

What's their story? Students Share Their Experiences and Understandings of Barriers for
Success within Alternative Programs Designed for "at-risk" Youth

by

Kathryn Jill Cooper

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Copyright @ 2019 by Kathryn Jill Cooper

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Michelle Honeyford, for her wisdom and guidance throughout my research and writing. She encouraged me in my belief about the importance of this study, even in those moments when I wanted to give up. She challenged me to think deeply and her high expectations have made me a better researcher and writer. Thanks to Dr. Ee-Seul Yoon, who provided avenues to think about within the research that had not occurred to me and made the study more accessible for those outside the world of alternative education. Ee-Seul's reminders about the importance of patience during recruitment came at just the right time. Dr. Rob Simon offered enthusiasm and support for my inclusion of my own experiences as an educator within the study. When I was concerned about the bias my previous teaching might cause, Rob framed it as a strength and pushed me to include myself more explicitly within the research. I'm grateful to the attention, detailed feedback, and unflinching support I received from all three.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to my husband Geoff and to my children, Maureen and Sam. Geoff took over many of the household tasks without complaint, and allowed me to focus on the hours of reading and writing that was necessary over many weekends. Maureen and Sam, who can both focus in noisy environments, turned down their volume and vacated spaces in our home in order to accommodate my need for quiet and minimal distractions. Their support and love has always been my safe place to land. This process has been no exception. I love you.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to the memory of my father, Keith Cooper, who fought for the underdog and worked tirelessly and cheerfully for equity and social justice. He consistently did what was right even when it wasn't popular. It is also dedicated to my mother, Dianne Cooper, who continues to generously care for her community and give to others. As both young and adult children, she taught my sisters and I to do the same. Growing up around their conversations and their examples made me aware of my privilege and luck without taking it for granted. My road was paved because I have been taught and inspired by two incredible parents.

I also dedicate this work to the many, many students that I have had the good fortune to learn with throughout my teaching career. I am a better teacher and more importantly, a better person because of their generosity. Their stories are a part of this one which I hope will be part of discussions of a more equitable story for all students in the future.

Abstract

Despite many alternative programs designed for students who have been labelled as unsuccessful within traditional environments, in the urban context where this study takes place, large numbers of students are leaving before receiving high school diplomas. Studies within the educational literature describe the reasons why students are pushed out of schools as well as possible models for alternatives. What is lacking in the research are the voices of students themselves. In response to this gap, questions were posed to four former students that aimed to understand their experiences in order to influence design and programming for future alternative programs. In this context, “alternative” refers to those educational sites attended by students who have typically been failed by more traditional schools.

This study, while influenced by narrative inquiry’s use of story, uses qualitative semi structured interviews as a methodology. The analysis of these stories raises questions of power, agency, and the role of schools in meeting the needs of all learners. The participants’ stories show a need for alternative programs to have clearly defined and articulated visions, attention to the overall purpose and intent of course activities and learning experiences, as well as a more holistic view of the student. Reimagining equitable student-teacher relationships, open access for different populations of learners, advocacy for students, and design models that are constantly re-examined and upgraded based on the needs of students were important conclusions. Despite the initial intention to focus this study on alternative schools and programs for so called “at-risk” learners, the findings suggest that educators and policy makers should pay attention to student experience within alternative education in order to improve those programs as well as their traditional counterparts so there is no longer a need for alternatives.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
List of Tables and Figures	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Context	3
Situating Myself as a Researcher (My story)	9
Theoretical Influences	13
Conceptual Framework	14
Identity as a Conceptual Framework.....	15
Power as a Conceptual Framework	16
Agency as a Conceptual Framework.....	17
Structure as a Conceptual Framework.....	18
Definitions of Alternative Programs	19
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	22
Guiding Questions	23
What are the labels that define particular types of learners saying about these learners and their relationships to schools?.....	24
Who is Excluded?.....	25
Silencing and Privileging.	28
Purposeful Labelling.	31

How does the enactment of student/teacher roles (discourses) impact students' and teachers' sense of self?.....	33
Identity as a Social Construct.	34
Silenced Identities.	36
Definitions of Teacher Identity.	38
What part does education play in limiting opportunities for youth?	41
Types of Alternatives.	45
Characteristics of Success and Failure.	47
Academic Program Quality.	49
The Role of Teachers.....	50
How can educational programs ensure equity, opportunity, and access to groups of students who have traditionally been on the margins?	52
Student Power.....	52
Developing Relationships.....	54
Diversity and Difference.	56
Personal Stories.	58
How do educational decisions made by administration and teaching staff increase student investment and voice?	60
Agency and Investment.	60
Essentializing versus Anti-Opressive Education.....	61
Defining Literacy.....	62
Raising Critical Consciousness.	64
Critical Literacy.....	67

Insights from the Literature	69
CHAPTER THREE: DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND ANALYSIS	70
Research Questions	71
My Research Stance	71
Rationale for Qualitative Interviews	74
Recruitment	77
Participants	79
Consent	82
Research Instruments.....	83
Interview Protocol	84
Confidentiality	85
Ethical Implications.....	85
Data Analysis.....	86
Versus Codes	106
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	108
Said Versus Unsaid.....	108
Loss Versus Gain.....	113
Open Versus Closed	121
Structure Versus Chaos	125
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS	129
Discussion of the Findings	129
Definitions of Learning and Impacts on Perceptions of Success.	131
Grief, Trauma, and Perceptions of Success.....	139

Alternative Models and Perceptions of Success.....	143
Conclusions	148
References	154
Appendix A - Recruitment Poster	165
Appendix B – Informational Letter Regarding Study for Organizations	166
Appendix C - Youth Organizations	167
Appendix D - Letter of Consent	168
Appendix F - Letter of Consent from Parents for Participants Under 18 (Under 18	174
Appendix G – Letter to School Divisions	177
Appendix H - Interview Protocol	179
Appendix I – Confidentiality Agreement	181
Appendix J - Participant Recruitment Questions	183
Appendix K - Focus Group Preamble	184
Appendix L – Focus Group Statements.....	185

List of Tables and Figures

List of Tables

Table 1 - Grade 12 Provincial Exam Results.....	p. 5
Table 2 - Types of Alternative Programming Models.....	p. 79

List of Figures

Figure 1 – Relationship Between Big Ideas – Conceptual Framework.....	p. 15
Figure 2 - Rounds of Data Analysis.....	p. 87
Figure 3 – My Analytic Memos.....	p. 92
Figure 4 - My Initial Sentence Strip Analysis.....	p. 93
Figure 5 - Placing sentence strips under broad themes.....	p. 94
Figure 6 - Examples of combining sentence strips to confirm my understanding.....	p. 95
Figure 7 - Colour coding the data.....	p. 103
Figure 8 - Colour coding the data.....	p. 103
Figure 9 - Concepts to Consider in Future Alternative Programs.....	p. 151

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

All that we are is story. From the moment we are born to the time we continue on our spirit journey, we are involved in the creation of the story of our time here. It is what we arrive with. It is all we leave behind. We are not the things we accumulate. We are not the things we deem important. We are story. All of us. What comes to matter then is the creation of the best possible story we can while we're here; you, me, us, together. When we can do that and we take the time to share those stories with each other, we get bigger inside, we see each other, we recognize our kinship – we change the world, one story at a time...” (Wagamese, 2018)

This study explores the quality of educational experiences provided to students who have attempted to gain credits toward a high school diploma within an alternative education setting. First, it is important to clarify the meaning of *alternative* within the context of this research. There are many definitions of “alternative” programming in the city and province where this study takes place. These will be described in more detail later. This study is concerned with those programs specifically designed and targeted toward students who have failed in more traditional environments: the so called “at-risk” learner.

There are many educational research studies discussed in the following pages that theorize about the reasons why particular populations of students are leaving educational environments. Poverty, cultural difference, lack of confidence in academic abilities, mental illness, and other factors that cause students to feel differently when comparing themselves to the

norm are causing a gap in educational attainment for many groups. These issues will be presented and examined in detail in throughout the study. As well, attention to attempts made by the educational system to address these gaps by providing alternatives will be considered.

My own experience of teaching for seven years in two contexts designed for students who have not been successful in traditional educational environments, caused me to be surprised when I continually read the same recommendations and conclusions that encouraged designing alternative schools or programs in particular ways, including focusing more on developing positive relationships through smaller class sizes and use of first names between staff and students. The research, which will be presented in further detail later, claimed that these design recommendations would enable these students to ultimately meet with more success. My professional observations have not shown this to be the case. In both of the alternative contexts where I have taught, many of these recommendations were followed in both structure and classroom practice and too many students were still not thriving and demonstrating their learning in the ways researchers suggested they should.

Due to this misalignment between my experience and the research I was reading at the time, I became interested in student perceptions about their school experiences. I developed the research questions for this study in order to better understand the experiences of young adults who had attended alternative programs. Silencing the voices of youth who have experienced barriers by a lack of examination of *their* needs and perspectives is a recurring theme in the literature review that follows. Inviting young people to share their stories provides an opportunity to fill a significant gap in the current research available regarding school experiences for marginalized youth. There are many troubling statistics and descriptions about the ways that

many youth experience curriculum content, school structures, relationships between staff and students, and perceptions of their peers. Hearing directly from youth who have experienced the educational system's attempts to improve those structures may help educators better understand students' experiences and include their perspectives in efforts to improve educational environments in the future.

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. How do students describe their experiences in alternative school environments?
2. What are the barriers that students experience?
3. How would students suggest educators improve program design to increase positive educational experiences and outcomes?
4. How can students' stories of their experiences within alternative programs help inform future alternative program designs that are more successful in meeting the needs of their students?

This study attempts to fill a gap within current educational research by attending specifically to the impressions and perspectives of the students who have left alternative programs before achieving their educational goals.

Context

The story of this study has its setting in a large urban centre in one of the prairie provinces. There are many young people who live within this centre who are thriving. *This* story is not about them. Its protagonists reside in the same large urban centre and have attended

schools within the largest school division in the province. These young people have been failed continually by the schools they have attended. As they enter young adulthood, many have attempted to fit in and succeed in many school settings. By the time they enter high school, they have been taught to believe that they are not learners and so they are unsuccessful according to dominant cultural narratives.

The role that poverty, race, and place of residence play in potential success within the educational system is well documented. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), of the one in five residents who live in the defined “inner city” area, 33 percent live in poverty. In 2018, 19.9 % of inner city residents had no high school as compared to 10.9% of the residents in the other areas of the city (State of Inner City, 2018). According to these statistics, as well as educational research, poverty directly correlates with chances of success in schools (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002; Dei et. al., 1997; Freire, 2000; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Pollack, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999). The research is also clear that those who live in poverty in Canada are more likely to be Indigenous (State of Inner City, 2018). According to the CCPA, 40% of the Indigenous residents of the inner city do not have a high school diploma. As well, 28.3% of single mothers have not graduated (State of Inner City, 2018).

On their website, the provincial department of education reports vast disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in terms of numbers of graduates. In June 2018, 87.9% of non-Indigenous students graduated in four years with a high school diploma. Indigenous students who earned the same diploma in the same time period numbered only 48.5%. Grade 12 Standardized Test scores (See Table 1) also show a gap in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (High School Graduation Rates and Student Achievement Statistics,

2018). Average marks achieved for the Grade 12 Essential math exam in 2018 were 53.7% overall. Non-Indigenous students scored an average of 55.2% overall as compared to Indigenous students who scored 48.2%. The Grade 12 English Provincial Exam marks for the same period showed even bigger gaps in achievement between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students. The overall average was 67.8%. Non-Indigenous students averaged approximately 69%. Indigenous students averaged 60.6% on the same exam (High School Graduation Rates and Student Achievement Statistics, 2018). The performance gaps between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students on the Grade 12 Provincial exams are important. Despite both groups having low to average test scores, the difference in graduation rates between the two groups in the same year is nearly doubled. These statistics could point to barriers beyond academic ones for Indigenous students.

Table 1

Grade 12 Provincial Exam Results-Differences in Performance Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students

Math		English	
Average	53.7%	Average	67.8%
Indigenous	48.2%	Indigenous	60.6%
Non-Indigenous	55.2%	Non-Indigenous	69.6%

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has become an important tool for policy makers to use in evaluating educational standards in schools. The survey is conducted every three years and is a comparison of achievement rates across the subject areas. The results

of 2015 show that the province where this study takes place is seeing worsening achievement rates in math and reading levels in comparison to the rest of the country (Richards, 2015, p.1). The study attributes high Indigenous populations in this region as a factor in the weak test scores. Reasons for this are varied but include: confusion between federal and provincial responsibility for funding Indigenous education, familial history with residential schooling causing a distrust in the school system, and lack of access to resources on reserve and rural schools where many Indigenous students reside (Richards, 2015). During my time teaching in four different contexts, Indigenous students were over-represented in school or classroom populations that would be characterized as “problems” either because of their non-conforming behaviour and/or lack of academic achievement. Despite attempts to respond to perceived gaps in education through additional supports such as extra time with a resource teacher or educational assistant, students did not see more than modest gains.

Aside from the gap in test scores, the gap in income levels is also glaring. Alarmingly, “Indigenous children in this province still have the highest poverty rate of any province (39%). Non-Indigenous children in [the province] face much lower rates, but at 18% those rates remain among the highest in the country” (Richards, 2015). The provincial department of education suggests that poverty rates among Indigenous children and families are getting worse. It seems clear from the government statistics, that Indigenous students as well as students who live in poverty are at the highest risk for being failed by the educational system due to lack of support and resources. In many cases, being poor and being Indigenous go hand in hand. It is possible that the underserving of Indigenous students by the educational system is perpetuating inequitable opportunities which directly lead to a greater likelihood of living in poverty.

Many youth who are characterized by descriptions found in statistical data generated by provincial achievement tests, standardized assessments, and/or school division reports such as “living in poverty”, “Indigenous”, “refugee” or “New Canadian”, or “inner city”, attend schools within the largest school division in the province. This division serves the core of this urban city. Within this geographical area, there are 20 schools serving grades 7-12 students. There are many schools for middle grade and senior high students with traditional programming where students move throughout the building to different classes with different subject specialists as their teachers. In many cases, the expectation for students is that they work at the same pace and complete the same assignments and assessments.

As well, the division offers programming for students who, for a variety of reasons, have not been successful in the environments of a mainstream school. Examples include an alternative school and thirteen off-campus programs identified on the division’s website. These programs provide supports for a range of issues affecting students that may impact their schooling such as poor mental health, chronic attendance problems, parenting demands, and/or economic disparities. Many of these programs are located within the city’s urban core. Beyond these alternatives, many schools have designed and implemented their own special programs within their schools to deal with the specific needs of their own students.

Access to these specialized programs is often given to students who are known by the staff in their current or home schools. However, not all youth are able to access or benefit from these programs. Students who move homes during the course of a school year are less familiar to school staff and therefore to alternative programming models. Student mobility, or school change, either over many school years or during the course of the school year, seems to have a

detrimental effect on student academic outcomes (Aman, 2010, p. 7). Mobility rates refer to the number of times a student moves in and out of a specific school during the course of the school year. A high rate means that students are moving from at least one school to another on a regular basis, which can cause major gaps in their learning as well as their ability to form relationships with peers and teachers. The more students move homes and schools, the less likely they are to achieve at the rates of their more stable peers. According to the division's school demographics report (2016/2017), the one alternative school that exists in the division also had the division's highest mobility rate at 84.5%. This high percentage was an increase of 32.8% percent over the previous year (2017). The report also suggests a geographic trend to student mobility rates. The schools with the highest mobility rates are all located in the centre of the city (2017, p. 15). This is also the area most populated with families living in poverty, many of whom are Indigenous.

The barriers facing youth living within the urban core of this Western Canadian city are many, but the attempts to respond, either successfully or unsuccessfully, to these barriers by the educational system are also varied and plentiful. The data from the school division, Statistics Canada, and educational research shows that the positive impact on students who are vulnerable due to economic and social factors is not yet correlating with the amount of financial resources and professional expertise expended to improve the educational experiences of these youth. Although the system *is* creating alternatives for students who are struggling within more traditional environments, there are continued questions about how well the alternatives are serving those for whom they were designed to help.

Situating Myself as a Researcher (My story)

As we tell our stories and listen to our participants tell their stories in the inquiry, we, as inquirers, need to pay close attention to who we are in the inquiry and to understand that we, ourselves, are part of the storied landscapes we are studying (Clandinin, 2013, p. 30)

My interest in the barriers experienced by students attending alternative programs started developing a long time ago. I was raised in a middle-class home, by two parents who had worked within the educational system. Both my mother and father grew up in rural environments: my mom, the child of a farmer and a teacher who left her job when she married, as was the custom. My dad was raised by a father who was a pacifist who served as a stretcher bearer in the war. His mother was a devoted caregiver to all of them and to her many friends in the community. My parents were raised with values of honesty and hard work and they passed those values to me and my sisters. I was surrounded by discussions of social issues like poverty and racism and their effects on more vulnerable populations. I understood that those who were victims to hardship were not personally to blame. I was a critical thinker and hungry for engagement in conversation and debate when I entered high school.

I learned early in Grade 10 that my learning needs were not to be addressed. My classrooms, with only two exceptions, were not places where students were invited to participate in the same ways I did at home. We were to work quietly at our desks after the teacher delivered a lesson. When I didn't understand a concept, I asked for help. If I still didn't understand, it was attributed to a lack of effort on my part.

I found my community outside of the school. In school, I did the bare minimum. I had a group of friends on whom I could rely for social and emotional support. I regularly skipped my classes but also knew that I could only miss twelve per semester before I would lose the credit. I handed in assignments but never spent much time studying. My marks were below average in most of my academic classes. I knew how to manage the system so that I would pass, but I was not interested or involved enough to achieve at a high standard as defined by my high school.

My skills in theatre and music were not recognized as valuable within my academic classes so I barely attended. Although my dream had always been to be a teacher, the idea was shaken somewhat, by the boring and repetitive styles I endured for the majority of my classes. I have little memory of high school beyond my friends and the musical theatre and performing arts events in which I participated. Throughout those years, I sat at a dinner table with parents who fought for social justice through their work in peace movements and social services organizations. I was aware of child prostitution and homelessness. I knew that these problems were more likely to befall the Indigenous residents of our city. I knew that my life was so simple in comparison. I was the typical middle-class student, with all the resources necessary to succeed in a typical high school environment. And yet, I barely made it through. How were those students, the ones I only knew in the abstract from conversations around my dinner table, ever supposed to succeed?

I entered the Faculty of Education with these questions in the back of my mind. I hoped to eventually work within the city centre in order to understand some of the issues that I had been raised to question. One of my professors assigned us to do a book review on any educational text of our choice. This kind of option had not been given in my prior courses and I started scanning

for titles in the library. I chose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire which had been first published in English the year after I was born. I knew little about the book, but when I brought it home, my parents were visibly stirred with their own experiences and memories of their work in activism and education. My professor was also enthusiastic about the book choice and how I might respond to the ideas presented within. I was inspired. I had not read anything similar in my courses and the combination of social and educational goals fit well with what I had learned within my own household. I carried the ideas of critical theory with me, although I did not yet know the name of the theoretical framework, nor how important it would become in my career.

My teaching career started in 1995 in an alternative program for grade 7/8 students in a Nursery to Grade 8 school in the core area of an urban centre in Canada. The school itself fit the characteristics of a high needs school in that many of the students attending at the time lived well below the poverty line, came from single parent households, had family members suffering from addictions or trauma, and were Indigenous. The program I taught was designed for students who had failed in regular classrooms in that environment. Since almost all of the students in the school had been labelled “at-risk”, the students with whom I worked were defined as even more so. The philosophy of the program was to provide one teacher for all core subjects in order to develop stronger relationships with students and to provide academic programming in the form of booklets that students could complete at their own pace when they were in attendance. I had approximately 40 students registered in my class in each of the three years I worked there. On a good day, about 10 would attend. Of those 10, many had serious gaps in their learning because of chronic absenteeism and/or academic difficulties.

More than seventeen years later, I was a teacher in a small alternative school in the core area of that same city. The school's mandate was to provide a choice for students who have struggled for a variety of reasons in other educational environments. While I was teaching there, I had been focused on readings in my graduate studies work that focused on the kinds of students that I was teaching; youth who have been labelled "at-risk" or "marginalized" for a variety of reasons. In my view, the school paid significant attention to research conclusions about successful environments for students who have disengaged from more traditional models. The school provided smaller class sizes, substance abuse and career counsellors on site, an infant lab, and a focus on relationship building between students and staff. The school also operated on a continuous progress model so that students who had gaps in attendance could pick up where they left off in their course work. Yet staff were still being met with many of the same issues that I faced in my first classroom in 1995. Many students registered and never attended, or attended very sporadically, or attended but engaged in practices that did not move them forward as learners.

Although there are many students who *do* succeed, my interest and the focus of this study will be on those who don't. During my course work and review of the literature that follows, I found rich information regarding the history and intention of various alternative programs. Staff, administrators, policy makers, and researchers were all present in the voices and stories of these studies. What was missing were the stories of students themselves. This study asked students to share their own stories about their experiences in alternative environments in order to understand more deeply the reasons why these environments did not work for them.

Theoretical Influences

The main theories that are informing my research include critical theories of education (Freire, 2000; Peters & Giroux, 2012), specifically feminist (Fine, 1989; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984; O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012), Indigenous (Brendtro et. al, 2002; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Macdonald, David & Wilson, 2016; Tupper, 2009; Vowel, 2013), and other anti-oppressive models (Dei, 1993; Kumashiro, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Pollack, 2017) that seek to understand the experiences of those of have been excluded from societal institutions that are supposedly characterized by equal access for all. These will be elaborated on more deeply in the literature review. My experiences as an educator prior to beginning this study had previously influenced my beliefs about the lack of accuracy in reports of “equality in education”, but theorists researching and attempting to understand the experiences of people who routinely live, work, and study either on the margins or directly outside of these structures, have shaped the ways I think about the interaction of systems and how and who they choose to serve.

I attempted to find research that would highlight the voices of the students I was remembering and/or the teachers who were working to design and create alternatives for those who had chosen to or been asked to leave their traditional school environments. Those voices were few and far between in the studies that I found. Questions about knowledge, who is classified as an expert, and the way power is positioned and understood, particularly when excluded individuals attempt to gain entry into dominant systems, became important in thinking about educational systems and programs. I wondered who was speaking for the many youth I had taught over the years and how their voices, insights, and suggestions might be included in the body of educational research about alternatives that serve those who have been made silenced by

the current system. Researchers that question dominant ideologies and power structures are noticing and naming the lack of representation and visibility of non-dominant groups and their lived experiences within the story provided by academic research.

Conceptual Framework

Critical and anti-oppressive educational theorists have guided my thinking about the inter-relationships between identity, power, agency, and structures. The importance of these concepts to me is informed by my experience as a student, as a teacher, as well as my reading and understanding of the educational research that follows. I designed a visual (See Figure 1) to illustrate the concepts both individually and in relation to each other. I have imagined them as embodiments of specific questions that relate to the ways that an individual might define themselves in multiple contexts. The discussion that follows will align more closely with how I worked to understand these concepts in relationship to alternative education and the questions and I wish to pursue.

