Side of the Door’s” significance to homeless youth research.

“The Other Side of the Door:” Key Scenes of the Play

Critical scenes of the play are included so that readers can consider the
playwright’s dialogue, and surmise their own understandings as to why Steve
walked through to “The Other Side of the Door,” and how he coped once homeless. A
brief plot description and character analysis will help illuminate the narrative arc of
the play, and the dynamics of the mother-son relationship at the heart of it. The
“Other Side of the Door” raises complex issues about parenting: when does parental
violence cross the line into abuse? Is a mother abusive if she thinks that discipline
will prepare her child for a harsh and unforgiving world?

Taking place over several tumultuous weeks, “The Other Side of the Door”
focuses on Steve, who repudiates his mother’s physical and emotional abuse. Unable
to communicate with his volatile and defensive mother, Steve confronts an
existential and ultimately unknowable question: with no money, guidance or care
from a well-meaning adult, will his life be improved by walking out the door and into the unknown? On his own, will Steve be able to adapt to and resolve unpredictable and at times dangerous situations, or will he plunge into despair, depression and substance abuse?

In homelessness, without Wonda trying to control him, Steve must define who he is. He has little choice since at every turn his acquaintances demean his values and challenge his dignity. As a price of belonging and acquiring status, his peers insist that he use drugs and alcohol, and they shame him for his virginity. He stays at a shelter for a time, but after discharge, he hopes for better conditions at home. With an unyielding mother, though, the stage is set for an explosive finalé. The play unexpectedly ends with Wonda erupting in rage over her son’s flagrant transgressions of her rules. The playwright leaves it to viewers to imagine how this bitter confrontation between mother and son might end.

_A fraught relationship between mother and son._ The play opens in the kitchen, where Steve is washing dishes and listening to the radio. Wonda, Steve’s mother, returns home from work. Encountering her son in the kitchen, Wonda immediately asserts her authority—and imposes her will. The opening words of the play are ominous:

Wonda: What did I tell you about that trash?
Steve: Mom it just came on the radio. I can’t control what they play.
Wonda: Boy, I don’t want no excuses.

*Wonda strikes Steve across the face.*
Wonda: I already told you about that devil music. Don’t let me catch you again listening to that garbage. Speaking of trash, empty the bags out back when you’re done with the dishes.

*Wonda unplugs and grabs the stereo*

Upon seeing Steve when she comes home, Wonda denigrates the music he listens to. Without conceiving other means to influence her son’s taste in music, she resorts to violence and strikes her son across the face. Wonda’s reaction is disproportionate to his behavior, and belies the fact that Steve is conscientious—he is not smoking cigarettes, getting high or drunk, or idly lying about either. Neither is he up to no good with a group of wayward peers. Contrary to the “discipline” she metes out, Steve is a responsible teenager doing his chores.

The disturbing image of a volatile mother smacking her son across the face foreshadows how a youth flees home. Without reasonable cause, and with a hair-trigger temper, Wonda transgresses her son’s physical space and threatens his emotional and physical safety. With the action in the opening act, Kofi, the playwright, imaginatively foregrounds two central themes that the youth prioritized in the arts phase: the kind of parenting that can lead a youth into homelessness, and identifying what constitutes a homeless youth.

*A gang introduces Steve to drugs, alcohol and sex.* Later that evening, after the confrontation in the kitchen with Wonda, Steve runs an errand for her at the grocery store. Once there, he encounters a menacing group of boys. Brains, the leader, detects Steve’s discomfort with his gang and taunts him: “You look worried, everything cool?” Demonstrating his resilience—his intelligence and level-
headedness in stressful situations, Steve replies, “Ya, I’m ok. I just had a long day.”

They light a joint and get high. Although this gang constantly tests Steve’s limits, they eventually become Steve’s “street family” through an interesting turn of events.

The group brings Steve to their hangout in the park. To initiate him further into the gang’s drug and alcohol culture, Brains pulls out a 26 from his bag.

Brains: Steve, you drink?
Steve: Ya, I drink.
Brains: Cool.

*Brains pours a cup for Steve and the rest of his crew. Everybody takes a sip but Steve.*


*Steve takes a big gulp, then spits it out.*

Group laughs.

Brains: Don’t worry, I’m gonna roll a spliff just now.
Steve: Wow you guys smoke a lot of weed.

After getting high, Steve is in no condition to remember his 9 pm curfew. When he eventually does, however, he exclaims, “Shit my Mom’s gonna kill me! I had to be home 45 minutes ago.” He leaves the gang and slinks back into his house, avoiding eye contact with Wonda, who is stewing on the couch. She pounces:

“What the hell do you think you’re going? Do you know what time it is?” The stage instructions indicate that Steve is speechless; he is without a voice and cannot be heard. Simply put, he is defenseless. Wonda takes off her shoes and wacks her son across the face and beats him until he flees to his room.

As further punishment, Wonda strips Steve of a valuable privilege: his freedom to go outside in the summer to be with his friends. While Steve could seemingly cope with Wonda’s strictures inside the home, he cannot bear the idea of
abiding by them outside the home. At his tipping point, Steve contemplates the unimaginable: crossing through “the other side of the door” into homelessness.

Concerned about his stepson’s despair, James, Wonda’s second husband, tries to intervene with his wife on Steve’s behalf. Wonda instantly deduces that Steve put James up to this, and boils. A critical confrontation ensues between mother and son, which proves to be a turning point in their relationship:

Wonda: Look, if you have a problem with the way I do things address me personally.

Steve: You don’t hear a thing I say.

Wonda: I brought you into this world. You wouldn’t have a mouth to speak with if it wasn’t for me. Why should I listen to you?

Steve: Because I’m your son.

Wonda: In the real world, when you break the rules, they take away your freedom. In my house it’s the same thing.

Steve: In the real world it’s summer. On the other side of that door kids are playing right now. Because they don’t have crazy parents like me.

Wonda: So you want to play, right? Then go to the other side of that door.

Steve stares at the door, then back at Wonda, and starts walking towards the door.

Wonda: Another thing. If you leave—don’t come back.

Based on Wonda’s dictatorial and unambiguous nature, Steve takes literally her order not to come back home, and exits into a life of homelessness. He now focuses on surviving on the streets.

**Steve’s initiation into homelessness.** Steve heads to the hangout at the park where he was previously drinking and getting high. Brains arrives with his friends, and
introduces Steve to Ivy, a homeless girl, and Ivy’s friend Sarah. Unsure of what to do or where to go, Steve reveals his predicament to his new friends:

Steve: I was planning to steal a sleeping bag and sleep outside.

Everyone starts laughing

Steve: Look, you guys have no idea what I’m going through. It’s not funny at all.

Deon: Oh trust me... we have more than an idea of what you’re going through.

Steve: What do you mean?

Brains: We’re homeless too.

Steve: Really?

Brains: Yeah, and we all live in the same shelter.

Steve: I had no idea.

Sarah: What did you expect?

Steve: You guys don’t look or dress like… I mean.

Brains: Shut up before you say something stupid.

Steve’s lack of planning and knowledge about how to survive on the streets represents key findings in my research: few youth have a plan when they leave home, almost none know about shelters, and even youth who are becoming homeless are steeped in the same stereotypical views of homelessness as the broader population (see Chapter 4). Unacquainted with street culture, Steve broaches his stereotypes about homeless youths’ clothing and appearance, but Brains cuts him off: “Shut up before you say something stupid.”

**Steve takes refuge in a youth shelter.** The group takes Steve to their shelter, where he undergoes an intake by a staff member. The intake worker tells Steve about curfews and other shelter rules, especially the penalty of discharge if found fighting with another resident or possessing drugs and weapons on shelter
property. After intake, Ivy invites Steve to come out drinking with her and Brains.

Steve queries Brains about how he earned his moniker:

Steve: Did you get your name because you're smart?
Brains: I got my name because of the amount of brains I got in high school.

*Everybody starts laughing except Ivy*

Brains: I'm not joking. I got so much head I made Hugh Hefner look like a nun.

This banter exemplifies some of the sexual undercurrents in the play. Intuiting that Steve is sexually inexperienced, Brains ridicules him in front of Ivy and Sarah.

Brains: Speaking of pining, Steve, how much girls you pined?
Steve: Pine?
Brains: Yeah, how much girls you slept with?
Ivy: That's none of your business.
Brains: You're not a virgin, are you?

*Brains and Sarah start laughing. Ivy's angry.*

Steve: Look, I still have a lot of time to have sex.

After some heavy drinking, Brains and Sarah leave and become intimate behind a tree. Feeling pressured, Steve finds a secluded spot with Ivy, and he loses his virginity with her. Once back at the shelter, Steve is keen to dispel Brains’ rumours that he is a virgin, but Ivy pulls Steve aside and warns him to not embarrass her. Ivy tells Steve that every one she slept with was her boyfriend. Steve asks Ivy to be his girlfriend, and the other youth in the shelter are taken aback to see this new couple.

*Steve and Wonda: a hostile ‘reunion.’* Steve’s new life free of Wonda’s dictates is disrupted when he is told to go to the shelter office. There, he speaks to a policeman armed with a search warrant for him. The officer arranges telephone
contact between mother and son. Absence has not diluted the tension between
them.

Steve: Hello.
Wonda: What the hell’s the matter with you?
Steve: What do you mean?
Wonda: You leave the house; nobody’s heard from you in weeks; we don’t even know if you’re alive. You could have at least called.
Steve: Don’t worry, I’m fine.
Steve: Look Mom, it’s not what you think.
Wonda: Steve you’re coming home right now.
Steve: Over my dead body.

*Steve hangs up the phone.*

Even with Wonda’s harsh tone and belligerent attitude, she clearly demonstrates
concern for Steve’s welfare, a quality that is conspicuously absent in many homeless
youths’ lives. Indeed, many such parents or guardians of these youth never bother
finding them. Wonda, however, anxiously wants to know how her son is faring. The
officer tries to better understand Steve’s situation:

Steve: I’m not going back home.
Police: And why is that Steve?
Steve: Because my mom’s brutal—and crazy.
Police: Does she abuse you?
Steve: Yeah, but she calls it discipline.
Police: Well it’s your right to live where you want. But do you feel like the shelter’s the best place?
Steve: I’d rather go to jail than go back home. In fact, my house is a jail.
Police: Jail huh?
Art helps express the ineffable: how exactly can Steve put into words the extent of Wonda's violence towards him? As a male, can he admit to a policeman, or even to himself, the stigma of being abused by his mother? Can he recount his abuse to a stranger who may not believe him, or think he is exaggerating, or not manly enough to fend off, or cope with such a threat? Unable to share his literal story, Steve uses an analogy of jail to express how confined and trapped he feels in his own home. Even the police officer has difficulty fathoming that Steve's domestic situation feels like jail with iron bars, draconian rules, and troubled occupants. In sum, Steve struggles, as do many homeless youth, to relate his lived experiences to others. “The Other Side of the Door” helps outsiders begin to understand what it is like to have no home to return to, the emotional upheavals of homelessness, and the youths’ tentativeness moving forward in a society that has left them behind.

Regardless of Wonda's demands, Steve is determined to stay at the shelter. After receiving their small allowance from the government, Brains, Ivy, and Sarah debate whether they should drink hard liquor or beer. Steve is interested in neither, and proposes a movie instead. Steve’s disdain for alcohol and drugs clashes with the desires of Brains and Ivy, and unwittingly sets up a betrayal of Steve when Ivy discloses the nature of her relationship with her new boyfriend to Brains:

Ivy: I’m so stressed.
Brains: How come?
Ivy: There’s nothing to do. The weather’s crappy outside and I haven’t drank for days.
Brains: In days?
Ivy: Yeah, every time I try to drink Steve lectures me. Oh it’s bad for you. Oh it’s a waste of money. Oh let’s watch a movie.
Brains: That’s when you say ‘oh shut up.’

As Brains relates his passion for drinking, Ivy’s cravings intensify. To free herself to go drinking with Brains, she schemes to get out of a date with Steve. Ivy lies to Steve about visiting an aunt, but Steve is suspicious as Ivy has never mentioned this aunt before. After a shelter worker tells Steve that a mother’s love is invaluable, Steve hopes his new girlfriend can fulfill what his mother cannot; accordingly, he plans to tell Ivy of the love he feels for her. At this moment, Steve and Ivy veer off in markedly different directions.

While Steve walks through the park, he is startled when he overhears Ivy and Brains being intimate behind a tree. Steve is betrayed—and devastated. Back at the shelter, Steve starts fighting with Brains over his intimacy with Ivy. The shelter immediately discharges both young men for violating an iron-clad rule: “no fighting.”

Out of options, Steve calls Wonda, who agrees that he may return home, but under specific conditions: no girls and no drugs. Once there, the situation is emotionally charged—and volatile. The contrast in parenting styles between James, Steve’s stepfather, and Wonda is pointed:

**James:** Steve you have no idea how worried we were. I was forced to call the cops.

**Wonda:** What the hell was going through your head?

**James:** Wonda, how about we try a calmer approach?

**Wonda:** Hush. Nobody’s talking to you.

**Steve:** James is right. You’re violent and controlling. How am I supposed to experience life if you put bars around it?

**Wonda:** This is my house. If you want to live here you go by my rules.
Steve: Why did I even come here? I’m goin back to the streets.

*Steve gets up from the table and attempts to walk out the door, but James stops him halfway.*

Steve: Get out of my way!

James: Don’t! Why go back to a shelter anyways?

Steve: Because at least in a shelter I can enjoy a summer.

James: We’re not going to ground you for the summer anymore.

Wonda: What the hell are you talking about?

James: Wonda work with me on this, ok?

Wonda: If he can’t take the rules, he can leave.

James: Look Wonda, it’s better if he stays here and we give him a curfew. That’s safer than the streets.

Wonda: You white fathers are too soft!

Steve: James don’t worry about me. I can handle myself.

Wonda: Ok, Steve. You’re not grounded for the whole summer, but I expect you here by 9 pm sharp.

*Steve frowns.*

Wonda: I still expect you to do your chores. I don’t want anybody over, especially girls.

James: Is that cool with you Steve?

*Steve nods.*

Wonda: And if I find any drugs I will throw you out myself.

Steve returns to the shelter to gather his belongings and meets a remorseful Ivy who tells him that Brains put her up to drinking, and then pulled her around the back of a tree and said, “I didn’t drink you up for nothing.” When she expresses her revulsion of Brains and vows not to drink again, Steve takes her back as his girlfriend. They get high, and return to Steve’s place. Ivy has a dime bag of drugs in her jacket pocket; she hangs her jacket on top of another one in the crowded closet. Steve discovers a kitchen filled with dirty dishes which he is no mood to wash. In this climatic scene, the action and dialogue express the charged atmosphere, lack of trust, and misunderstandings that run between mother and son. The play cuts out
before we learn how Wonda deals with her son’s violation of two of her major rules: no girls—and no drugs:

Wonda comes home early from her business meeting. As she opens the closet, Ivy’s jacket falls down and the dime bag falls out.

Wonda: That imbecile!

Wonda walks over to the kitchen and sees the dishes piled up in the sink. She can’t believe her eyes. She marches upstairs to Steve's room.

Wonda: Steeeeeeeeve!

—end of play—

“The Other Side of the Door”: Analysis and Validity

After analyzing youth homelessness in the context of Steve’s struggles when he leaves home and fends for himself, the responses of youth, service providers and professors to the play from various readings are explored, particularly in the context of the play’s validity.

Three professors from the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education at the University of Toronto contributed to the discussion on central issues of the play, when they were interviewed by the youth with a questionnaire of their design. David Booth, a professor of drama and literacy, Clare Brett, associate professor with a background in applied cognitive science and educational technology, and Kathy Broad, a former high school principal and the Executive Director of Initial Education at OISE/UT, shared their perspectives on the issues that the play raises.
Analysis of “The Other Side of the Door.”

