Self-focus: The Early Months and Years of Street Involvement

Youth experience self-focus in three experiences of street-involved life: 1) A fresh start and encountering hardship; 2) the experience of using drugs, and 3) education on one’s own terms. First we tell Dinah’s story, which exemplifies the chronological and ongoing experience of a self-focus. Dinah left her family when she was very young, and she fiercely valued the independence she achieved from her family and from formal education. She looked out for herself, participated in both the formal and underground economies, and she managed a recreational drug habit. Eventually the demands of a court case and her experience of street life led to a desire for something more stable and a willingness to compromise with the system.

Dinah’s circumstances and choices illustrate Wyn’s (2004) belief that a) instability is increasingly a feature of the entire life course, and b) individuals are increasingly responsible for decisions and commitments that formerly were considered part of the social compact, at least in western economies. Dinah also illustrates Arnett’s (2007) suggestion that youth freedom during emerging adulthood is associated with less influence by social institutions, including family, education and the job market/employment. The difference is that she is in her teens, and because she is in her teens the primary help she receives is from short-term services and, when she breaks the law, from the justice system. Part of the trouble that Dinah has is that she finds school to be discouraging, even meaningless. School is often trouble, and youth like Dinah know that it is important but also learn from school why they do not fit in.

In this chapter we also discuss Erikson’s (1950) “moratorium,” a period of postponing maturity, and we connect it to contemporary developments including an even longer gap for many youth between leaving high school and family and the eventual assumption of permanent commitments. One reason we think street-involved youth are interesting is that if self-focus is truly freedom from parental and school-driven routines, they are exemplars of this freedom. Street-involved youth experience minimal financial support from parents and relatives. Where it is hoped that other youth will stay in school and training programs for longer periods of time, street-involved youth tend to find school discouraging and often meaningless, and most leave before they are legally allowed to not attend. In these respects they are both exemplars of emerging adulthood and perhaps quite unlike other emerging adults simultaneously.

We are presenting an alternative to the narratives of “at-risk” youth, a notion that has been available for a long time (e.g., Kidd, 2012) and that other researchers have suggested are not helpful. Many of the street-involved youth in our study may be examples of young people who made their way through alternative pathways to maturity, pathways that do not rely on secure employment, educational degrees, marriage, or stability. Accessibility to these options are worth continuing effort, but we also ought not to conflate maturity with these. The markers of adulthood, like a career, stable housing, education, and a committed relationship, are difficult to achieve for many and especially for street-involved young people. If those markers are required for maturity, it is a dispiriting future for many and, perhaps, a bit too anchored in middle-class expectations. Street-involved youth exemplify a unique form of emerging adulthood in which a kind of maturation occurs whether adult social roles are available or not.

In the previous chapter and this, we describe some of the experiences in which a self-focus is implicated, and we propose that emerging adulthood features, like self-focus and possibilities particularly, occur consecutively rather than coincidentally. Street-involvement includes a period of self-focus, with more immediate day-to-day interests and concerns and less involvement with social institutions. Later, when street-life is less appealing, it is future possibilities that beging to guide their choices. The street-involved youth were free of school and family routines during the teen years, with different freedoms and different uses of that freedom than housed youth. These include facing some hardships, finding satisfaction in getting their life on the street organized, finding a community, figuring out how to re-engage with formal education, and new and intense experiences with drugs and alcohol.

<1>Dinah

When we first met Dinah she was 14 years of age. She did not have a place to stay, and she was frustrated because she had been turned down for a bed in a popular transition shelter. Her world seemed against her, even her friends: "My friend is a bitch." When she needed to move to another shelter, the youth worker at the former shelter would not bring her stuff to the new shelter. Dinah had long-term problems as well, having been treated for depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and self-harm. The self-harm involved cutting and then using drugs to "fix the problem, and it made it worse." Associated with these challenges was a history of childhood physical abuse and sexual assault. At one point in her life Dinah had attempted suicide.