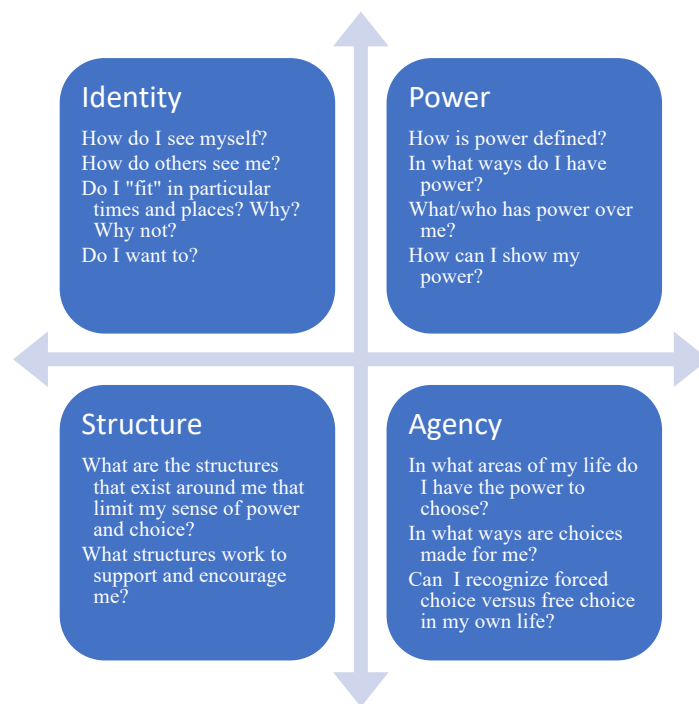


Figure 1 – Relationship Between Big Ideas – Conceptual Framework

Identity as a Conceptual Framework

The concept of identity, as it relates to this study, is deeply influenced by the psychologist Erik Erikson who believed that “identity encompasses individual and social meaning and is considered in terms of the interplay between individual and society” (Flum & Kaplan, 2012, p. 240). Therefore, one’s identity is made up of relationships: with individuals, communities, institutions, and other systems with whom one interacts throughout their lifetime. Identity is not fixed. It changes over time and is dependent on experiences with others, including experiences with schools. For many children and youth, more of their waking hours are spent in schools than anywhere else. It follows that the way one perceives oneself and how one is perceived within the school will have a profound impact on the creation of one’s identity. How

one is schooled or perceives oneself as a learner has everything to do with the identities of those providing the education as well as those receiving it. Gee (2012), who suggests that identity is composed of many parts (i.e., an “identity kit”), maintains that learning is not all about skills. He argues that learning “is about learning the right moves in embodied interactions in the real world or virtual worlds, that get one recognized as ‘playing the game’: that is, enacting the right sort of identity for a given situation” (Gee, 2012a, p. 48). If this is true, what are the “right moves”? Who decides how to “play the game” or, what the “rules of the game” are?

Power as a Conceptual Framework

Ideas about which identities are viewed as more or less powerful within educational environments are another useful lens. According to French philosopher Foucault, “power is not a thing held or owned by individuals to be used but rather power is a relation between individuals or groups of individuals” (Niesche & Gowlett, 2015, p. 375). Therefore, powerful people are those who are perceived to have more in any relationship. Kumashiro (2002) identified the multiple ways that people within school settings express power and dominance over others. Some are overt and visibly harmful, and some are passive and characterized by inaction. Perpetuation of privilege and positioning of predominantly white, colonial, western, male, and hetero-normative worldviews and knowledges as “truth” continues to offer more power to certain groups and less to others. By allowing curriculum that teaches “about only certain groups and perspectives in society, students are not learning about alternative perspectives and the contributions, experiences and identities of those Othered, and by not learning such knowledge, students are not troubling the (mis)knowledge they already have” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 55). Powerful groups maintain their positions with little resistance or change. Therefore, questions about power become: Who has it within the educational setting? Which groups are seen as

powerful? Why? How do students who have less visibility in a school setting exert their power? Do they?

Agency as a Conceptual Framework

Agency is broadly defined as an individual's ability to control their own destinies through material, emotional, and physical means available to them (Ecclestone, 2007). Synonymous with autonomy, it describes not only the individual ability to choose for oneself, but also the notion that there are many alternatives over the course of one's life to choose from. Therefore, education should provide the means to participate in the many options that exist upon leaving the school system. Students should have the opportunity to learn the skills and aptitudes necessary for various futures. In educational settings, "if learners invest in a language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 37). Students in a school setting, according to this concept, will become subjects in their educational process when they feel it is of value in their personal trajectories or "imaginary capital" (Yoon as cited by Yoon, 2013). Imaginary capital refers to "encompassing the practices and products of young people's socially situated imaginations of their presents and futures in relation to the dominant social imaginary" (Yoon as cited by Yoon, 2017, p. 46). This could imply that all students within the education system are being provided with the means to both imagine their futures as well as succeed in whatever context that they can imagine for themselves. It seems that this is happening for students who fit the more conventional model of schooling. What happens to those that don't? Are there equitable educational choices for students who are marginalized and disenfranchised by their current school settings? Are these learners making a specific choice by leaving an environment that does not promise anything worth

investing in? Do all students have the same ability to demonstrate that they are agents acting in their own best interests?

Structure as a Conceptual Framework

Structuralism refers to both visible and hidden structures that help individuals understand the world around them. Linguist de Saussure, named as one of the founders of structuralism, applied the idea to language and the signs and signifiers that allow a language learner to interpret meaning through the inter-related structures used when joining individual letters together to create words. de Saussure “saw language as a social system that was coherent, orderly and susceptible to understanding and explanation as a whole” (Lane, 1970, p. 27). Levi-Strauss, an anthropologist, believed that cultures were built on underlying structures that gave meaning to existence. These can be recognized through universal binary relationships such as hot/cold, black/white, and up/down (Lane, 1970). Post-structuralists like Foucault and Marx challenged the notions of structuralists by including the notion of free-will or agency within their discussions. They believed that structures did exist, but that disruption of binaries was the task of a subject who exhibits agency through their relationships to and within those structures (Callinicos, 2009). Post-structuralist thinking is more useful to my help my understanding of the ways that I understand the structures within educational environments.

When using these ideas to examine current educational models, questions of structures that assist some students while making others vulnerable become relevant. How do these structures shift and change over time and for particular groups of students? What traditional binary relationships continue to exist that privilege some students? Are these made visible? Can students recognize the structures that limit their agency? Do these limitations change if they are

explicit? How do schools, as organizations, perpetuate oppression by maintaining repressive structures and systems? These concepts will be woven throughout the study as ways of thinking about the questions that I am posing to better understand the relationships of students to their schooling experiences.

Definitions of Alternative Programs

In order to clarify the role of alternative programs and their impacts on students who have attended, it is important that I clearly define alternative programs in terms of what they are, as well as what they are not. There are a variety of programs that claim to provide an alternative to the traditional school model (See Table 2). When referencing the Public Schools Act specific to the province where the study took place, it is clear though not surprising, that there is no single cohesive definition for what constitutes an alternative program. Neither the province itself nor the legal body created to ensure the province is carrying out its duties to education provide a description. The Public Schools Act discusses the legal implications for providing an alternative to students for particular reasons such as health needs, second language acquisition, and internship programs to name just a few. These alternatives are provided according to parental requests or local school identification of an individual student need. The provincial parent council association handbook directs parents who are seeking alternative education options to the provincial education department website to learn more about homeschooling. As well, they can look to the independent guide. It is likely that those who have access to the resources suggested on these websites are already quite knowledgeable about how to advocate for their children. These parents also may have the skills necessary to navigate the complex demands that searching for options requires (Editor & Ciabattari, 2010). Reading government documents, annual reports from provincial associations, making telephone calls to relevant organizations, and following up

when calls and emails are not returned are all skills that require a certain amount of linguistic expertise, confidence, time, and experience within particular systems. As well, many people who are advocating for change have hope that a call for action will result in a positive outcome. However, in this particular context (as described earlier in this chapter), many residents may not see value in working within a system that has not been supportive. Or, even if they do have hope that their advocacy may result in better outcomes for their children, their work and family demands may not allow them the time for the phone calls and emails that such advocacy requires.

The provincial education department website (as of 2018) provides no definition for what is considered to be an alternative program. Therefore, it would seem very difficult for parents of students who have had difficulty in school, who are already cynical of the system, to understand the potential alternatives that exist and who they serve. As well, if they do translate the definitions of the options, is there clarity about how to access these choices for their children? It seems that it is up to schools and school divisions to devise and communicate alternatives for themselves. Therefore, while there are many examples of programs that are named as alternatives, it is difficult to identify what they have in common or what can be expected from them. For the purposes of this study, participants had attended programs that were and continue to be alternatives for students who have failed in other settings.

This study is significant in terms of opening up a conversation between policy makers and educators and the students for whom they are programming. The literature review that follows considered approximately eighty studies related to educational settings and how students are silenced and marginalized within them. Of those studies, only eighteen are related

specifically to alternative environments (Darmanin, 2003; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015, Foley & Pang, 2006; Francis & Mills, 2012; Gregory, 2001; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lagana-Riordan et. al., 2011; Lange, 1998; Lee, 1999; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Munns, 2007; O'Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016; Parent, 2011; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Vandale-Dubois, 2011; Wishart, 2009; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). Some of these studies, which will be detailed in the next chapter, describe possible successful alternatives that are influenced by design suggestions, vision, high expectations, remedial education packages, and teacher experience. As well, there are those that criticize alternative environments for lowering expectations and perpetuating the problem of failure rates for students. The small number of studies specifically examining models of alternative education and their successes for student achievement is troubling. What is more troubling is the fact that of these eighteen studies that are cited above, only two specifically asked for student perspectives regarding their educational experiences (Lagana-Riordan et.al. 2011, Lee, 1999). Student voice is lacking within this realm of research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing the literature related to alternative educational models and how students are served within them, I found that there are a broad range of topics addressed in quantitative and qualitative studies (narrative inquiry, case studies, interviews) in Canadian, American, and international research related to alternative education. Researchers speak to issues such as resiliency, academic programming models, and parent involvement, but there is little to no specific definition in the literature as to the design of program models or who the students are who attend them.

Current research, as well as my own experience as an educator show that the Eurocentric education system and dominant models of teaching used by teachers in the majority of schools today continue to fail far too many students. In this literature review, I will explore the ways that particular groups of students may be marginalized in school because of their race, class, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, or other identity categories and how, for many, their struggles with school are compounded by a combination of oppressions based on their identities. Initially, my focus was learning about the histories of and strategies for designing successful educational alternatives for youth whose needs were not being met. What were the characteristics of classrooms or schools that were improving academic outcomes for youth who were living in poverty, or fighting against racist, sexist, transphobic, or homophobic stereotypes? These questions changed as I engaged with the research and was unable to find what I had been looking for regarding students like those I was teaching and how to better provide conditions for their success.

Guiding Questions

Thinking about the many students with whom I have worked over the years caused me to turn to research that spoke directly to causes of being marginalized within school systems and society as a whole. My research began with foundational studies in Canada and the United States regarding notions and definitions of dropouts and failing students. *Subtractive Schooling* (Valenzuela, 1999) and *Redefining Dropout* (Dei et. al. 1997) are both ethnographic studies situated in traditional school environments where students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members were subjects. Both identify the structural components of school systems that work against the success for students of Latino (Valenzuela, 1999) or African (Dei et. al., 1997) descent, and keep them from achieving in schools at the rate of their white peers. After reading these studies, I continued to search for research that would help me understand alienation of “at-risk” students from alternative models of schooling. I used the one-stop search function on the website of University of Manitoba Libraries, the ERIC database, as well as works cited in relevant publications. My thesis advisor and the education librarian suggested ways I could both broaden and narrow my search. I used the terms: “alternative programs for “at-risk” youth”, “successful alternative programs”, “factors increasing student drop-out rates”, and “models of alternative programs”. As I reviewed the literature, which spanned from 1970 to 2017 and included Canadian, American, and Australian studies, I began articulating questions prompted by repeating ideas in the literature as well as my own experience within these programs. I made notes of ideas and concepts that spoke specifically to issues that I noted as recurring across studies and that directly linked to my interests in this area. I began to code the specific quotes and points I had noted during my reading of the research until I had five questions, which became the focus of the review:

- 1) What are the labels that define particular types of learners saying about those learners and their relationships to schools?
- 2) How does the enactment of student/teacher/roles (discourses) impact student (and to some extent teacher) sense of self?
- 3) What part does education play in either limiting or increasing opportunities for youth?
- 4) How could educational programs ensure equal opportunity and access to groups of students who have traditionally been on the margins?
- 5) How do educational decisions made by administration and teaching staff increase student investment and voice?

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to focus on the views, experiences, and voices of students who have attended alternative schools or educational programming. The literature review will discuss views, experiences, and voices from all stakeholders where appropriate, due to the impact that these have on student experience. In my view, it is difficult to fully understand the barriers that students face within alternative environments without examining why those alternatives became necessary in the first place. For many students who have been enrolled in alternative programs, their previous school experiences have defined their school-based identities as learners.

What are the labels that define particular types of learners saying about these learners and their relationships to schools?

In both my teaching and my graduate work, I spent a lot of time thinking about labels and how they are used to categorize students. I have had classrooms filled with students who carry a number of labels. Although the descriptions are attempts to describe reasons for students'

learning barriers, they seemed to me, too often, to be used by professionals as well as students themselves, as ways of putting people into familiar categories. Reasons for these categories are varied but they have a direct impact on how students see themselves, how schools are organized, and why programs are designed and delivered in deliberate and purposeful ways. The research that follows provides analysis of possible barriers for students in what many would define as “regular” school programs. Labels that shape stories of student experience within the traditional educational environments that they have left are worth exploring. These previously designated labels and the ways that they have influences student self-perceptions could provide a context for possible barriers for students in alternative settings. Labels that exclude some and privilege others may be used unintentionally or with a direct purpose. Possible reasons will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Who is Excluded?

In my career, I have found that labels applied to students and programs such as “at-risk”, “marginalized”, “inner-city” “rubber room”, “EAL”, or “ELL” all carry predetermined ideas about who or what a student is and how programs should be designed to improve and/or “warehouse” particular types of learners. All labels have different definitions based on who is using them and why. Labels can come from caring educators who are trying to program for students who have failed. They can come from students describing their narrow understanding of a program that is situated down the hall from their classroom. Students and their parents may use labels to define specific learning needs that may enable extra supports within a school environment. Labels can have an advantage within the system if they are used as a means to assist in providing targeted and necessary supports, but too often these descriptions relegate a

student to an unequal status within the classroom and school community (Pollack, 2017). A theme that occurred to me as I read the literature that also resonated with my experience in schools as a student and as a teacher was this: labels can come to define students' understanding of themselves as well as the ways teachers define them.

In an internet search of the term *marginalize*, the first definition that I found was this: “to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group” (mirriam-webster.com). Factors such as poverty, race, gender, gender expression, sexuality, learning differences, language barriers, and mental health concerns are all ways in which certain groups of students are distanced from a traditional educational environment. African-Canadian students identified “colour-coded streaming” (Dei et. al, 1997, p. 69). Others describe school practices that treated “minority children as “other” and their social practices as “deviant” and “non-standard” (Gee, 2012b, p. 4). Negative descriptions of alternative school students can come to be regarded as factors that are inside the student instead of recognizing harmful social and societal structures (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). Labels limit students' school success in other ways as well, for example, through contributing to: creation of negative perceptions in teachers' minds that then shape students' views of themselves (Lee, 1999); unyielding school structures that are not responsive to student needs (McGregor & Mills, 2012); programs for students living in poverty that teach only basic skills (Lipman, 2004; Peters & Giroux, 2012; Pollack, 2017); success for Latino students only if they “act white” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 17), or lack of caring relationships between teachers and students (Wishart, 2009). As the studies detailed above suggest, despite differing backgrounds and school settings, a common story from the research is that many students feel that they must change themselves to fit the school system. The school will not change to fit them.

Researchers maintain that the predominantly white, middle class, Eurocentric model of schooling does not include voices from the margins of our communities. For example, “students learn an “ethnocentric curriculum and mainstream curriculum and mainstream pedagogies that serve to reinforce the knowledge and experiences of white middle class learners” (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 96). This curriculum reinforces the values of the dominant classes, which do not include Indigenous ways of knowing. There are other groups who are not represented. Examples of those groups who are left out include: students of colour, students who live in poverty, and/or those who are questioning their sexualities or gender identities. Therefore, many students do not see themselves in the curriculum that they are being taught. Schools are legally obligated to program for all students but tend to ask many students to fit into a mold that does not affirm or value them. There are ‘Aboriginal Peoples’ units in social studies courses, as well as multicultural days where students have opportunities to learn about other cultures and celebrate and share their own, but the idea that these are separate and not woven into the day to day teachings of each classroom “perpetuates the colonial and essentialist view” (Tupper, 2009, p. 86). The same could be argued of Gay/Straight Alliances and Social Justice Groups in many schools. These extra-curricular activities can be regarded as sufficient supports for students, but they do not lead to a deeper, critical questioning and change of the daily and systematic practices within the larger institution. Many students are asked to leave their cultural values, subjectivities, and life experiences behind in order to fit in to a school culture with which they may not have any experience. Students are expected to shed their own identities in order to fit in. Therefore, “Students are subjected to a double standard expected to make sense of school when it won’t make sense of them” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 258). It seems that many within the system expect much more of students than they do of themselves.

Silencing and Privileging.

Program labels that connote the types of students who are allowed entry as well as the purpose of who is served by the program (or perhaps more important, who is *not*) send a message about those populations of learners who are valued within the school. The conversations and “the things people say about students in schools shape how adults think about and treat students, how students feel about themselves and their peers, and who offers students which opportunities and which resources” (Pollack, 2017, p. 4). This kind of talk perpetuates a societal attitude about who is more deserving of time, attention, and resources. Schools program accordingly. For Indigenous students, the consequences can be devastating. According to Vowel, “Not only do we [Indigenous people] have to excel in a foreign system of education, we must do so without sacrificing ourselves, without succumbing to annihilation” (Vowel, 2013).

There are also ramifications for students who are economically disadvantaged. Those who succeed in school and in society more broadly are overwhelmingly white and middle class, “Affluent youth have always had higher attainments than poorer youth” (Lipman, 2004, p. 119). This assertion begs the question: Why? Many current researchers would suggest that schools are organized to favour middle and upper class youth in order to maintain the existing social order. If schools are products of their communities, they are simply educating in ways that they have been taught to do so. Lipman (2004) argues that schools are delivering the skills that are required by the societies to which they are beholden. These are “skills that are required for the large number of low-skill, low-wage service jobs... this stratified education produces identities for a stratified labor force, stratified city, and stratified society” (2004, p. 173-174). Paulo Freire (2000) would call a form of education where teachers deliver or deposit information and students are obliged to become repositories the banking model. Teachers fill the student with knowledge

that is unquestioned and absorbed. There is no need for critical thinking nor imagination. Freire would argue that the unequal relationship between teacher and student models the unequal relationships within the dominant society. The continuation of those relationships in their current format are maintained because they serve the interests of the dominant power structure (2000, p. 45).

When students are “pushed out” (Dei et. al., 1997) of regular schools, research suggests that they could be falling victim to the same low educational standards in alternative programs and schools. The National Centre for Education Statistics in the United States conducted the first national study of public alternative schools and programs serving at-risk students. It “reported that alternative schools are located disproportionately in urban districts, districts with high-minority student populations, and districts with high-poverty concentrations, making them susceptible to social, political, economic, and educational inequalities” (NCES as cited by Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). These statistics are not surprising considering that most alternative schools and programs are still extensions of the schools and districts that create and maintain policy in traditional environments. If the students leaving the traditional programs are treated as “the problem” as opposed to the society and system, then the student is further marginalized by being blamed for lack of success in the program designed specifically for them. This is arguably, the point of the production of the programs in this way:

Neoliberalism produces the individual as a flexible entrepreneur, seizing the opportunities available to them: society has a duty only to *offer* not *ensure* opportunity. This facilitates production of those failing to thrive as feckless and wanton, their failure explained by their own character deficiencies. (Francis & Mills, 2012, p. 256)

Social inequities can be further entrenched and internalized by students in the school system. In their study of alternative programs based in the United States, Kim and Taylor (2008) cite conclusions made by Valencia that “school tracking, inequalities in school financing, curriculum differentiation, and low teacher quality - all of which help maintain the status quo - are not held accountable in explaining why some students fail in school” (Valencia as cited by Kim and Taylor, 2008, p. 208). It could be seen as more efficient, cheaper, or easier to continue to warehouse students in programs where they do not disrupt the traditional way of doing things. Kearns (2011) documented responses from participants in a high stakes literacy exam in Ontario. Students who were already defined as having lower literacy levels felt even deeper levels of embarrassment and shame after completing the test. The stated policy for creating and administering the test is to increase transparency and equity for students. The results of the study show “an unintended discrepancy between the policy intent and the policy as it is lived by those youth marginalized by the ... literacy test” (Kearns, 2011, p. 123). Why would such practices continue despite evidence that their stated goal is not being met?

Students who attend less valued programs perceive that they are different and can begin to demand less for themselves. Students who maintain their membership in the traditional program can continue to view themselves as superior as they gain higher levels of knowledge that will increase their chances of success in a society that legitimizes their values and knowledge systems. Freire (2000) would argue that this provision of goods to some and not to all is intentional because to do otherwise would result in releasing oppressed groups from their oppression. Student knowledge, learned from schools, continues to support the power structures that keep them functioning the way they are (2000, p. 72). Research would suggest that fear of change, fear of difference, and a fear of naming the deep-rooted social causes that lay blame on

oppressed groups for their own oppression are philosophies that drive disparities and inequities within society. Therefore, “silencing of student and community voices is standard educational practice” (Fine, 1992). It is more profitable for the powerful to remain silent. Many classrooms operate with the “entrenched assumptions that democracy is something that has already been achieved” (Tupper, 2009, p. 78). To name the real issues that cause marginalization would require a total redistribution of power.

Purposeful Labelling.

Some theorists would argue that the assignment of particular identities to particular groups of people is no accident. It is done with a direct purpose; to keep more vulnerable populations of students in a continued state of marginalization (Darmanin, 2003; Dei et al., 1997; Dei et. al., 2002; Fine and Weis, 2003; Gee, 2012; hooks, 1994; hooks, 2010, Kearns, 2011; Kempf, 2016; Kumashiro, 2002; Lipman, 2004; Salole & Abdulle, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999; Wishart, 2009). There are many “models of schools that are based on set numbers and scores that shape narrow definitions of achiever and underachiever. Many Aboriginal youth and their families currently carry the latter definition, that of underachiever” (Lessard, Caine, & Clandinin, 2015, p. 200). It is more politically and economically expedient for larger political systems to blame the problems of the vulnerable groups in our society on those groups. Instead of blaming the victims for their lack of access, it is important to include their perspectives. For example, “When planning and implementing school changes, policy makers should hear the voices of students and teachers. This requires policy makers to reconsider their hierarchical decision-making practice, which pervades the education system in general” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 217).

If critical thinking and creative problem solving are not a part of the curriculum for all, the majority of students are not taught to reimagine their futures or those of others. Feminist theorist bell hooks labels this phenomenon “dominator culture” (2010) and believes “the killing off of the imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo” (hooks, 2010, p. 60). A radical reimagining of education might mean a radical change in society. “Dominator culture” (hooks, 2010) may be resisting this change. If this notion of control and maintenance of current power structures is specifically focused in the philosophies of those overseeing designs for programming for students who have been failing, there are implications for students’ self concepts and opportunities both in the present and future. Educators may need to admit that:

In our attempts to control and predict, we objectify youth and separate them from their environment, an environment that gives meaning to who they are. While we may think that this process helps us to know our students better, it only protects us from being exposed to something new in the world. (Wishart, 2009, p. 101)

Whether the ideology is one of accountability, transparency, increased standards, or reform, if there are no real and fundamental changes to the existing model, little will change for vulnerable student populations. Too often, “educators and administrators look for strategies and programs that will *squeeze* [Indigenous] students back between the walls of the colonial fort, integrating or assimilating them into settlerstream curriculum, making them resemble their “more” successful settler peers” (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016, p. 17).