The events in “The Other Side of the Door” spill on top of each other; with little time for reflection; much of the play is action. Out of his home at age sixteen, Steve has a series of tests, many involving peer pressure with Brains and his followers, or trials with Ivy, his first girlfriend. Through these tribulations, he’s learned that he can stay true to himself and survive on his own terms. As a result, Steve’s survival skills, maturity and self-confidence—his sense of self—grow immeasurably. Accordingly, Steve calls into question his mother’s behavior, so upon returning home after his discharge from the shelter, he has even less patience for her strictures and intolerance. While clashing with Wonda, he tells his stepfather James, who physically tries to restrain him from returning to the streets, “don’t worry about me. I can handle myself.” He has no qualms entering homelessness yet again.

In this coming-of-age tale, Steve leaves home as an ingénue, thinking he would need to steal a sleeping bag to live in the rough. He is a quick study: he learns how to game shelters by pretending to do a job search, and he dates a pretty girl whom Brains himself fancies in a twisted “love-hate” kind of way. With newly found clout from surviving independently, Wonda grudgingly grants Steve a 9 pm curfew, instead of grounding him for the entire summer.

Not all youth react to homelessness as resiliently as Steve. Some can’t get past their estrangement from home and community; some grapple with difficult mental health issues, often in isolation from medical service providers, while others feel “stuck” and have great difficulty developing and sticking to a plan to get off the
streets. Still others consume—or abuse—various substances to cope; a smaller number may engage in destructive, deviant, or criminal behaviour.

**Youth and providers assess the validity of the play.** The “Other Side of the Door” uses ethnographic techniques such as researching lived experience in a context of critical conversations to “accurately and faithfully depict given social phenomena” (Mienczakowski, 1995, p. 364). Trifonas (1995) adds that internal validity must “accurately reflect the actual behaviors of the phenomena studied” (p. 93) which was attested to in multiple readings of the play to larger groups of homeless youth who corroborated the play’s depictions of lived experience (see also Quinlan, 2009) on the streets and in the shelter system. Yasmin, a participant, shares,

> I liked the whole play. I related to the words in the play and a lot of stuff in it. Like I was in those situations a lot of times. When I first moved to a shelter, I had experiences like when Steve meets Brains and his friends.

Reflecting the uncertainty and unpredictability of the homeless lifestyle, Aleysha says, “The ending [of the play] makes you think about what happens next, which is something we do a lot of in our situations.” Yasmin compares the extensive substance use in the play to that of the shelters she has lived in: “You don’t really want to be here [in the shelter], so you just want to be high or drunk.” She adds, “A lot of youth don’t want to do other kinds of stuff, like go to movies. All they want to do is smoke or drink, so it’s [the play] like realistic.” Moreover, she says, “you see all kinds of drugs you never even thought of in shelters.” Although Yasmin generalizes
drug and alcohol usage in shelters, Kofi estimates that 20% of youth in the shelter system do not abuse substances and avoid those who do.

Youth, along with administrators and staff from the shelter were joined by teachers, caseworkers, youth psychologists and professors in other readings of the play. All noted the play’s fidelity to experiences in dysfunctional homes, out on the streets, and in shelters. A youth worker comments, “It’s important to see a play on youth homelessness. The public is ignorant about the homeless youth among us. People don’t get youth homelessness, since they believe that youth should be at home with their parents.” David Booth observes, “The play offers a vignette feeling, as if there was a camera following this particular family. Our job as teacher-educators is to help students know about all kinds of families.” Booth’s goal of focusing on “all kinds of families” as an educational strategy was welcomed by the youth, who hoped that such a policy might lead to their acceptance and inclusion in schools, of profound import to them, when so much was failing for them in their homes. The Executive Director of the shelter where I conducted the research shares,

Steve’s led a vulnerable existence, like many of the youth in shelters. One moment he’s secure, and the next moment the rug is pulled out from under him.
The play teaches us about good parenting. While Steve’s mother, and stepfather are concerned about his safety, Steve still ends up homeless. Effective parenting is about much more than loving a child.

The Executive Director points to a central finding of the play pertaining to effective parenting: physical and emotional abuse, in the guise of discipline and love, is inimical to building safety and trust. Many youth in the research attested to the impacts of such parenting on them and how it led them to the streets. Amir shares,
“My father had like a controlling type of mentality. So I feel maybe that’s what made me become so aggressive. My dad was always the one to control everything in the house. Like he was the one that always said ‘It’s my way, this is how we’re going to do things’ blah, blah, blah. He micromanaged every single thing. I’m not just talking about micromanaging; I’m talking about like milli-milli-micromanaging if that’s a word. So I couldn’t ever really be my own person.

Amir’s synopsis that his father’s “micromanaging” prevented him from “be[coming] my own person” were common refrains from other youth in the research. A number of youth of immigrant parents spoke of how oppressive it felt when their parents insisted that they follow traditional customs that diverged from their new Canadian friends’ cultural values and practices. Validating Kofi’s depiction of the parenting style that can lead to youth homelessness in “The Other Side of the Door,” Amir’s account above can virtually be transposed on Steve’s since he also feels trapped by Wonda’s overbearing dictates and rules, and contests them by fleeing into homelessness.

Clare Brett, Associate Professor with a background in applied cognitive science and educational technology, was interviewed by the participants as part of their primary research process. A mother of two sons, Brett shares her ideas on effective parenting. “I spend a lot of time with my sons, and talk to them. I try not to dump my own crap, my own anxieties, my own fears on them.” In contrast, many youth in my study commented on how little they spoke to their parent(s), and how tentative they were about even trying to broach the topic of their parent(s)’ abusive and controlling behaviors. Devon succinctly says, “You can’t tell some parents what they’re doing is wrong.” Voices murmured in agreement when Devon described his
mother’s rigid boundaries and his frustrations trying to communicate with her. In sum, various stakeholders from the youth themselves to an array of providers and educators validated that “The Other Side of the Door” accurately depicted some of the major challenges of youth in homelessness.

**Performing the Other Side of the Door: Issues and Outcomes**

Although the participants creatively imagined different audiences for the play, they were passionate about presenting it to their peers in high schools. The youth pondered some unintended consequences from performing the play to some vulnerable high-school students living in dangerous and volatile homes. Finally, the youth and I learned much from staging it in the shelter where we conducted the research.

**Participants conceive audiences for the play.** Youth thought creatively and imaginatively about potential audiences, revealing a number of groups with whom these young people feel some type of connection. Of note, some of these audiences have the potential to translate into social capital for these young people, a valuable consideration for homeless youth who are often isolated from, and have little access to mainstream society and institutions.

DG: Who would want to see this play?
Adrieekah: Other youth.
DG: Such as?
Brian: Homeless youth.
Adrieekah: Youth in school.
Brian: Any type of youth.
DG: So youth in school or those who are homeless. Who else might want to know about, and hear your research?

Adrieekah: Other researchers.

DG: Other researchers.

Brian: Like parents and stuff.

DG: I'm sorry?

Brian: Parents or workers.

DG: Parents. Workers.

Brian: Social workers. Food banks. They've got to know what's going on and what's like... And governments too, since they came up with shelters.


Brian: Police. Um, the courts. And juvy [juvenile corrections]

DG: Ok.

Adrieekah: You know, like business offices. I don't know. Society...

DG: Tell me more...

Adrieekah: Well no one said the public.

DG: The public. Okay, but the public is pretty big, right? Can you tell me...

Adrieekah: Downtown. Yeah because it's busy.


DG: Anybody else?

Jermaine: High schools.

Kofi: Students.

DG: Why high schools?

Jermaine: Because there's a lot of teenagers in high schools. Most homeless kids are teenagers, so it's like the same age...

Aleysha: The younger kids are at the age where they too could become homeless.

Youth provided imaginative ideas for audiences such as “food banks, researchers, economists, parents, lawyers, psychologists, the courts and the police.” Above all, though, they said they wanted to perform “The Other Side of the Door” to their peers in high schools. I was taken aback, since in my research these young people
expressed a profound disconnect with *all* aspects of the educational system. Their decision to perform the play to an audience of high school students struck me as an act of generosity, and one that could serve as a protective resource to young people. Aleysha elaborates: “Through it [the play], we want to educate people about the things that go on in a homeless youth’s daily life. By educating communities about homelessness, we can possibly prevent it.” Devon imagines how seeing such a play might have affected him before he became homeless. Speaking softly, he shares, “I wish I had the chance to see this play. It would have been helpful if I had someone to talk to before I ended up where I did.”

**Performing “The Other Side of the Door” in schools.** Many youth in this study expressed the need for change in schools, an institution intended to support and educate *all* young people in a community. The participants shared that the “supports” in schools are unhelpful to youth in their situations. They said that youth facing homelessness must conceal their dangerous and volatile home lives from peers, teachers, and administrators, anxious that this information would be leaked out in the school and that their “social death” would ensue (see Chapter 4). In a context of “self-imposed silence” in schools, they said they could not access protective resources they so desperately needed.

Compounding their feelings of Otherness, and reinforcing their isolation, the youth said that the topic of youth homelessness was absent from the curriculum, the classroom, and any form of discussion. They said that a time in their lives where they were struggling and needed to feel as “strong” as possible, their circumstances
dictated otherwise: they said that they felt “unwelcome at home and unseen in schools” (see Chapter 4). On the verge of a perilous life in homelessness, they were truly alone.

Accordingly, the participants emphasized the value of concluding performances of “The Other Side of the Door” in schools with questions and conversation, particularly since the play may be profoundly unsettling to some young people in the audience. As “Critical ethnodrama presupposes interaction stemming from performance” (Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2006, p. 177) some participants envisioned fielding questions and giving advice and support to young people who, as the data from this study and the play show, had virtually no idea of the multiple—and formidable challenges awaiting them in homelessness.

The participants in this study also acknowledged that some students might wish to chat privately after a post-performance discussion. They also wanted to offer help-line numbers for youth in distress, or those with mental health issues, and supply informational brochures with agencies and resources for young people who had nowhere to turn. Some participants projected a sense of pride and self-respect when they talked about how they might counsel other young people in the schools.

Opening up a conversation about youth homelessness in a school setting would represent a significant change from present practices, and could prove to be a valuable support to youth on the verge of homelessness. Elaborating on how “The Other Side of the Door” could affect change in a school, Kathy Broad, a former principal says, “The play can help students, teachers, and parents think about other ways they can operate towards youth leading troubled lives.” The interchange after
the play could produce new “entry points” in conversation regarding homelessness, a difficult-to-broach topic. More importantly, by questioning stereotypes about who homeless youth are, and the types of parenting that led them to this situation, the play could help students, teachers, parents and administrators imagine new ways of interacting with young people struggling through one of the most traumatic—and vulnerable periods of their lives.

Broad addressed more specifically the value of arts-informed research in the context of schools:

Theatre is a strong way for people to connect. Schools are in a different place for thinking about work that helps build understanding of the lives and experiences of other people. When you say “This research represents important lived experience and documented stories of people over time”, it’s also evidence-based. These are powerful things to take to a school.

A number of youth were intrigued to hear Broad explain how their evidence-based research validated their presentations in a school context. Mienczakowski and Morgan (2006) elaborate on the value of research-based art in the context of public education: “the notion of research-based presentations is often used to legitimate and lend authority to their on-stage representations and post-performance audience interactions” (p. 177). Unlike the stereotypes about these young people that project them as unintelligent and wayward, both the performance and a post-performance dialogue might enlighten students, teachers, and administrators that homeless youth have something valuable to contribute to an educational setting.

In the context of performing “The Other Side of the Door” in schools, Broad provides insight into the hidden pre-homeless students in many classrooms: “This
play is not just about strangers. It's actually about peers at school you know well and are connected to." Aleysha imagines how youth in high school might act differently towards friends living in a dangerous and dysfunctional home: “So [the result of the play] could be ideas on how to help their friends in this situation [impending homelessness], or better prepare them for how to deal with their own situation.” Here, Aleysha speaks to the possibly protective aspects of the play, where friends, once understanding what was previously hidden about a classmate, may offer support in new and yet unimagined ways.

Many youth in the research recalled that beyond couch-surfing at a friend’s, they had little idea of how they would survive in homelessness. Accordingly the dialogue with students after a performance of “The Other Side of the Door” might provide the students with insights that may help save lives or dramatically reduce harm by sharing options, resources and arrangements other than trying to survive alone in sometimes dangerous streets and places.

**Will youth with abusive parents act rashly after seeing the play?** The young participants foresaw a troubling outcome if students in schools took literally the message of “The Other Side of the Door.” Although Steve survived a number of tribulations while homeless, and even seemed to gain strength through them, homelessness is not the quick fix to troubled homes that some youth might imagine. The participants voiced concern that after seeing the play and considering homelessness as “a way out,” emboldened youth might confront an abusive and authoritarian “Wonda-type” parent—to disastrous ends. Devon cautions:
What if this turns out wrong? Say these kids go home and try to talk to their parents. But for my mother, and with some other parents, there’s some things you never discuss. And there’s no ifs, ands, or buts about it. You can’t tell some parents what they’re doing is wrong. What if the parents lash out? Who’s to blame then? I don’t want some youth in this situation to be brave, and try to act out what they see in the play, because it could all go wrong and they could get hurt.

Broad replies,

Any time you teach somebody something, or offer somebody something, you can’t necessarily know the outcome. This [the artwork] will help someone see some different options. You can’t know it’s going to go exactly the way you want. But that person [the viewer] may know themselves and their circumstances better and act differently as a result.

Without minimizing the stakes for young people living in dysfunctional families, Broad emphasizes the power of education to change minds and provide a range of options that can be life-saving to youth in desperate need of them. Yasmin, however, was anxious about young people romanticizing homelessness, while ignoring the difficulties in it. She validates a major theme in “The Other Side of the Door”: “We have to let them know that if they go to a shelter they’ll get peer-pressured and influenced.” Youth rejected from their homes, as Phoenix says, suffer a major blow to their self-esteem, and feel “down” as a result. In such a depressed state, some young people muster even less resistance to peer pressure. Indeed, youth possess varying degrees of resilience; some, like Steve, maintain integrity-of-self under relentless peer pressure; others fall under the sway of charismatic bullies like Brains.
Yasmin is unsparing in her contrast of life at home and in a shelter:

Some kids feel ‘my mom is too strict, my dad is too strict, I’m going to go live in a shelter.’ You shouldn’t just use that or another issue at home to go to a shelter, because living at home is way better than living in a shelter.

“Not always,” counters one young male, who suffered years of physical abuse from his father and who advocates shelters as a place of refuge and safety for youth in similar situations. Wanting to dissuade some young people from “trying” homelessness after seeing the play, Yasmin stresses the limited capacity in the youth shelter system, “there’s beds that real, younger homeless need—they’re taking the beds away from them.” Some youth in the research expressed contempt for non-homeless young people “trying out” shelter life to score drugs or sex, and to take away shelter beds from youth who desperately need them.

“The Other Side of the Door” is performed at a youth shelter. As Kofi’s script proceeded through a number of readings with youth, shelter administrators, staff, and professors, enthusiasm built among the young people to stage the work. Accordingly, Kofi and I recruited some homeless youth, found a rehearsal space in another shelter, and proceeded to workshop the play. We soon ran into logistical challenges, since many of the youth who committed to performing in the play lived far away from the rehearsal space. Moreover, a number had short-terms jobs with fluctuating schedules that often conflicted with the rehearsal times. For fear of jeopardizing their jobs, the youth prioritized them over the rehearsals. A number of other participants in the play were hard to contact, so regular workshop attendance became problematic. Still, we continued rehearsing with a dedicated group. We
staged the play at the shelter where we conducted the research, on a day when the shelter’s board of directors attended. Since we could not assemble enough actors to stage the work in its entirety, the youth performed central scenes, particularly the ones involving Wonda and Steve.