Still, generally the experience of independence from her family was a positive change from her old life, and Dinah reported being happy and hopeful. She had friends and family she trusted and people to count on in an emergency, including her father and a crisis worker. She did not have many fears related to street life, except that like many street-involved youth she was quite afraid of and worried about the police. Dinah seemed to have considerable self-awareness and said that she knew how she wanted to live her life, even if her circumstances did not always cooperate. She was also a committed user of weed and alcohol, even though she was on probation and had been to detox. She told her drug and alcohol counselor, "We're not talking about drugs ‘cause I'm not quitting those yet. We're gonna' talk about my life instead." She had a wide range of experience with drug use, having tried alcohol and marijuana as early as age 11, and in the prior six months had used alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, GHB, acid, mushrooms, and crystal meth. In addition to these, she was also taking prescription sleeping pills.

Like some other youth, Dinah exercised some discipline about her drug use. She reported reserving the use of harder drugs for the weekends so that pursuing employment and education might still be possible. She was seeing a physician regularly, and she was receiving help for her anxiety and depression. She was managing, she was in charge, and her attitude and emotional well-being were improving, she said, because she left home. Her entrepreneurial spirit meant that she navigated the available resources and made herself familiar with local shelter, food, income health, and education. She seemed to enjoy at least some of the daily drama of relationships and of managing everyday life.

Dinah was born on the Canadian prairies and her parents split up when she was very young. She lived in Victoria with her mother and step-father until her teens. She then lived with her sister but the relationship was marred by physical abuse and within the year she moved to her grandparents. She lived again with her biological father--for the first time in more than a decade, then moved back to her sister’s home, couch-surfed with friends, temporarily lived in a group home, and was then on the street. Before turning 10 years of age she had spent time in a short-term "stabilization" psychiatric program. Dinah did not experience her father and mother as compassionate and comforting people. Her mother suffered from depression, and there was a crisis before Dinah started school, such that she believes her mother "basically slept for a year-and-a-half." Her mother was, behind closed doors, "the psychotic idiot." Dinah described her brother as the dog in the family, always needing affection and reassurance, and herself as the cat, mostly independent. Eventually Dinah decided, "I don't need you guys or your crap....there's the entire... pool of anxiety and frustration and, like, depression that has followed me since I was three years old." She stated that her life would have been better without "pill-tossing, drunk parents."

She dropped out of school a few days after beginning ninth grade. She disliked school, wanting more "catered learning. I'll tell you how I am going to learn." This same attitude turned up when she described what it was like talking to her drug and alcohol counselor: "I'll tell you all my personal business, I don't give a shit, it's my life. Want to hear it go ahead. But if you disobey my trust or you break my trust then I won't talk to you.” At first, to get by she couch-surfed and she and her friends panhandled, borrowed money from family and friends, and sold drugs. The sums were modest: She made $70 a week panhandling, $20 a week from her family, and about $10 from theft, and the amount from selling was unreported. There was some risk to this: She was arrested for being drunk in public and arrested and convicted of theft--the source of her probation.

Her independence was hard won, and occasionally hard lived, but it was rewarding enough so that she was determined not to let any adult again tell her what to do: "My family all said, 'To hell with you.’ So, you know, I live down here and...I have older friends that watch my back, you know: 'Any guy that tries any shit with you they're dead'....I know lots of people and they are my family....there are a few people who generally wanna' help you, and then there are people out there like the cops and the Ministry… who shove the help down their throat that they think is best for you." Within the next year she had a job at a fast-food restaurant, was enrolled in a part-time, alternative, self-paced high-school, and she reported that "things are going great." School still "drives her insane" and she could not spend more than an hour "in there." Even as she reported doing well, she was still living at a seasonal shelter during the winter months when the weather turned cold and damp. The shelter was the only option after a friend kicked her out.

Living in a shelter while working and going to school required organization. The shelter did not allow residents to leave personal belongings during the day, so she took a garbage bag with her, and at work she left it in the office. After work she carried it to a service organization for youth to hang out and get dinner; this place allowed her to leave the garbage bag there until later in the evening when the shelter opened again. The shelter program did not have its own facility; they used area gyms and halls. The shelter moved around the city, so she moved with it. On top of work, school, and the shelter, she was still on probation and was required to regularly visit the probation officer. It was a busy life.