How does the enactment of student/teacher roles (discourses) impact students' and teachers' sense of self?

This section builds on the notion of identity to examine the ways that identity is created in relationships with others. The concept of identity and how one fits (or doesn't) within their various social spheres is also discussed in the literature (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Dei, 1993, 2002; Dei et al., 1997; Eith, 2005; Gee, 2012b; hooks, 1994; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Kumashiro, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Vandale-Dubois, 2011; Wishart, 2009). These concepts are very important for all types of educational programming, but they are specifically noteworthy when thinking about designing successful learning environments and experiences for youth on the margins of the system. The intent of these labels should be to help identify high quality and relevant programming that will serve vulnerable students best. The labels also serve, for better and for worse, to define the individual. Research states that it is "beyond dispute that the world is experienced differently depending on one's race, ethnicity, class, ability, gender and sexual preference, and one's place in the world's economic system" (Dei, 2007, p. 38). Students will experience their place within a classroom and a school community based partially on the notions of self that they bring with them from before schooling begins. They are also taught how to perceive themselves and others within the walls of the educational institutions they attend throughout their school careers, "Early schooling experiences shape our awareness of self because 'self' is constructed relationally... lack of social acceptance has had a significant impact on the ways in which their "selves" have been constructed" (Wishart, 2009, p. 65).

For many students, their identities are constructed through inequitable relationships in schools. For many teachers, their views of themselves as professionals and perceptions of their role within the system perpetuate continued lack of success for a variety of learners. Examining

the role of other players within the school system is an important component in understanding how their actions impact the stories of students. Power structures within school settings are often enacted or made visible by those who enforce the rules. How students relate to the ways in which structures are imposed by the various actors within any school setting will provide important messages regarding students' sense of personal power and agency.

Identity as a Social Construct.

Identity is not isolated nor easily defined as one aspect of our personalities. Instead, there are many parts of each person that make up who they are and who they will become. Gee discusses the various roles that make up an individual's identity as discourses. He defines them as "ways of being in the world." They are "forms of life." They are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social products of social histories" (Gee, 2012b, p. 3). Our ways of behaving in various social contexts are taught through relationships with others. These relationships teach us how to act depending on what we are doing and with whom we are doing it. Our first experiences strongly shape our sense of self and make up our primary discourse. Capital "D" discourses are learned early on and contribute to our deeply held views about who we are. Later, in more public domains, we learn multiple secondary discourses or those labelled with a lower case "d". Gee also describes lifeworld discourses as those that our childhood discourses become (2012 b, p. 153-155). Discourses are not static; they are fluid and continuously changing depending on the roles we take in the various contexts in our lives.

For example, my primary Discourses are: female, daughter, sister, member of the middle class, family member, and Canadian citizen. I am also a communicator. Early experiences taught me that when I spoke my needs were met and my opinions were valued. These primary

Discourses changed into my lifeworld discourses that are: mother, wife, daughter-in-law, friend, and advocate. My secondary discourses are: educator, graduate student, and professional association member. These many parts of me are part of my “identity kit” (Gee, 2012, p. 152) and make up who I am and how others see me. They help me understand how to behave in various contexts. All of us put on various identities in order to become a part of a particular community at a particular time. In so doing, “Discourses are all about how people “get their acts together” to get recognized as a given kind of person at a specific time and place” (Gee, 2012b, p. 152). The assumptions that are made about me are partly based on my own choices of association with particular people and groups. They are partly placed upon me from the outside based on others’ perceptions of those groups of which I am a member. The way I behave, my style of dress, the language I choose to use, and/or the amount of time or money I spend within these various groups ensures my membership or standing within them. My particular discourses, in this particular period of history, offer me a sense of power and control. For the more acceptable discourses in our society, “...being privileged requires that a person thinks, feels, acts, and relates to others in only particular ways; it requires that a person be identified by others in only particular ways” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 156). I know that recent events have had me re-examining what it means to be female in this society. My own feelings of safety and power within my current society have been threatened. This recent feeling of unease makes me wonder how student learning is experienced in individual classrooms when their discourses are not the ones that are privileged or protected in our society and therefore in our schools.

Being a student who has failed within the school environment becomes another discourse for a student; the teaching of a population of students who have failed becomes a discourse for the teacher. Gee would call these their secondary discourses, which are “those to which people

are apprenticed as part of their specializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization, for example, churches, gangs, schools, offices” (Gee, 2012, p. 165). If those labels and identities are imbued with demeaning and negative connotations, both students and teachers will continue to be powerless within the larger system. Labels and language used by those within a school community “shape how adults think about and treat students, how students feel about themselves and their peers, and who offers students which opportunities and assistance” (Pollack, 2017, p. 4). It is possible that removing students who resist the mainstream environment due to their “non-compliant” discourse, could have a positive effect for some. Perhaps, that effect “could be that learning (a change of behaviour) can actually occur. Maybe without the time-consuming pressure of having to act against something, these students would have the time, energy and focus to learn some content and some social behaviours” (Vandale-Dubois, 2011, p. 29). While this may be true for some, for others there is the risk of the development of “castelike minorities” who are minorities within the school system that develop cynicism toward a system that doesn’t meet their needs” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 237).

Silenced Identities.

There is much evidence that schools are places where students are asked to silence parts of their identities or lifeworld discourses. Examples include but are not limited to: systemic oppressions facing Indigenous youth such as suppression of their cultural identity, racism and gender violence (Harper & Thompson, 2017), assumptions from school staff regarding future job

aspirations for Latinx youth (Valenzuela, 1999), African Canadian and American males being disciplined more severely and more often than their white peers for similar behaviour infractions (Dei et. al., 1997; Lee, 1999), lower academic standards for poor, Indigenous, Latinx, and Black youth (Darmanin, 2003; Dei et. al., 1997; Kearns, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lipman, 2004; Pollack, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999), and/or the silent, passive, non-questioning stance required of any “good” student in many school environments (Fine & Weis, 2003). These mean that too many students are hiding parts of themselves. Those who may not be labelled or categorized in negative ways may be hiding in order to be successful. Those who are unable to hide the parts that the system deems inappropriate are sometimes pushed out by the schools, others drop- out (Dei et. al., 1997), and some are labelled in specific ways in order to gain admittance into an alternative program. These definitions of self, either by students themselves by the educational system, have a consequence for access to educational programs. Students are navigating their world “As embodied identities inscribed by race, ethnicity, gender, and social class, learners navigate through spaces where they are not only granted or refused the right to speak, but also the right of entry” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 43).

Many students learn that it is necessary to incorporate values that may be against their own cultural or personal ones (hooks, 1994, Dei et. al., 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Particularly important within the context of this study are the ramifications for Indigenous students (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016; Brendtro et al., 2002; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Hildebrandt et al., 2016; Lessard, Caine & Clandinin 2015; Parent, 2011; Tupper, 2009; Vowel, 2013). Settlerstream education (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016) refers to a system of education that favours the versions of history and ways of knowing that are based on white Westernized curriculum. In order to fit in, Indigenous students must assume and accept as truths “narratives [which] work to affirm White

settler identities as hard working, industrious, courageous, and as embodying the pioneering spirit necessary to the early economic success of Canada (Hildebrandt et al., 2016, p. 18). Due to stories that exclude the knowledges and histories of Indigenous students, many resist sharing their own stories because they do not fit within the accepted knowledges of the schools they attend. In one study, many Indigenous students “told of ‘not telling’ stories of who they were in their school curriculum making world, rather, they know to hold silent the stories they lived in their familial curriculum making world” (Lessard, Caine, & Clandinin, 2015, p. 210). These repeated experiences of diminishing who one is by denying one’s stories, heritage, knowledge, or culture causes further alienation from school and potentially society as a whole. This is of concern for Indigenous youth “particularly because they are situated on the outskirts of prevailing Canadian society and at higher risk of multiple oppressions” (Harper & Thompson, 2017, p. 47).

Definitions of Teacher Identity.

Teacher identity is a key factor in student success as well. If part of the teacher discourse is control and tradition (according to the Eurocentric ideas), many students will continue to be vulnerable to lack of access. In Canada, many “teachers are discursively produced to perform particular narratives of the “good” teacher as value free and apolitical” (Hildebrandt et al., 2016, p. 19). This can prevent discussions between educators about what is being taught and the interests being served which are vital to bringing about change. It is important “to acknowledge that the desire to continue teaching the disciplines as they have traditionally been taught is a desire to maintain the privilege of certain identities, world-views, and social relations” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 58). This is also true of who and what we are *not* teaching. Eisner (1988) discusses the importance of what school curriculum teaches “implicitly as well as explicitly, and

[what] it teaches, most of all perhaps, by what it neglects teaching. I have called these sources of school learning the result of the explicit, the implicit and the null curriculum” (Eisner, 1988, p. 11). The way schools are organized, subjects students are taught, and roles of teachers all fall under the effects that this unstated curriculum has on schools and on learning. Teachers are taught the ways they must present themselves, how to engage with their students, colleagues, and the rest of their school community. These implicit messages are strong and perpetuate the educational choices made in classrooms.

Attempting to embrace the messy and unpredictable by encouraging student choice and voice would not fit with the identity of “good teacher” established by the expectations of the school system. Often the tensions teachers experiences are caused by the competing discourses that they take on to meet their roles as teachers for the system. These are different than the discourse of teacher that meets the needs of students. For example, teachers may feel pressure to cover content and demonstrate teaching skill through dominance and mastery in their specialty area. Classroom practices which invite student discussion and physical movement, as well as relationship building are not priorities for educators whose teacher discourse is informed by systemic demands to improve academic outcomes for students. High test scores, low numbers of office disciplinary referrals, predictable and well controlled classroom lessons where the teacher delivers the content and students listen are the characteristics of good teaching in many schools. Teachers deserve respect and subordination simply because of their positions. The educator as an individual does not need to actively earn respect. The title, in and of itself, should be enough. These perceptions are not necessarily shared by students. For many students of different cultural backgrounds, respect is earned through action and behaviour. Being a good person and caring for others are important qualities in a teacher. Students respect a teacher they see as compassionate

more than one whose sole focus is academic knowledge (Dei et. al., 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). For Indigenous students, participating in a sharing circle where all members have equal status connotes a safe and respectful environment (Hildebrandt et al., 2016). Opportunities for this kind of educational opportunity are still too rare. In fact many Indigenous students “report being regularly misunderstood, stereotyped, and targetted by racism and ongoing settler-colonialism in schools, often leading to attrition and lower school performance” (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016, p. 4).

Even teachers who know that a one-size-fits-all content-driven teaching style is failing many students, are focusing on those methods because of larger systemic demands to teach to a particular test. In this province, so far, tying monetary rewards connected to student performance on standardized tests is not happening, but the cries for accountability and data driven results are strong (Kempf, 2016). The province where this study takes place is currently undergoing an educational review. A committee has been appointed by the provincial government to examine the current educational system and to provide recommendations for moving forward. There is a climate of distrust and fear due to the many cuts that this same government imposed on the health care system after a similar kind of review. Educators are concerned about the possible amalgamation of divisions which could present a loss of representation for the most vulnerable children in our system. Teachers who have defined a “teacher discourse” as meeting the needs of students first by teaching to diversity are feeling pressure to change the characteristics that their identities as teachers demand in order to conform to a system that has different priorities. Publication of divisional scores on provincial standardized tests, school reports on credit attainment as well as marks earned in particular courses, could cause teachers to focus more on outcomes that are easily quantifiable such as marks and credits. In many cases, teachers are

“moving professionally backward on Maslow’s hierarchy, handling the basics and less and less frequently attending to questions of diverse pedagogical strategies, critical approaches, and a broad curriculum” (Kempf, 2016, p. 100). Despite teacher belief in working with students in engaging, collaborative, and innovative ways, content and coverage are more valuable to the broader system.

What part does education play in limiting opportunities for youth?

The following discussion provides some important insights on both visible and invisible structures that serve as barriers to student success in schools; especially students who have been labelled as “different” or “difficult”. Reviewing the history of various types of alternatives helped me understand the ways in which supportive learning environments have been defined by educators. Despite the existence of options for school and classroom programming, many students are still deprived of access. According to the research, the structures and design of these alternatives, made available for learners who have either been pushed out or opted out of the traditional educational model for a variety of reasons, seem to provide an educational experience that is at a lower academic level. Understanding the systemic reasons that power and access may be inherently afforded to some and not to others, may shed light on the reasons why the students I interviewed initially chose an alternative program. As well, the characterizations of success and failure by teachers and students in the literature may be challenged, confirmed, or more deeply understood after this study. This may provide greater wisdom in future programming possibilities for youth who have recognized that current educational alternatives do not serve their interests both in the present or their imagined futures.

Many of the studies I reviewed discussed the great numbers of youth who feel that it is in their best interests to avoid an educational system that further reduces their opportunities for future success—either because programming is offered at a level that limits their possibilities for postsecondary education or employment, or because it demands they deny aspects of their identities. According to the research (Darmanin, 2003; Dei et al., 1997; Eith, 2005; Gee, 2012; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Peters & Giroux, 2012; Pollack, 2017; Wishart, 2009), many students are aware that the courses that they are offered within the mainstream system do not adequately prepare them for the futures they envision for themselves. In the interests of “helping”, students are asked to do less rigorous course work, allowed to maintain sporadic attendance, and/or engage in behaviours that are disruptive to their own, or other students’ learning. Students who attend alternative programs are given dumbed down curriculum that prohibits entry into colleges or universities (Dei et al., 1997; Valenzuela, 1999), or if they are viewed as more academically capable, they are asked to deny their cultural or familial values in order to succeed in a Eurocentric version of successful student or person (Tupper, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999; Vowel, 2013). Schools are neither equipped nor interested in providing educational experiences that are reflective of all cultures. Paris and Alim (2014) argue that denial of educational practices for all students is continuing to perpetuate racist stereotypes against people of colour. They argue that a culturally sustaining pedagogy “is necessary to honor and value the rich and varied practices of communities of color *and* is a necessary pedagogy for supporting access to power in a changing nation” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 90).

This undervaluing of students has the effect of those same students undervaluing the system. They leave school in search of a better alternative. The students who do stay face a different kind of marginalization. Dei et. al. (1997) identified the “double alienation when

students adapt to more mainstream values” (p. 52). They are not completely accepted by their own groups nor by the mainstream culture they are trying to emulate and fit into. The result is that they become more vulnerable within a number of contexts, including school and peer groups.

Much of the research suggests that once a student has been labelled by others or takes on a discourse of ‘unsuccessful’ themselves, options for their futures can become severely limited. This course is very difficult to change (Dei, 2002; Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 2002; Dei et al., 1997; Gee, 2012; Lipman, 2004; Pollack, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999; Vandale-Dubois, 2011; Wishart, 2009). Defining students in particular ways for particular purposes that minimize their sense of themselves and their ties to their communities has been called subtractive education (Valenzuela, 1999). The “key consequence of subtractive education is the erosion of students’ social capital” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 17). The subtractive definitions of students, imposed by the educational system, have the potential to become a large part of the lifeworld discourse of many students. These youth are then also in jeopardy of losing the relationships that could teach them to navigate in a number of spaces in order to create real alternatives for their futures. Schools have the capacity to change or entrench student beliefs about themselves. They “are not neutral spaces; rather, they are dynamic settings that shape and constrain opportunities for student success” (O’Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016, p. 536). Instead of examining the societal structures that subtract resources from students, it is easier to simply blame the student (McGregor & Mills, 2012, p. 847).

The inequities in their educational opportunities are exacerbated over time. In fact, “research shows that kids who get accelerated learning opportunities early tend to get increasingly accelerated opportunities over time. Conversely, students who are given lower-level

opportunities early keep getting lower level opportunities; curriculum slows and gets more boring” (Pollack, 2017, p. 103). The idea that those with advantages in society keep receiving them above those who are disadvantaged is referred to as “The Matthew Effect” by sociologist Robert Merton (Huang, Moon, & Boren, 2014, p. 96). In education, “the Matthew effect was first introduced by Walberg and Tsai (1983) and implies that students who begin with higher levels of skill and understanding learn more quickly than their peers who begin at relatively lower levels of skill and understanding and who consequently may struggle with learning” (Huang et al., 2014, p. 96).

The likelihood that students who have been failed in their educational settings have advocates in their families is also lower; this is not because their parents don't care about education. It can be, in the case of Indigenous students, that their parents are survivors of residential schools and do not trust the current system due to their own trauma. In other cases, it may be a result of lacking the cultural and social capital necessary to navigate larger school systems. Conversely, “middle-class parents have cultural knowledge and social networks that they can leverage to improve their child's educational experiences. The working-class parents do not” (Editor & Ciabattari, 2010, p. 119). Cultural and social capital are passed on from parents to their children which perpetuates the success of those students whose families already understand how to ‘play the game’.

If students who have previously failed see themselves as less worthy of a good education than their peers, it seems unlikely that they will demand anything different for themselves. This is particularly true if their educational experiences have always been poorer because of their ‘othered’ status within the school system. Paolo Freire (2000) would call this fear of freedom. When ‘othered’ groups have been denied choice and self determination on a consistent basis by a

controlling figure or system, the idea of being asked to take responsibility can be a threat. This negative self concept can be carried with a student for years into adulthood, affecting their choices and aspirations for themselves based on their perceived talents and capacities. It seems for many students, their imaginings of their futures are bleak. Family members who were residential school survivors, victims of institutional racism and/or other trauma may make it difficult for many Indigenous students to believe in a future that is different from those of their family members. Unless schools and programs offer a true alternative, there is a credible threat that the cycles of poverty and blaming the victim will continue. For example, Macdonald and Wilson (2016), report that the average “education level is quite low among status First Nations parents with children living in poverty... Almost 60% of status First Nations parents with children in poverty did not graduate high school” (2016, p. 25). Without a high school education, it is more difficult to obtain a job with a living wage. Therefore, economic capital, particularly for Indigenous students who have been pushed out of the educational system, is influenced significantly by social and cultural capital.

Types of Alternatives.

Due to the inadequacies of the traditional system to program for students who have not lived up to the school's definitions of success, there have been many attempts to create alternative environments. Montessori Schools, which have been in existence for a century, focus on each child as unique and offer choice with many different activities going on at the same time within the classroom. Students are invited to play and all learning materials are laid out for them to see (Al, Sari, & Kahya, 2012). Waldorf Schools, another well-known example, were founded by Edward Steiner and, since 1928, have been an alternative to what he saw as a highly

routinized mindset in education. He was offering an alternative in order to prepare students for a society that was advancing technologically. Steiner's philosophy was similar to Maria Montessori's. Both believed in educating the whole child (Easton, 1997). These early alternatives have influenced the current alternative environments that exist both within and outside the regular system. Examples include: classrooms within mainstream environments that house a particular group of students where one staff person teaches all core academic subjects, off campus programs such as store front or community centre locations, or full schools which attempt to provide programming and meet the needs of students in diverse ways.

In a study focused on characteristics of successful alternative programs (Quinn et. al., 2006), the authors document a partial history of attempts to program for students who are unsuccessful in alternative environments. The authors discuss the debate between those who viewed the student as the problem versus those who saw the system as the problem. These different ideologies informed the structure and philosophy of the various alternative programs (p. 11). Three main types of schools for failing youth were created serving various purposes: They were categorized as either attempting to change the student, change the school, or change the system (Raywid as cited by Quinn et. al., 2006). Programs developed with the "problem student" in mind are generally short term, highly structured, and highly punitive. These are the least effective of the three in terms of increasing academic achievement or positive behaviours in this population. The second type, which focus on creating a specific school environment for "at-risk" students, show increased success for students while they are attending, but success was not maintained when they returned to mainstream classes or institutions. Decisions about student placement within these programs, as well as when they returned to their regular schools, was out of the hands of the student. This research seems to suggest that current attempts to provide a

better education may be further marginalizing students because they are unable to transition from an alternative placement. Students are taken out of a system that does not meet their needs and placed into one that may help for a short time, but does not teach the capacities necessary to be successful in multiple environments beyond the “alternative”.

Characteristics of Success and Failure.

There are some studies that suggest characteristics of programs that would successfully engage the learner who has failed in previous school environments. Strategies such as: smaller classroom sizes, caring relationships between teachers and students, addictions and career counselling within the school building, a safe and caring environment often characterized by first-name relationships between students and staff, student involvement in decision making and problem solving, and a strong sense of school community were all themes that emerged repeatedly throughout the literature (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Dei, 2002; Dei et al., 1997; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Francis & Mills, 2012; hooks, 1994; Lee, 1999; Munns, 2007; Noddings, 2015; O'Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999). Indigenous researchers also assert that beyond practical supports within school buildings, intentional efforts to name and change the structural oppressions specifically experienced by Indigenous students, must be a part of the work of educators. The current system of “education continues its assimilationist agenda through multicultural rhetoric that promotes diversity while it positions Western knowledge as the centre of the curriculum, legitimizes dominant languages, and promotes mainstream values” (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 95). The mainstream ideology and philosophy permeates school culture through the culture of competition, European and male

dominated text selection, valuing of Western authors and versions of history, and rewards for individual over collective effort.

There is also research that suggests an alarming trend in education targeted toward the “at-risk” learner in both traditional and alternative environments. Instead of increasing opportunity for these youth, many schools and programs are actually eroding their chances for a quality education and future success. The programming models that focus solely on behavioural programming with low academic standards, or those that teach remedial academics in place of challenging course work leave students without the possibility to enter the demands of the modern workplace or post-secondary education. It can be argued that lack of quality educational programming adds to “deficiencies in youth caused by schools that subtract “their” resources” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 5). “Marginalized” students leave traditional environments for a number of reasons. Some perceive racism on the part of their teachers, peers or administrators (Dei et al., 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Others recognize that they have been “tracked” into a program that won’t allow them to gain the skills necessary for the future they have planned (Dei et al., 1997; Lee, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999; Vandale-Dubois, 2011). In many cases, these students are recognizing the ways that schools perpetuate their inequitable status in the larger community and society in general. Schools act as mirrors of their society so it is not surprising that “In their reproduction of socio-economic inequality, schools are damaging-symbolically, but also more viscerally. They distribute (unequally) the credentials that facilitate access to material wealth, hence denying such access to some children” (Francis & Mills, 2012, p. 257).

Alternative programs and schools have been accused of many of the same issues as their traditional counterparts. Without attending to the myriad identities and experiences that students

bring to school, “What ends up happening with labels that are applied by one class onto another, is that the labels only serve to strengthen the class that does the labelling, rather than reduce the “risk” of those so labelled” (Wishart, 2009, p. 97). In attempting to define a clientele for a different model of educational programming, students are labelled as problems in order to create easily identifiable programs in which to place a particular kind of student. The labels rarely capture the complexities that individuals are experiencing both within and outside of schools. It may help the educators sort and place students, but they may not be providing equitable educational opportunities for students.

Academic Program Quality.