Although a youth shelter is typically a loud, bustling place, during the performance, there was complete silence. The youth at the shelter were riveted by the premise of the play: a dysfunctional home, a domineering mother who brooked no dissent, and a conflicted young man who, facing the loss of his summer due to being grounded, looked hesitatingly at the door, and then at this mother, before exiting through it into the unknown.

What did the production say to the youth in the project, and to the other shelter youth who watched it? By depicting these young people’s struggles in homelessness, to a keenly interested audience, the play attested that they were worthy subjects of an “artistic gaze.” The play confirmed to the youth that they and their experiences mattered. The play also earned the respect of shelter administrators, youth workers and staff who said that the play accurately depicts a dysfunctional home, and homeless youth lifeworlds.

In our discussions after the performance, the youth said that the play felt empathetic to them, particularly since they rarely see a positive reflection of their self-worth, and a credible account of their struggles. Staging the production was an important milestone for the young people in this study. The positive feedback from peers, administrators, shelter staff, and the board of directors confirmed to the participants that the dramatic representation of their arts-informed research was
both educative and enlightening. The production also gave Kofi and his team first-hand experience of some of the challenges of staging the play with a group of young people dealing with homelessness.

"The Other Side of the Door" and Social Change

An artwork in a PAR project can instigate social change, an empowering goal to many of the participants. Indeed, many participants said that they were inspired by the potential for social change in this project. Of note, the arts can both facilitate social change among the participants themselves, and be an instrument of social change in larger society: arts-based research “seek[s] to inform, contest and promote changes in the perceptions, behaviors and lives of participants and audiences” (Mienczakowski and Morgan, 2006, p. 177). Which audience “perceptions and behaviors” should be contested, changed and perhaps even transformed? As many people shun the homeless youth they encounter on the streets, there is widespread suspicion, stereotyping and misinformation about these young people. Provocative works in the arts, however can help unsettle the ideas many audience members hold towards them, and may help some reconceptualize their ideas about this population.

While researching drama as an artform, Kofi uncovered a long tradition of drama affecting social change. He shared his research with our group:

Theatre has a long tradition of performances addressing events and issues essential to society, encouraging consciousness and social change. The political satire performed by the poets long ago in Athens influenced the
Athenian democracy. And drama in the past has been used for religious ceremonies and political purposes.

“Unpacking” social change, such as Kofi references regarding the ancient Greeks, requires an analysis of power structures that subordinate others: “…theatre oriented to social change” Quinlan (2009) argues, “… investigat[es] the social processes by which power is organized (p. 119). As is evidenced from “The Other Side of the Door,” the manner in which “power is organized” is profoundly disrupted for homeless youth as their bonds to family, social and economic capital, supports and networks are often fractured in a transient and exceedingly difficult lifestyle.

During a discussion about social change, Devon declared, “I guess it takes just one voice to be heard to change everything.” McNiff, (2008) also notes the power of the personal regarding social change: “Change and insight in the personal realm are increasingly being recognized as a key source of corresponding social change” (p. 37). Indeed, Wonda and Steve, the protagonists in “The Other Side of the Door” may well be singular voices that move students and others to a more comprehensive understanding of young people in our midst for whom their homes are no longer an option.

Although transformed personal beliefs can be instruments of social change, habitual ways of thinking about the world that have “defined who we are” can prove intransigent (McNiff, 2008, p. 37). To contest such deeply-held beliefs, Denzin (2003) calls for “performances which intervene and interrupt public life. Such interruptions are meant to unsettle and challenge taken for granted assumptions concerning problematic issues in public life” (p. 247). The goal, Denzin states, are
performance based texts that don’t “just describe the world, but... chang[e] it” (2003, p. 261). Deeply moved by “The Other Side of the Door”, and believing that larger publics might be as well, some young people expressed confidence that “The Other Side of the Door” was just such a text.

By leaving the viewer with some issue or detail that they would like to resolve, engaging art can provoke a reconceptualization of an issue or problem: “Maybe some detail of the story will offend the reader, or make the reader feel uncomfortable. Maybe some unanswered questions will become haunting” (Finley & Finley, 1999, p. 334). These authors state that pursuing these questions may instigate dialogue, a type of action, and they note that a handful of disparate actions can lead into activism. As Devon alluded to earlier about the power of a single voice to “change everything,” Conrad (2015) adds how insight by members of an audience can have a “ripple-effect” and instigate social change (p. 5). Social change theory is also deepened with Boal’s (2006) ideas about how some drama can be a catalyst for future action. He states, “In the act of changing our image, we are changing ourselves and by changing ourselves in turn we change the world” (p. 62). These changes were facilitated when the youth developed their research skills, artistic abilities to represent data, and conceived action regarding audiences, venues and after-play conversations. As the young people utilized their agency to achieve these objectives, as Boal (2006) suggests, the young people saw one another—and themselves differently.

Performing the play in front of a receptive audience of different ages, professions, and occupations at the shelter validated a central premise of
participatory action research: action, through staging the production, and subsequent discussion and reflection among audiences, can reach—and change public perceptions of youth homelessness. Wadsworth (1998) elaborates on this dynamic of social change: “Things inevitably change as a result of research—the mere act of asking questions is an intervention in a situation, and giving and hearing answers and making sense of them inevitably brings about changes in those involved” (retrieved from http://www.aral.com.au/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html). Readers and potential viewers of the play “The Other Side of the Door” excerpted in this chapter, and included in full in the appendix, may well be moved to ask what the young participants in this study asked about themselves: “who is a homeless youth?” And is such a young person a catalyst of homelessness, or a victim of it? Since Wonda’s abusive parenting is the primary cause of Steve’s homelessness, audience members may also ponder the relationship of parenting to youth homelessness.

Youth Prioritize Two Major Themes From the Play

After workshopping, discussing, and analyzing “The Other Side of the Door” youth articulated two key themes in it: “Who is a homeless youth” and parenting and youth homelessness. Both of these themes address profound existential questions that the youth grappled with as they considered their parent’s roles in leaving home, and who exactly is a homeless youth.
“Who is a homeless youth?” The “who is a homeless youth” theme has been taken up throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout this dissertation. There is no single answer to this issue, since young people display different levels of resilience and coping strategies to deal with abuse and neglect. As well, in a minority of instances, some young people’s decisions, behaviours, and peer groups are responsible for, or exacerbate the likelihood of their own homelessness. Complicating matters, once in homelessness, youth live in any number of circumstances, from couch-surfing, to catching sleep in bus or subway stations, coffee shops, stairwells, squats, ravines, or other public places. Some participants said that a youth could even be homeless inside the family home. With no single way that a young person survives homelessness, some youth in the study said that they had pondered profound questions of self by asking “who is a homeless youth?”

Turning to “The Other Side of the Door” for answers to “who is a homeless youth,” it is noteworthy that while Steve could no longer bear Wonda’s strictures and abuse, some youth in similar situations may have demonstrated a higher tolerance for Wonda’s ways, or devised other ways to cope with her abusive behavior. Nonetheless, the decision to leave home is a deeply personal one that has monumental consequences.

Given the distressing consequences of departure, most youth endure as much trauma and conflict as possible before fleeing. In “The Other Side of the Door” Steve addressed “who is a homeless youth” by displaying courage, self-respect, and resilience by fleeing his home, and by opposing charismatic individuals like Brains who tried to bully him into to becoming someone other than himself. In our
discussions, the issue of “who is a homeless youth?” turned from Steve in the play to the experiences of youth in the group. One youth, who suffered years of physical beatings from his father, disclosed that he related to Devon’s account of preparing to run by packing a bag which he kept at the door. This youth, who had been homeless as a young person for six years, disclosed that he too pined to escape in his early teen years, “When I was young, I knew that the further away I was from my parents the more successful I’d be in life.” All the youth in the room, as runaways or “throwaways” had reached a similar point, where they concluded that their lives would somehow improve once they were on their own. A participant succinctly stated that when youth run out of options, they abandon home “for a greater good.”

Some youth used Steve’s character as a reference point for “who is a homeless youth.” As they reflected on their own circumstances, some saw aspects of Steve’s courage and inner strength in themselves. Rasheed succinctly said, “Steve didn’t want it [the abuse] any more.” In short, “who is a homeless youth” depends on the individual’s coping mechanisms, since youth react differently to circumstances according to personal qualities, temperaments, intelligence and resilience.

**Parenting and youth homelessness.** The relationship of parenting to youth homelessness is another key theme that is discussed throughout this chapter and in this dissertation. “The Other Side of the Door” seems ambivalent about the issue of parenting, since despite her inadequacies as a parent, Wonda loves her son and cares about his welfare. Her behaviour sharply contrasts with other parents and guardians of homeless youth who do not put up missing children’s posters, nor
inform the authorities about their missing child. Nonetheless, as the Executive Director of the shelter where the research was conducted in points out, successful parenting depends on more than loving a child.

Wonda’s “parental toolkit” is virtually empty; accordingly she displays little creativity in helping her son develop new behaviours, or modify his existing ones. Instead, Wonda regards any differing opinion by her son as an affront to her—and her authority. In the opening scene, for instance, by slapping Steve across the face, Wonda reacts disproportionately to her son’s taste of music. Another mother might have simply teased her son about his interest in rap and hip hop, while respecting his prerogative to have his own musical tastes.

Wonda’s curt dismissal of Steve’s feelings and wishes also weakens the bonds between mother and son. As part of her unyielding nature, Wonda declares to Steve, “in my house, you go by my rules.” She reinforces her dominance through relentless discipline and punishment. Dealing with an inflexible, and volatile parent, Steve, like many homeless youth, is stuck. Feeling physically violated and emotionally suffocated, and unable to effect meaningful change through his pleas to James, his stepfather, Steve flees to the streets in the hopes of finding “a greater good.”

In some ways, Steve and Wonda are like two boats on a foggy sea calling out to each other. Their signals, however, broadcast on different frequencies, so they cannot detect each other’s distress signals. In the skillful hands of the playwright, everything, as in the actual home of a youth struggling in an abusive and dangerous environment, points to disaster. In Wonda’s home, Steve has no “free space.” Wonda is “everywhere” as she strives to rule his body with “discipline” and his mind with
guilt. Accordingly, her mantras are: “In my house, you go by my rules,” and “I’m doing this for your betterment.” With Wonda punishing Steve by insisting he stay inside during summer, she asserts her dominance over Steve both inside and outside of her home, Steve’s “options” constrict even further. His sole option, as he sees it, is to flee.

**Conclusion**

In this study, a number of participants disclosed traumatic experiences about family dysfunction, and leaving home. During these times, the youth were paradoxically courageous—and extremely vulnerable. While sharing, they needed to know that they were not only heard, but understood. After these disclosures, many looked straight at me and asked: “Ya feel me?” This play affords audiences the chance to “feel Steve,” in a continuum of space and time. After our readings of the play and discussions, the young people said that “The Other Side of the Door” depicts “twisted” dynamics between mother and son, while insightfully dramatizing peer pressure, substance use, and shelter life in their homeless lifeworlds.

As the manifestos of a number of theatre groups indicate (conversation with David Booth, April 2016), engaging with the moral issues in “The Other Side of the Door” demands more of an audience than to be “entertained.” By bearing witness to Steve’s upheavals in homelessness, viewers thoughts and attitudes about homeless youth may begin to change as they ponder how they themselves might survive on their own should they flee their home, our most important social institution. Some members of the audience may develop a deeper understanding of the family
dynamics that can lead to homelessness, and of the seemingly insurmountable burdens placed on young lives by a lack of guidance support and caring from safe and reliable adults.

In this research, many of the young people showed compassion and concern for others in similar plights, and wanted them to benefit from their lived experiences, and the representation of them in “The Other Side of the Door.” Like scientists toiling in a lab, they want to make a difference with their research findings, and hopes to affect social change. Kofi describes the scale of his ambitions for social change when he says that “The Other Side of the Door” should be performed to “the world.” Devon shares his passion for making a difference in the lives of others,

I want to perform the play in schools, and talk to the audience of a certain age group, and to let them know, whatever may be going on at home, it doesn’t have to be that way. It’s probably not the best option, but there are shelters they can go to and get help. I want to really try and reach these kids. I feel empowered with this project, because I know I’m actually helping somebody.

The arts anchored the young people in this study, and served as a powerful tool for them. As a means of embodied expression, and an outlet for creativity, the arts provided the youth the means to represent their prioritized themes, and their research about them. The arts, as Kofi alluded to earlier, helped the young people examine their own world more closely, through a “parallel,” but “fictional” one that they created. In the arts phase, many youth were imbued with energy, curiosity—and confidence. In a participatory ethos, they supported each other, but they still
called something out in their peer’s work that could be improved. Through their efforts, and the play that they selected to represent this study, and their contributions to it in workshops, readings and the performance, the youth uniquely expressed their ideas about “who is a homeless youth” and the impact parenting has had on youth who can no longer stay in their homes.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the outset, the youth brainstormed more than 100 research themes they said were relevant to their homeless lifeworlds before narrowing down the ones they wanted to focus on. The youth prioritized stereotyping and stigmatization, the focus of Chapter 4. They took up two other major themes: “who is a homeless youth” and the connection between parenting and youth homelessness, both of which are explored throughout this dissertation and more specifically in Chapter 5 regarding the theatre play “The Other Side of the Door.” In it, Steve, a 16-year-old protagonist, defines “who is a homeless youth” through his actions striving for independence from his mother’s abusive, unpredictable and controlling ways. The play also explores the connection of parenting to youth homelessness by depicting how Wonda’s parenting challenges the person Steve is, and the one he wants to become.

As an overview, in this chapter the significance of the research is addressed by analyzing the three themes at the heart of this study. Validity measures for this study are discussed, as are participatory action research and social change. The dissertation concludes with three recommendations that address the principal concerns of the participants in this study: the stereotyping and stigmatization that they shared Others them in their lifeworlds. Finally, an epilogue includes a brief interview with Kofi regarding this project and his play “The Other Side of the Door.”

Significance of Research: Three Key Themes

Seldom do homeless youth have the opportunity, in a research context, to define research according to their own interests, needs and priorities, (Rice et al.,
2013; Smith, 2008; Kidd & Davidson, 2007) or to help disseminate their research findings to broader publics. Based on the youths’ participation in, and stake in this project, they said that the research process, themes, findings and artworks held meaning to them. Goldstein (2002) succinctly evokes the value of foregrounding the participants’ experience and desires in a research context: “Useful research is research that allows participants to meet their own educational, social and political goals” (p. 56). Accordingly, this project demonstrates that effective research need not only be conducted by the academy and for the academy, but that oppressed, disenfranchised, and marginalized communities with incomplete formal education, can, with effective facilitation, conduct such research and generate significant findings and meaningful outcomes.

Based on their research and goals for the project, the youth prioritized three major research themes: stereotyping and stigmatization, “who is a homeless youth” and parenting and youth homelessness. These themes manifest the interior psychological states of youth who shared that they feel ‘othered’ much of the time as they grapple with existential questions about who they are, how they got there, and how they ‘fit’ into the larger world around them.

**Stereotyping and stigmatization.** The first major theme the youth researched in this study, stereotyping and stigmatization, addresses a significant gap in the existing literature about youth homelessness. Few published studies, if any, detail from the youths’ perspectives how they deal with these social constructs in their various social settings. Accordingly, Chapter 4 details from a psycho-socio
perspective how homeless youth confront pervasive and demeaning stereotyping and stigmatization in their lifeworlds.

In this study, the young people described how they feel oppressed by these stereotypes and corresponding stigma. The young peoples’ challenging life circumstances and scant resources compound their difficulties with these damaging social beliefs and attitudes. Once stereotyped, these young people are Othered through stigmatizing behaviours. Separated from family, with often-tenuous ties to community, these young people are distanced from most social institutions. As a result, the transience and chaos of homelessness diminishes social capital. Mired in difficult circumstances, and with pressing matters to attend to for daily survival, these youth have negligible resources to contest stereotyping and stigmatization. Accordingly, to protect themselves from these demeaning social constructs and behaviors, many of these young people said they retreat inward and hide.