However well Dinah was managing otherwise, the financial consequences of frequent drug use became increasingly demanding. She began working full-time and noticing how quickly the 20 dollar bills disappeared when spent on alcohol and drugs, when a "hangover in the morning and a desire for more doesn't go too far." She and her friends sometimes made $150 in a weekend panhandling, but the money disappeared quickly when spent on drugs. Her friends began to worry her more because they were frequently drunk and "in denial." While she took a couple of hits of acid in recent weeks, for fun, and once got drunk again, she said she was using less. She also recognized the limits of the service industry, hoping to eventually find work that she is "passionate about." She started to describe herself as an artist, wanting to get into the artistic side of hairdressing. Although she was making money, she could not afford to pay all of her rent from her salary. She was still well-connected to street life, because of her housing challenges, and she still had access, whenever she wanted, to the underground economy: She had friends who made money panhandling, selling drugs, and to help fill the financial gap she then began selling drugs, now reporting that she made about $350 a week.

Later, after another 18 months, Dinah stopped reporting that she had been depressed. Her immediate ambitions at that time were still modest. Her life would be complete, she said, if she had an apartment with a $20 TV, Playstation2, couch, bed, and a bookshelf. In one sense these possessions represented a new self and a new level of maturity: "Those things have life meaning," she said, as compared with the temporary pleasures of drugs and alcohol. Her life seemed to be coming together in a new way, and it was still attached to being independent. "I have been taking care of myself for like the last... god knows how long months....there's no way you get to come in here and tell me what you think is best for me....I haven't had a parent tell me that in a long time. Some random stranger's sure as hell not going to do it." Not surprisingly, she didn't like depending on other people, but she distinguished that from asking others for help, which she did not mind doing. She said that it is obvious that she needs some assistance, including shelter, help with food, and health care. It's the dependence she minds; she would prefer that it be easier to find a straight job that pays for her basic living expenses rather being offered more services.

At age 16 she had an adventure -- hitchhiking to Ottawa and back. While she was there she and friends squatted and lived under a bridge. It was fun, and then she came back to Victoria to "face her shit." Upon returning she picked up some new sources of housing. She reported staying a few nights with a parent, a few more on the street, and also some nights in a group home and also a foster home, and now had a Ministry caseworker. She participated in a jobs training and life skills program that paid $8 an hour, and she was looking for a new job. In Ottawa she added to her money-making repertoire by trying squeegeeing. She found that she could make a surprising amount of money doing it, about $200 a week. She was not selling drugs anymore, and she was unemployed, so her income took a serious hit.

But the "shit" was serious, "possession for the purposes of trafficking," and it was serious because she had already been on probation. She had a court case, and she had come back to Victoria to deal with the court case. She arranged for a new lawyer, organizing her life to prepare for court, as she said, so "I'm not backed into a corner by the judge or probation officer." She found a place to live, temporarily, with one of the local youth shelters, and she recruited the help of youth workers who helped her think through her court case. Then she moved into a specialized, private foster home for youth who were previously homeless. She re-enrolled in the alternative school program; although she did not mention it, this would please her probation officer and it would look better in front of the judge. She had been banned from the downtown area--"red-zoned”--because of her former drug dealing, and her old friends started to get jobs and apartments, and they were not as available as they used to be. Because she was red-zoned she was not able to visit the drop-in centres or the food programs. So her new friends were mostly from school.

The other change in lifestyle was that Dinah’s foster home was a long bus ride from the city. But the home was nice, the foster parent was helpful and provided her with her basic needs and was "chill." She was surprised that the foster parent would "meet her halfway," and she thought she would unpack her bag and stay awhile. She recognized that she used to say "fuck this," whereas now she liked the bed and having her own room. She also had a youth worker who helped her figure things out. Despite the court case, life seemed okay, and the only thing she could think of that would make it better was a regular pay cheque. She was surprised to discover that she now had started to like when people checked up on her. At the same time, she was happy that the group home and her current foster home did not force her to pretend that they were a family. "I don't want to be a part of your family. I'm just here because, apparently, I need a bed." She said it was a problem to be independent so long and then be "shoved in a home with rules." She wanted housing without restrictions.