There are also concerns regarding the quality of academic programming being provided in many of these programs (Brendtro et. al., 2002, Darmanin, 2003; Gee, 2012a; Kearns, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Larson and Marsh, 2015; Salole & Abdulle, 2015). Many teachers tend to focus on independent work that is delivered in packages or modules that students can complete at their own pace. In my experience, the intent discussed for using this programming model is to allow the students to feel successful through mastery of skills that they may have missed learning previously. It is also a more practical way of programming for the irregular attendance patterns that are prevalent for many learners registered in these kinds of programs. In actual practice, “in many cases, it has resulted in “at-risk” learners being given a special dumbed-down curriculum meant to catch them up on “basic skills”- a curriculum that all too often is a bad learning experience for these students” (Gee, 2012, p. 60).

This focus on skill building and remediation could be because of the lack of agreement about what alternative education means. Lange (1998) has outlined three types of programs

designed as alternatives. The first are choice programs and largely populated by middle and upper class students who have the economic and emotional resources to ensure their academic success. The second and third are focused on either behavior, remediation, or rehabilitation. Students who attend these programs are largely from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As well, many identify as racial minorities (1998, p.183). Programs created for specific groups of students could be having the effect of further marginalizing the “at-risk” learner. Generally, students who would be candidates to attend the “short term” or “quick fix” programs are not there by choice. When they return to their traditional or mainstream programs, the assumption is that they have been improved either behaviorally, academically, or both. Again, the problem is positioned as residing in the student and not the system. The mission of programs like these “although ostensibly claiming to offer marginalized groups access to schooled literacy, simply narrows their options for their futures and creates an impoverished educational diet” (Vasquez as cited by Larson and Marsh, 2015, p. 44). The focus on independent work packages, basic skill building, and academics aimed at low-level rote learning seem to perpetuate the unequal opportunities for these groups of students. As well, disciplinary practices that are either highly punitive or highly enabling also serve to send messages of inadequacy.

The Role of Teachers.

The role of teachers in the inequity of access for certain groups of learners can not be ignored. Teachers are products of a system designed to fail particular groups of students and are given limited resources to change the way they operate within their individual classrooms or their schools. Teachers, in many cases, continue the process of “colonization that serves to teach students allegiance to the status quo has been so much the accepted norm that no blame can be attributed to the huge body of educators who simply taught as they were taught” (hooks, 2010, p.

29). Many educators were taught to design units based on specific outcomes and with specific and measureable evaluation procedures. It is a much more difficult and messy process to create classroom processes that honour diversity, dissent, and difference. These are far less predictable and far less amenable to a traditional grading system. Despite good intentions and a growing body of research that supports a change from traditional pencil-paper, formative tasks to activities that encourage relationships, choice, and real world student-driven curriculum, teachers are still working within a larger structure that demands adherence to grading and reporting procedures that do not serve the students as a whole. This is particularly true for students who have been failed by the school system.

In my view, it is understandable and somewhat predictable, that teachers are placed in an impossible position. To educate for change is discouraged by the larger systems that are responsible for schools. Administrators want to keep their jobs, board trustees want to keep their seats, and provincial politicians want to be re-elected. It is much easier to develop common standards to which all schools and teachers should be held accountable. Accountability “is a system that robs principals, teachers, students, and communities of agency....and is also a highly racialized discourse of deficits” (Lipman, 2004, p. 175 & 177). Students of colour and their cultural and language practices are rarely represented in the curriculum nor the assessment tools. Practices such as standardized testing or use of commercial curriculum packages further silence “at-risk” students by assuming that all lived experiences are the same (Honeyford & Serebrin, 2015; Tupper, 2009). The people on the front lines who are responsible for keeping students in line with those falsely created standards are teachers. There is an inherent power relationship between teachers and students that perpetuates the power structures in society. Classroom and school-wide behaviour management strategies are not focused on creating relationships founded

on mutual respect between teachers and students. Although all may seem to be operating smoothly from the outside, mutual relationships do not exist because “When overt hierarchical power dynamics make domination of the weak by the strong acceptable, then students will not respect teachers and vice versa. They may indeed show deference, but the core of this trait is not respect but subordination” (hooks, 2010, p. 111). Students may sit in quiet compliance and complete assigned tasks, but their sense of agency within an educational setting may be minimal at best.

How can educational programs ensure equity, opportunity, and access to groups of students who have traditionally been on the margins?

There are many hopeful voices in the literature that recognize the potential that schools have for being powerful catalysts for change. Within schools, “The classroom...remains a location of possibility...we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves...an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries” (hooks, 2010, p. 207). In order to fulfill this role, schools must work with larger societal systems to create an equitable playing field for *all* students. Although the focus of this study is most specifically aimed at understanding the needs and programming for students who have been vulnerable because of lack of educational access and opportunity, these recommendations apply to all and have the potential of minimizing the number of students who become vulnerable in the future. As noted previously, many students who are currently attending mainstream educational environments may be marginalized or silenced in ways that are more difficult to recognize.

Student Power.

Students' sense of personal power and control is discussed throughout the literature. Most relevant to this study are those researchers who identify that the process of leaving, failing, or resisting school or a school culture, can be attributed to student choices about what is good for them in the long run (Dei et al., 1997; Gee, 2012; hooks, 1994; O'Gorman et al., 2016; Salole & Abdulle, 2015; Vandale-Dubois, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999; Wishart, 2009). In contrast to the view that failing students are passive in their approach to schooling, these scholars would argue that these groups of students are well aware that they are not being served or that they are being discriminated against; so they disengage. This can be emotional, physical, or spiritual disengagement, or it can be all three. Regardless of the type, it "is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement" (hooks, 1994, p. 39). In *Framing Dropouts*, Michelle Fine (1991) reports that "dropouts bring a communalistic orientation to their relation with kin and community, whereas graduates pride themselves on sharing families, but the sharing ends at the boundaries of extended kin, not into the community (1991, p. 135). It could be argued then, that not providing equitable educational programs harms even the students who graduate and the communities in which they live.

Students defined by their failures are given significant systemic messages throughout their schooling careers that it is unsafe to be who they are. So they resist. For many Indigenous students, when the "rupture between schooling and education occurred, and schooling became a dominant force in the lives of Aboriginal peoples, the familial voices and presence of Aboriginal peoples and their distinct histories were no longer attended to" (Lessard et al., 2015, p. 199). This tension between home, family, and cultural practices being denied by schooling practices has caused many students to actively avoid participation. Resistance "involves the attitudes, behaviours, and actions which challenge dominant institutional norms and practice, as a means to

effect social and institutional change” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 25). By the time these students are placed in, or choose for themselves, an alternative program or school, many of their school behaviours and habits have been formed.

Darvin and Norton (2015) describe an invested learner as one who chooses to participate in a learning environment or experience which “allows them not only to acquire material and symbolic resources in a way that reproduces the status quo, but also to dissect, question, and sometimes resist dominant practices and ways of thinking that have become systemic within different fields” (p. 52). Students who have left environments that have ignored or demeaned their abilities and skills need to be given space to show that they have abilities. Students also need to be challenged and respected in a safe environment.

Developing Relationships.

Discussions of caring and relational aspects of education for students recur throughout the literature (Darmanin, 2003; Dei et al., 1997; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Eith, 2005; hooks, 2010; Lee, 1999; Noddings, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999; Vandale - Dubois, 2011; Wishart, 2009; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). Noddings (2005) defines a caring relationship in the following way:

A caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared for. In order for the relation to be properly called caring, both parties must contribute to it in characteristic ways. A failure on the part of either carer or cared-for blocks completion of caring and, although there may still be a relation-that is an encounter or connection in which each party feels something toward the other – it is not a *caring* relation. (Noddings, 2005, p. 15)

Reciprocity and investment by all students and teachers is important to real and authentic learning. It is evident in the educational literature that in order to succeed, students need to feel cared for and respected by their teachers and the school system as a whole. The concept of “all my relations” in Indigenous culture is also important within the educational context. When people are seen as interconnected and interdependent, a sense of belonging is fostered that allows for growth and change within individuals and communities. In Indigenous culture, seeing “others as related was [sic] a powerful social value that transformed human relationships” (Brendtro et. al., 2002, p. 47).

Care should not merely be defined as providing for students’ emotional needs. In too many environments, youth are placed in programs where being “cared for” involves building relationships with teachers who do not demand that students participate in learning or take responsibility for their actions. Darmanin (2003) cautions against a system “where social cohesion rather than social justice is the main objective” (p. 164). Educators who attempt to move away from punitive and rigid approaches to discipline by creating nurturing environments may instead be enabling their students to continue to fail. She asks, “Is this a new regime of truth in which ‘at-risk’ pupils become subjects of new discursive practices that remove them from their status as pupils to turn them into clients of social work practices instead?” (Darmanin, 2003, p. 151). It becomes acceptable to chronically arrive late or not attend, to not participate in school activities while in attendance, and/or use drugs and alcohol during school hours. Caring for students means working *with* them in new and diverse ways. It does not mean treating them as though they have no capacities and doing everything *for* them. Students know this too. Several researchers have found that rarely was a teacher well liked who had lower standards; students saw those teachers as ones who had given up on them (Dei et al., 1997; Edgar-Smith & Palmer,

2015; Lee, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Smith and Palmer describe how teachers with high expectations can be successful because they are loved instead of just liked:

The people that we love can demand levels of commitment from us that defy even our own notions of what we are capable of. People that we like, but do not love, typically are not able to push us to the limits of our abilities. Nothing more clearly divides these two groups of people in our life than the level of trust we have in them. (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015, p. 634)

To provide a loving educational environment means high expectations and challenging students to believe they can succeed. Notions of caring within educational contexts are important to examine. It would be possible to assume that students who leave schools do not feel cared about by their teachers or other school staff. Perhaps they don't care about the material being taught or understand how it will impact their future chances. Providing learners the opportunity to define caring in their own words was one of the goals of this study.

Diversity and Difference.

Many researchers are insisting that difference must be recognized and celebrated in all classrooms in all schools (Dei, 2002; Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 1993; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Gee, 2012b, 2012a; hooks, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002; Larson & Marsh 2015; Nieto, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Although speaking specifically about women's empowerment, Lorde (1984) challenges the idea that to become a cohesive community means denying difference. She believes that "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do

not exist” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). In order to effectively provide education for the myriad of different needs, backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives that students bring to their classroom environments, educators need to have knowledge of diverse teaching techniques and knowledge of issues relating to equity and power relations (Dei, 2002). To deny some students access to classroom materials that reflect their identities and experiences denies others as well. Although students from dominant cultures may see themselves more often and more accurately represented in their school environments and the materials presented therein, they are also denied alternative ways of seeing the world and different ways of knowing if they are only taught one dominant world view. Providing meaningful educational experiences “in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994, p. 13). Caring for students means caring that they have access to a future rich with possibilities that include understanding difference and moving through spaces in different ways with different skill sets.

Students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds often enter schools managing difference. Their home and school communities potentially define success in very different ways than the traditional school environment. Making sense of the student discourse kits that include all of their varying roles within their home-based identities versus their school-based identities requires constant navigation of various social and cultural norms. For example, in Latinx cultures, it is considered rude to speak about oneself and assert your opinions above others (Valenzuela, 1999). In African culture, respect is earned through action (Dei et. al., 1997). “Indigenous youth struggle to find relevance in classrooms that make little or no efforts to represent their histories, values, perspectives, and worldviews” (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 96). Values such as assertiveness and competition which equal success in many spaces in white

middle class culture, can have the effect of distancing students of colour from their schools. Knowledge of these differences is key for equalizing access to education for “at-risk” students; many of whom are representing ethnic or racial minorities.

Personal Stories.

Developing classroom practices that allow for the sharing of personal narratives between teachers and students has been an effective way to allow students choice, agency, and power. It follows then, that asking youth to share their stories of school experiences could have an impact in lessening feelings of exclusion and isolation. The following research describes the positive effects in school and classroom settings. It is also relevant information for the research methodology I chose to use in the study.

Sharing personal stories as a way of developing a community of learners is particularly effective in facilitating the process of investment for students and teachers in a variety of school environments (Bissell and Korteweg, 2016; Hildebrandt et. al., 2016; Honeyford and Serebrin, 2015; Gee, 2012; hooks, 1994, 2010; Kearns, 2011; Pollack, 2017; Wishart, 2009). Doing so can allow teachers to name their own strengths, fears, and personal histories in the educational spaces they inhabit with their students. Whether it be as writers who are working to anticipate the writing moves of their students (Honeyford & Serebrin, 2015), white teachers who are attempting to decolonize their classrooms by celebrating Indigenous knowledges (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016), or developing an understanding of how all Canadians are affected by broken treaty promises (Hildebrandt et al., 2016), sharing authentic and honest dialogue between students and teachers is an important step toward anti-oppressive education.

This also contradicts the use of independent learning packages or modules used in many alternative programs and classrooms. Teaching practices such as these continue to erode the powerful learning experiences offered when students interact with one another and with a teacher. Many students have had difficulty in personal and social relationships in their pasts. The response from many educational environments is to minimize opportunities to acquire both new social skills as well as the rich academic skills that are present when one is engaged in dialogue with others. hooks (1994), through her teaching experience believes that “Sharing experiences and confessional narratives in the classroom helps establish communal commitment to learning. These narrative moments usually are the space where the assumption that we share a common class background and perception is disrupted” (1994, p. 21).

These open dialogues between teachers and students help create a safe space where real and authentic learning can begin. Students begin to feel a sense of responsibility for the creation of both the classroom community and the construction of authentic learning activities. Learning, through this lens, is defined as “changing participation” (Larson and Marsh, 2015, p. 5). It is not simply acquiring content knowledge. It is instead “about disruption and opening up to further learning, not closure and satisfaction” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 43). The telling of stories of lived experiences of all members of a classroom community creates an open exchange, a sense of trust, responsibility, and engagement. Personal stories are also a place for honouring emotional feelings that many school practices deny. hooks (2010) would insist that we must allow for these feelings to be present within a holistic learning community. “Storied ways of knowing” (Hildebrandt et al., 2016, p. 18) are also valued through visits from Indigenous elders, who lead sharing circles that acknowledge personal and cultural histories as demonstrated by a Grade 3 student who hugged herself while an elder drummed ceremonial music (Hildebrandt et al., 2016).

Pretending that emotions are not present in educational environments “does not change the reality that the presence of emotional energy over-determines the conditions where learning can occur” (hooks, 2010, p. 160). Denying their existence does not remove them from the classroom, it simply negates the opportunity for learning through and with them.

How do educational decisions made by administration and teaching staff increase student investment and voice?

Agency and Investment.

Students who are failing in educational environments are often described in negative ways in school contexts. Language used by classroom teachers, peers, resource staff, guidance counsellors, and administrators, and even students themselves can define students as powerless and weak in terms of both their academic abilities and their life choices. The effect of these labels is that they become a part of the philosophies of those who are creating the programs intended to serve these students. School staff “are often complicit with racial, gender, and class codes of conduct that cast youth in a negative light, and we neglect to examine our own assumptions about these students” (Wishart, 2009, p. 8). According to the literature (Bendtro et al., Darmanin, 2003; Dei, 1993; Dei et al., 1997; Foley & Pang, 2006; Francis & Mills, 2012; Gregory, 2001; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lee, 1999; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Olsen, Harper & Thompson, 2017; Parent, 2011; Pollack, 2017; Tupper, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999; Vandale-Dubois, 2011; Wishart, 2009), many programs are created with these negative stigmas of students in mind. Therefore, high quality academic resources, innovative teaching practices, and truly supportive environments with high expectations for students and staff are not in place. It can be argued that students who have been

pushed out of the system need dynamic, invested, and empowered educators in order to change their views of the system that has failed them continually.

Essentializing versus Anti-Opressive Education.

It is important to note that any education that speaks to the experience of an individual as the experience of the whole is problematic. Instead, “precise descriptions of young people, linked to actual provision of support when needed, are key to school talking for equity” (Pollack, 2017, p. 42). Educational environments that program for students as though they are all one homogenous, predictable group do the same disservice to vulnerable learners as their mainstream counterparts. Asking one Indigenous youth to speak for all Indigenous youth promotes stereotypes. The same is true in assuming that any one program will fit all learners. This is especially true when those learners have been alienated from a classroom environment over a number of years. In anti-oppressive education, “essentializing is problematized” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 95). Students are treated as individuals and programming is adapted and reflected upon on a continuous basis.

Another important factor in education that equalizes access is engaging teaching practices that are anti-oppressive and critical in their approach. All teachers “have a responsibility to make schools into places that are for, and that attempt to teach, all their students. To fail to work against various forms of oppression is to be complicit with them” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 37). Many teachers do not see this as their role. Content delivery is more valued than critical thinking skills. The assumption that students are gaining those skills outside the school can no longer be assumed. Therefore, those students coming from homes where parents’ literacy levels are low, or who work outside the home during the evenings or on weekends, or whose parents have mental

health or addictions issues, or have any one or more of these barriers themselves, are at risk of falling further behind their peers. Without the intervention of the educational system to make up for these gaps in learning experience and opportunity, the status quo continues to remain unchallenged.

Defining Literacy.

A common understanding of literacy seems to be lacking within educational programs and among school staff. Schools need to “offer a more rigorous curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking, synthesis, and higher order thinking, which, in turn, would help students achieve their goals” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 216). Literacy should not just be viewed as the acquisition of a narrow set of skills achieved in isolation from others. Instead, it is a relational practice. Teachers who are truly engaging in teaching literacy are “educating people to be self-reflective, critical and self-conscious about their relationship with the larger world” (Peters & Giroux, 2012, p. 166). One’s ability to read and write or perform mathematical computations are not the only indicators of one’s literacy level. Instead “reading and writing become tools for learning and engagement in and out of school, across the disciplines, in the community and the workplace, in conventional and print settings” (Gutiérrez, 2009, p. 477).

Students who are placed in “alternative” programs that only provide lower level skills through pencil and paper tasks or workbooks, are not provided with the skills they need in order to succeed in the future. This seems to suggest a clear structural barrier for a learner in any of these programs. Examinations of the “digital divide” in Canada, meaning who has access to technology and who does not, continue to show that gender, race, and class are all factors that influence both access and ability to use technology in advantageous ways (Haight, Quan-Haase,

& Corbett, 2014, p. 510). Modern society demands a facility and comfort with various technologies without which, entrance into many career paths is impossible. Communication between individuals, groups, and communities is changing. In our present and future, where virtual relationships and opportunities for advancement are no longer based on face to face interactions, success could be seen as “the nature of one’s portfolio, the sorts of experiences, skills, and achievements one has accrued (which one shares, by and large, with the “right” sort of people) and one’s ability to manage these in a shape shifting way” (Gee, 2012, p. 106). Providing equal access would mean ensuring all students have an opportunity to gain the kinds of skills necessary to succeed in the new world. It also means using those skills appropriately in a variety of contexts.

The role of education should be one of equalizing opportunity and access for all students. This is significant to note in terms of current and future programming for learners who have been unsuccessful. Previous sections of this review have demonstrated that in many cases, despite needing a better education than their peers in order to level the playing field (or at the very least, as good as), they are often receiving worse. These students already have potential strikes against them in terms of familial support, economic advantages, literacy skills, and emotional and mental health barriers. If they continue to be held personally responsible for their lack of access to supports that their wealthier, predominantly white peers automatically receive, the trend downward will most likely continue, with implications for the larger community both economically and morally. If the motivation for addressing these inequities is purely financial, an argument can be made:

We can no longer afford the economic drain of disposable people. The youth we are casting aside today are part of a small generation who will have to support a large cohort of retired citizens as the twenty-first century unfolds. We are literally abandoning the persons whom we will ask to support us in retirement. (Brendtro et al., 2002, p. 5)

If the argument for equitable access to education is made from a purely financial standpoint, it is economically prudent to invest in programs that prepare children and youth for the futures and possibilities that exist within the current context in which they live. Without these skills, the aging population will be supporting the younger generation through other social programs such as income assistance, health and social services, and/or the justice system. The previous belief that the younger generation will support the older one can no longer be assumed.

Raising Critical Consciousness.

Researchers are calling for an approach to education, especially with vulnerable groups of students, that critiques and challenges the societal biases that protect the status quo (Darmanin, 2003; Dei, 1993, 2002; Dei et al., 1997; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Francis & Mills, 2012; Freire, 2000; Gee, 2012b; hooks, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002; Larson and Marsh, 2015; Lee, 1999; Lipman, 2004; Lorde, 1984; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Nieto, 2000; Pollack, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999; Wishart, 2009). Literacy includes abilities in questioning, analyzing, collaborating, co-creating, debating, and formulating in order to advance not only in one's future career, but even more important, to understand and question the social, economic, and political structures that act as divisive forces. As Lorde insists, "In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower" (p. 112, 1984).

Critical pedagogy argues that education should be concerned with raising the critical consciousness of the learners (Freire, 2000). Students who have been historically labelled “at-risk” or “marginalized” by the system may be resistant to these kinds of learning activities. Many have been indoctrinated through their previous educational experiences to believe that success requires following orders and filling out rote, skill driven assignments. Students have been taught not to think. To question or to be asked to meaningfully participate may not have been required in their previous educational environments. Educators have also been conditioned to teach lessons that identify a predetermined goal or outcome. Therefore, embracing practices that involve co-creation with students of projects or tasks that require thinking about an authentic audience requires relinquishing control. This can be dangerous work in classrooms where students are justifiably angry with the system. As students become active subjects instead of objects in their own education, through dialogue and power sharing within a critically engaged structure, emotions can run high:

Social and linguistic practices are mutually constituted within past and present power relations among people who read and write to accomplish social goals. The context is constituted by local, culturally specific practices that outline who has access to learning to read, and who writes which kinds of texts for which purposes. (Larson & Marsh, 2015, p. 17)

As vulnerable students begin to recognize that they have been denied access to a variety of learning experiences based on their positionality within society and therefore in school, their understandable apathy toward the system can turn to feelings of hostility. Instead of avoiding this

experience, educators committed to equity and access in education should be viewing these reactions as appropriate responses to their students' experiences of being 'othered'.

This kind of initial resistance can turn to anger throughout classroom activities and discussions with students who are coming to understand the nature of their oppression and the societal and social forces that shape these inequalities. Students who have been marginalized have also been taught to individualize and internalize their lack of success. Many see it as their own personal failing. Participating in learning experiences that suggest that there might be societal and structural reasons beyond their individual choices or actions can be a powerful and emotional process. It can also be a difficult classroom management situation for a teacher. Referring to the power of ideas and texts "whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon...the educator, who hands over the gun, hands over the bullets (the perspective), and must own up to the consequences" (Gee, 2012, p. 61). The work of teaching in this way becomes harder. Authentic, honest dialogue is harder to control than top-down, teacher driven lessons. Many teachers do not see their role in the system as political, especially in the case of advocating for "at-risk" students. In *The Challenges of Anti-Racist Education in Canada*, George Sefa-Dei (1993) asserts an opposite view, "We must pursue a political agenda to remove those systemic barriers to educational equity and also give 'voice' and 'space' to the silenced and marginalized. But, more importantly, we must challenge power" (Dei, 1993, p. 47). Students who have been positioned on the margins need more opportunities to question and challenge existing assumptions about how they learn and who they are. Educators who allow these spaces for student voice will be allowing opportunities for a different positioning of the voices that have been silenced within the mainstream educational system.

Critical Literacy.