A key finding of this study is that stereotyping and stigmatization constrains the young peoples’ agency—their desire to be a “force in the world.” Rather than strive to be included, these young people said that they withdraw, in public, on buses, in schools, at the workplace, and in their families—from circumstances that reinforce their Otherness to them. Moreover, these young people’s psychological distress is compounded by material deficits, namely a lack of safe and affordable housing, dearth of resources, limited formal education, and career challenges. Accordingly, on both psychological and material levels, these youth are confronted with the idea that they are “Others” who don’t belong. In too many instances, these young people said that the result is “social death”— the
erasure, non-participation and “other[ness]” of the stigmatized (Kleinman, The Harvard Mental Health Letter, p. 7).

The “social death” from mainstream society is distressing on numerous levels. Besides the moral offensiveness of condemning young people to shortened lives that are often filled with despair, mental health issues, and compromised health, “social death” has profound developmental consequences. Indeed, as part of their socialization and maturation young people need to feel that they belong—in school, among the greater public, applying for a place to live, at health appointments, and in the workplace. A principal finding of this study, however, is that stereotyping and stigmatization curtails agency for homeless youth at a stage in their lives when they may develop and “test” their agency in different ways and in different environments in their quest to enhance their life possibilities.

Who is a homeless youth? In this project, Rasheed and Derek address the question of “who is a homeless youth” by describing how the dearth of necessities for young people jeopardizes their lives, safety and well-being. Evoking their perilous circumstances, Rasheed says, “A homeless youth has no roof over his head, nowhere to go, and nobody to turn to.” Moreover, youth in these predicaments are in a “dead-end.” Derek elaborates: “You can’t do anything if you don’t know where you’re going to sleep.” When it is too dangerous to return home, Amber, explains how transience becomes a survival strategy, “If you’re under 16, you’re running from Child Services, you’re running from your parents, you’re running from the police. You don’t want to be brought home.” Although a number of youth in this
study shared different narratives about how they were “thrown away” or ran away from home, most divulged that their family home was unsafe and one that they felt unwelcome in.

The participants helped to create a nuanced answer to the question “who is a homeless youth.” In so doing, the study provided a forum for the young people to resist the stereotypes and stigmatization they encounter in their lifeworlds. Stereotypes abound, the youth said, since the public lacks a counter-narrative about them, especially since people typically avoid them on the streets. All that is left for the public, some youth said, are widely circulated, superficial and unchallenged stereotypes about them. They said they prioritized ‘who is a homeless youth’ because they were confident that their ideas would find a wider audience through both the artwork at the heart of this research and, as some came to learn, through media, books, journal articles and conference presentations resulting from this study.

In homes with constant abuse or neglect that the young people said they could not change, they fled, despite having little knowledge of life on the streets or how to move forward with their lives once on them. They revealed that they did not know about youth shelters before leaving home either. Their reflections about their lived experiences reveal a group of pragmatic, hardened young people, many of whom show themselves to be “wise to the world.” Few are romantics, either; “it is what it is,” some say, pithily capturing the acceptance, and perhaps resignation, that some of these young people utilize to cope with their situations.
Kofi’s play “The Other Side of the Door” also responds to the question of ‘who is a homeless youth’ through Steve, the central character, a 16 year-old ingénue entering homelessness. In unfamiliar surroundings, Steve must learn quickly to survive. In some ways, the play provides a case study of Steve’s resiliency—and intelligence—because he is constantly, and intensely pressured to act in unfamiliar ways and roles. As a newcomer to homelessness, Steve cannot dictate how his new peer group should act, nor can he change long-standing shelter policies. Accordingly, he has to adjust to worlds not of his making. Yet Steve displays characteristics at home with Wonda that he does on the streets with bullies like Brains; regardless of pressure, the scorn of his peers, or even the loss of his “home,” he sets his own standards and abides by them.

By asserting his lack of interest in drugs and alcohol, Steve rejects the “norm” as embodied by Brains and his gang. Under pressure and relentless teasing and mocking, however, Steve loses his virginity. But, whether consciously or not, the 16 year-old Steve is testing himself, to see how—and if—he can survive on his own without having to abide by Wonda’s abusive and controlling ways.

In sum, through the youths’ words and thoughts, and “The Other Side of the Door,” the question “who is a homeless youth” is answered by young people like Rasheed and Derek stating that they have little to count on but themselves in their struggles, in a host of lifeworlds that designates them as “Other.” The young people said that they do not fit into one single template that defines a homeless youth in all places and situations. Instead, as with the character Steve in the play, they use their experience, intelligence, and temperaments to react to the situations they
encounter. They said they object to stereotyping and stigmatization because under these constructs they become “generalized types” that erase their individuality, histories, and character.

**Parenting and youth homelessness.** Parenting, the last theme prioritized by the youth in this study, is a major catalyst in youth homelessness. As a number of young people divulged in this study, parental abuse of a physical, sexual and emotional nature, or sustained parental neglect often forces them onto the streets. For example, a young male in the study cited repeated beatings over the years by his father, leading him to disturbing—and murderous—fantasies to terminate the abuse. A young female shared how her mother neglected her and a younger brother by moving out to live with a boyfriend, but returning home every few weeks to visit and to leave packages of hotdogs for their daily meals. Another female described how her inability to communicate and connect with her much older parents and have them understand her experiences led her to the streets. Another female talked about how her family neglected her by ignoring her. Her difficulties, she said, were compounded by sexual abuse that she tried to prevent by telling family members, but no one believed her. For her own safety, she fled. A male who had completed several years of university spoke about how his father’s steadfast refusal to acknowledge his version of the truth led to unresolved tension and disagreements that culminated in his homelessness. First generation youth spoke of challenges around parents who cling to and impose “old-country” ways while they try to fit into their new culture that does things differently. Instead of supportive, nurturing,
guiding, and loving families, these young people spoke of physically and emotionally threatening ones. A youth in my study captures the dysfunction in such homes by simply stating, “Your family despises you.”

The play “The Other Side of the Door” also offers an in-depth account of how a parent’s actions and behaviors affect youth homelessness. In it, Wonda’s behaviours and actions corrode the connective tissue between a mother and son. To control Steve, Wonda administers threats, abuse, and scorn. Although her new husband James gingerly hints at other approaches, Wonda reacts defensively to any implication that she is an inadequate parent. She curtly dismisses James’ overtures: “You white fathers are too soft!” Since Wonda is unmoved by the appeals to modify her parenting style, which greatly constrains her son’s freedom both in and out of her home, the young man crosses to “the other side of the door” and flees into the unknown.

Notwithstanding Wonda’s limitations as a parent, the playwright Kofi demonstrates that a parent’s role in creating youth homelessness is complex. Through her actions, Wonda demonstrates that she does indeed love her son; indeed she rationalizes her excessive discipline as toughening up Steve to survive in a hostile world. Moreover, once Steve is on his own, Wonda is distressed about not knowing his precise whereabouts, and she frets about his safety. Accordingly, she contacts the police to try to locate him. Such behavior contrasts sharply with guardians and parents of many homeless youth who do not bother to put up missing children’s posters or otherwise attempt to locate their child. Nonetheless, these instances of parental love and concern for a child may be insufficient, because as the
Executive Director of the shelter where I conducted the research in notes, a successful parent child relationship depends on more than a parent loving a child.

Although the youth in the study shared from lived experience and from their research how parenting leads to homelessness, they maintained an open-minded approach to the topic, as they shared how their own behaviours may have contributed to friction with their parents. Some disclosed how their poor choice of peers, disinterest in school, use of drugs, or early teen pregnancy exacerbated tensions in the household and strained the connection with their parent(s). While these were contributing factors to a challenging relationship with parent(s), in the overwhelming number of narratives in the study, youth shared that they had stressful, dangerous and frightening home environments, where parents engaged in outright physical, sexual or emotional abuse of them. They shared other problems that strained their relations with their parent(s): heavy-handed discipline, consistently inadequate advice, or the imposition of old-world ideals and mores that clashed with Canadian ones that they were trying to assimilate with. In sum, youth stated that for any number of factors, the parenting in the home they were thrown away from or fled was inadequate, threatening and dangerous and imperiled their physical and emotional safety.

**Study Considerations**

This section addresses the magnitude of a PAR project, compensation of the participants, and the limitations of the study. The validity measures for a
participatory action research project, including social validity and new knowledge, are analyzed in the context of this study.

**Magnitude of a participatory action research study.** A researcher-facilitator in the academy should prepare for the considerable length of time involved in the multiple phases of participatory action research (Maguire, 1987; Healy, 2001). Given the voluminous data that emerges from a holistic approach of “naming the word to name the world,” one must devote substantial time to transcribing and coding. As well, one should anticipate quickly developing proficiency in new discourses based on the participants’ “hidden” priorities and interests. Accordingly, Kidd and Kral (2005) note: “The size, nature and scope of the PAR project itself present problems in the present academic culture” (p. 191). Indeed, the scope, magnitude and complexities of a PAR project can seem overwhelming at times. Reflecting back, at certain moments during the study, I felt like I was using a tiny chisel to break through a seemingly impenetrable concrete wall. I smashed away, and grumbled at what appeared to be little progress. I kept at it though, until some light eventually appeared through some of the cracks.

For this study, I worked with the youth in the field for a full year and spent much of another year transcribing, coding and analyzing 1,500 pages of complex data which I coded with NVivo software. Conceptualizing the relationships between categories in such large data sets can be challenging, given the holistic dimensions of the youths’ experiences that they discussed including home life, parenting, abuse, neglect, school, peers, shelters, substance abuse, depression, community, career, and
housing, to name a few. This data was further broadened from the youths’ primary and secondary research and from the numerous artworks they generated to represent their findings.

**Financial compensation of participants.** In many instances, the subjects in participatory action research are compensated for their participation, so one must either receive funding or self-finance a study which is a considerable financial undertaking. Maguire (1987) notes, “Participatory research simply cannot take place without some combination of institutional resources, human, financial and material” (p. 45; see also Healy, 2001). Projecting a budget for PAR research involving homeless youth can be problematic, since the transience of these young people determines the number of participants in such a study, and the length of time they can devote to it.

The shelter residents at the time of the study received $30/week from the government, so the $15.00 compensation for the weekly session that ran several hours in length was significant to them. As a PAR researcher-facilitator, I shared with the young people that I was interested how they would surface and prioritize research themes in their homeless lifeworlds, what their research and findings would disclose, and the subsequent actions they would conceive to address their concerns.

Regarding compensation, Aleysha says, “My initial attraction to the research was the compensation. It took me a bit of time to get into the research, but when I did, I believed in it. We worked hard,” she adds, “because we knew our work would
benefit others in our situations. I would have continued in the research without it [the compensation].” Derek shares, “getting paid made the research feel legitimate. It incentivized my words and my contributions. The money recognized what we did in the research: we gave our mind and got a royalty for it. The research was transparent,” he says, “there were no more layers than what were displayed. Any ‘agenda’ never crossed my mind.”

**Limitations.** Homeless youth constitute a heterogeneous community with distinct subgroups. For example, some youth use shelters while others avoid them entirely; some work in the formal economy while others obtain work informally. Regardless of group affiliation, these individuals have varied histories, experiences, characters, and responses to social situations and social stimuli. Accordingly, this study recounts the participant’s reflections, feelings, and theories, often in the youth’s own words, about experiences which are contextualized in time and place. Since the study covers a small, non-representative sample of shelter youth at a particular time and place, it does not speak for all homeless youth in all places. Nonetheless, the youth’s insights about the scope of stereotyping and stigmatization in their various lifeworlds, and their coping mechanisms can be instructive to further research into these totalizing social constructs, and help us glean insights into a problem that is insufficiently explored from the perspectives of the young people themselves.
Validity. Participatory action research employs an array of validity measures, including evaluating the outcomes for projects that are largely conducted by the community being researched. With focused discussion by the participants, primary and secondary research, and, in the case of this study, input from newcomers to the research, as well as from shelter administrators, staff and professors, participatory action research has established a range of “checks” to ensure the validity of the knowledge generated in the project. Lincoln (2001) contrasts this approach of internal and external member checks with a less participatory approach: “If inquiry processes are sufficiently undemocratic, unshared, or trivial that research participants are unmoved by them, then the inquiry effort itself is adjudged to be a failure” (p. 126). Central to validity in a PAR study, and consistent with a Lewinian approach, is the design and corroboration of the process, methods, and findings by the “experts,”—the youth themselves who live the problems they research and conceive solutions for.

Given the high rates of transience of the homeless youth in the study, new youth frequently joined, at which time they performed a “member” check on their peers’ research themes. To do this, newcomers were given the research theme sheet (see Appendix A2) and asked to contribute to it, or to choose a theme/s of interest as a means of engaging their interests and priorities in the project. Many newcomers said that their peers’ themes were comprehensive, insightful and accurately represented their hopes and struggles in homelessness. By providing this feedback, the youth validated the content and substance of their peers’ research efforts into youth homelessness. Reason and Rowan (1981) elaborate on how this form of a
member check helps validate a study: “Good research... goes back to the subjects with the tentative results, and refines them in the light of the subjects’ reactions” (p. 248). New youth “checking in” helped provide feedback that their peers’ research themes were both comprehensive and pertinent to investigating significant aspects of their homeless lifeworlds.

Besides internal “member checks,” there were external checks as well. Regarding the scope of individuals to invite to contribute to, and help validate a PAR study, Herr & Anderson (2005) suggest considering “how deep does it [collaboration] go and how wide does it extend?” (p. 56). In this study, given the array of interests of the participants, they were keen on having a range of experts and specialists meet with them. While sitting in as an observer on their interviews, I noticed the respect and openness with which the youth considered these experts’ ideas, as they were developing their own. The interviewees reciprocated this generosity as they thoughtfully considered the youths’ expertise, and their ideas and priorities about their lifeworlds.

The Executive Director of the shelter, shelter managers, case workers, and professors of education and psychology were some of the youths’ interviewees in their primary research. A number of these individuals also attended readings of “The Other Side of the Door” where they offered feedback, from their perspectives, as to the accuracy of the research findings and the insights about youth homelessness.

The specialists and experts who participated in the research were interviewed by the young people, with a questionnaire the young people designed (see Appendix A3). During the ensuing conversations, the interviewees mulled over
the youths’ central research questions and initial findings and offered feedback. Cronbach (1980) describes how critical dialogue about research themes and findings helps validate each: “The job of validation is not to support an interpretation, but to find out what might be wrong with it. A proposition deserves some degree of trust only when it has survived serious attempts to falsify it (cited in Lather, 1986, p. 67). This dynamic was evidenced when the experts helped scaffold the youths’ understanding of some issues, such as when Dr. Broad had an interchange about how some participants worried that youth, emboldened from seeing the play, might provoke an explosive clash in the home with an authoritarian parent or guardian (see Chapter 5) or when Dr. Brett explained some physiological reasons why some youth have a type of “mind-blindedness” that may lead to an inability to surmise and act on larger understandings of self (see Chapter 2).

In this study, data was subject to repeated scrutiny, by new participants to the study, by critical discussions about the data, and through presentations of it to “outside” homeless youth [who did not participate in this study], shelter staff and administrators, and professors. McTaggart (1994) summarizes participatory validity: “Validation is accomplished by a variety of methods including triangulation of observations and interpretations, co-authorship, participant confirmation and by testing the coherence of arguments being presented” (p. 327, italics in original). Herr & Anderson (2005) summarize that triangulation utilizes “a variety of methods” (p. 56), which transpired in this study as the young peoples’ ideas were presented to and evaluated by a range of individuals, specialists and experts who provided the young people feedback and commentary in the discussions that ensued.
After being interviewed by the young people, and discussing the play at the heart of the research, Dr. Kathy Broad, a former school principal and Director of the Initial Teacher Education Program at OISE corroborated the validity of this study, particularly in the context of the arts performance at the centre of it. She notes,

This research represents important lived experience and documented stories of people over time, so besides being a fine work of art, it’s also evidence-based.