As always, Dinah’s well-being was multi-dimensional. For the first time, she started to worry about the possibility that she was addicted and that she might not always be able to feed her addiction. She also worried about losing her current housing, something that was a possibility if she was caught using. She was still spending $120 weekly on alcohol and marijuana, which she smoked several times a day. When we met her the next year she had moved again, out of the foster home and into a more independent setting: The Pandora Youth Apartments. She was paying $350 rent per month. She worked as a dishwasher and also as a cashier in a discount store. She still panhandled occasionally, but she continued to abstain from selling drugs and participating in petty theft, the cause of her original probation. Budget troubles continued, trying to make her income stretch to cover room and board and other living expenses, especially her recreational marijuana and alcohol use. She was figuring out how to file her taxes, and other than that she described her life as "working and panning, working and panning," making enough money to get by independently.

Dinah was now reporting being physically and emotionally well, and she was still happy and had many friends and many supports--informal and formal. None of the people on whom she relied were biological family. "All the pieces I wanted to have come together." From the very start of being street-involved and independent of her biological family, she has been happier away from them and fiercely protective of her independence and self-definition. We can see in Dinah's story the satisfaction in and fierce assertion of her independence, experimentation with lifestyles and activities, a more critical evaluation of her life and the gradual adoption of a long-term perspective, while still rooted in the underground economy and social worlds. Dinah’s life was organized around immediate needs of her own choosing. She rejected overt control by others and thrived when her independence was respected.

<1> A Fresh Start and Overcoming Hardships

Dinah left her guardians because they and the lifestyle Dinah had with them were harming her physical and emotional health. Leaving represented a fresh start and she was freed, at least temporarily, from family and school troubles. A new horizon opened, with new possibilities and new responsibilities. It is also part of the process of self-discovery and discovery of how the world works. A fresh start was the result of push and pull, beginning with the first experiences of street-involvement, and it might have to be repeated. Romantic partnerships are one such arena that can pull some youth into a new direction, with the allure of something new. Romantic partnerships are invested with anecdotal and societal ideals, lifestyles, symbols, and hopes that have to bear much—at times too much--weight. The enthusiasm for new love is fetching, and disappointment is traumatic. When the source of one’s self-hood is located entirely in one or a small number of other people, the failure of those relationships is a developmental threat (Kegan, 1989). It is also a material threat for many of these youth, since when the relationship fails they lose a place to live, when they share rooms with partners and friends, and sometimes they lose an income.

Friendships and romantic relationships sometimes need to be escaped. As Dinah put it: "Like I guess I’ve had less of like my ex- in my life and so I’m kind of starting to like move on from dealing with that shit. I’ve been doing like a lot less drugs and shit and just trying to be- do more positive things." Dinah went on to say, "Well the people that are just down there [hanging out on the street] like that do it, like that have taken it too far, like they don’t care--they have nothing to live for... so you do what you gotta do." Doing what you gotta' do is making new friends and not hanging around the same people. In a later chapter we discuss more thoroughly the developmental and structural transformations in friendship from street-involvement to adulthood.

Changing a habit or a frame of mind is another motivation for moving on. Again, states Dinah: “Well, I’m trying to get out of my depression and I’m looking for work. And if that doesn’t work I’m leaving for the Okanagan Valley." Also, "I stayed here first... and then decided I needed a fresh start somewhere so I moved to Vancouver with a friend." Many youth travelled to a new town, hoping for a new life, or took time out from street life to try something else. For Dinah, new places to live were also commitments to try a different self-management strategy, and sometimes new friends and goals. For street-involved youth starting over is more fun and more adventurous when they are younger, and it can be exhilarating to successfully adapt, cope, and even thrive. Overcoming hardship is an important element of these experiences, of which they are rightly proud and which organize portions of their life story. Sometimes hardships are self-inflicted and sometimes out of their control, and most of these youth are clear with themselves about which is which.

Hardship and starting over can lose their romantic luster and become drudgery over time. Losing a job, being evicted, betrayal by a friend, being ill, the death of a family member, losing possessions, being "red-zoned" from downtown, and living with few signs of progress after several years become harder, and options that were previously rejected start to look more attractive. Dinah eventually renegotiated her relationship with her previously absent father, and she went to foster care, both options that she would not earlier have entertained. To her surprise, she found that neither required her to give up her dignity or all of her independence. These choices too are characteristics of starting over, and these too represent new images of themselves.