Critical literacy scholars have been naming structural inequalities that exist in schools and calling for alternatives (Freire, 1970; Larson & Marsh, 2015; Luke, 2012; Peters & Giroux, 2012). There are many voices arguing that continuing to do things the way that they have always been done will only benefit the dominant class. Despite this, the system continues to function largely unchanged. Issues of power, racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of inequality are central to informing student perspectives about the kind of treatment they will receive within the school system. There are many who have been denied opportunities because of their gender, bullied because of their sexual orientation, or taught history lessons which passively deny or actively denigrate their cultural teachings and knowledge. The classroom and the school mirror the inequities in the larger society and function by ignoring the needs of the most vulnerable (Dei, 2002; Fine, 1992; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002; Lorde, 1984). The role of education for equity must be intentional in its resistance to the current power structure.

Critical literacy is presented as a framework for challenging power as well as developing investment and agency within vulnerable student groups (Francis & Mills, 2012; Gee, 2012b; Larson & Marsh, 2015; Lipman, 2004; Luke, 2012; Peters & Giroux, 2012; Wishart, 2009). Critical literacy “involves interrogating texts in terms of the power relationships imbedded by and reflected by them, in addition to positioning readers and authors as active agents in text creation and analysis” (Larson & Marsh, 2015, p.3). The role of a critical pedagogy allows students to recognize, discuss, and deconstruct the ways in which social institutions position them within society. This philosophy of pedagogical practice seeks to make students aware of their agency within the different spheres of their lives. These include their personal, familial, and

community relationships. This allows learners to “become subjects, rather than objects, of the world” (Wishart, 2009, p. xiii).

The importance of gaining a critical literacy stance to recognize and speak to systems of their own oppression, as well as the oppression of others plays a pivotal role in individual and collective empowerment for these students (Larson and Marsh, 2015; Lipman, 2004; Luke, 2012; Peters & Giroux, 2012; Wishart, 2009). Darvin and Norton suggest that a definition of invested learners are those who seek to change their level of power and control within their social and cultural spaces. Learners become more invested in a process which allows them to think through various possibilities for their future selves. Darvin and Norton assert that “imagination allows learners to re-envision how things are as how they want them to be” (2015, p. 46). Engaging with new and valuable learning experiences will give students hope; a feeling that may be lacking in so many of their lives. Providing students with opportunities to question and challenge the portrayals and representations of dominant cultures, languages, ways of thinking and knowing allows a ‘repositioning’ within the system that has been responsible for isolating and silencing. Education that seeks to empower students who have been disempowered by the system for most of their school lives is not an easy task. Due to critical literacy’s “explicit aim of critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, and institutions and political systems” (Luke, 2012, p. 5) teachers who take a critical literacy stance have the potential to promote students’ agency within the classroom and school setting; especially students for whom the dominant paradigm of education has kept on the outside.

Insights from the Literature

Although there are many important observations, assertions, and learnings for educators presented in the literature, the gap between the intentions of alternative programs to engage learners who have been failed within other environments and the success of alternative programs to effectively engage learners has not been deeply explored. There are few studies within the educational research that specifically explore student experience within alternative environments. In the studies that do exist, there are fewer that explore student perspectives and stories as a way of understanding the issues that may be preventing student investment and engagement within these specialized programs. This is of particular relevance within the context of this study due to the high population of Indigenous and low-income youth who attend schools within this school division. Despite the division's best intentions, access to alternative educational programming is having little impact. According to the provincial statistics cited on the government website (2018), successes measured by drop-out rates, graduation rates, and achievement scores on provincial exams are showing only small gains. There is little research that provides youth perspectives regarding the reasons for their lack of engagement and investment in these programs.

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND ANALYSIS

The research in which I engaged was an attempt to address a gap that I identified in the literature. The absence of student stories and voices from the margins of the educational system informed my study design, methodology, and analysis. These are described in detail in the following chapter.

My thinking and approach to this study were deeply informed by the ideas in Narrative Inquiry research methods. Engaging in stories of participants as well as examining my own story as an educator and researcher became an important focus. I was interested in the relational focus of this method because of my own relationship with the subject. My previous professional experience was not seen as a potential for bias and characterized as negative by narrative inquirers. Instead, narrative inquiry is “situated in relationships and in community, and it attends to notions of expertise and knowing in relational and participatory ways (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13). Narrative inquirers also start with the personal and the questions they are asking from their own stories, histories, and contexts (Clandinin, 2013). True narrative inquiry studies are marked by communities that live alongside each other during the research. The participants in this study were relating their past experiences. I was also thinking about my past experience as an alternative educator. We were not engaged in a research community all together during the research process (Clandinin, 2013). Therefore, this study is more accurately labelled as qualitative research using semi-structured interviews. The descriptions of the qualitative study that follow weave in the important ideas that were contributed by narrative inquirers even though the study itself can not be labelled as a narrative inquiry.

Research Questions

1. How do students describe their experiences in alternative school environments?
2. What are the barriers students experience?
3. How would students suggest that educators improve program design to improve their educational experience and future opportunities?
4. How can students' stories of their experiences within alternative programs help inform future alternative program designs that are more successful in meeting the needs of their students?

These questions come from my interaction with the research about alternative programs as well as my own curiosity as a teacher who continually struggled with the knowledge that too many students were choosing to leave the alternatives despite desperately wanting to complete their high school diplomas.

My Research Stance

My approach to this research is informed by questions that I have been asking for many years. The questions come from my personal experience as a student, my work within the school system, and my graduate work. In my view, specific groups of students are not present within current educational systems or in much of the educational literature. In order to understand this phenomenon and to provide a space that includes them, I am guided by Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) focus on a stance of inquiry with which to engage in research. They view practitioner research as an important site for including teacher and student knowledge as

valuable, disrupting notions of research purposes that provide quantifiable explanations over rich descriptions of phenomena, and social justice aims. My position within the research comes from a concern over my own students' potential to achieve success in ways defined not only by them, but by the larger society that sees economic and material success as the primary goal. The young people with whom I have worked over the years may or may not be accepted as post-secondary students, hired as employees, have their children cared for, be provided with social assistance, or be defined as "productive" within the communities in which they choose to live. In my view, when young adults are unable or unwilling to engage in opportunities to enrich their lives, schools have failed them. What is most significant to this research are my continuing questions about the ways that our current educational system allows for and designs alternatives for students whose learning needs do not fit the definitions of "normal".

When I began my Master's program, I was interested in exploring arts-based models of education in order to re-engage disengaged learners. Within the first year of my course work different kinds of questions emerged: How do students become disengaged in the first place? What are the forces that are excluding some learners from educational opportunities? How do students become defined as failures by themselves and by the system? The role of a researcher coming from a stance of inquiry is "social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). It is my intent as a researcher to engage in conversations with former students that will further my understanding of *their* interests and the ways that I can respond authentically and meaningfully as an educator who cares deeply about working within a system that provides equity and empowerment for all who participate.

My unique position as a teacher who worked for seven years in programs whose stated aims were to equalize access to education for students who had previously had none, allows me to ask questions informed by academic research as well as my own practice. Susan Lytle would frame this perspective as part of the “contact zone of teacher research” (Lytle, 2000, p. 692).

It is important to note that my location within the research continues to be seen in conflicting and contradictory ways. The use of:

concepts such as “the wider academic community” and the “public sphere” implicitly depends on a margin and centre framework that designates teachers’ knowledge and action as local and the actions and ways of knowing in the academy as something broader, bigger, and by implication more significant. (Lytle, 2000, p.700)

There are parallels in the silencing of teachers as researchers who are pushing the boundaries of what was historically viewed as a teacher role and those of students who step outside systemically traditional definitions. The process of thinking through the power imbalance and ethical implications between teachers and their students and the negative implications that this can present within teacher research are extremely important, but it is equally important that excluded youth have different avenues to express their opinions and insights than the traditional academy provides. If it is true that the participants in this study have been pushed out or under-represented by the mainstream educational system, it is reasonable to theorize that they might not see the value in engaging with a study commissioned by a larger and even more distant academic institution (university) with a person with whom they have no relationship (academic researcher).

The research methods that I used were influenced by a narrative inquiry approach. This approach “fundamentally differs from positivistic knowing by understanding that knowing other people and their interactions is always a relational process that ultimately involves caring for, curiosity, interest, passion, and change” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 29). I acknowledge that my own stories as high school student, teacher, and graduate student inform my stance as a researcher as will the participant stories of the various identities they inhabit in the various worlds in which they live. The philosophy of narrative inquiry “is situated in relationships and in community, and it attends to notions of expertise and knowing in relational and participatory ways” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13).

Rationale for Qualitative Interviews

In order to establish this relationship between myself as a researcher and my participants, I gathered information using a qualitative research approach because of the intentional focus on participant perspectives as a basis for research. According to Dei et. al. (1997) a “qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the issue....from various perspectives, taking into account the intersectionality of representation and identity” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 33). Semi-structured interviews are designed to invite participants to tell their stories as opposed to having those stories told for or about them solely through a researcher’s interpretation of their behaviours or interpretations of test scores and/or attendance rates. Through genuine questions and conversations, a relational understanding becomes more possible. Initial recruitment questions, discussed in further detail later, were designed so potential participants could state their relationships as learners to alternative programs. The expertise these participants carry, based on their experiences within various school settings, in combination with my experience as

an alternative school teacher in two contexts, provided distinct connections between researcher and participant as well as to the subject of the study.

The epistemological approach of quantitative research demands a search for one objective truth or reality (McMillan, 2016). In contrast, qualitative research methods search to “understand participants from *their* point of view” (McMillan, 2016, p. 307). My job as a researcher will be to reject “Grand narratives and single cause-effect explanations of social phenomena [with] suspicion rather than unquestioning acceptance” (O’Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012, p. 500). As a researcher, I am acknowledging my own perspective and bias as well as becoming a witness to experiences that shape my own perspectives and understandings. This act of “Witnessing involves the deliberate attendance to people, seeing and taking notice of that which they believe is meaningful” (Laura, 2013, p. 290).

Semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity to engage in conversation with participants about *their* experiences. Their perspectives of themselves as students and learners within, outside, around, on the margins of, and against these contexts will have a variety of layers based on their unique perspectives of their roles within the school context. In their article describing childrens’ processes of text making, Roswell and Pahl (2007) discuss the importance of attending to the representation of “sedimented identities” (p. 392) that will emerge through those texts. It helped me think about how discussion with participants about their stories can become similar artifacts, that become records of experience. On the surface, data collected from interviews can be seen as one specific response to a set of questions about a particular period or experience in time. The challenge for me, as a researcher is to identify the ways in which the producer of text (participant telling their story) is allowing multiple identities to emerge. These

identities are representing “ways in which cultural patterns are infused over time” (Rowse & Pahl, 2007, p. 402). I would also argue that other identities that are brought to the creation of text in this context will be constructions of youth perspectives that have been shaped by their experiences within their schools. The use of open ended questions to frame the interview allows for each participant to focus on aspects of the story that they view as important. Question starters such as “tell me about” and “which parts did you like/dislike” are attempts to allow the participant to drive the story in the ways that best describe their experiences.

A qualitative approach using interviews allows me, as the researcher, “to work against ways in which imposed interpretation and purported objectivity often do violence to the words and lives of the people being researched” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 22). My intention is to use the questions only when necessary. I want to allow each individual participant to shape the interview according to the elements of their educational experiences that they feel are most important to describe. This is consistent with the philosophy of narrative inquiry as a “deeply relational practice which [sic] sees research as an unfolding of lives in relation” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 141). I did not use my questions as a strict set that had to followed in a particular order. They referred to main ideas that I wanted to learn about from the participants. If our conversations took a different direction, and the ideas were covered in a different way, I did not ask them again. I asked questions based on what the participants’ stories were telling me in the moment and tried not to adhere solely to my own ideas about the ways they would or should answer.

I chose this approach because I believe interviews with open ended questions allow for more open dialogue which will allow for a greater understanding of individual youth experience. It will also allow youth participants to tell their stories and have them heard and shared with

others. Meeting in person provides the potential for a higher level of comfort between the researcher and participant. Questions and confusions can be cleared up within the immediate moment; elaborations on relevant points can be expanded. Fixed questionnaires and surveys do not provide for this because a “story invites participants into the research, formulas can intimidate and exclude them” (Clandinin, 2007, p.19). In my view, these voices had been silenced for too long. I was very interested in what they had to say and what they could teach me.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. A poster (see Appendix A) and letter (see Appendix B) containing information regarding the study was sent to various alternative and off campus programs throughout the city. These were also posted at the universities in the city with permission so that education students (many of whom are teachers or have co-operating teachers) could identify potential participants. Various community organizations for youth were approached to display the poster (See Appendix C). Due to my previous role as a teacher in alternative programs, I approached some of my former students and asked about their connections to students who had attended similar programs within the community. Therefore, I provided some with the recruitment and contact information so that they were aware of the intent and procedures of the study. Four school divisions in the city were also sent a formal request to conduct research because of the existence of programs for students that fit the study's criteria.

The poster and letter provided my university email and a link to an online platform that explained the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, offered a \$15 gift certificate as compensation for participation, and outlined possible locations for the interview. Protocols for confidentiality and consent were also explained.

Despite these initial attempts, there was a great deal of difficulty with recruitment. No one responded to the posters that were placed in the community organizations or the universities. Of the four school divisions that were contacted; two denied permission. One cited “research fatigue” as the primary reason. The other objected to the characterization of students as “at-risk” or “vulnerable” as I had defined them in my informational materials. Because of their philosophical stance of full inclusion, they felt that programming provided for different learners categorized students in negative ways. Therefore, they also rejected the study. The third allowed me access to one particular school but said that the principal would be in touch. That didn’t happen. I was granted approval in one school division and therefore could begin approaching staff.

A former guidance counsellor and two teachers reached out to former students. This direct approach, with someone who had a previous relationship with students in these environments, was key to the success of the recruitment process. Had it not been for these key people, I suspect that the focus of the study would have been changed by necessity, or that it would have taken much longer to find willing participants. As it was, it took approximately four months to hear from potential participants. The fact that the four participants talked to me at all is quite remarkable based on the lack of relationship they had with me and with the study. None of them were attending an alternative environment at the time of the interviews and so their stories and recommendations will have little impact on their current or future school experiences. Between the four of them, they have school commitments, children, live outside the city, work, and yet they still found time to connect with me and share their diverse experiences.

Participants

Before describing the participants, it is important to be familiar with the number of types of alternative programs that exist for students who have had difficulty in traditional schools (see Table 2). These kinds of programs are represented in the participants' descriptions of places they attended at various points in their educational careers. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants in small sample, I will not be referring specifically to the programs they attended within the body of the study.

Table 2

Types of Alternative Programming Models

Alternative School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A separate building dedicated to delivering an alternative educational model to students who have previously failed in other environments. • Administration is in the school but is attached to a school division.
Off Campus Program (1)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Store front or other community space (normally not within a school building) where students at various grade levels attend school. • Administered by a local school and students are registered as students in that school.
Off-Campus Program (2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Store front or other community space (normally not within a school building) where students at various grade levels attend. • Administered by a local school and students are sent from a number of local schools.
School Program

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small classroom within a school setting with smaller numbers of students and individualized programming. • Student population may come from other schools as well as local school. • Administered by school where program is housed.
Tutoring Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One on one tutoring provided to students who can not attend a full school day for a variety of reasons. • Located in school division administration buildings • Administered by leaders in building where programs are located.
Short Term School Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referred to as “garage models” (get them in, fix, them up, and get them out) • Located in and administered by local school. • Students selected from same school community and join regular classes when they are judged as ready.

I conducted interviews with four participants who had attended various alternative programs for different lengths of time. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour in length. There were some similarities in their stories but there were also significant differences in their experiences and perspectives as well as their reasons for attending alternative environments. I had the transcripts numbered and dated without names in order to ensure confidentiality. I created pseudonyms after the final round of analysis as I started to write the data analysis section. The names for each participant were chosen at random after I attended a workshop with a woman who was commenting on names from the late seventies and early eighties that are no longer common. This seemed a good way to disguise my participants' identities as none of them were born during that time period. The names I chose were Julie, Denise, Leslie, and Bruce.

Julie attended a variety of secondary environments before graduating from a traditional high school. Her description of the main reason that she left her first high school environment was that she was a “pretty crappy student”. Referral to a tutoring program was provided by her home school. She attended briefly but got bored with the one course-one room model. She tried several other environments before graduating from a traditional high school. She lives with her parents and is working on upgrading her high school marks.

Leslie attended a large high school for approximately a year but found the large environment too overwhelming. She described how, “we all kinda got herded all together”. Not feeling like she belonged in the academic world, she got more involved with peers than with her classes. After several meetings with staff about her lack of progress, a family member suggested that she try an alternative program that she had previously attended. She was hopeful that the smaller class sizes and more individualized attention promised by the program would provide the motivation she needed to finish her diploma. Although she loved the environment and the staff, she left school in order to work. After two years away, during which she worked full time and started a family, she attempted to return to the original alternative environment that she had previously attended. When that didn’t work out, she went to another alternative program and graduated.

Bruce attended an alternative program after having health issues that prevented him from regularly attending and progressing at his high school. He was referred to a program that allowed him to go at his own pace and choose his academic focus during the time he attended. He found the program to be “really relaxed and something I could handle and I was still not necessarily fully all focused on school”. After completing some credits and feeling that his health issues

were more manageable, he chose to return to a regular high school in order to take advantage of the broader range of course offerings and opportunities.

Denise spent about 18 months in an alternative setting after having issues with her peers in the high school that she had previously attended. She describes the major factor that pushed her out as “well there was some drama, obviously, high school”. Guidance counsellors from that school as well as family members agreed that a smaller, more attentive classroom setting would be a good fit. She has left the program due to loss of financial assistance from her social support networks. To my knowledge, she is currently not attending school.

Aside from the consent forms that students signed indicating that they were over the age of 18, I did not ask for any specific information about their ages, cultural, or economic backgrounds. Denise shared that she was living on a reserve during the interview so I assume that she is Indigenous, but I did not specifically ask for this information. Any conclusions about how race, social status, or level of income played into those experiences would be merely conjecture on my part and not led by the specific data I collected in this study. The focus of the study was on their school experiences and therefore my questions were intended to understand their perceptions about the strengths and weaknesses of their school programs. These four young people shared openly and honestly a variety of fascinating experiences within all of the varied environments where they had attempted to complete high school.

Consent

Letters of informed consent were prepared for participants to sign at the outset of the interview (Appendix D). I did not receive responses from youth who are under 18, but in the event that I had, a letter for parents and guardians was also prepared (Appendix E). These letters

outlined the protocols for the interviews, including their option to decline in sharing all or parts of their stories or histories whenever they felt uncomfortable. Participants were also informed at the beginning of the interview that they would be provided a transcript of their interview upon request and could ask for certain portions to be omitted from the study before it is published. None of the participants requested transcripts. They were also reminded of their ongoing opportunity to decline to answer specific questions or to withdraw from the interview completely at any time. If, at any time in the process they became uncomfortable for any reason, they could cease to participate. I also restated the information contained in the recruitment package regarding the possibility of a follow-up interview should one become necessary.

Research Instruments

In the spirit of narrative inquiry, which “begins and ends with a respect for ordinary lived experience” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18), the only tightly scripted piece of the interview was the initial part where participants were reminded of the researcher’s commitment to confidentiality, the reiteration of consent and its implications, the participant signature if necessary, and provision of gift card and transportation compensation. I asked if they had any questions, and I told them to please feel comfortable asking them at any time during the conversation. Other than those elements, very broad guiding questions were used to draw out participants’ stories. In all of the interviews, participants were mostly comfortable and confident sharing their impressions without the use of many questions from me, so it was unnecessary for me to interrupt. I asked clarifying questions when I didn’t understand and paraphrased to make sure that I was understanding their intended meaning correctly. Each participant had a unique perspective about their school experience, which is what I was interested in. Therefore, I had no set agenda or

questions that I felt must be asked of each participant. The interviews lasted between forty and fifty-five minutes.

Interview Protocol

The following is the script I used to introduce myself to the participant and to explain, in person, the intent of the study, the conditions of their consent, and to begin questioning regarding their experiences within an alternative setting. The questions were not provided to participants ahead of time. I used all of the questions in each interview but not necessarily in the order listed. I also asked different clarifying questions of each participant as a result of the unique conversation I had with each one. The interview questions are attached as Appendix H.

Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me to discuss your experience in an alternative program. I want to remind you that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time during or after the interview, and you can refuse to answer any question that I ask while we are in the interview. I know from the information you provided on the initial on-line survey that you attended (program name) for (period of time). I'm really interested in hearing about your experiences there. The reasons that I am particularly interested in this topic is because I started my teaching career in an alternative program for middle years students who had not had great experiences in their regular classes. Until September of this year, I taught at an alternative high school in the city. Many of my former students were having similar struggles so I am really wanting to hear from students about the ways that schools, especially alternative ones, weren't working for them. I think it's really important for people in education to understand the problems for the students' point of view. Thanks again for being willing to help.

In order to be fully present during the process I took no notes during the interview period but recorded each interview with a handheld recording device. I also brought an iPad with an audiorecording app to use as backup. After each interview I recorded any observations I had during the interview regarding participant attitude and engagement with me as a researcher and the process. After recording my initial observations, I listened to the recording and made notes about my impressions.

Confidentiality

Each interview recording and transcription was coded using both a number and pseudonym. Recordings, transcripts, and identifying information was stored in a locked cabinet in my home and away from my other research and school supplies. I transcribed the interviews and was the only one with access to the recorded material as well as my notes. My faculty advisor had access to transcribed copies of the interviews after I identified pseudonyms for each participant. Any other identifying information such as consent forms were stored separately. Files will be destroyed after the research is conducted.