The participants interviewed the Executive Director of the shelter where the research was conducted. She said,

The youth have achieved something significant with their research. They opened up their interior lives to help us better understand them. We see how difficult their choices are, and what a tough road they have on their own without the family and community supports we all take for granted.”

Professor David Booth says,

The young people successfully used ethnodrama—drama based on research about lived experience—to show us “the hidden,” and the “taboo” in their lives. The arts show us what we turn away from, or what we refuse to see. The knowledge in this play can only unfold in this format—naturally, and in real time. Through it, we get a rare look at the frightening and dangerous dynamics in the home that lead young people to flee. As we see through Steve, the central character, young people on the streets are much more than we imagine them to be.

Finally, a case manager adds,

People can’t see homeless youth, because they can’t imagine being apart from their own children. This research, and the play, may help people see these youth for who they really are. This is important work—there are few opportunities for society to learn about what these young people deal with and go through.
Feedback that ensued from these discussions and interviews corroborated the validity and the significance of the themes and findings that the youth brainstormed, prioritized and researched.

**Social validity.** Francisco and Butterfoss (2007) propose that “social validity” be employed to “evaluate[s] how research affects the lives of participants” cited in Kim, 2016, p. 49). As detailed in Chapter 3, youths’ lives changed in the study as they performed this research. Kofi, who has been in homelessness for seven years, distinguishes the social validity in PAR from other types of homeless research he engaged in. He said that these other studies were short-term, and conducted by a researcher who was “never seen again.” He contrasts this approach with the “long-term” relationships that PAR fosters, and the opportunities that emanate from it.

In the study, social validity was evidenced as numbers of young people honed their interpersonal and critical thinking skills as they navigated through their research findings and the complexities of the study. Many were inspired during the arts phase, where they had the opportunity to further develop their skills by applying them to represent the research findings in this study. Significantly, a number of young people said that they felt validated on an existential level in the study—that they and their ideas had import. Accordingly, a number of youth mentioned that they did not feel homeless in this study. And three young people from the study built on their confidence and successes in the research, and the subsequent mentorship of them, to have now fully left homelessness behind.
**New knowledge.** Another validity measure is new knowledge (Herr & Anderson, 2005) generated by the participants in a PAR study. Many young people in this study provided a glimpse into the “hidden worlds” of their beings and psyches, by divulging the private means they use to deal with stereotyping and stigmatization in their lifeworlds. There is a dearth of this knowledge in the research literature (Rice et al., 2013; Smith, 2008; Kidd & Davidson, 2007), and none that I know that examines these damaging social constructs, from the young peoples’ perspectives, in the totality of their lifeworlds. This study examines these social constructs and the associated behaviors from those in mainstream society who hold these beliefs, and the unique ideas the young people have to redress them, both practically and through the pedagogical device of the play.

The ethnodrama, “The Other Side of the Door” also uniquely contributes to knowledge about youth homelessness, with an “interior look” at a mother-son dynamic that can rarely be detailed as “straight” narrative, since many males are loathe to admit abuse by the female as cultural mores and norms dictate that males deal with—and overcome physical threats to their beings and bodies. The play also delivers an “up-close” look at how Wonda functions as an authoritarian mother, in terms of how quickly she becomes defensive, nor budge from her dictates and commands, even when they are grossly disproportionate to her son’s “misbehavior.” The play also evokes the bind that Steve is in, since as a 16 year old he wants to expand his horizons that his mother shuts down with edicts such as “you’re banned from leaving this house this summer!”
The end result, as Swantz asserts of dialectical and critical discussions, triangulation of methods, and the interests and priorities of the youth, is “living knowledge” that deepened the youths’ understanding of the complexities and nuances of youth homelessness. Derek summarizes the new knowledge generated in this project, “This research developed my mind. By hearing about so many different issues in homelessness we were exposed to a lot more life experience in the research than outside of it.” Many youth commented that the wide-ranging discussions about youth homelessness in the research, much of it involving “lived experience,” profoundly altered their understanding about the complexities and causes of youth homelessness. Some youth also said that through their participation in this project, their knowledge of themselves changed as well.

**Participatory Action Research and Social Change**

One of the hallmarks of participatory action research is that the process and outcome can be a catalyst for social change both in the participants themselves, and in the audiences who witness the ideas and artistic representations of the participants. Lund (2010) summarizes such work: “sustained critical interrogation, dialog and action... can lead to significant individual and collective change (Lund & Carr, p. 233). “Collective change” may transpire as policy makers, governments, media, publics, schools, researchers and the academy may also implement change from the findings, and the political action that can result from these projects. Social change may also ensue with readers of this study who may develop a more accurate
understanding of who these young people are, what they have gone through, and what they are capable of.

The critical involvement of the subjects in PAR can lead to a transformed self-concept among numbers of the participants and their ability to effect change through their creative endeavours. As Aleysha illustrates when she utilized the research as a springboard to build her skills of inquiry and critical thinking to return to complete high school, and is now succeeding in a professional college social work program, one cannot underestimate the potentially transformative nature of PAR to a participant’s self-concept and self-efficacy. A number of youth noted that they found “home” in the research. They added that the study not only helped distract them from their formidable challenges in homelessness, but inspired them to utilize their creative abilities, insights, and intelligence to think about their circumstances—and how to change them. Such a transformation in attitude and perspective, or “unleashing of subjectivity” is aptly captured by Fals-Borda (1997), “We finally came to see participation as a breakup of the relationship of submission, exploitation, or oppression between subjects and objects in most expressions of daily life” (p. 108). As the project progressed, it was exciting to see numbers of young people believe in—and utilize their agency, and to witness their changed self-concept as a result.

The educational process of PAR depends on participants asking ever better questions to both define and address their priorities. Rorty (1979) elaborates about how research transforms the inquirer: “In coming to an understanding, the interaction between the knower and the known produces changes in both. In
interpreting, we always encounter something new and unexpected, and we gain a new experience, by virtue of which we become altered” (cited in Park, 2006, p. 85). Indeed, with 107 research themes that the participants generated, and discussed among themselves, and the critical processes involved in developing better understandings of their prioritized research themes, this PAR project offered numerous opportunities as Rorty (1979) suggests to “com[e] to an understanding”... to produce changes between “the knower and the known.”

Finally, another young man in this study has left homelessness behind to start a social enterprise which uses print, online media and the arts to illuminate issues of youth homelessness from the perspectives of those currently living in it, and those who formerly lived in it. His social enterprise has helped change the perspectives of some policy makers, charities, granting institutions and foundations that tend to assess and finance one shelter independently of others. This young man, who has stayed in all of these shelters in an eastern Canadian city, is turning aside the “one shelter perspective” and looking at the system as a collective. Through his intelligence, creativity, and courage, he and his social enterprise have willed himself into a larger conversation. Using a participatory approach, Freire (1971) asserts how formerly passive people can learn to exercise their agency, “[P]eople] can insert [themselves] into history as a subject” (p. 61). This young man is encouraged by the receptivity he is finding to his agency and to his ideas, as an array of stakeholders hear—and respond to his message and that of his community.

Lewin, who fled the Holocaust, was inspired by an ideal of creating a viable alternative for the ’other’ who were designated for destruction (Bradbury, Mirvis,
Neilsen & Pasmore, 2008/09). His enduring ideas underpin participatory action research, which proposes that the “marginalized” use their agency to define themselves, rather than accept stereotyping and stigmatization, that perpetuates exclusion and Othering. In terms of relationships to the Other, the larger goal of social change, Trifonas (2005) argues is, “A noncoersive environment in which to initiate genuinely intersubjective dialogues between perspectives, to... familiarize differences for the enrichment of society” (p. 152) and to open the Self to the difference of the Other (Trifonas, 2003b). The goal of this PAR project, and, “The Other Side of the Door,” its representative artwork is to have helped conduct such a dialogue, and in so doing, demonstrate to a public largely steeped in stereotypes, that these young people, indeed, have “something to say.” Through these young people’s ideas, findings and representations, we may more accurately learn their capabilities and potential regarding how they see and prioritize their lifeworlds, so that we may better assist them as they define their challenges—and their opportunities—in their efforts to leave homelessness behind.

**Moving Forward: Three Recommendations**

In this study, 35 young people shared that stereotyping and stigmatization: the social constructs, attitudes and behaviours of others towards them negatively impacts their psychological well-being by othering them in their various lifeworlds. With ever growing numbers of homeless youth, (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2010, cited in Kidd, 2012) we need to do more than commission studies; we need action
plans that foreground youths’ research, priorities and representations in strategic plans to improve their circumstances.

As detailed in Chapter 2, homeless youth face profound crises on numerous fronts: elevated mortality rates, high rates of depression, and other psychological challenges due to being Othered in the home, at school, in the public, in the workplace, and while trying to attain safe and affordable housing. To cope with their situations, and numb their pain and trauma, many young people resort to high levels of substance use. Murphy and Tobin (2011) succinctly summarize the enormity of homelessness, “Few events have the power to affect life in negative directions more than homelessness” (p. 33). This situation is further complicated with these young people since “Of all homeless people, homeless children are most vulnerable” (Burt et al. 2001, p. 33, cited in Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

The crises of these young people have been amply studied, but this population of young people is growing in size (Murphy & Tobin, 2011)—and pain. Given the magnitude and seriousness of these problems, we now should implement—and evaluate research-informed action strategies. Accordingly, the following three recommendations present changes to current practices involving homeless youth.

**Recommendation 1: Separate high-school education for homeless youth.**

As discussed in Chapter 4, the young people in this study shared that in schools they never disclosed their dysfunctional home lives, to teachers, administrators or peers, for fear of the marginalization that they said would result.
Moreover, the overwhelming majority of youth in this study recalled a negligible connection with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. This lack of connection to any adults at school was especially problematic for these young people when things were failing in their homes, where they said they had no safe adult family members to seek advice or support from. The young people said they had no adults at school to turn for advice, counsel and support at a time in their lives when they were at their most vulnerable.

Ideally, many schools try to include—and teach students from a variety of backgrounds, including those with special needs and learning disabilities. Homeless youth, however, present challenges to the educational system that differ from those of their housed peers. Simply put, although many of these young people have the intelligence, and the motivation to succeed, their circumstances in homelessness jeopardize their schooling. Lacking stable and affordable housing, these youth frequently move, impeding regular school attendance. Research shows that just 20-30% of homeless youth have completed high school (Busen & Engebretson, 2008; Edidin et al., 2012).

School curriculum is designed so that students use previously learned skills to build new ones. But with sporadic school attendance, homeless youth often miss foundational skills, limiting their ability to keep up with their classmates, and devastating their morale in the process. Moreover, their daily lives impact their class performance. After a restless night, for instance, their energy may be depleted, compromising their concentration and ability to stay on task. With difficulty accessing bathrooms and showers, and places to wash and keep their clothes,
personal hygiene may be lacking. Without a secure place to store belongings, books, papers and binders can get lost. Inadequate and sporadic nutrition can also divert their concentration from their lessons and curriculum. At the end of the school day, homeless youth can be shattered seeing their peers picked up by family to go to a home, while they are unwelcome and unsafe in their own.

While adolescents readily detect, and often act on social differences among peer groups, homeless youth are conspicuous targets for stereotyping, stigmatization and bullying. Without understanding how difficult their lives are, young people at school can stigmatize and reject homeless youth for their differences, and, in so doing, Other them. In short, the marginalization that the youth feel on the streets and in society at large can be reinforced at school. Of note, studies show that students perform poorly in environments where they feel they do not belong (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Uwah, McMahon & Furlow, 2008).

So what does work with educating these young people? Education needs to take place where these youth go and feel safe—in shelters, or at places they frequent for their life-skill programs. In “dedicated” educational spaces, instead of confronting stereotyping and stigmatization from some classmates, teachers and administrators, these young people can devote their intellectual and emotional energy to learning. Here, these young people can serve as a community, and as a support to each other. Role models can inspire others, and one student’s success can be a source of celebration for everyone.
Community is reinforced with shared experiences. Most of these young people can relate to experiences that many have difficulty even imagining: scrounging for food, going to bed on an empty stomach, and searching for a warm, safe place to spend the night. Teachers in dedicated spaces are sensitive to, and often proficient in dealing with an array of behaviours that these youth may display such as acting out, mental health issues, or post-traumatic stress disorder. And these teachers can draw on ideas from a team at the shelters in which they sometimes stay, such as caseworkers, and other staff whose ideas can collectively make a substantial difference to a young person’s life.

Wouldn’t a dedicated educational program segregate these youth from society and further marginalize them? Most staff that work with these youth are keenly sensitive to these young people’s marginalization from school, family, community, housing and work. The issue is not opposition to “re-integration,” but formulating the best steps to ensure it. By having a “dedicated” education specifically for homeless youth, and providing other supports to help them transition out of homelessness, these youth will garner the stability and confidence they need to eventually sit beside their peers in a general educational setting, as is the case with two of the participants in this current study whom I mentor and who have left homelessness behind. As discussed, one female is currently participating in a college social work program; the other young man is enrolled in credentialed courses to help him further develop his skills in the construction trades.
**Recommendation 2: A sustained adult mentorship program for homeless youth.** Adult mentorship can be profoundly supportive and protective to young people for whom their homes are no longer an option, and who are accordingly bereft of the ongoing support, nurture and guidance of their parent(s) and guardian(s). The messages that mentorship impart to these young people are salutary and multiple: “We care about you, you matter, you are worthy of our time, and our regard. We see you, you count, you register. Through our involvement with you, you are more than ‘the Other’ whom we can just ignore and shunt aside.” “Unpacking” the intentionality behind the act of mentoring is: “we will take responsibility for our actions toward you, in word and in deed.”

While the young people in this study shared that stereotyping and stigmatization are both psychologically devastating and rampant throughout their lifeworlds, mentorship with adults they respect helps foster an alternative narrative. Indeed, as the young people reflect on their experiences with such a mentor, it may become apparent to them that stereotypical “labels” and stigmatizing behaviors are not uniformly held. Effective mentorship involves patience: a willingness to accept that there may be difficult moments for a young person struggling with the psychological consequences of homelessness. A mentor should be prepared to make a commitment of at least one year so that a youth does not start to feel an attachment, based on trust, only to have that mentor vanish from their lives.

The impacts of stereotyping and stigmatization, the young people said in this study, affect them psychologically—and existentially. Psychologically, they said, they feel “less than” and Othered; many said they wanted to hide or become invisible.
Existential impacts, the young people said, include diminished agency, eroded social capital, and exclusion from community. Accordingly, mentorship programs should be initiated whereby adults with varied backgrounds, professions and interests, after appropriate police background and reference checks, share programs for these young people based around their hobbies and interests. Many young people are interested in pursuits that adults are passionate about: visual arts, music, singing, story-telling, chess, sports, languages, poetry, performance, reading and dramatic arts among others.

The effect on these young people from such mentoring can be immeasurable. A positive reflection of self from adults they value and respect is essential for young people shaping their futures—and their very lives. Although their own families, for any number of reasons, cannot or will not provide a home, mentors can convey to these young people that they do indeed belong. The importance of this cannot be overstated to young people who shared in this study that they feel Othered in virtually all of their lifeworlds. With effective mentorship, some of these young people can build social capital, and in the process benefit from the advice, guidance and support of adult mentors as they move forward in their lives.

**Recommendation 3: A “Homeless Youth Day” in schools.** A “Homeless Youth Day” in schools would combine two key stakeholders: youth in school would research aspects of youth homelessness that interest them, while homeless youth would either bring in artworks or performance pieces and participate in a post-performance dialogue or a general discussion. As elaborated below, homeless youth in this study expressed keen interest in making presentations or having discussions
with high school students if there is a prevention component to appearing at a school.