<1> The Experience of Using

*It makes you feel really good and it makes you feel shitty.*

For a substantial number of youth the use of drugs and alcohol was a major contributor to friction with family or school and the initial appeal of street-life. Almost all youth used marijuana regularly, and nearly all drank alcohol frequently for at least a few years. Karabanow (2009) too found that Canadian street-involved and homeless youth frequently used illegal substances and alcohol. Although most had tried some harder, illegal drugs like cocaine or used them occasionally, a smaller number used them regularly and had some difficulties as a consequence. Most youth had experience with using before becoming street-involved: junior high and high school are common places to acquaint oneself with drug use, and some became acquainted with the street drug culture before they left home.

Experimenting with alcohol and substances is part of lifestyle exploration and representative of the freedom of being young and independent, especially during the first months and years of street-involvement. Drug use, especially marijuana and alcohol, is usually a social experience and facilitates friendship and builds networks on the street. Youth who use drugs make friends while learning where to get the drugs and how to sell them, and obtaining access and using becomes part of the fabric of the community. Most street-involved youth develop an ethic about drug use: Which drugs to worry about under which conditions, which people are dangerous companions and who will protect them, and what styles of long-term use are bad, as signified by people they know.

At some point in their street-youth career most begin to think less flippantly about what kind of substance use is manageable for them and how much money, identity, and time they are willing to invest. Dinah was able to partition her use so that marijuana and some alcohol on weekdays still allowed her to work and be functional most of the time, and she reserved use of other substances for the weekend. Later in her life having an apartment became a priority, and this goal conflicted with the amount of money spent on recreational drug use.

The everyday ethic of drug use is learned from personal experience and from watching people they know. Their "voice" during interviews was authoritative and as they grew older a bit parental toward other youth. Katelin put it like this:

When crystal meth became big for me in my social group we were all really young and we got that out of our systems as quickly as we got it into us, you know, that and then now none of us will touch that stuff; you gotta try it once or twice to know that you don’t want to do it and I’m really stoked that me and my friends figured that out younger and that it wasn’t just me figuring it out, that it was me and my friends doing it as a group and all decided that we didn't ever want to touch that again so it’s [“that”] hard for us to go back there you know.... Youth are super-indulgent... from myself....it costs money and it’s taboo and makes you feel really good we’re gonna be so glad to overdo it that’s why youth are so good at excess... and we.... do it really well and... should be a concern. My mom knows about it though she knows that I’ve seen... too far... that shit for me to ever get really into it but she also knows that I’m dumb sometimes and I have weeks where I don’t do very good.

Similarly, Shannon said, "I’ll kind of go the wrong way with, you know, not really pressure but my own problem I guess you could call it with substance, but....it’s not too serious but it’s like occasionally I’ll have a bit too much fun, spend a bit too much money, you know what I mean?" Using is like having a fun, new toy, and it can be shared. It can also become boring, with overuse and time. Thus, states Shannon:

It’s practically the same thing day after day, you know, I hang out downtown, you know, I hang out with my friends, do drugs or drink, you know, and it’s just like it, it gets dull and boring after a while, like.... it doesn’t matter what drug I’ll do… it’s the same thing because I know what it’s like, you know, and I... went to detox... And I quit, I quit crystal meth and I’ve been clean from it since detox, about three weeks or a month ago probably.

For those youth who had more severe substance use troubles, their struggle to change their substance use is compelling. There is that same pride in overcoming hardship; it can be a powerful experience, sometimes shared. Shelley describes Antone:

He had a very, very, very bad addiction to ketamine and I made him promise that he wouldn’t do chemical drugs with me, like put it all together, like all of it. All we do is smoke pot now; we don’t even drink because we do not really like it. And I was actually so happy last night because he was feeling really crappy and he has hypertension disorder and “K” was what- the reason he was addicted is ‘cause it made him relax. And I told him that if he really, really needed it, he could do some if he wanted and he looked me in the eyes and told me, “I don’t want to do “K” anymore.” And I cried because I was so happy, ‘cause you know, he’s been addicted to that for probably about like six years. So, I feel really good about myself.