Ethical Implications

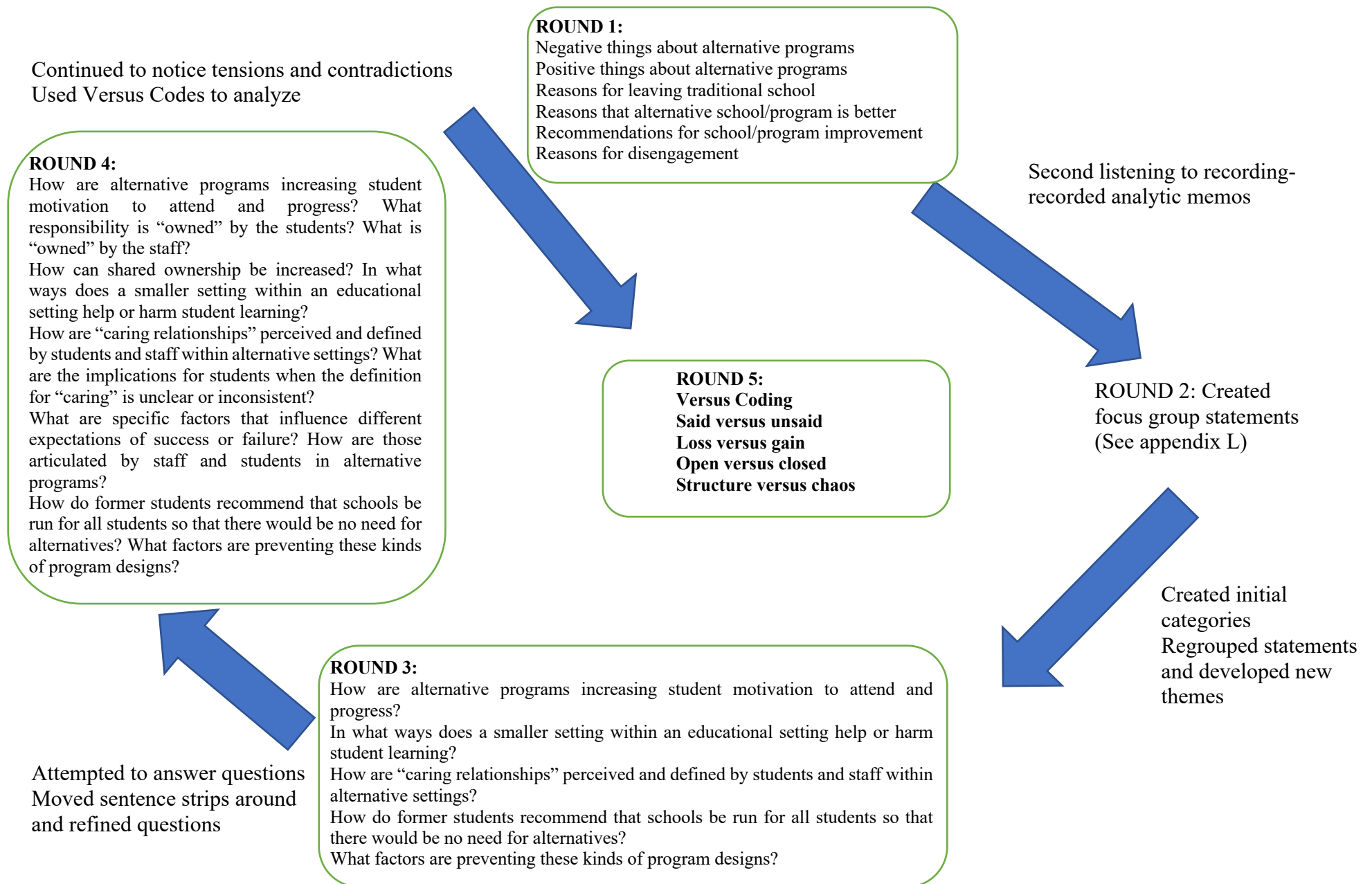
The potential ethical issues in the study have to do with protecting participant confidentiality. These have been mitigated through careful storage of audio recording and transcriptions as well as the use of pseudonyms. As well, there is a danger of misrepresenting of participant voices by the researcher, especially due to my own experiences and biases having worked in two alternative environments. My understanding and beliefs about alternative programs have the potential to influence my interpretation of participant stories and the barriers they face for success. Allowing the participants the option to check my initial transcriptions, and

to respond to themes as I saw them emerging, was a way to assist in ensuring that the stories were represented with accuracy. Discussions with my advisor during my initial rounds of analysis helped to guarantee that I was continually going back to the participant words and experiences to inform and re-inform my new questions and ideas.

Data Analysis

I created a visual (Figure 2) which represents a snapshot of my process and thinking as I worked with the data that I had collected throughout my research study. Each phase will be described in more detail in the following pages and I will reference the section of the visual that corresponds to the work and thinking that I was doing during each round of analysis. Creating the visual helped me more clearly organize and articulate the ways that I came to understand the data.

The analysis took several rounds and included various iterations before I found a way to represent the underlying contradictions and tensions that kept revealing themselves within the participants' stories. I was not attempting to find definitive answers to any of the questions I posed. Instead, I was trying to remain open to what the participants were telling me through their honest and authentic descriptions of their school experiences.

Figure 2. *Rounds of Data Analysis*

My belief as a researcher is that the participants who engaged in this study have been disempowered through their experiences in many societal institutions. The focus of this study is the failure of educational institutions. Particularly, it is my attempt to understand how students are disempowered within alternative schools and programs. It is important to me that this research provides a clear and accurate description of the ways that former students perceive that they have been failed by alternative education programs. In my view, this will benefit the knowledge of those of us working within educational systems which are designed for vulnerable populations of students. I also see it as important for more traditional models of education as they play a role in pushing students toward these options. Hearing the details of students' stories about their specific experiences of school environments has challenged, confirmed, and deepened my own understanding of the problem. As a researcher who is learning from and responding to participants' stories, there is an opportunity to enact an "ethical responsibility to their participants to conduct research that will be useful to them; to do otherwise is to expect them to participate in and contribute their labors to a study that benefits only the researcher" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 16). Confidentiality is maintained by not naming individual participants, but their original voices are used within the study to help in drawing conclusions regarding their experiences.

I wrote approximately two pages of field notes immediately after each interview. I documented my initial impressions of each participant as an individual as well as their storytelling styles. Things like their comfort level with me, their mannerisms, ways of speaking, style of dress, gender identification, or racial identification were important to note in case they become factors in their understanding of their school experience. After writing these initial impressions, I immediately listened to the audio tape of the interview I conducted in order to

remember the important issues raised by the participant, as well as to ascertain if there were any problems with the recording. After the initial listening of the recording and note taking immediately after the interview had taken place, I transcribed the interview a day or two later in order to listen with a new perspective. Initially, I was the only one with access to the data and wanted to ensure that I had heard the stories multiple times before attempting to formulate any definitive understandings. As I transcribed, I began to make note of questions, surprises, or broad themes that were emerging within each story. After transcribing all four interviews I created a document composed of participant quotes in the following categories:

ROUND 1 :

- Reasons for leaving traditional school
- Reasons that alternative school/program is better
- Recommendations for school/program improvement
- Negative things about alternative programs
- Positive things about alternative programs
- Reasons for disengagement
- School responsibilities for disengagement

These categories were based on the general kinds of questions that I had asked of each participant which led to our discussions. I noted some general similarities in the interviews, differences that were unique to each participant, as well as some questions that I was thinking about during the readings of the transcripts. After this, I created a two-column table with the interview transcript on one side of the table and a blank space for note taking on the other side. I re-read the interviews and started to copy and paste into a separate document participant words

that described particular insights or issues. I also made notes of other contradictions that I saw within individual interviews as well as across the four. In taking a narrative inquiry approach, it is important to avoid looking only for similarities in the life histories of the participants (Clandinin, 2007, p.4). I approached the data with the understanding that there “is no final telling, no final story, and no one singular story we can tell” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 205). While there were common elements to these experiences, generalizing across all experiences of “at-risk” and “marginalized” students can disempower them, their stories, and their experiences. As a qualitative researcher I sought to pay attention to the idea that “multiple realities are represented in participant perspectives” (McMillan, 2016, p. 304).

Keeping this idea of both the general and the specific in mind, I began to write themes and insights that the participants’ stories were suggesting about alternative programs. These statements could be argued, depending on one’s point of view, and often contradicted each other. I organized them into four categories: *students, teachers, recommendations, and culture*. At this stage of the data analysis, there was a final focus group planned with the four participants where I would share these statements and facilitate a process where they could speak to each other and to the summary statements I had created (See Appendix L). The focus group did not happen due to participants lack of availability. One was too busy with her studies and offered to respond to the document by email, two never responded to the meeting requests despite their initial agreement, and one had sick children and couldn’t make the agreed upon date. She responded to the statements by email.

Despite the lack of success in completing the focus group, summarizing the data into statements became an important initial piece in my understanding of what was being shared by

participants. After speaking with my advisor, I read through each interview again and added statements based on parts of the interviews that I had initially seen as unimportant or irrelevant because they weren't directly related to participants' school experiences. My advisor reminded me that with such a small sample size, there is no unimportant information and that my attempts to understand by dismissing other pieces of the stories did not mesh with my intent to do justice to all aspects of participant experience.

After transcribing and creating the focus group statements, I listened to the audio recordings again to ensure my transcriptions were accurate, and also to record any information that comes from volume, tone of voice, pauses, or questions that each participant answered or refused to answer. The way the story was told provided as much insight as who is telling it and what is actually said. I recorded my impressions and observations of the data using "analytic memos" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 103) which tracked my thinking throughout the process. The following are two examples from my notes during this round of analysis. I have italicized them in order to differentiate them from the participants' quotes. As I listened, I was identifying my opinions about particular program styles by arguing with or agreeing with the participants' experiences and insights. In the first example, I am responding to participants' descriptions of academic modules that were presented for individual work. In this particular interview, the participant is identifying the module work as efficient when there are so many students doing so many different subjects. I'm concerned about depth of learning over content coverage which I noted in frustration.

I think this discussion hits on one of the reasons that real change is not implemented in these programs- the mentality of underachiever is perpetuated, students don't get pushed,

and teachers become institutionalized too. I got that a lot from both students and staff- hear it now when I run into former colleagues about how they “never got to teach”. It offends me.

In the second example, I am agreeing with a student who “*Wants teachers to reign students in who are not working or who are distracting. Also a common theme. Also true in my experience*”. These memos and the process of writing down my thoughts and ideas while I was listening to the interviews again helped me make my own perspectives, and their possibilities for influencing my understanding of the participants’ experiences, both positively and negatively, more explicit.

I also used in-vivo coding processes which were true to the words that the speakers use as much as possible (Saldaña, 2011).

#1: never went to class.....got in a lot of fights	Bad student behaviours-fights
Jill: didn't understand it? didn't like it? (talking over each other here a bit), didn't... o.k.	
#1: kept getting into fights, fell in with the wrong crowd	Bad student behaviours-“wrong crowd”
Jill: o.k. so it was more about your relationships with your....with people in the	Problems with school-relationships with other students

Figure 3. My analytic memos

From codes and memos such as the example above, I was attentive to any themes and ideas that resonated throughout the stories. Narrative inquirers understand that the stories themselves are the data and the information within them should be shared with and “attentive to

multiple audiences” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 212). The research is not intended to be an end point. Instead, participants’ stories about their experiences and insights, have the potential to act as descriptions of what “could be” if alternative programs were truly designed to serve students both in the present and the future.

After re-reading the interviews I added a few more sentences to the initial statements (Appendix L) I had created for the focus group. I reprinted them on single sided paper and cut them into strips.

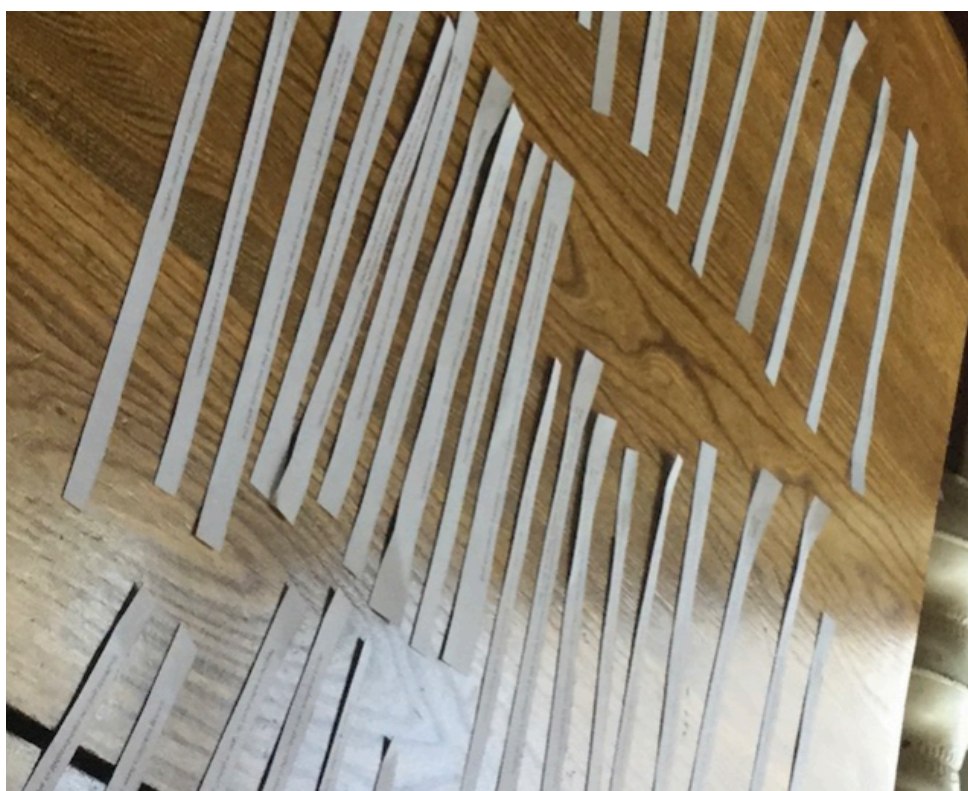


Figure 4. My initial sentence strip analysis

I began to arrange them into categories that I noticed as I reread them. My advisor and I had loosely defined some bigger ideas in our previous meeting so I had an idea of a more systematic process that I would use. This helped me make some connections between the

categories and also notice if I was changing or disregarding my initial thinking as I began to add more sentences to particular sections. For example, one of my initial categories was *choice*. I was thinking about the different choices available as alternatives to students who have left schools. I was also thinking about choices within those alternative settings. Choice and options seemed too similar at first, but as I moved some sentences toward the choice section, I started to wonder about options providing and/or limiting choice for students.

I continued to categorize and define using broad ideas. I categorized the majority of the sentences under the following broad categories: *relationships, motivation, choice, setting, expectations, and systems*. *Choice* included the following reminders: real? agency? Are students being provided with real and meaningful choices or are they being warehoused so they don't bother others? Are the choices provided within these programs opening up options or shutting them down?

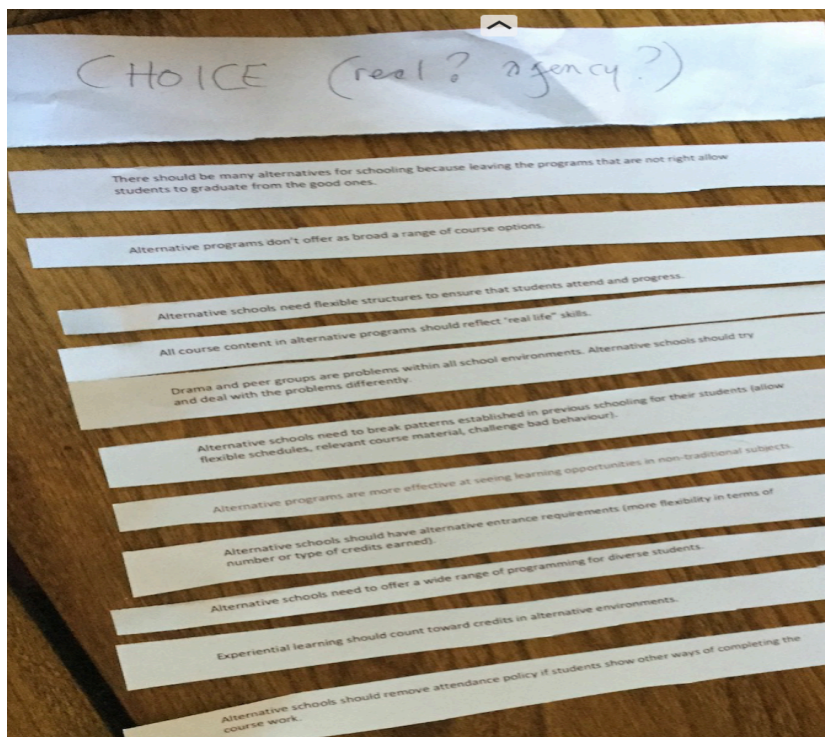


Figure 5. Placing sentence strips under broad themes

The statements under the *systems* category had me thinking about the visible and invisible structures that inform and create larger systems.

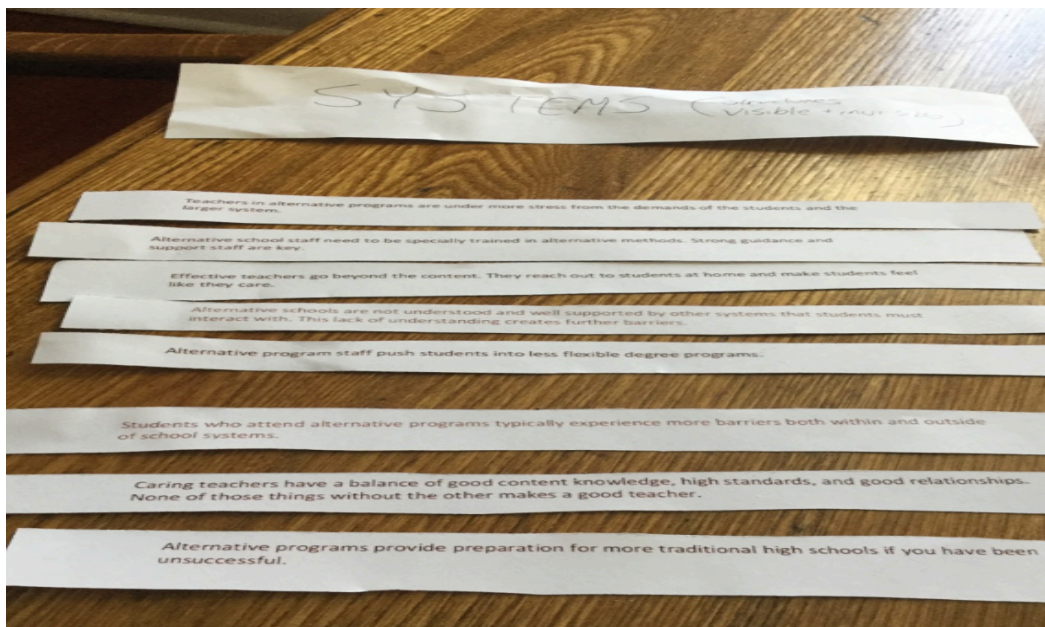


Figure 6. Examples of combining sentence strips to confirm my understanding

Setting suggested ideas about the geographical locations where programs are located as well as the settings created inside the programs by the people who inhabit them. As well, I started noting questions about the relationships between the categories as well as things I was wondering about as I was making decisions about which statements seemed to fit with which others. I started to notice a strong connection between *motivation* and *expectations* but continued to wonder what the connection is and how programs might understand this connection in order to inform their design. As I looked at the statements under both *choice* and *systems*, I started thinking about notions of difference. How does difference factor into student experience? How do teachers and schools recognize, celebrate, and program for difference? How are “alternative” programs fundamentally different from “regular” ones? How do alternative environments accommodate for or recognize strength in the differences that students bring?

Relationships between staff and students is a key theme that emerged in all of my interviews as well as in the literature I reviewed. Expectations of students based on their prior school experiences informed their relationships with the programs and the people in them. Teacher expectations and the relationships created as a result was also important. The participants all spoke about motivation in different ways, whether it was internal, external or both.

In thinking about these categories, I also kept narrative inquiry's focus on temporality, sociality, and place as a lens (Clandinin, 2013, p. 39). For me, place became very clear as a dynamic and ongoing factor in how participants experienced the various programs. Locations viewed as dangerous, hard to get to, shared with other programs or organizations all influenced participants' impressions of access and safety. As well settings within the spaces themselves were noteworthy and repeated. The availability of comfortable furniture, food, and the size of classroom versus number of students, were also discussed at length. Geographical, physical, and psychological safety played a role in participants' success within these programs as well as their later perceptions of program design strengths and weaknesses. Many of their descriptions of the things they both appreciated and found challenging continued to provoke more questions. How do the locations that are chosen for these programs and the young people who attend them get made? How are they perceived by potential students, parents, and community members? How does location inform perceptions of what constitutes a "good" school or program?

Temporality was also present in the various statements, particularly in participants' reports of wanting to "get it done". There was a clear perception of speed as a good thing and slowing down or taking more time as negative. This was also consistent with participants' experiences of being asked to narrow their options in order to finish at a particular age or

particular time. Two participants used a race as a metaphor for how regular school felt for them. They got behind in the race and couldn't catch up which is how they came to alternative programs. How do alternative programs define the time for course completion? Is it beneficial or advantageous for students to be moving through course work at different paces? Who decides on that pace? Why?

Sociality, for researchers using a narrative inquiry lens, focuses on relationships (Clandinin, 2013, p. 39). For the purposes of this study, sociality can be defined by the relationships developed within and outside of school. Participants confirmed the research which indicates that students in alternative settings do better if they have strong and equitable relationships with peers and staff. Participants also clearly stated the important role that principals play if they are seen as accessible and available. The relationships that students have also seemed to define their identities as students and learners. Relationships with teachers who were viewed as unfair, who played favourites, or who were viewed as uncaring had a large effect on participants' motivation to attend and therefore succeed. The art of balancing the high expectations and caring for students as humans was noticed and appreciated by all of the participants. They may have liked teachers who were seen as nice but who they didn't feel worked with them to complete course requirements, but they did not respect or appreciate them as much as those who expected them to work hard. Teachers and principals who expected hard work and maintained good relationships were more respected and appreciated by the participants.

A few days after I edited the number of statements, I repeated the process of grouping them. I started to notice that in many cases, the sentences were similar in topic, but could be

placed in two categories under a general idea. I placed the statements in six broad categories. The first two were:

- systemic barriers
- location

These were the smallest of the six and had the least statements within them. The other four were:

- small settings (positives and negatives)
- caring relationships (positives and negatives)
- programming (do's and don'ts)
- motivation (internal and external).

There were many more statements within these four categories that described opposites and contradictions. I divided the statements into two groups that I believed showed some of the differences in these alternative students' experiences within the different settings. They echo some of my own past questions about effective program design and nurturing relationships within these settings. These categories and the binaries created within them, forced me to think about the ways in which these tensions and contradictions can either improve the experiences for students or make them even worse than their experiences in the environments that caused them to leave their more traditional school settings. Questions I was asking as I thought about the reasons for such diverse experiences and expectations included:

ROUND 3:

How are alternative programs increasing student motivation to attend and progress?

In what ways does a smaller setting within an educational setting help or harm student learning?

How are "caring relationships" perceived and defined by students and staff within alternative settings?

How do former students recommend that schools be run for all students so that there would be no need for alternatives?

What factors are preventing these kinds of program designs?

My next step was to go back and reread the ways that I had categorized and understood the analysis of the original set of statements that I had used. I created another document and separated out all the names of the categories that I had been noticing and questions that I had been posing. I began to reorganize again based on themes I noticed repeating throughout both sets of analyses. I also began to ask different questions because of the combination of ideas and their intersectionality.

I removed the broad topics of relationships and motivation since I had included both as important in the questions that I developed after the second round of analysis. In the initial round, I placed expectations as its own category. In the second round, it seemed to run as a constant throughout all of the participant stories. The location and setting continued to present questions regarding space and location and seemed important to keep distinct, but I continued to wonder how location within negatively defined communities or spaces within the city influence expectations of success or failure.

I was also continuing to mull ideas of difference and how they ran throughout the stories. I began thinking and exploring the connection between difference and expectations. I revised the questions that I had posed after the original analysis. One piece of data that I had not yet considered was the one participant response I had received after sharing with participants my initial set of statements. I went back and reread the response. Interestingly, many of the statements the participant had not responded to were ones that I had combined for the second round of analysis. As well, the statements that had the most detailed responses were ones that pointed out the contradictions in student and staff expectations and internal and external motivation. For example, this participant took exception to the view held by some that alternative programs are easier academically. The response pointed to that notion as a negative stigma

which can be perpetuated by some staff and students. This participant also noted that motivation can be lacking in any academic program depending on teacher quality and student readiness.

This particular participant took almost full responsibility for their lack of success and attributed no responsibility to the school environment for the amount of time it took to graduate. In fact, all of the participants refused to place blame on the schools and programs. They all felt they had more to do with their own success or failure and that the programs and schools provided a space where they could have flourished had they had the correct mindset. While I was continually impressed by the maturity and resilience of this common perspective, it is a struggle as a current educator interested in alternative programs to imagine that nothing can be done at a school or programmatic level. Schools and programs should be taking responsibility for ensuring student success. For me, it begs the question: How are we instilling a sense of partnership between all members of an alternative school community?