Stereotyping and stigmatization about homeless youth can flourish in schools where there may be few competing narratives to contest these misconceptions and damaging labels. In this study, youth on the verge of homelessness recalled feeling Othered attending school. They elaborated that they felt an absence of “connective tissue” to the personnel, programs and curricula in schools, and that they hid their troubled home lives from teachers and school personnel as a result.

At the outset, most curricula avoid mentioning the discomfiting topic of youth homelessness, rendering those students on the verge of it invisible. Moreover, the young people in this study shared their anxiety about revealing their home environments at school. Feeling intuitively that the disclosure of their dysfunctional homes would lead to marginalization, they also expressed fears of being accused by both administrators and students alike should a disciplinary matter arise among the student body. Facing social death, which Kleinman (2010) asserts is the erasure, non-participation and “other[ness]” of the stigmatized (The Harvard Mental Health Letter, p. 7), the stakes are too high for these young people to be transparent about their situations. In a climate of silence, the young people miss the opportunity for potential adult guidance, support and mentorship from safe and well-meaning adults at school.

While youth homelessness is not typically reflected in school curricula, many students in schools have seen homeless youth in their communities and may have heard about a young person on the run among their extended family members or
among someone they know. As a result, for “A Homeless Youth Day in Schools,”
some students may be able to draw on their own life experiences as catalysts of
their interests. Accordingly, students might research different aspects of youth
homelessness that interest them, subject to their age and maturity. Topics might
include abuse and neglect in dysfunctional homes, means of improving
communication in dysfunctional homes, substance abuse, early teen pregnancy,
impact of a youth’s peer group on the family, and different parenting styles, such as
authoritarian ones which can increase conflict and dysfunction in the home. Other
topics might include stresses in single parent households and challenges in homes
without fathers. How young people survive on their own and in shelters might be
another topic. Different groups of students may research diverse issues and
interests, and then the class might combine for the purposes of learning from one
another.

The youth in this study shared ambivalence about disclosing their situation
to their housed peers in schools. When these young people conducted arts-informed
research, as they did in this study, however, and conceived artwork to represent
their findings, they seek an audience of people whom may be moved by, and affected
from such work. The young people in this study said uniformly they wanted schools
to be that audience and many said they wanted to partake in the presentation and
the after-performance dialogue. Devon wistfully reflected back to his school days
and said how much meeting and learning from homeless youth could have changed
the trajectory of his life. Indeed, a “Homeless Youth Day in Schools” might help save
some young peoples’ lives from some ill-intentioned adults on potentially harmful
or deadly streets by presenting the young people with options, strategies and resources they didn’t know existed.

The result from “A Homeless Youth Day in Schools” could be that students, teachers, administrators, and parents discover that these young people are capable of much more than the deficits and limitations that are projected onto them through stereotyping and stigmatization. Indeed, many of these young people are intelligent, mature, resilient, and adaptable, skills that may contribute to an educational environment as is the case in this study with a young female who earned 90s when she returned to high school and was honoured with several student ambassadorship awards. She is now succeeding in a social work program in college, and significantly contributing to the class discussions from her lived experiences and insights. Another young man from this study is enrolled in union training regarding all aspects of the construction trades such as fork-lift operations and the proper use of heavy tools on a construction site.

In closing, schools are especially powerful institutions in teaching knowledge and attitudes towards others, so the engagement of schools in this event would be significant in helping some students, teachers and administrators change their attitudes towards homeless youth. Indeed, research shows that people can modify misleading stereotypes when they have a chance to meet and interact with such a stereotyped population (Alexander & Link, 2003; LeBel, 2008). In this context, some youth may feel “safe” enough to share their circumstances with an adult at school, and perhaps significantly alter their life chances by feeling more welcome—and accepted at school when their own homes are no longer an option.
Concluding Thoughts

In this project, the youth and I had travelled a long road on a complex participatory action research journey. The youth were fully engaged in the research and they opened their hearts and minds to it. They said that they valued an “open-mind” during the research process; they genuinely wanted to learn from their discussions, and the primary and secondary research they conducted about the problems that they defined and prioritized. With courage, frankness and generosity, the young people reflected on and shared major aspects of their homeless lifeworlds, including how they ended up on their own, their challenges in homelessness, and their future hopes and concerns.

This study corroborates Kim’s (2016) conclusion as shared in his scholarly review of PAR projects with young people, “Overall, PAR appeared to be effective in improving youth’s individual development, empowerment, and critical awareness about social issues.” (p. 48). Indeed, the expertise and agency of the young people in this study contest the stereotypes that project them as lazy, untalented and unmotivated. Rather, these young people are characterized by some exceptional talents, like Kofi, who was homeless for seven years since the age of fifteen. Few had envisioned the depth of his intellectual abilities, and his skills in representing this complex research project with his script, “The Other Side of the Door,” the focus of chapter 5. Because of the skillful writing, mature insight, humour, pacing, and adroit characterizations, a producer and director have expressed interest in bringing “The Other Side of the Door” to stage. Of note, other youth created a number of insightful and powerful artworks during the study, including some compelling performance
pieces, but for the purposes of this study, they selected “The Other Side of the Door” to represent it.

In a study based on respect of self and others, many of the young people thrived in this project. As shared in this dissertation, there were wide-ranging contributions from many of the young participants. Separate schools for homeless youth, adult mentorship programs and a “Homeless Youth Day in Schools” are all recommended for their psychological and practical benefits to these young people. These recommendations also contest stereotyping and stigmatization, social constructs and behaviours that the young people in this study shared devastate their self-concept and self-esteem. Given the need for new solutions to long-standing problems of youth homelessness, that involve the youths’ ideas and priorities, it is incumbent to launch more PAR projects with these young people.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, 20-30% of homeless youth have completed high school. Few youth in this study completed high school either. Nonetheless, this study confirms the expertise of these young people, whose ideas I intermingled throughout this dissertation to “set up a conversation” with the Western world’s most educated scholars and researchers about youth homelessness. The young people illuminated scholarly ideas about homelessness with insight, generosity, and honesty. They have pointed us to directions that lie at the heart of their lifeworlds: stereotyping and stigmatization, “who is a homeless youth” and parenting and youth homelessness. Other PAR studies can similarly reveal these young people’s “hidden worlds” to help us make a dent in the complex and entrenched injustice of youth homelessness.
Through the participants’ agency, aspirations, and priorities, participatory action research shows what can be otherwise; it can serve as a model for life. PAR projects can help surface “living knowledge” that can alter lives and circumstances, as is the case in this study with three young people who have left homelessness behind, and some of the other thirty two young people who participated in this project and derived benefits from inclusion and knowing that their research interests and priorities shaped this project and helped determine its outcome. Additional PAR projects with these young people can help us tackle the enduring problems of youth homelessness by tapping into other young researchers, thinkers and artists who are “living the problem” but whose concerns have yet to be discovered, and whose creativity remains unknown. As a result, other homeless youth are deprived of the potentially life-saving opportunity to contribute their “living knowledge” to their challenges as they themselves define them.
Epilogue:

Discussion with Kofi, the playwright of “The Other Side of the Door”

DG: What does participatory research mean to you?
Kofi: When the people you’re researching participate in the research. For example, we talked in the research about parenting and I did my own research on it. And I learned that things like rigidity and fixed beliefs can lead to youth homelessness, especially when the youth has other ideas. All of the youth’s research helped us learn more about youth homelessness.

DG: What is your play about?
Kofi: My play is called “The Other Side of the Door.” It’s about a youth named Steve who grows up under abusive parenting and searches for freedom on the streets. Away from home, he experiences a lot of different things and meets different types of characters along the way.

DG: Where should the play be performed?
Kofi: The play is educational so we’re planning to get it inside the school system. The play touches on a lot of experiences that youth can relate to, so I believe it will interest them.

DG: What outcomes do you want your play to achieve?
Kofi: My hopes for the play are to raise awareness and inspire social change. I’d like to see youth homelessness talked more about in schools. This message will have a chance to connect with youth who may be headed for homelessness. Opening the discussion may give them more options. It could even save their lives.
DG:  What did you learn in the research?

Kofi:  I learned that youth homelessness is a broad topic with a lot of causes. As a youth who’s been in the system for some time, I have never seen research like this. There is research where they ask questions, give you some money and you never see them again. This research has changed my life. We are a part of the research. Opportunities came through the research that I didn’t have before.
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Appendices

Appendix A1: “The Other Side of the Door” Theatre Script

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

by

KOFI ©

N.B. This script is strictly confidential and may not be photocopied, forwarded or distributed in any way

CHARACTERS:

Steve: black teenager, 16 years old
Wonda: Steve’s mother, previously married, in her 40s
James: Wonda’s white boyfriend, in his 40s
Brains: light-skinned, 20
Naps: black teen, male
Deon: black teen, male
Ivy: black teen, female
Sarah: black teen, female
Shelter staff person, could be male or female
Police Officer: could be male or female
Loretta: a tough staff person

SETTINGS:

The interior of a house
A homeless shelter
A park

...in Toronto, now

Scene 1

(In the kitchen of the house where STEVE lives with WONDA and JAMES)

WONDA: What did I tell you about that garbage?

STEVE: Mom it just came on the radio. I can't control what they play.

WONDA: Boy I don’t wanna no excuses. (WONDA strikes STEVE across the face.) I already told you about that devil music. Don’t let me catch you again listening to that garbage. Speaking of garbage, empty the bags out back when you’re done with the dishes. (WONDA unplugs and grabs the stereo.)

STEVE: Mom I swept and mopped the house, washed the dishes and threw out the garbage.

WONDA: And you interrupted my TV show.

STEVE: It’s just you said you were gonna pay me so I was wondering when I could get my money.

WONDA: You’re lucky it’s a commercial. (She fishes in her purse, and gives STEVE a $5.00 bill.)

STEVE: Five dollars! You usually give me more.

WONDA: You should be happy I even gave you a cent. Back in Jamaica my parents never paid me for no chores. Boy you need to be more grateful. Now move out of the way. My show’s back on.

(STEVE exits and puts on his jacket.)

STEVE: (sings) Back in Jamaica, back in Jamaica, we’re not in Jamaica anymore. (STEVE walks back downstairs.) Mom I’m going to the store.

WONDA: Boy you know nine o’clock is curfew. Don’t be late.

Scene 2

(Group of boys outside a grocery store. They look menacing. They accost STEVE.)

NAPS: Yo, you got a lighter?

(STEVE quietly passes the lighter; NAPS sparks a joint.)

BRAINS: You look worried; everything cool?
STEVE: Ya, I'm ok. I just had a long day.
DEON: Bro, you need to relax. Wanna puff?
STEVE: Sure, but I got to get home soon.
BRAINS: You need to loosen up and not worry so much.
DEON: Ya, the weed should make you feel better.
STEVE: So what’s your names anyways?
BRAINS: That's Deon and Naps. They call me Brains. What’s your name?
STEVE: Steve.
BRAINS: Cool.
DEON: Now less talkin, more smoking.

**Scene 3**

*The group takes STEVE to their hangout in the park. BRAINS pulls a 26 from his bag.*

BRAINS: Steve, you drink?
STEVE: Ya, I drink.
BRAINS: Cool.

*BRAINS pours a cup for STEVE and the rest of his crew. Everyone takes a sip but STEVE.*


*STEVE takes a big gulp, then spits it out. Group laughs.*

BRAINS: Don't worry, I’m gonna roll a spliff just now.
STEVE: Wow you guys smoke a lot of weed.
NAPS: Every day.
STEVE: Well, what does your Mom think?
NAPS: I could care less. I don't live with her anymore. I'm free.
STEVE: What do you mean free? Where do you stay?
BRAINS: You're asking too much questions. Just let's smoke this spliff before nine. So we have an hour to kill before curfew.

*STEVE glances at his watch.*

STEVE: Shit my Mom's gonna kill me! I had to be home forty-five minutes ago.
DEON: Time flies when you're high...
BRAINS: So you’re not going to smoke this up?
STEVE: I’d love to… but gotta get home.
BRAINS: Cool. Deuces.

(STEVE leaves the park.)

DEON: I’m happy he’s gone. The dude is straight weird.
BRAINS: I don’t think he’s gone for good. He’ll be back.

**Scene 4**

(STEVE walks into his house and sees JAMES and WONDA on the couch. STEVE avoids eye contact and tries to go straight to his room.)

WONDA: Where the hell do you think you’re going? Do you know what time it is?
(STEVE is speechless.) Come here boy!

JAMES: Wonda, I know you’re mad; just stay calm.

WONDA: Boy what’s wrong with you? Is your time an hour back?

(WONDA takes off her shoes and whacks STEVE across the face.)

JAMES: Wonda leave the boy alone. It’s only an hour.

(WONDA beats STEVE until he runs away and locks himself in his room.)

WONDA (yelling): No more outside for you! You’re grounded for the summer. Don’t even think of asking for a dollar.

**Scene 5**

(Next morning. STEVE wakes up and goes straight to his stepdad.)

JAMES: How you doin Steve?

STEVE: That’s not fair, you know that’s not fair. One stupid hour cost me my whole summer.

JAMES: Yeah, your mother took it a bit overboard. Don’t worry, I’ll talk to her.
(JAMES walks into the bedroom where WONDA is making the bed.) Hey honey, how’s it going?

WONDA: I’m cleaning.

JAMES: I was thinking; I felt like you were a bit too hard on him.

WONDA: Look, I’m a grown woman. I don’t need anybody to tell me how to raise my son. (WONDA walks downstairs where STEVE is hanging out.) Look, if you have a problem with the way I do things, address me personally.

STEVE: You don’t hear a thing I say.
WONDA: I brought you into this world. You wouldn’t have a mouth to speak with if it wasn’t for me. Why should I listen to you?

STEVE: Because I’m your son.

WONDA: In the real world, when you break the rules, they take away your freedom. In my house it’s the same thing.

STEVE: In the real world it’s summer. On the other side of that door kids are playing right now. Because they don’t have crazy parents like me.

WONDA: So you want to play right? Then go to the other side of that door. (STEVE stares at the door, then back at WONDA, and starts walking towards the door.) Another thing. If you leave — don’t come back.

(STEVE takes one last glance over his shoulder and walks out.)

Scene 6

(STEVE walks to the park where he sees some youth hanging out. They greet STEVE.)

DEON: Look who it is. The kid from last night.

BRAINS: Speaking of last night, what happened?

STEVE: I got into a fight with my mom and decided to leave.

SARAH: What are you going to do now?

BRAINS: Oh yeah Steve, this is Sarah and Ivy.

IVY: So what are you going to do now?

STEVE: I was planning to steal a sleeping bag and sleep outside. (Everyone starts laughing.) Look, you guys have no idea what I’m going through. It’s not funny at all.

DEON: Oh trust me... we have more than an idea of what you’re going through.

STEVE: What do you mean?

BRAINS: We’re homeless too.

STEVE: Really?

BRAINS: Yeah, we all live in the same shelter.

STEVE: I had no idea.

SARAH: What did you expect?

STEVE: You guys don’t look or dress like... I mean.

BRAINS: Shut up before you say something stupid.

IVY: It’s almost lunch time. We should go back and eat.

BRAINS: Yeah, good idea. Steve, you coming? Or are you gonna go find your sleeping bag?
STEVE: Yeah, I'm coming.

Scene 7

(At the homeless shelter)

SHELTER STAFF: Have you been here before?

STEVE: No this is my first time in a shelter.

STAFF: Do you have ID with you? (STEVE passes the STAFF his ID.) OK, the rules are no threatening, no weapons, and if you're going to drink or smoke, it's off property.

STEVE: OK.

STAFF: Curfew's ten-thirty, Sunday to Thursday, and twelve on the weekends. (STEVE nods.) You get a warning if you don't do your chore, a warning if you come after curfew, and a warning if you don't come downstairs on time in the morning. (STEVE nods.) Get four warnings and you're discharged. Understand?