According to Shelley, drugs were fun, and then they were not: "And you do way too many drugs and you just drink way too much for your own good and you just-just get lost, right?" Some, including Bennie, become unrecognizable to themselves:

I quit because... the way it turns you from being a normal person into a totally changed person... when you’re like, badly into drugs like past the point of no return... you lose your friends you steal from your friends you rip your friends off you lose your family you lose everything ‘cause all you care about is another drug habit another way to find out where you’re gonna steal your next fucking whatever to get your next fix to, to, to screw your friend over to you know, like – screw yourself over not take care of your health not eat not drink water when you need to not like it’s fucking horrible so I was like… then when I got my dog like my dog really helped me change my life because like what I’m gonna drag my dog through all this fucking bullshit and then drag myself through it too while she suffers way more than I... ..cause then after a while you start really looking gross you..... [get] really skinny, and you just get unhealthy you just look disgusting and you start feeling like shit....your whole body hurts you feel like throwing up you get itchy, like so itchy...like I was really into it for like two months straight –yeah so for two months it felt great and then the one day just started feeling bad.

Cleaning up was a “spiritual experience” for some, including Tina: “Three years ago, I think I officially like stopped doing all drugs, there’s kind of a weird detox period, like you do not kind of feel completely normal for a while – and the physical is only like a year. But kind of like mentally, I don’t know, just to get back and check with everybody else –I felt like I stopped growing up when I started drugs –so I felt when I stopped, I was a few years behind, so I felt I had to relearn…

I: Emotionally catch up a little bit.

Yeah.

I: Oh, that’s interesting. And how did you do it, how did you quit?

I think – some people, I don’t know, like I’ve seen so many different handouts and stuff, and I almost think that was, that was actually bad for me.... for me, it’s when I got the tough love and just lost everything – I could, like completely, ‘cause I was in like, weird assistance from different like Income Assistance and things like that, legal assistance, and there’s always a detox to go to, get more food, and there’s always something. So when I had like nothing left, felt like – I was kind of forced in it, and I feel when I’m in that situation, so that’s why I did this.

Interviewer: Right. ‘Cause you had no one else to turn to.

Tina: Yeah. At first I guess I was really mad but then I was like, no, this is a good thing – and I cleaned up and then I’m like, wow, if that didn’t happen I’d probably still living there.

Like Dinah, for whom living for the pleasure of drug use eventually was not enough, for some youth, such as Mikaela, it is an existential crisis.

When I first started here and I went to Detox-the whole reason why I went to Detox was because I can’t live on the streets, I need to do something with my life and so I went to Detox and then I was like-I need to eat and I need to find a home and I need to go back to school. It took me a while but... And… at first it is, I hadn’t really done any drugs, since I maybe like once you know, every six months or year, do something but… then I started, I used the excuse to like, you know, I need to stay up at night or something I needed, I need energy or, stuff like that or, I’d say I need GHB to, be able to like, perform and stuff. And, then I realized I was doing them to the like… even if they could be used in a good way, the way I was using them definitely was, wasn’t. And, and I doubted I could use them in a good way. So I realized I had to stop.

A further motivation is disgust. Brenda used crack for six days without leaving the apartment and barely eating. She found herself "gross." She said, "like the whole quitting meth, you know I went through pre… withdrawal before and I was withdrawing and I was, I screwed up, you know, I did end up going and doing it but um since, since then it’s just disgusted me, like a lot, or it’s gotten to the point where it disgusts me so much that if I do, like I smoked, I only smoked crystal meth and when I have a hoot, you know, it’ll, it disgusts me so much that it’ll actually make me vomit..." Sometimes this disgust and the accompanying self-awareness came on suddenly. Remco said, "I never realized that until a couple weeks ago how fucked up I was and how embarrassed of my, like, I was so embarrassed of myself and whenever I was doing crystal meth I wouldn’t come downtown and see my friends because I didn’t want them to see me like that , and oh it’s just hectic, I’m glad I’m out of that scene..."