I combined the analysis I did from round one, two, as well as the one participant's email response to my initial statements. I generated a final set of questions that I hoped the participants' experiences would help me answer. As well, I knew my story of being an educator within these contexts would continue to impact the ways that I understood and addressed the issues raised. The questions were:

ROUND 4:

How are alternative programs increasing student motivation to attend and progress? What responsibility is "owned" by the students? What is "owned" by the staff?

How can shared ownership be increased? In what ways does a smaller setting within an educational setting help or harm student learning?

How are "caring relationships" perceived and defined by students and staff within alternative settings? What are the implications for students when the definition for "caring" is unclear or inconsistent?

What are specific factors that influence different expectations of success or failure? How are those articulated by staff and students in alternative programs?

The third round of analysis was done through colour coding the interviews in sections that I saw corresponding to the colours I had assigned to each question. Before I started highlighting the text, I saved the transcripts again and removed all the line numbering that I had added for the purposes of quoting the documents in answering the series of questions that I had posed. I decided that it would be helpful to remove the recognition of where in the interview the response had been recorded as well as who was speaking. My memory of the initial question in the interview protocol might make it more difficult for me to reimagine the new story that I was trying to understand. Without the line numbers and identifying information attached, I expected to be better able to see if groups of colours were combining to provide answers to the questions I was posing. I kept the interview transcripts intact, but I was also interested in how the participant narratives were interacting with each other. I also continued to record my own analytic memos that spoke to experiences in my own teaching contexts that agreed with or contradicted some of the stories shared by the participants. I kept a separate document where I copied and pasted participants' quotes that I believed could provide answers to more than one question.

After I finished colour coding the transcripts, I created five separate documents that held the colour coded groups I had created. I believed these held the initial answers to the questions that I had posed before I began this round of analysis. These documents contained only participants' descriptions. I intentionally copied and pasted the excerpts within the document in different orders for different questions so that I was continuing to focus on the words instead of the participant. I hoped that looking at the narratives in multiple ways would help me understand more deeply what the participants were describing through their experiences. My initial bullet points (Figure 2) had struck me as only a surface view of the barriers that these participants faced within their educational environments.

After I finished recreating documents according to the colour coding I had done, I went back to be analytic memos and added the sections of the transcripts that I had separated because I felt that they could be placed in more than one category. I removed the original colour and changed it to the second document's colour. This was another attempt to keep me from remembering which particular quotes could be coded twice. No section fit into more than two colours.

I then read all of the documents that had been colour coded in their entirety to see if specific ideas were emerging in answer to the questions I had posed. I began to notice some patterns and commonalities among some of the ways that participants were responding, but there continued to be differences and contradictions in their different answers. I was not looking for consensus and continued to be interested in some of the conflicts I saw emerging both within the participants' individual narratives as well as between them, I also went back to my analytic memos and recorded anything that was resonating in reflecting on my own teaching experiences. I recorded questions, frustrations, memories, and surprises that I was experiencing as I was analyzing the data.

I decided, as I had in the initial rounds, to print the pages as I had colour coded them, and cut the individual responses up to see if I could more clearly see the interactions between the stories and how the participants were responding to each other when I re-ordered things. In my initial colour coding, I pasted the responses from each interview as a group, so the individual stories were still more present.

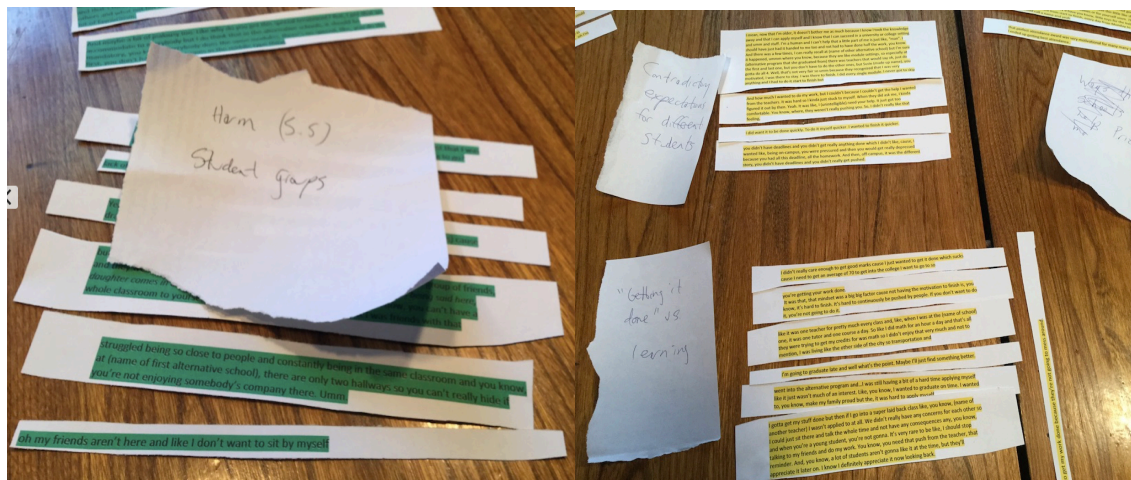


Figure 7 Colour coding the data

Figure 8 Colour coding the data

At this point, I wanted to continue to focus only on the ideas, as opposed to the person who had said them. Once I finished this step in the analysis, I intended to go back and attach participant and story together more specifically. I wanted to remain true to my original commitment to each participant and their unique experience. Separating the ideas and the specific quotes helped me more deeply examine and analyze some of the questions I had, but I wanted the transcripts of each participant intact when I started to think about how best to present their insights.

When I grouped these responses together thinking about the ways that the participants were answering the questions, some new answers started to form. I regrouped the colour coded sections together under an idea or phrase that helped me link them. I went back to the original transcripts that had been colour coded in responses to my five initial questions (Figure 2 -Round 1) and added the line numbering. At this point, I wanted to begin to write the answers using the specific voices of my participants.

I developed a document that had initial answers to the questions that used quotations from each of the participants' transcripts. I sent that round of analysis, as well as the memos I had been keeping, to my advisor. We agreed that the questions were useful in helping organize

the data and my thinking, but that the answers that I was coding based on my working through the transcripts weren't really feeling a deep story of why and how the participants came to their own understandings about their successes and failures within their multiple educational environments.

After this round of data analysis which continued to uncover repetitious and contradictory ideas, I went back to the recordings of the interviews. I remained unsatisfied with the way that I had organized the data in attempts to answer the original questions. At the advice of my advisor, I kept my "thinking document" open and started to write about my continued questions, concerns, and observations. I did this with each interview and then went back to the literature review. I reread the work that I had done in preparing for this study and continued to write informally about the things that I continued to be thinking about. Instead of forming conclusions, I had more questions, but some broader themes began to emerge from my notes.

I went back to the research that defined the ways that I was analyzing the data and found two kinds of memo taking that began to capture the ways that I had been looking at the data. Johnny Saldaña, (2013) describes pattern coding after an initial coding process has occurred. My initial data sort and colour coding had to do with finding answers to my initial questions. Looking for those answers through the words of the participants' stories enabled me to see identifiable broad themes in what was being said. The themes were not telling the whole story though, because I was continuing to wrestle with the contradictions that were emerging within and across the participants' stories, my own experience as a disengaged high school student who became an alternative educator, my researcher self, and the literature that I had read. Saldaña explains that after labelling specific patterns in the data, many researchers attempt to find "super codes" (2013, p. 212) by finding relationships that exist between the initial codes. I did

attempt to find some relationships but there were far too many codes that stood alone, or where the relationship suggested an opposite. I continued to resist finding answers in the data and to push past the discomfort and tension that I was experiencing in the stories.

After analyzing the data through attempting to answer my initial questions, I was left thinking about three broader themes. These were: *culture, myths about teaching and schooling, and orientation or positionality*. The culture created by dominant ideologies of schooling is in conflict with alternative ideologies. This culture propagates myths and contradictions about what teaching, schooling, and learning should entail. The orientation or position carried by those within a system affects one's place in it. These contradictory cultures, myths, and orientations all act together and separately to create a multitude of contradictions for students who are attempting to navigate an already complex system.

Narrative inquirers suggest that "Thinking narratively about a phenomenon challenges the dominant story of the phenomenon as fixed and unchanging throughout an inquiry" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 38). The unresolved conflicts and contradictions continued to deserve attention. In studying narrative as a genre, I always taught my students about the three main kinds of conflict: person versus person, person versus environment, and person versus self. These participants' stories contained multiple layers of all of these kinds of conflicts and tensions.

I was also struck by all that participants *weren't* saying in their interviews. They did all share a lot, but there were reactions to particular questions that caused either silence, hesitation, or quick one-word answers that suggested I should move on. The null curriculum that exists within all schools and all classrooms seemed to continue to exist in these participants' stories. Silence also resonated with my description of the difficulty of my recruitment process and the focus group session. Thus, silence became an important concept within this research. The

potential participants who did not reply to my invitation, or who contacted me once and disappeared are important to remember and acknowledge. It would be presumptuous to theorize or even comment about what those stories may have revealed, but their absence presents a gap that should be highlighted.

My commitment to telling the individual stories of the participants within this study instead of distilling them into one generalized result meant that I had to engage with the data in a variety of ways and multiple times. I took time and space between each round of analysis to avoid jumping to conclusions and/or rushing to judgements. My own experiences as a teacher in these programs allows me a specific perspective and knowledge but it also has the potential to shape the participants' descriptions to fit my own. The messy process of examining, re-examining, developing questions, developing more questions, and finally developing codes that describe the tensions and conflicts within the data. Instead of trying to resolve these tensions, I allowed myself to continue raising questions and seeking to deeply understand the participants and the ways their experiences might inform and change future alternative programming models.

Versus Codes

As I continued to search for ways to describe the kind of coding I was using, I came across a coding process that seemed to resonate with the contradictions that I was reading and hearing in the interviews. The coding method is called “versus coding” and is used when the researcher identifies binaries or conflicts that exist between parties represented within the data (Saldaña, 2013, p.115). While the conflicts in my research are not necessarily between the participants within this study, the versus coding strategy helped me to name some of the struggles and power imbalances that I was observing within the participant stories both separately and together. Versus coding is seen “as an important diagnostic tool for facilitating

positive social change” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 116). It is through the forming of versus codes that I found a way to understand the data I had collected more completely.

The use of versus coding as a way of sharing the data in this study helped me think about and respect the multiple perspectives, insights and experiences that were presented by the participants in this study. Through the process of personally engaging with the participants and then working with the transcripts of their interviews, I became aware of the lack of concrete and ready answers to the questions that I was interested in answering at the beginning of the study. My initial research questions regarding barriers for alternative students and the ways that educational systems could respond if they were made aware were made more complicated and more fascinating by the participants’ descriptions. At the point in the analysis when I started to use versus coding as a strategy, I was more questioning than answering and looking for a way to represent the conflicts and tensions. Versus coding helped me represent these binaries and tensions within the data. The four codes that informed my analysis (Figure 2) serve as metaphors for the contrasts that were present as I engaged with the stories, descriptions, and insights of the participants. I was not attempting to create a dichotomous way of thinking by creating these codes. Instead, I am interested in how the data can be seen from ‘both sides’ of perceived opposites. The earlier rounds of data analysis started to show the tensions but did not help me

up

ROUND 5:**Versus Coding****Said versus unsaid****Loss versus gain****Open versus closed****Structure versus chaos**

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The following chapter will discuss the findings that resulted from the continued questions, contradictions, and ideas that emerged from the participants' descriptions and insights. The ideas presented in this chapter highlight the existence of more than one side to each story. There seems to be many sides that can be explored and understood through engaging deeply with the words of these young people. Despite the fact that I chose to use versus coding to understand the data presented by the participants within the interviews, the categories created by the codes are broad and therefore allow many layers of understanding within each series of opposites. Throughout the research, I was continually struck by the multiple perspectives that each participant brought to the discussion. Within their individual interviews, there were shifts in opinion depending on the context they were describing, the timing of their experiences, and their reflections looking back. Reading and considering the interviews together, there are many points of agreement but there are diverging points of view as well. The dialogue that exists between the participants, even though they were never together, represents a multitude of viewpoints on the ways that their school experiences have shaped their current realities.

Said Versus Unsaid

'Said' refers to what is explicitly spoken and recorded during the interviews. In many cases, the descriptions provided by the participants were similar to what I had experienced in my own high school life as well as my teaching experience. There were many perspectives and observations that were openly shared, and all participants readily answered the majority of my questions. 'Unsaid' refers to the silences, pauses, or physical shifts in posture or eye contact that

cued me to either change my line of questioning to avoid this topic, or to explain in a different way. My impression was that some of the tensions that I was witnessing were a result of a systemic “fear of naming” (Fine, 1992, p. 120). Although the research on this phenomenon describes this lack of dialogue as an intentional act by the privileged to maintain the status quo, I began to wonder if the impacts could potentially be seen in those who are products of institutions created for the same purpose. It is perhaps not surprising that participants felt it difficult at times to articulate the barriers for their success that were outside of themselves. The literature devoted to labelling students and inequitable access to quality teachers and academic programs would echo the reasons for this silence (Dei et al, 2003; Dei et al, 1997; Lipman, 2004; Pollack, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999).

Julie attended many different kinds of alternatives in order to earn her Grade 12. When I asked her to reflect about the programs and the things that might have helped her be more successful, she was reluctant to dwell on those memories. She was much more focused on the present and what needs to happen now. This exchange between Julie and I showed this dynamic:

Jill: So, when you think back on those, like those times in (names of alternative programs), what do you think about?

Julie: I don't

Jill: You just don't, like they're so not on your radar.

Julie: (Pause-fumbling a bit for words) I've pushed forward. I'm doing what I need to do now. Doesn't even bother me anymore. It's a school. Somewhere I went.

Jill: It was an experience and you've...

Julie: Moved on from it

She is representing an unwillingness to focus on past mistakes and regrets. Julie, like the other participants, has had to move forward through difficult challenges. In order to do so, she did not want to spend time talking about the areas that were difficult. In other parts of her interview, she candidly described areas of programming where she excelled, or could prove to teachers that she knew the content and did not need to repeat the course work. She was thinking deeply about the things that school did to both help and hinder her progress and sense of confidence in what she could do. She was not interested in spending time talking about regrets or disappointments, although it was obvious to me that they existed beneath the surface of the conversation.

This same dynamic existed in the interview with Bruce. His whole affect and way of responding to me during the interview was very calm and quiet. Bruce had spent a lot of time reflecting about particular aspects of his experience as a student and was open and earnest. In fact, in our initial email exchange, he told me that he didn't need the gift card that I offered as a small expression of gratitude for his time. He said he would have participated for free.

Bruce's descriptions of the courses in which he is currently enrolled and the opportunities that have been provided for him since he left the program were rich and lengthy. He also spoke fondly of the bridge that the smaller alternative program provided for him when he felt he was unable to attend a larger, more traditional environment. Despite his open and warm nature, when asked about the difficult things that had occurred for him, he did not want to talk. His physical posture changed, and he seemed very close to ending the interview for a few moments. During this discussion of the difficult parts of attending the alternative program, he spoke specially about some of the challenges of sharing the space with another agency:

Bruce: I don't know (pause). I think (pause). I think you go to school to try and build a better future and there's (pause), and maybe that's me being intolerant. I don't know...

Bruce was identifying an issue that came up throughout my research: location. Location matters to students in these programs. In attempting to house these programs in central and easily accessible locations, school divisions may choose to share with other groups that have been failed by the larger systems within the dominant society. Therefore, students who are attempting to re-integrate themselves into the educational system, may find themselves working alongside others who are making those same attempts by accessing food banks, mental health services, or addiction programming. In Bruce's response, I could both observe visually and hear in the tone and volume of his voice that he was showing empathy to others who needed different supports in order to be cared for. At the same time, he found some of the behaviours that he witnessed because of the specific challenges of these populations a barrier to his own learning. Bruce wouldn't speak to it directly and called himself intolerant for even naming it.

The interview with Leslie uncovered the same patterns of said versus unsaid that I had observed in the other three. Although there was less silence and pausing, what remained unsaid throughout many of her responses were the ways that the staff or school structures could have helped her succeed within the initial timeline she had set for herself. She said:

you're not going to get a perfect setting anywhere you go. There's gonna be bumps and there's gonna be people that you disagree with, that you don't see eye to eye with and that's just has to come from, you know, a personal... you know to get over it and still attend that class even though you're not having that relationship with that. But, that's hard to do when you're younger and don't have that mindset quite yet and ummm so maybe getting that from another teacher that you do bond with. Hey, you know, I know you don't see eye to eye with this person but just do it. Cause you need that credit, and if

you don't get that credit, you're not going to graduate, you know, so. Maybe had somebody...

I complemented her for her ability to reflect and take responsibility for both her challenges and successes, but it was concerning to me that she seemed to have little to no expectations of the schools and programs to adapt or change in order to assist her. Leslie's ability to recognize the challenges faced in providing alternatives for various learning and personal needs shows a great deal of knowledge and maturity. In some of her descriptions, I feared that schools were not being held accountable for doing their part. I don't believe schools must do the work alone, but Leslie seemed to demonstrate repeatedly that she had to completely change herself before she could be successful. This begs the question: what can schools do to help in changing that mindset before students fail?

In my interaction with Denise, the things she said during the conversation were descriptive and open regarding her experiences and barriers. What I thought remained unsaid were the ways that Denise might advocate for changing or improving alternative programs for herself or for future students. Like the other participants, Denise spoke very positively and fondly about her experiences at the alternative program she attended. She expressed gratitude to the staff and other students for advocating for her during some difficult personal challenges. Denise also recognized that there were components to the program that didn't exist in the traditional schools she had attended. She named food and alternative ways of earning subject credit as two of her favourite things. Denise was very candid and open during our conversation. From my perspective, one thing that remained unsaid had to do with Denise's recommendations for programming for future students. When I asked her what she thought the characteristics of the perfect alternative program would be she responded, "Well. Hmmm. That's actually a

really good question”. She had not been asked to name the reasons for her success or lack of success in this particular way. Later, I asked her if there was anything else that she felt people who were designing programs like the one she attended needed to know. Again, her pause and non-response was interesting to me. She had been so animated in other parts of the interview. She paused and stated, “I’m thinking way too hard for this one”. Despite Denise’s incredibly detailed and insightful responses in other parts of the interview, when the question specifically asks for programmatic recommendations in a more formal way, she does not seem to feel that she has the expertise to provide those even though I would argue that she has several times throughout the transcripts. Perhaps this speaks more to a lack of understanding on my part of appropriate questions and less about what Denise felt about what she wanted to say, but again, I am concerned with what could be interpreted as a lack of confidence on Denise’s part, to provide concrete ideas in an area where she has so much experience. Kim and Taylor (2008) cite Giroux’s research which “indicated that students who have been marginalized by class, race, and gender are seldom invited to engage in educational discourses about pedagogical practices to shape their everyday lives” (p. 210). If students like Denise have never been asked to share their opinions and experiences, one of the strategies of succeeding could be to accept and conform as opposed to challenge and critique.

Loss Versus Gain

The other concept that I identified after reading and rereading and listening multiple times was the notion of grief. Although grief is often discussed as a response to a death of a loved one, there are other significant losses that may not be as obvious and therefore are not as easy to define. What happens when losses are not expressed? What kinds of losses exist within

educational settings that are never mourned? As a classroom teacher, I lost groups of students year after year whose relationships I valued. I lost colleagues who moved on to other opportunities. I lost financial support for supplies and programming as budgets were cut. Those small but unarticulated losses were many over the years. In contrast, I gained many important things through the years as well: new groups of students with whom I would share my days, colleagues who would become good friends, the confidence and opportunities to try new things and learn new ways of teaching. The code I identified as I was thinking through my own experiences and thinking about the participants' descriptions, was loss versus gain.

These participants, in all of their stories, were naming losses that they felt. They lost time though wasted years in school or out of school. Denise specifically talked about losing her ability to progress because of certain behaviours of other students in the program. She remembered, "It wasn't really safe and I didn't really like it because of that. So, I still came to school. I just, I don't know, never got to where I wanted to be with all of the craziness happening". Julie identified frustration with a one course at a time model offered at one of the options she attended. She was trying to finish multiple credits, but remembered only being offered support in one, "So like I did math for an hour a day and that's all they were trying to get my credits for was math so I didn't enjoy that very much". All of the participants in this study lost the sense of themselves as students who could graduate "on-time". Both Leslie and Bruce used a race as a metaphor for describing high school completion. Leslie describes it this way:

I almost thought of it as like a race. And everybody's in the race and if you trip a little bit everybody's already farther ahead and now you're trying to catch up and sprint and so I already had that mentality of oh, you know, if I don't keep at this pace, then it's gonna,

I'm going to fall way behind and I'm going to graduate late and well what's the point.

Maybe I'll just find something better.

She appreciated the opportunities provided by the two alternative programs she attended before graduating, but the sense of having already been defeated by the established timelines was clear. Bruce described his sense of urgency this way, "I did want it to be done quickly. To do it myself quicker. I wanted to finish it quicker". The way the system defined the timeline for school completion means that they will never get to feel that their graduation means as much as those who complete high school in a traditional period of time.

Denise, who was not attending school at the time of our interview, had concerns about completing her remaining high school courses outside of a traditional high school. She was concerned about her job prospects and imagines potential employers thinking less of her. She says, "I think they most likely wouldn't hire me because I went to (adult learning centre). A lot of people think like that".

I also recognized a loss of identity for both teachers and students in the participants' stories. It is possible that teachers' concepts of what it meant to be a good teacher was compromised through their attempts to manage overloaded classrooms by delivering work packages to students. Teaching 30 kids in four different grades who are completing upwards of 15 different courses is an impossible task. For students, trying to work through challenging course material in environments where they could not get the help they needed could once again have represented a loss of their self-concept as a good student. All of the participants described this feeling of frustration during their conversations with me, although it wasn't specifically named as a loss. I continued to wonder about these small losses that occurred for students and

teachers in these programs over a long period of time. In many cases, they seem to be unexpressed and unmourned.

In thinking about the contrast to grief or death, I initially thought about using the metaphor of birth, which is an immediate addition or gain when viewed as the opposite of death. This specifically existed due to the many student descriptions of teachers who will “push you through”, meaning that they will allow students to get credits without completing the course legitimately according to existing criteria for contact time or demonstrated achievement of outcomes. This act could be seen as a compromise on the part of the teacher if we are defining a compromise as being an act of generosity that requires both sides to give a little to reach a mutually satisfying agreement. Therefore, the student gains a mark, a credit, and eventually a high school diploma. In the cases where participants described teachers who were willing to bend the requirements, what was compromised may be the graduate’s ability to live the life that had been imagined. This rite of passage in graduating is an initiation into a new world that in many cases is not preparing the students in the way that we would expect parents to prepare their children. As teachers are “in loco parentis”, their responsibility to care for their students, albeit in different ways, is potentially devastating or liberating in its effects. There was tension within the participant interviews about both appreciating and feeling disrespected by the same kind of teacher behaviour. Julie’s description of one of her teachers illustrated this contradiction:

So I had her all year last year and she was a really good teacher like she took the time to talk to her students if they needed to talk she would say to them hey like this is what you have to get done by this date. Ya know, like, I kinda cheated on a couple of my assignments and didn’t watch the movies, I went on the internet and searched up the questions cause she actually took a couple a the uh questions off the internet and I guess

she didn't realize that some students would think to do that and the answers were with the questions. Well, I told her I did that. I was like, I didn't have time to watch the movie.

Sorry, this is what I did. She'sok. I was like, I put it in my own words though and she was like ok and I think I passed cinema with a 56.