STEVE: Yes

STAFF: Sign right here. (STEVE signs.) So what brings you to a shelter?

STEVE: My mom tried grounding me for a whole summer.

STAFF: What did you do?

STEVE: I came home late.

STAFF: Really?

STEVE: Tell me about it.

STAFF: You hungry?

STEVE: Oh yeah.

STAFF: We're serving food out in the kitchen. Go help yourself.

(STEVE gets food.)

BRAINS: Yo Steve, come sit over here. (STEVE sits down at table.) So what do you think?

STEVE: Not what I expected.

DEON: What did you expect?

STEVE: I didn't know places like this existed. When I think of homelessness I think of old guys with shopping carts.

IVY: Same. Nobody ever talks or thinks about homeless youth. I thought I was going to have to sleep on the street corner or on a park bench.
BRAINS: But instead you’re sleeping in my bed.
IVY: Ha ha funny.
DEO: Ivy, don’t act like you don’t want it.
IVY: You guys are disgusting.
BRAINS: I don’t know why bitches these days try to act like they’re not sluts. I lie Steve.
STEVE: I don’t really call girls bitches.
NAPS: Why does it offend you?
STEVE: I don’t know. It just doesn’t feel right.
DEON: Wow Steve. Now you’re sounding like a bitch right now.
SARAH: What’s wrong with you Deon? Leave him alone.
DEON: Bitch! Who the fuck’s talkin to you?
IVY: Until you guys learn how to talk to women properly, don’t talk to me. Steve, I don’t know why you talk to these losers.

(IVY and SARAH get up and walk away.)

BRAINS: Yo Steve, I think she likes you.
STEVE: I don’t know what makes you think that.
NAPS: (to STEVE) Bitch!

Scene 8

(In the shelter, the next day. Everyone’s excited for PNA.)

STEVE: What’s PNA?
NAPS: Nobody told you, bitch.
BRAINS: PNA is personal needs allowance. You get paid thirty dollars a week by the government if you live in a shelter.
STEVE: Cool; that’s more than what my mom pays me.
DEON: Yeah, Steve, but you’re only getting paid for the two days you’ve been here.
STEVE: How much is that?
BRAINS: Eight dollars.
STEVE: Eight dollars! What’s that good for?
INTERCOM: PNA’s being handed out right now. Everybody line up. Single File. By the office.

(STEVE is in the line up with IVY in front of him.)
IVY: Hi Steve.
STEVE: Hi.
IVY: What are you up to today?
STEVE: I’m not sure yet. You?
IVY: What I always do on pna day.
STEVE: And that is?
IVY: Drink.
STEVE: That sounds fun.
IVY: Wanna come?
STEVE: I’m not really much of a drinker.
IVY: Just come; it will be fun.
STEVE: Who’s all going to be there?
IVY: Me and Sarah, and that pig Brains.
STEVE: Brains?
IVY: Don’t tell Sarah I told you this, but she has a crush on him.
STEVE: Well I’m not really doing anything.
IVY: That’s good; so you’re coming. I’ll tell Sarah.

Scene 9

(Later on that evening SARAH, STEVE, IVY and BRAINS are at the park drinking.)
BRAINS: Wow, Steve, remember what happened last time you drank?
SARAH: What happened?
BRAINS: This guy took one sip and spit it out.
(BRAINS and SARAH start laughing. STEVE shifts uncomfortably and IVY is upset.)
SARAH: What did you guys drink?
BRAINS: It was a twenty-six of vodka.
IVY: Yeah but this is beer; it’s not as strong.
STEVE: I didn’t know it was gonna taste so bad.
BRAINS: Then why did you say you drink?
IVY: Brains, leave him alone.
STEVE: I can drink. I can probably drink more than you Brains.

BRAINS: Oh yeah? *(BRAINS grabs a can and chugs it back.)* Let's see what you got.

STEVE: Let's go. *(STEVE grabs a can and chugs it back.)*

SARAH: Ok you guys relax. We want to drink too.

*(A few beers later...)*

BRAINS: Steve how do you feel?

STEVE: A little drowsy.

SARAH: I think he’s drunk.

BRAINS: I don’t blame him. I’m smashed too.

IVY: Yeah, I can tell.

STEVE: So Brains, I was wondering...

BRAINS: What’s up?

STEVE: Did you get your name because you’re smart?

BRAINS: I got my name because of the amount of brains I got in high school. *(Everybody starts laughing except IVY.)* I’m not joking. I got so much head I made Hugh Hefner look like a nun.

IVY: A little too much info.

BRAINS: I pine so much girls they used to call me Porky.

SARAH: Oh Brains you’re so funny when you’re drunk.

IVY: You never shut up when you’re drunk.

BRAINS: Speaking of pining, Steve, how much girls you pined?

STEVE: Pine?

BRAINS: Yeah, how much girls you slept with?

IVY: That’s none of your business.

BRAINS: You’re not a virgin, are you?

IVY: Brains, shut up.

SARAH: He’s not saying anything.

BRAINS: Ha ha Steve’s a virgin.

*(BRAINS and SARAH start laughing. IVY’s angry.)*

STEVE: Look, I still have a lot of time to have sex.
BRAINS: A lot of time? What have you been doin with your self?

IVY: Not everyone's a pig like you.

BRAINS: Whatever Ivy. It's not like you're not a slut.

IVY: Fuck you Brains.

BRAINS: I know you want to Ivy.

IVY: Shut the...

(SARAH cuts her off.)

SARAH: You guys stop fighting. Ivy — calm down.

IVY: I'm calm.

SARAH: Brains come here with me.

(SARAH takes BRAINS around the tree.)

IVY: Steve, I'm sorry you have to be around that arrogant bastard.

STEVE: I'm used to it.

IVY: Some people just don't get it.

(STEVE and IVY hear BRAINS and SARAH making out behind the tree.) What the hell are they doing back there?

STEVE: I think they're making out.

IVY: I don't know what Sarah or any girl sees in him.

STEVE: Neither do I.

(An awkward silence.)

IVY: So Steve what are you thinking?

STEVE: Kinda drunk right now.

(IVY grabs STEVE's hand and leads him out of the scene.)

**Scene 10**

(BRAINS standing alone talking on the phone.)

STEVE: Brains.

BRAINS: Yo Steve, where did you guys go last night?

STEVE: You'll never believe what happened. (IVY walks in and interrupts the conversation and pulls STEVE to the side.) What's the matter?

IVY: Don't tell anybody about what happened last night.
STEVE: How come?

IVY: What do you mean, how come?

STEVE: Everybody’s gonna make fun of me for being a virgin. I have to let ‘em know that I’m not anymore.

IVY: Don’t bring it up.

STEVE: Why are you worried anyways? It’s not like they don’t know that you’ve had sex before.

IVY: Yeah, but that was different.

STEVE: How?

IVY: They were my boyfriends.

STEVE: Well, why can’t I be your boyfriend?

IVY: Who said you couldn’t?

(STEVE smiles, then kisses IVY on the lips.)

STEVE: Is this official now?

IVY: It’s official.

(DEON, NAPS and BRAINS are freestyling. STEVE and IVY walk in holding hands.)

DEON: No way.

NAPS: You’re kidding me.

SARAH: You guys are together now?

BRAINS: Wow, you guys really kicked it off!

Scene 11

(STEVE and IVY are sitting on the couch watching TV. They notice a POLICE OFFICER walking into the office. Shortly after STEVE gets called into the office by the intercom. STEVE walks into the office.)

STEVE: What’s the matter?

STAFF: Your mother wants to speak to you.

(The POLICE OFFICER passes STEVE the phone.)

STEVE: Hello.

WONDA (visible in her kitchen): What the hell’s the matter with you?

STEVE: What do you mean?
WONDA: You leave the house; nobody’s heard from you in weeks; we don’t even know if you’re alive. You could have at least called.

STEVE: Don’t worry, I’m fine.


STEVE: Look Mom, it’s not what you think.

WONDA: Steve you’re coming home right now.

STEVE: Over my dead body. (STEVE hangs up the phone.)

STAFF: What did she say?

STEVE: I don’t care what she said. How did she know I was here?

OFFICER: She called our department and reported you missing. Runaways often come to this shelter, so we checked here first.

STEVE (to STAFF): You said my stay here was confidential.

STAFF: If the cops have a search warrant there’s nothing we can do.

STEVE: I’m not going back home.

OFFICER: And why is that Steve?

STEVE: Because my mom’s brutal—and crazy.

OFFICER: Does she abuse you?

STEVE: Yeah, but she calls it discipline.

OFFICER: Well it’s your right to live where you want. But do you feel like the shelter’s the best place?

STEVE: I’d rather go to jail than go back home. In fact, my house is a jail.

OFFICER: Jail huh?

STEVE: Don’t get no wrong ideas. I’m not saying I wanna go to jail. I’m just saying when you come from a strict environment like mine the shelter is a dream come true.

OFFICER: Ok Steve, I can’t force you to go back home. Just don’t go down the same trap that we’ve seen a lot of kids go down.

(POLICE OFFICER exits)

STAFF: Steve I don’t understand why you don’t wanna go back home. You can’t stay here forever.

STEVE: What are you trying to say?

STAFF: You have to work towards something if you want to stay here.

STEVE: I’m in school, but it’s summertime right now.
STAFF: Going to school's not going to pay for your own place. I suggest you start a job search. (STEVE looks dejected as the staff hands him a job search sheet.) There’s an employment service two blocks down the street. They help you make a resume. After, fill out the contact information of the places you drop it off at.

STEVE: What if I don’t wanna do it?

STAFF: Then you’ll get discharged. No worries; it’s for your own good.

(STEVE meets IVY in the living room.)

IVY: What was that all about?

STEVE: My mom wanted me to go home.

IVY: And you said?

STEVE: You must be joking me—especially after what she’s done to me.

IVY: You seem really upset.

STEVE: It’s not that; it’s just the staff are making me job search.

IVY: Soft.

STEVE: What do you mean, soft? I’m trying to have fun and not look for a job.

IVY: You’re such a rookie to the system.

STEVE: What do you mean?

IVY: When have you ever seen us job search?

STEVE: What do you do then?

IVY: Google.

STEVE: Google?

IVY: Yeah, you google random places and take down their contact information and pretend you visited these places.

STEVE: Damn, I never thought of that!

IVY: But now you did.

**Scene 12**

(DEON, BRAINS, NAPS, STEVE, IVY and SARAH all hanging out at the park. DEON and NAPS are drinking.)

BRAINS: Deon, Naps, you guys need to chill on that.

DEON: Chill on what? I paid for this.

BRAINS: That’s not the point. It’s almost curfew. And if they think you’re drunk they’re gonna kick us out.
SARAH: What are you so worried for anyways? You’re always getting drunk.

BRAINS: I know that — but Loretta’s working tonight. She’ll kick you out for breathing the wrong way.

NAPS: Brains, I thought you had balls. You’re starting to sound like Steve.

BRAINS: Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

IVY: Deon, put the bottle in your backpack. It’s time for us to head back.

*(Group walks to the shelter and enter the living room. Intercom calls DEON and NAPS into the office.)*

DEON: What do you want?

LORETTA: Me and my co-worker feel that both of you are drunk.

NAPS: Drunk?

DEON: You don’t know what you’re talking about.

LORETTA: Then why does your breath smell like whisky?

NAPS: It’s gum.

LORETTA: I wasn’t born yesterday. Both of you guys pack up your stuff. You’re both discharged.

DEON: Discharged?

LORETTA: I’ll refer you to another shelter. In the meantime pack up your stuff.

*(DEON and NAPS walk out of the office into the living room. They are furious.)*

SARAH: What’s the matter?

DEON: These assholes are kicking us out.

IVY: Kicking you out?

BRAINS: I told you idiots but no, nobody wants to listen to Brains.

STEVE: Where are you guys going to go?

NAPS: They’re sending us to another shelter.

SARAH: That sucks.

DEON: Fuck these assholes; I could care less about this place.

*(DEON and NAPS leave)*

SARAH: I’ll miss you guys.
Scene 13

(STEVE, BRAINS, IVY and SARAH standing in the PNA line.)

SARAH: Things are really gonna be different without Deon and Naps.
STEVE: Yeah, I kind of feel bad for them.
BRAINS: I don’t feel bad for shit. If they listened to me they’d still be here.
IVY: You’re still on that Brains.
BRAINS: I’m just sayin… if everybody had a brain like Brains than everyone’s brain wouldn’t be so in…sane.
IVY: Brains, shut up.
(They all get their PNA)

SARAH: So what’s the plan for today?
BRAINS: Let’s get some beer.
IVY: We had beer last week; let’s get hard liquor.
BRAINS: Screw liquor. Let’s get beer.
SARAH: Ivy kinda has a point. Let’s switch it up.
BRAINS: Who cares if we had beer last week? Beer is way better than liquor. Right Steve?
STEVE: I don’t really want beer.
IVY: In your face Brains.
STEVE: Well I don’t really want liquor neither. (Everybody pauses and gives STEVE a disturbed look) It’s just every time we get our PNA we spend it on drugs or liquor. Let’s spend on something different for a change.
IVY: Steve are you ok?
STEVE: I’m fine. I just don’t want to drink.
BRAINS: Then beer it is.
(IVY and STEVE are talking.)
IVY: Steve, I thought you like drinking.
STEVE: It’s not that. We should just catch a movie instead.
IVY: Brains and Sarah have already made up their mind that they’re gonna drink, regardless of what you want to do.
STEVE: Well who said we have to go with them? It could just be us two.
IVY: Us two?
STEVE: Yeah, us two; there’s a lot of good movies out right now. I know we’ll have fun.

IVY: I guess.

(BRAINS and SARAH walk in.)

BRAINS: So Ivy, have you convinced Steve to come drinking?

IVY: We’re going to a movie instead.

SARAH: A movie?

BRAINS: Since when do you go to the movies?

STEVE: There’s a lot of good movies out right now. You should come too.

SARAH: I’ll pass.

BRAINS: You guys are actually wasting money on a movie?

STEVE: You’re really missin out.

BRAINS: Well, I don’t know about you guys but me and Sarah are getting drunk. Have fun at your movie.

Scene 14

(Later, in the shelter. IVY on couch by herself)

BRAINS: Wa-gion Ivy.

IVY: I’m so stressed.

BRAINS: How come?

IVY: There’s nothing to do. The weather’s crappy outside and I haven’t drank for days.

BRAINS: In days?

IVY: Yeah every time I try to drink Steve lectures me. Oh it’s bad for you. Oh it’s a waste of money. Oh let’s watch a movie.

BRAINS: That’s when you say, Oh shut up.

IVY: It’s not that easy.

BRAINS: I don’t know what to say.

IVY: What are you doing right now?

BRAINS: I’m waiting for Sarah to come back from her aunt’s so I decided to kill time by getting some drinks.

IVY: Let me come.

BRAINS: Sure, but what about Steve?
IVY: Don't worry; I'll figure out something to say.

BRAINS: If you say so.

IVY: Just go to the park and I'll meet you there.

(BRAINS leaves the room. STEVE walks in and hugs IVY from behind.)

STEVE: Hey sweetie, how you doing?

IVY: I'm good.

STEVE: That's good to hear. What do you want to do tonight?

IVY: Me and my aunt made plans to meet tonight.

STEVE: Your aunt? I thought you and your family weren't close.

IVY: We're not close, but we're working it out.

STEVE: Oh? When will you be back?

IVY: Just before curfew.

STEVE: Cool.

IVY: I'll see you then.

(IVY gives STEVE a hug and walks out the door. STEVE takes her seat. Pause, then SHELTER STAFF walks in and notices him sitting alone.)

STAFF: Steve, are you ok?

STEVE: I just have a lot on my mind.

STAFF: If you need to talk, I'm in the office. (STEVE walks into the office.) So Steve, what's on your mind?

STEVE: When I first moved out of my house I was so relieved.

STAFF: Why's that?