Drug and alcohol use had a developmental and existential link to many themes of growing up for our street-involved youth sample. Many youth found eventually that the pleasure of use did not last and that it was better to aspire to ideals and things that last. They learned the limits of such pleasure. Even two youth who were in some despair about their inability to quit recognized that using was not meaningful. Using had a utilitarian ethic, in that most youth described which drugs were more likely to cause long-term trouble for people generally and which drugs were particularly troublesome for themselves. They identified the consequences of the demands of addiction, the temptation to steal from their friends and family, and the lure of “dating their dealer.” They learned the difference between using friends for the purpose of using and using for the purpose of friendship. They learned the difference “between freedom and being free,” as Bennie put it. Even so, most youth continued to participate in some drug use, for social reasons and for pleasure.

<1> Education on My Terms

Dinah said that she never wanted to go back to the same conditions of living with her family that were present when she was young, and she had the same attitude about school. This was common among these youth: Their leaving home was usually also about leaving school, or at least the representation of mainstream school in which few of them had had much success. Only one youth said that school was not important, but only two were willing to again attempt it in a mainstream high school. The rest desired an educational program that better matched their temperament, that did not fill them with shame, and that treated them like adults or at least like young people with the capacity to be responsible. Some of them attributed their own difficulties in school to their own choices, and some attribute their difficulties to the inflexible nature of mainstream schooling or to the social culture. Even those who were critical of schooling believed in their own agency and ability to succeed in school. And they fiercely argued for their right to have school on their own terms.

For some school is challenging because of their own predilictions. Most youth have difficulties with school and attitudes about school that are not unique to being street involved. Trenton was kicked out of school for smoking pot, and he was asked about his plans for next year. His story is an old one, among the emerging adults.

Trenton: I’m planning on going there next year.

Interviewer: Where do you think you’ll go?

Trenton: Probably SJ Willis [a flexible, part-time, alternative school]

Interviewer: So is there anything that would have to change in order for you to go to school?

Trenton: I’d need to go more often....just show up there and not smoke a bunch of pot when I’m there. Cause that’s part of the reason why I got suspended. I got kicked out around the end of the year for smoking pot.

Interviewer: So is there anything you can think of that would help you do differently or help it be different this time?

Trenton: Well I don’t really need to smoke pot at school [laughs] It’s just when someone asks me, “Would you like some? So I just gotta learn to say no.

Ella had similar difficulties. "...there’s a lot of, like, drug addicts in school, so… [she laughs]. I don’t know, they were all like-they were all around and I guess one of the harder things is being like, ‘No, I don’t wanna do drugs.’” She said, "I had too many other things going on, and I couldn't deal with it." When asked what she needed to do, she said, “Maybe get my head on my shoulders a bit more and like...get on it. [laughs].” Nate said, “It’s definitely been really difficult going everyday and passing all my courses. Like I’m pretty smart and like I can pass easily if I went everyday I’d get pretty good marks but yeah going- attendance is a problem. Interviewer: Yeah? Why is that? Just ‘cause you’re not interested? Nate: Well it’s just ‘cause it’s at school and like someone won’t call me or I’ll sleep in or something like that. I don’t have a first block, which is really, really nice ‘cause I don’t have to be at school until 10:10, so I have time get ready, time to wake up. For some, including Angelia, the personal issues were more complicated and includes a history of some alienation and, perhaps, misunderstanding.

Grade eight, grade nine, I decided to change that, ‘cause at – towards one of the two years, I just snapped, and I grabbed a kid by his hoodie and looked at him and went, dude, I respect you, you can respect me. Otherwise you’re going out this window. And I got reprimanded for it, but the teachers all knew how much stress I was going through, to the point I didn’t want to be in school anymore. To the point my vice-principal went behind my parents’ back, called our family doctor, and told the receptionist to book an appointment for me to go in for depression pills. Because I’m always depressed, I’m always wearing black, I have no friends, I keep to myself. Well – maybe that’s not a case of depression, maybe it’s a case of lack of understanding. And they wouldn’t understand it. Even though I went to counselors – like, I’ve gone through four different Y counselors, through – through, what was it – fourteen, fourteen to sixteen or seventeen, I went through four different counselors, and that’s not including my youth school counselors...

Others were more critical of the pedagogy and environment of school. Stevie mentioned the "boxed-in" feeling:.