STEVE: Because I was free; I could do what I wanted.

STAFF: It was that bad?

STEVE: You have no idea; I couldn't even breathe without my mom on my back.

STAFF: We have rules here too.

STEVE: I know that, but it's nothing compared to my mom's house. She makes this place feel like heaven.

STAFF: Heaven? You don't look like you're in heaven.

STAFF: Empty?

STEVE: I finally had time to hang out with friends and didn't have to worry about being a slave. I finally got a girlfriend, but I still feel like there's something missing.

STAFF: I think I know what you're missing.

STEVE: Really... What?

STAFF: I think you're missing a parent's love. Nobody can love you like a mother can. You can't find that in a shelter.

STEVE: But I have found love.

STAFF: What do you mean you've found love?

STEVE (*hesitantly*): Iiiiivvvyyyyyy; I'm in love with Ivy.

STAFF: Did you tell her this?

STEVE: No, but I'm going to.

**Scene 15**

(*STEVE leaves the office to the park. He walks by the tree. He hears voices, so he wants to turn back. Before he can turn back he hears...*)

BRAINS: Ivy, cut that out.

STEVE: Brains, is that you?

(*BRAINS and IVY come around the tree. STEVE walks away crushed.*)

**Scene 16**

(*STEVE is sitting on a couch; BRAINS and IVY come in.*)

STEVE: You traitor!

BRAINS: You don't know how to treat a woman.

(*STEVE pushes BRAINS, BRAINS pushes STEVE, and they start wrestling on the floor*)

IVY: You guys stop!

(*STAFF breaks up the fight and brings STEVE into the office.*)

STAFF: Look I'm not gonna ask what happened. Just know you're getting discharged. Here's the shelter list.

STEVE: I'm not going to another shelter.

STAFF: Well then have fun sleeping on the streets. We'll call the cops if you refuse to leave.

STEVE: Let me use the phone.
STAFF: Yeah, go ahead. Just know you have to pick up your stuff right after.

STEVE: Mom.

WONDA (visible as before): Steve.

STEVE: I want to come home.

WONDA: What happened to your paradise?

STEVE: I don’t want to talk about it right now. Can I come home or what?

WONDA: Yeah, you can come here, but when you arrive me and you are havin a talk.

Scene 17

(STEVE knocks on the door and WONDA answers. STEVE walks towards the dinner table where JAMES is seated.)

JAMES: Steve you have no idea how worried we were. I was forced to call the cops.

WONDA: What the hell was going through your head?

JAMES: Wonda, how about we try a calmer approach?

WONDA: Hush. Nobody’s talking to you.

STEVE: James is right. You’re violent and controlling. How am I supposed to experience life if you put bars on it?

WONDA: This is my house. If you want to live here then you go by my rules.

STEVE: Why did I even come here? I’m goin back to the streets.

(STEVE gets up from the table and tries to walk out the door, but JAMES stops him.)

STEVE: Get out of my way!

JAMES: Don’t! Why go back to a shelter anyways?

STEVE: Because at least in a shelter I can enjoy a summer.

JAMES: We’re not going to ground you for the summer anymore.

WONDA: What the hell are you talking about?

JAMES: Wonda, work with me on this, ok?

WONDA: If he can’t take the rules, he can leave.

JAMES: Look Wonda, it’s better if he stays here and we give him a curfew. That’s safer than the streets.

WONDA: You white fathers are too soft!

STEVE: James don’t worry about me. I can handle myself.
WONDA: Ok Steve you're not grounded for the whole summer, but I expect you here by nine p.m. sharp. (STEVE frowns.) I still expect you to do your chores. I don't want anybody over, especially girls.

JAMES: Is that cool with you Steve?

(STEVE nods.)

WONDA: And if I find any drugs I will throw you out myself

STEVE: Can I take a shower?

WONDA: What are you asking me for? Go clean your dutty ass up.

(STEVE goes up for a shower.)

Scene 18

(STEVE returns from the shower.)

WONDA: Steve I'm about to leave. I expect the dishes to be done by the time I come back.

STEVE: When will you be back?

WONDA: Eight maybe. James is working overnight at the hospital.

STEVE: I'm going to get the rest of my stuff from the shelter.

WONDA: Well you know what time the curfew is, and these dishes better be done by the time I come back.

Scene 19

(STEVE is at the shelter getting his stuff.)

STAFF: Steve, I'm sorry things didn't work out, but I'm glad you're back home.

STEVE: Yeah, me too.

STAFF: Good luck, stay at home.

(As STEVE leaves, he runs into IVY.)

IVY: Steve! Steve! (STEVE walks past her.) Steve, I was drunk.

STEVE: Why should I talk to you? You lied to my face.

IVY: Because I... I love you.

STEVE: If you really love me why would you do that?

IVY: I really wanted to drink. You wouldn't let me, so when Brains offered I couldn't turn it down. (STEVE gives IVY a curious look.) I wanted to go home, but then he grabbed me and was like 'I didn't drink you up for nothing.' I'm sorry. I swear it won't happen again. I don't even like Brains anyways.
STEVE: How do you know it won’t happen again?

IVY: Because I quit drinking. I swear I did. Well, at least I will if you can give me one more chance.

STEVE: I guess, if I ever see you around.

IVY: I swear on everything I’ll never drink again.

STEVE: Will you stay true to your word?

IVY: I promise I will. (STEVE hugs IVY.) So why did you come by this spot anyways?

STEVE: I want to tell you that I lllllooo.....

Scene 20

(STEVE brings IVY back to the house with him.)

Steve: My mom should be back in an hour, so you can’t stay for too long. (He notices the pile of dishes.) Way too high to do the dishes right now.

IVY: You should’ve thought of that before you smoked that joint.

STEVE: Yeah, I’m too high to smoke the rest of it. Hold it while I run upstairs.

(STEVE passes IVY a dime bag, then runs upstairs. IVY puts the dime bag in her jacket pocket. Since there are no more clothes hangers, she puts her jacket on top of another one and shuts the closet. She follows STEVE upstairs. Silence.

WONDA comes home early from her business meeting. As she opens the closet, Ivy’s jacket falls down and the dime bag falls out.

WONDA: That imbecile! (She walks over to the kitchen and sees the dishes piled up in the sink. She can’t believe her eyes. She marches upstairs to Steve’s room and yells...) Steeeeeeeve!

-end-
Appendix A2: 107 Research Themes

Issues in Homelessness

1. How did we end up homeless? Did you ever dream you’d be homeless?
2. What is homelessness?
3. Who is a homeless youth?
4. Programs that keep youth in their homes
5. Will I ever get out of homelessness?

Parenting

6. Parenthood (fatherhood; motherhood)
7. Parental rigidity/leniency
8. Support: family (being there for somebody)
9. Disconnecting and connecting with family
10. Family reunification
11. Parenting and youth homelessness

Issues in a shelter

12. What is a shelter? (a place when there is nowhere else to go)
13. Some positive adults in a shelter who care
14. The stresses in shelter life
15. Judgments living in a shelter or being homeless
16. Shelter means you’re not homeless
17. Stability in a shelter (meals, schedules, programs)
18. Safety in a shelter
19. Shelter timeline to exit (3 months)
20. Respect
21. Surviving in a shelter (watch your back)
22. Trust (especially in a shelter)
23. Social diversity in a shelter
24. Kids who don’t need to but come to a shelter for a thrill
25. Participating in shelter programs after getting housing
26. Staff understanding (or not) the youth’s situations and problems
27. Staff dealing fairly with youth and with their complaints
28. Consistency (or not) of case worker
29. Separating mentally challenged youth
30. Help for people with mental challenges
31. Equal rights for non-Canadian citizens
32. Discovery/Social Diversity
**Issues in a Shelter** (continued)

33. Falling into a shelter way of life
35. Discharges in a shelter
36. Food choices in a shelter
37. Shelter relationships (lasting or flings)
38. Relationships in a public place like a shelter
39. Curfews
40. Giving “proof” to get tokens
41. Being ill in a shelter
42. Roommates in a shelter
43. Favoritism in a shelter
44. Being micromanaged in a shelter
45. Dealing with rules in a shelter
46. Associating with shelter youth outside of a shelter
47. A shelter is a village

**Issues of Self**

48. “Protection” being homeless; being anonymous, concealing one’s identity
49. Music
50. Friendship/Acquaintances/Bonding/Loyalty
51. Love
52. Sex
53. Motivation
54. Similarities/Connections to each other
55. Being alone/loneliness/loss
56. Growth
57. Problem solving
58. Healing or overcoming the past
59. Dealing with lows and hardships
60. Emotional and mental obstacles we face and how we deal with them
61. Anger
62. Vulnerability
63. Shame/stigmatization/stereotypes/embarrassment
64. Loyalty
65. Disappointments
66. Resources and networks that failed us, or that we failed
67. Money
68. Work
69. Funding
70. Responsibilities
71. Faith
72. Dependence
73. Self-help
Issues of Self (continued)

74. Helplessness
75. Being helped
76. Letting yourself down/self-sabotage
77. Unfairness
78. Before and after becoming homeless
79. Community
80. Food
81. Addiction such as cigarettes and substance abuse (coping, overcoming)
82. Reflecting: on past, future, and where you should be
83. Hopes and Dreams
84. Decisions: what do I want to do with my life? Will my life get better?
85. Setting goals
86. Dealing with distractions from your goals
87. Suicidal thoughts/Depression
88. Sickness
89. Protection/security
90. Challenges living on your own post-shelter
91. Hate and hatred
92. Abuse: verbal. physical. mental/emotional
93. Neglect
94. Bullying
95. Giving
96. Courtesy/Respect for others/Self-respect
97. Racism
98. Homophobia
99. Welfare
100. Housing

Issues in school

101. Nothing much about college/university in shelters; all focused on high school
102. Being in high school at 22
103. Avoiding school because not wanting to see people
104. System does not recognize educational attainments from other countries
105. Challenge coming from one curriculum into another one
106. Being dropped grades
107. Feeling loss about not being in school
Appendix A3: Primary Research Questions

**General “life” questions**

What was it like growing up?

What were some of the challenges you went through before becoming successful in life?

**Questions on parenting**

When you look at homeless youth, what image comes to mind about their parents?

What kinds of actions by a parent do you think could lead to youth homelessness?

How does parenting affect youth?

How do you think your parents decisions/behaviors will influence your own parenting?

What are some of the big mistakes that parents make on their part?

How do you feel being a single parent?

What do you see as the effects when there is no man in the house to discipline his kids?

**Questions on homelessness — If appropriate**

How did you end up homeless?

How did you deal with and feel being homeless?

Did you ever dream of being this way in life?

How do you feel having no one to talk to?

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All the primary research questions were formulated by the youth themselves, and the youth alone asked the questions of the interviewees and conducted the follow up conversations with them as well.
Your opinions on youth homelessness

Why do youth end up being homeless?

What is your view of homeless youth?

Do you feel that there are any solutions to youth homelessness?

Questions on abuse

If I may ask, have you been physically abused growing up?

When kids who are abused become parents, will they abuse their children too?

Ask interviewee if they have a question(s) of you
Appendix A4: Letter of Consent
University of Toronto Letterhead

Research Project: “I Have Something to Say” Project

Researcher: David Goldberg, M.Ed., PhD Candidate, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education.
Email: d.goldberg@utoronto.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Peter Trifonas, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education. Address: 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, ON. M5S 1V6. Email: peter.trifonas@utoronto.ca

I, ________________________________ (name) have talked with David Goldberg about his research project and I would like to participate in it. We have discussed the information in the Project Information Form which he has given a copy of for me to keep.

I understand that this research is to:

- Discuss a variety of research questions pertaining to youth homelessness and decide on one of them
- Research the question(s) that are decided on by the group
- Discuss and analyze these findings
- Decide how to disseminate these findings and to which groups they will be shared with

I understand that this project meets once a week, for about two hours, for about one year. If there is any workshop activity or discussion that I don’t want to partake in, I am free not to do it.

I understand that all information that David Goldberg collects for his research will be stored in a locked cabinet and that it won’t be seen by anyone but him, possibly a

11 Although Dr. Trifonas is a professor, I used “Dr.,” a more accessible term on this consent form
transcriber, his supervisor, and possibly one of the other two members of his thesis committee. No information that could reveal my identity will be included in David's dissertation.

The information David collects will also be used in his thesis and in any presentations or publications based on his thesis research. I will never be identified by name in David Goldberg's study.

I understand that everyone in the group is supposed to keep what is said there confidential. That is, this information should not be shared with others outside the group meetings. But I understand that David Goldberg can't guarantee that everyone will keep things confidential. So I will only do, say and share what I am comfortable with.

I understand that I am free to leave the study at any time without any negative consequences at this shelter or at any other shelter in the city.

I also understand that to be effective, a group must develop trust and respect for the participants, and their ideas. As such, physical violence, intimidation or verbal abuse displayed to David Goldberg, staff, or any other youth in the group will not be tolerated. I understand that if violence, intimidation or verbal abuse is shown, and does not stop, then this will result in immediate dismissal from this project.

I also understand that if David Goldberg learns of information pertaining to physical, emotional or verbal abuse involving a minor, this will be reported to the authorities.

I also understand that during the course of our research project, should David Goldberg or staff learn that someone in the group has been physically threatened, or that someone in the group intends to commit physical harm to someone else, this must be disclosed to the appropriate authorities.

I also understand that in our research project, should David Goldberg or staff learn that a youth is planning or threatening suicide, then this must be reported to a case worker (if there is one) and if there isn't the youth will be taken to an emergency crisis centre.
I understand that at the end of each meeting I will be paid $15.00 cash for my contributions. The receipts for this money will be kept in a locked cabinet by David Goldberg.

If at any time I have concerns that I do not wish to share with David Goldberg, I may call his advisor, Peter Trifonas at phone number.
Appendix A5: Recruitment Poster

Make a Difference in Youth Homelessness!

Project at a Glance

For this project, there will be one weekly meeting, for about two hours, over the course of about a year. The meeting will be in a convenient location, near transit.

Why does research matter?

We need more ideas to address youth homelessness. More research is needed to figure out solutions. Unlike most research where youth have little say in the aims of the research, this participatory project allows those inside the issue — the youth themselves, to have a say in every phase of the project.

Inside Participatory Research

This is a participatory project. In other words, as a group, you will decide the topic(s) of research. With support, you will play a key role further researching, analyzing, and sharing these topic(s) and findings with other interested groups.

What's in it for me?

This project will give you a chance to broaden your research skills, an important skill in further education. As well, your ideas and talents that you display in this project can help you further your education and/or careers. Your ideas, research and findings can affect governments, policy makers, the medical community, social services and community workers and those who assist youth on the streets and in shelters.

Safeguards for participants

All participants will be anonymous; the meetings are confidential too.

Who is facilitating the project?

David Goldberg, a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. David started and runs a weekly shelter program.

How to get involved

You must be between 16-24 years of age, and homeless for at least 6 months. At an information session, you will be given a short questionnaire to answer. You can either write your answers down, or share your answers in person with the facilitator.

Come to the information session to learn more!
Appendix A6: Questionnaire for Potential Participants

Make a Difference in Youth Homelessness!

Our research findings can provide valuable ideas to governments, policy makers and officials addressing youth homelessness. As well, the research/communication skills you develop in this project will assist you with formal education. Your artistic talents and abilities will look great on your resume and can help you with your career.

This research project will last about a year. We will meet once a week for two hours at a convenient location.

You can write out your answers, or email d.goldberg@utoronto.ca if you would prefer to answer them in person. You can write on the back if you need more room; please print, type, or write clearly.

Please give an example of something you participated in that had a meaningful outcome.

Why would this participatory research project be important to you?

Do you have any special abilities, talents, artistic or other skills that would help this research project?

What characteristics do you have that might help assist the group as a whole?

What are some topics about homeless youth that you might find interesting to research?

Thank you for your participation!

-end of dissertation-