I’m actually getting myself back into school. It’s the scariest thing I think I’ve ever done in my life. I’m seeing things that people can’t even imagine like going there is like-I haven’t been in school for the last few years. Like actually in school.

Interviewer: Is it the regimen or what is it about it that freaks you out?

Stevie: Um, it’s the boxed feeling. It’s the feeling of having to do the exact same thing that everyone else is doing. I always felt like when I was in school that I wasn’t getting anywhere like even when I was young I was like I feel I can’t do this like I felt, I felt, like I’m repeating, like everything’s repetitive and I’m just doing the exact same thing like everyone before me has and I’m just like, where is this going to lead to?

Rosie said that “They’re all taught to like teach you…as a grade A level student, and not everyone’s that way, and then you get stuck into resource programs.” Almost everyone complained that school was boring and not helping...not about "real life.” Most felt it was important, for obtaining better jobs, but mainly for instrumental long-term purposes. Sarah argued it was important “[be]cause they learn things. Then when they get out on their own, they can actually use that advice... I hate school with a passion. But I still go. Just so I can graduate and all that crap.”

There were also more romantic views. Zach was one of few who said education is not important. You can do school anytime, but. “… you can only be a kid once….So you might as well just be a kid while you want, and then…..” Another youth felt that school was useful and he was likely to do it, but perhaps it wasn't the highest priority: "If I could support myself which I mean my mom’s pretty good about it but if I could you know still pay for my cigarettes and my leisure, and go to school then like I could go to school full time..."

Like other emerging adults, school was a choice, valued, and important enough that almost everyone re-enrolls at some point, but it was not necessarily something they believed was going to help them at the moment. They also did not believe it was as effective as the experiential, real life education they received informally.

# <1> Summary

Dinah’s hold on independence was unusual for its intensity but common among street-involved youth. The first step was getting some distance between themselves and their guardians, even when they were still living with a guardian. They did so to mitigate what they perceived to be the most harmful effects of those relationships. At their worst those relationships were abusive but this was uncommon; more commonly these relationships were perceived to be blocking progress toward maturity and growth. Of course, a few youth eventually believed they had earlier misattributed the problem to their parents when they later came to believe they themselves had a part.

Street-involved youth excel at accommodation, change and at starting over, often with new friends, a new place to live, a new source of income, and new romantic partnerships. The street-youth subculture was a new world, with ties to the mainstream and underground economies, and there was an acculturation process to this world, including new and frequent opportunities to sell and use drugs. Sometimes these were missteps, and they had to start over repeatedly. Anything that threatened independence was re-evaluated, including addiction, control by partners, roommates, caseworkers, and work. Emerging adulthood’s self-focus is about relative freedom from school and parents and prior to more permanent commitments to work. At first street-involved youth experienced some relief from the burden of school, though they stated it was important at least to their future, if not the present. Few were willing to set aside their independence for the sake of access to formal schooling, even when those demands were limited as they were in an alternative school. They were rethinking their present and future participation in education, fleeing from anything that looked and felt like what they previously experienced, but hoping that learning might again be useful and interesting.

This independence may look like rebellion. Yet it is also possible that they are working out how to be adult, with the freedom that independence brings, and that the options available to them are few. Experimentation with drugs is one way to be adult. Finding housing and an income are another, and these are not easy. This is why the example of “transient youth” that we discussed early in chapter one may be important. Perhaps rather than viewing these youth as at-risk, it would be possible to try viewing them as people in need of housing who are experimenting with how to live. Rather than “going off the rails,” they need time. They are not interested in stability, and as Wyn and Arnett say they are not likely to find it. Stability is not the goal, but room to breathe is. They are experimenting, and while their experiments with drug use can be scary, they are also experimenting with friendships, with romantic partnerships, with how best to live, and with the realities of obtaining an income.

This is the difference between experimentation and going off the rails. Eventually most of them aspire to mainstream options. In the early stages of street-involvement employment and education were not perceived as important. Later, the youth reconsidered, and employment became more important as a lifestyle and a route to independent adulthood. Similarly, youth became restless with the street-involved lifestyle and began to look over the horizon of their day-to-day life toward what life would be like in a few months, next year, and over the next few years. For this we turn to a discussion of “possibilities.”

<1> References

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