Julie appreciated the personal relationship developed by this teacher and her sense that the teacher wanted to know her and other students beyond just their academic performance. It is interesting to me that she also appreciated the fact that when the teacher discovered that she had "cheated" on an assignment, she let it go. The genuine relationship was more important to her than the feeling that she had legitimately learned something. Julie is currently upgrading some of her courses because her marks aren't high enough for entrance into the post-secondary program she is interested in pursuing. This connection between positive relationship and compromised learning environment seems clear in its effects on Julie's current academic standing. If the teacher "letting go" of Julie's sub-standard performance on assignments meant that her marks were lower, it may be the cause of Julie's need to redo her credits in order to meet the criteria for her future profession.

Denise's perspective of her teachers' demanding workload was a factor in her ability to progress. She had no complaints about the teachers' content knowledge. She simply saw that the demands of the classroom were impossible to meet. She remembered the following:

Denise: I think it was just so much kids in that one little program and the teachers were actually kinda upset and kinda annoyed with the principal from on-campus because they let so many students into the off-campus when they only had 4 people.

Jill: And you knew that? They talked about that?

Denise: Yeah. They did. And they said, well if 90 kids were to show up, let's say on one day, and they all came on the exact same day, we're going to take a picture with all of us, and send it to the thing (school administration) and like, you think this is funny?

This exchange suggested to me that the teachers were feeling that they needed proof that their large class sizes meant that their ability to meet student needs was diminishing. For those who became educators in order to effectively engage with students in an area of passion or strength, a loss of faith in administration's ability to take care of the systemic demands so teachers don't have to can be disheartening at best and demoralizing at worst.

Leslie also had memories of different treatment from teachers regarding course expectations. Her frustration was clear in the following example:

there were two students in particular that didn't write their English and their math exam and they still passed with the token 50 and it was discouraging for myself that worked my butt off all year and got a really really good mark and have that in place and then watch them literally just get it handed to them. I mean, now that I'm older, it doesn't bother me as much because I know I took the knowledge away and that I can apply myself and I know that I can succeed in a university or college setting and umm and stuff. I'm a human and I can't help that a little part of me is just like, "man". I should have just had it handed to me too and not had to have done half the work, you know.

Leslie understood the gains she made through completing the required course work and the implication for her future preparation because she didn't skip steps. I wonder what happens to students who are missing substantial sections of their high school because somehow the system thought that it was favourable to give compromised credentials instead of no credentials.

It is interesting to note that despite many negative experiences in their school careers, these participants saw attending and graduating from an educational program as a **gain**. Distance education, GED diplomas, or mature student programs offered by post-secondary institutions were not mentioned as options. The participants who were still attending public secondary programs at the time of the interview suggested that it would be a loss to not engage in partnership with the programs that offered them a chance to finish their high school diplomas in some way. The idea of education as partnership emerged throughout the interviews but it was defined very differently by the participants. The similarities were, though, that when participants left their more traditional environments, they were isolated from the educational system and the potential capacities and life choices that school had to offer them. Despite that, many of their comments showed that participants appreciated the relationships that suggested that they were being both cared for and held accountable. While some of the interviewees, on the surface, may have suggested that participants wanted to be left alone to do their own individual work, far more often, there was disappointment about a lack of available help, frustration with peers who took advantage of the system (and teachers who let them), and a disdain for teachers who were perceived to be just showing up for the pay cheque. These participants expressed desires to learn in community, even when the community was challenging.

Julie described a huge change in school climate based on a new principal. She saw this as a substantial gain for herself and her the whole school population. She said the school was much better and:

it's cause she took the time to talk to her students and she still does like I'm still going there this year to do some upgrading and she takes her time to talk to her students; she tries to show them she cares. She says to them "hey, cut your shit out, like you know

you're you're an adult, you need to get this done like, all last year, when I'd meet with her, like there'd be certain problems going on and like even though that I had those problems going on, I still got my shit done.

Julie valued the relationship she had with the principal and felt she was accepted and could be successful. She viewed the principal as a person who had high expectations of her and her ability to succeed. Julie referred to the principal a number of times as a gain and a major contributing factor in her school success.

Bruce's recollection of his loss of dignity during an exchange with a teacher in his traditional high school were related to me very reluctantly. The initial and practical loss was that he left the school environment. He felt that she was angry with him for asking questions and admitting to being confused about the content. He wanted to know that the teacher would be respectful in her future dealings with him. He suggested:

...If there was a medium like, if (teacher) didn't get defensive and actually started to put her teacher hat on and actually started to teach me in a way that I understood. Or tried to make me understand instead of getting defensive and saying, you know, bringing up the disrespect in my tone of voice.

Bruce, like Julie, saw the importance of connection between staff and students. Neither wanted to be coddled, but they did want to be treated with respect. They both had described times when they had lost their sense that they would be treated well within their school buildings, which led to decreasing gains in their educational possibilities.

Leslie also described the importance of the relationships within the community. The teachers with whom there were positive relationships were seen as a gain and in many of her

comments and descriptions of staff, she is openly affectionate toward many of her former teachers. In contrast, here she described a teacher with whom she:

had butt heads a few times about nothing school related. It was personal. Oh, this is what you should do, and this is how you should handle it, which is nice if you're asking for it. Like, you know, it's way different if I'm sitting there talking to (name of former guidance counsellor) and I'm pouring my heart out, of course I'm going to want her opinion on that kinda stuff and that umm, you know, perspective, but when I'm just talking to a friend and I'm not even talking about anything school related, I was like can you just? If I have a [subject area] question, I will ask you [giggles]. Come on!"

While Leslie appreciated certain relationships with staff in the programs she attended, the loss of clear boundaries in this incident affected her relationship. While all of these descriptions from the participants describe interactions between staff instead of peers, they are important to consider in terms of community building within programs. The staff set the tone in a building and students feel it quickly. Julie, Bruce, and Leslie, although relating different incidents, are showing their expectations for how they would like to be treated in their different school settings. It seems that they had varying degrees of success having those expectations met. Their collective losses, in terms of perceptions of safety, clear boundaries, high expectations, and respectful treatment had impacts on their academic progress.

Open Versus Closed

Open versus closed explores the relationships between perspectives, and specifically, perspectives that the expectations that young people have about teaching, schools, and learning. The expectations that are carried by those within any system will affect the ways that the system

functions for individuals and communities within those systems. I was struck several times while exploring the data and thinking about the participants' reflections that despite having had many different educational experiences in different environments, their collective ideas about the purpose of providing alternatives were fairly similar. Participants described the need to graduate but I did not hear many descriptions of ways educators or alternative structures might have been used to better meet their academic needs. Instead of being open to a new educational experience or design, it seemed that all that had changed was the location.

Bruce disclosed early in his conversation with me that his significant mental health issues had been a factor in leaving his traditional high school environment. He related with pride how well he was doing now in his new school environment, another traditional high school. Bruce spoke very appreciatively of the alternative program that he attended before returning to another traditional high school. When describing why his mother chose the off campus program that he attended for him, he said:

Like, she thought that was going to be a good fit but then I just wasn't, my mind wasn't on school. So, I just uh, kind of, hit a wall and then started, you know, moving again and so I chose to go to [name of off-campus program] and it was good for the time being.

As stated previously, Bruce was very reluctant to discuss any negative aspects of the program and did not want to be perceived as complaining. He spoke of the kindness of the staff and flexibility in the programming approach. He said about the alternative program, "I think it's what I needed. I needed a medium between school and non-school. So, yeah. It helped." I was struck throughout Bruce's interview with comments like these that suggested to me that he had not intended to finish school by attending an alternative environment. His perception of the program

setting seemed to be more of a place to rest and recoup; not a place from which to graduate. I was left wondering why Bruce was closed to the idea of graduating from an alternative and open to success in a traditional school. What messages are being sent about current and future success? Which doors become closed to those students who graduate from alternative programs? Are they closed in reality or is that another perception?

There also seemed to be a common perception about the role of teachers from the participants. Many were not open to the idea that staff within alternative programs should be as strict or directive as the ones that they had encountered in their previous environments. This closed view of teacher/student interaction influenced how Leslie felt about her teachers. For example, she commented about a teacher who left her and other students alone to have personal conversations during class time in her first alternative environment. She articulated interesting expectations of both herself and the teacher. She describes how she appreciated the teacher who allowed a break. She was sure “there was lots of times where you know [name of teacher], I’m sure would overhear all of us girls talkin’ and he never once, like very English. This is what I’m here for. This is what I’m teaching. I don’t care what you are talking about [giggles]”. Leslie seemed to be suggesting that she did not see the teacher’s role in assisting with strategies for focusing or using class time more productively. The teacher didn’t seem to see that as part of the role either. Both seemed to solely focus on the content of the class in their relationship. When I asked Leslie later if it might have helped to have some redirection, she admitted that she likely would have finished more course work had this teacher demanded a more rigorous environment during class. Leslie was completely open to thinking about the question I had posed during the interview, but it seemed that her teacher was not open to asking for class time to be used more appropriately. I wondered if this was one of the contributing factors to her leaving.

Julie also described being open to attending another program recommended by the traditional school she was attending. Her experience in the large, traditional high school had not been positive and she was willing to try something new. Julie described the programming model of this first alternative in the following way, “it was one tutor and one course a day. So like I did math for an hour a day and that’s all they were trying to get my credits for was math so I didn’t enjoy that very much”. Julie wanted a more social environment with other students and other possibilities for course work. It appeared that the closed model provided aimed to assist students by focusing directly on one subject at a time. Julie did not understand that this was the model and left soon after she began. One might infer that neither Julie, nor program staff clearly communicated their expectations and from Julie’s perspective, this approach to teaching was too closed for her to flourish. Julie’s openness changed once she realized that the fixed structure was not open to her academic needs.

Denise prioritized school activities and structures that were open to students showing their skills and capacities in a variety of ways. She was less fond of the academic booklets that she was expected to complete in her core subjects. Her love of the food and earning credits through cooking, serving, and cleaning up also shows a particular perspective toward school. When discussing the differences between the food-related activities and other subjects she said, “I do like the cooking and that. Not really much the English and the writing I don’t really like. So, it’s not really optional for me, but I kind of stuck through it so”. There were obviously attempts made in this program to engage students and make them feel comfortable in the environment. Denise’s perspective of herself as a learner was heightened through her work in these activities. The transfer of her feeling of competence in cooking and the associated activities to more traditionally academic subjects still seemed to be missing, but her perspective and

willingness to stick through it seems to be a result in the options provided by this particular staff. There was openness and flexibility provided in the optional subjects through cooking and cleaning. She described earning credits through preparing, serving, and cleaning up after snacks and lunch breaks. This work was seen as part of a volunteer credit. Denise did not describe the same ways of earning credits in the more traditional academic subjects. She had to complete the modules as paper and pencil tasks. There was no experiential or project based tasks in English or math, therefore her perspective of her possibilities for success in those subjects seemed closed.

Structure Versus Chaos

Many views of alternative education and programs describe that flexible, engaging, and holistic structures must replace rigid, uncaring ones. Options such as project-based learning, internships, and career-based education, and critical literacies are recommended (McGregor & Mills, 2012; Munns, 2007; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lee, 1999). Problems exist when school structures and expectations turn into an environment where there is no structure or expectations. Fluid structures can lead to lack of understanding of the expectations because they are always changing. Rigid structures can be seen as imposing and inflexible. Both can be seen as positive or negative depending on the perceptions of student who is attempting to navigate their learning within them. The code to describe this opposition is structure versus chaos.

Leslie describes her second attempt coming back to the alternative school where she had strong relationships with staff. She had left and had a baby and during her absence, a new guidance counsellor was hired. Leslie was in contact with her regarding a start date and related the following story:

I had the spot and then I missed my first day because she [the baby] was just not a good sleeper at night and we had been up all night so I gave her a call and I said I'm not gonna

be able to make it today. I was already very overwhelmed, cause you know I have this little two month baby that I gotta go all the way across the city to go there too and now I have to trust somebody else to take care of my baby and it was very, you know, overwhelming. Ummm, she had told me oh, well if you don't attend your next start date then we're just gonna withdraw you. I was like oh ok so I got even more overwhelmed. I ended up missing that date for the same reason and then she actually sent me a text message which I thought was very odd. It said, we just withdrew you. Clearly you are not prioritizing and you're not serious about coming back and this and that. and I was like instant discouraged. Oh, I don't need school. It's fine. I'll be ok.

This response from the school counsellor represented an attempt to have rigorous expectations in order to ensure commitment to attending on the part of students. Unfortunately, for Leslie, it had the opposite effect. Perhaps had those expectations been in place the first time she had attended the alternative school, she may have been expecting the structure and demands that being withdrawn by text suggest. On the contrary, her story, and the confusion and emotion with which she tells it, suggest to me that she was blindsided by the response. Leslie ended her time there and attended the program from which she graduated. Attempts by the school to impose a rigid and uncaring structure created more chaos for Leslie during a time when she needed support.

Denise related some differing experiences within her classroom environment. Initially, she described the teachers as letting certain types of behaviours with certain types of students go on for too long. She seemed to think that teachers were overwhelmed by the demands of the classroom and observed:

It was like, they were so focused on other things that they didn't realize that other students were slacking. There was a lounge area and most of the other kids, the bad kids, were around there, and they weren't doing their work, they were just loud, playing music, and they didn't have headphones, and it was really annoying so. It just felt like they were slacking a lot.

Later, she described situations where “they [*teachers*] were getting too strict and telling them [*students*] like, you have to do your work and they kind of, and in the students' mind they were probably like oh, we thought we could relax type of thing”. Denise's descriptions suggested again that there are attempts to respond to students in different ways at different times. Flexibility may be perceived as allowing certain negative behaviours to exist. At other times, harsh disciplinary decisions are imposed. Students seem to be unable to predict when and how this might occur.

Bruce also related stories of behaviour that was distracting within the program he attended. He was unimpressed with classmates who were not focused on their work and noticed that he may have been more aware of this behaviour due to the physical layout of the space. He noted:

It was just a distraction sometimes because kids would have, kind of, outbounds in class, and then you are thinking to yourself, I'm trying to do my work, like. Normally, if I was in an “actual” school, I think this would be handled in the hallway. There's no hallway here though so what are you going to do?

Bruce's characterization that the program he was attending is not an “actual” school aligned with his earlier comments about his perspective toward the program and his opportunities for success.

In my view, although Bruce does not say this directly, Bruce's descriptions also spoke to the chaos that can be caused by keeping a community of learners all together in one space for an entire school day. Again, there are possible gains and losses in the close and caring community structure creating negative consequences when the members of the community can't have privacy during emotional outbursts. It is possible that in attempting to remain open, flexible, and responsive, alternative programs are creating loose structures which cause internal turmoil and chaos for those within them. If students and staff have no predictable routines or guidelines on which to depend, it is possible that the uncertainty creates the very anxiety that they were created to address.

Looking at the data through the lens of the versus codes did not help me to find definitive answers to the research questions that I had posed at the beginning of the study. Instead, it helped me surface some of the continuing differences in perceptions that participants had regarding the role of the educators and the program models, and how they were best served (or not) within those environments. There were many positive descriptions and affection for program staff related by all of the participants. As well, there was frustration and regret about the need for these alternatives and/or the length of time taken to finish school or, in one case, the need to return. These mixed feelings about much of their school experiences presented some possibilities for attempting to attend to the ways in which the system designs these models. As well, the participants offer many compelling insights about the ways that educators might clarify and improve their approaches to future students. The following chapter discusses these ideas, insights, and further exploration of these possibilities.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

I started this research with many questions about the ways that youth who have attended alternative schools or programs perceive their educational experiences. Throughout the study, I continued to have significant questions raised about how best to meet the academic needs of *all* students so that alternatives are no longer necessary. My initial research questions were focused on understanding student experiences and the barriers that they felt hampered their success. I was also interested in hearing participants' ideas about the ways they thought that those alternatives could be improved in order to help them succeed. These ideas, I thought, could serve as a starting point for educators who are interested in creating equitable and accessible alternatives for students who need or want a choice.

In the following chapter I will discuss some of the insights I gained from the participants' stories as well as some of my continuing questions. The following discussion presents possible starting points for considering ways to design alternatives for as long as they are still needed. As well, I am hoping to provide an initial step in turning up the volume on the barely audible hum of student voice that exists in this area of the educational research.

Discussion of the Findings

In many ways, the participants' descriptions were not contradictory to what I expected due to my own knowledge and experience of similar types of environments. The successes and concerns outlined were similar to ones I had heard from my own students, many of whom did have academic success in similar alternative models to those that Leslie described as caring and supportive and responsible for allowing her to graduate. Initially, I had wondered if there would

be different stories from those who had not graduated, like Denise, who lost her funding, or Bruce, who returned to a large traditional school. Would they feel differently than someone like Julie who graduated but needed to upgrade in order to attend particular university programs? It was surprising to me that there were more similarities in the participants' stories than differences. Barriers that the participants experienced were similar whether they had graduated, were attending different traditional schools, or were still searching to find the right educational environment and support.

As the initial literature suggested, the participants appreciated smaller class sizes, personal relationships with teachers, and opportunities for working at their own pace. They did not appreciate being disrespected by teachers or other students, nor did they like the distractions that could sometimes be caused by the people with whom they were sharing their environments. None of these findings were a surprise to me. What was surprising was the lack of responsibility they placed on the schools or programs, as well as the minimal expectations that three of the four study participants had that they would graduate from their alternatives. Remembering the research questions that I asked before meeting my participants, I wanted to understand barriers to success from a student perspective. I also wanted to consider possibilities for future design models based on their recommendations and insights. In order to find the initial ideas emerging from these questions, I believe that it is important to focus on the ways the participants related their perceptions of success. Academic success, success in life, and how one perceives oneself as a success or failure all impact the ways that participants told their stories. I believe they also impact how they feel now. As well, their insights and ideas, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, could lead to potential improvements in future design of alternative programs, or better

still, for all programs. Three areas that merit further attention connected to perceptions of success are:

1. Definitions of Learning and Impacts on Perceptions of Success.

2. Grief, Trauma, and Perceptions of Success.

3. Alternative Models and Perceptions of Success.

Through these ideas, and their relationships to the ways that participants understood their opportunities for success due to their educational experiences, I will weave the implications of the study within each section. As well, some ideas for ways the participants' stories could inform new ideas for creating models of education that are truly alternative and equitable will be presented. Throughout this discussion, I will be following the recommendations of researchers who cautioned against creating a list of recommendations that will serve "all" students. For me, this is especially so for students whose voices have been silenced. The stories told by the participants as well as the stories that I bring have helped me start to tell another story, but it is certainly not the only story; nor should it be seen as the end. It is merely a beginning.

Definitions of Learning and Impacts on Perceptions of Success.

I became very interested in the ways that the various participants described their ideas about academic success and how they were made to feel successful within their school environments. Definitions about how participants felt they had been good students made me wonder about how effectively success is defined by schools, and if students are aware of how to reach success. Julie described the caring principal as one who encouraged her to "get it done". She also described that she "got her diploma" even though she didn't care enough to get good

marks. Julie also described the marks she earned in particular subjects, but when I asked her what kinds of course work she completed, she listed tasks. She did not talk about what she learned as a result of completing them. From my experience, this is not unique to Julie nor unique to alternative programs. In my experience as a teacher, Department head, and student, course outlines tend to list assignments and mark distributions for the term and year. They don't necessarily list the concepts and skills that students will learn through successful completion of the course.

In Leslie's stories of frustration about consistency in expectations, she talked about how students with low attendance had to complete less work. Leslie also said with pride "I was there to finish. I did every single module. I never got to skip anything, and I had to do it start to finish". Although she knew that she was better prepared for post-secondary because she had not had her credit "handed to her", she did not specifically say what skills she had acquired from finishing the material.

Bruce also talked about feeling more productive in his current high school because he was doing a more complicated math course. He felt this would better prepare him for whatever post-secondary options he planned to pursue. Bruce was also clear that there were particular types of high school diplomas that were more desirable than others. Some limited your options because they didn't require students to take as many courses. He felt that the "academic diploma" was more desirable than the "mature student" diploma. When I asked what the advantages of an academic diploma were for him, although he did not have specific future goals that made it necessary, he knew he wanted it eventually. It seemed to me that although his plans

in the moment of our interview did not necessitate an academic focus, he was confident that without it, he would have future doors closed.

Denise very much appreciated the way the program allowed her to earn some of her credits through counting up activity hours like walking around the block during a smoke break “cause you needed 115 minutes, I think it was. Er no, it was 115 hours”. I asked her why she thought the cooking, cleaning, and activity minutes were applied toward a credit and she wasn’t sure.

Thinking about these insights from the participants makes me realize that how schools and programs define learning is important to make explicit. It should not be the job of students to understand the learning intentions of the course material and requirements. It is the job of the classroom teacher. Many of the stories told by participants expressed confusion or contradiction regarding what was expected from their teachers to earn credit or show evidence of their understanding of course material. The repeated descriptions from all four participants about the lack of consistency between classes, as well as for different students in the same classes, point to a lack of precise language regarding the difference between credit attainment and learning. As detailed by much of the research described earlier, students in alternative programs are more likely to receive a lower quality education, given by less experienced teachers (Brendtro et. al., 2002, Darmanin, 2003; Gee, 2012a; Kearns, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008, 2008; Larson & Marsh, 2015; Salole & Abdulle, 2015). Mica Pollock describes that in:

schools serving low-income students of color predominantly, teachers serving students of color are also disproportionately inexperienced (and disproportionately white, from white

communities), and their schools are frequently under-resourced and under-staffed while concentrating students with many poverty related needs. (Pollack, 2017, p.79)

The roles that students assume are largely due to characters that they have been taught to play by their teachers and others within their school environments. If the teachers in their alternative programs do not have different expectations, then the only thing alternative about the experience is the location. The participants indicated that their expectations of success included earning credits toward a diploma. In many cases, how they showed their learning in order to earn that credit was not discussed. I made several attempts in each conversation to engage with students about their course work, how it was designed, and what specific learning experiences were the most engaging or memorable for them. These questions were either answered by describing memorable teachers or listing their marks. Although it had not occurred to me when I was designing the interview protocol to include a specific question about important skills, competencies, or concepts that were the most important for their learning, those questions came up through our conversations. It is telling that I did not think to ask initially, and therefore not surprising that they did not have those answers.

As an experienced teacher, I learned to make learning intentions clear for my students. Through continued professional reading, advice from colleagues, university courses, and divisional mentors, I developed a dialogue with students that established the “why” of the course work and not just the “what”. It stands to reason that teachers who have no experience or mentoring from administrators or colleagues in how to program for a variety of learning styles in a range of contexts, will be unlikely to know how to provide students with enriching or fulfilling options that allow them to understand the reasons for particular coursework. This supports the

researchers who maintain that products and learning activities borrowed from traditional models of education do not offer students the opportunity to engage with the multitudes of knowledges and literacies with which they arrive at school (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Gee, 2012; Hildebrandt et. al, 2016; hooks, 2010, Larson & Marsh, 2015). Teachers in alternative programs especially need to understand that “pedagogy is not about training; it is about educating people to be self-reflective, critical and self-conscious about their relationship with the larger world” (Peters & Giroux, 2012, p. 166). Without a rigorous and well-defined educational alternative, the programs have the danger of becoming dumping grounds for students who are not perceived as successful by those who run traditional schools.

Alternative schools and programs run the risk of becoming warehouses which simply provide an optional location for “unsuccessful” students and learning is often not emphasized. Credit attainment is the focus without a deep understanding by either the teacher or the student of the skills and competencies that must be developed in order to demonstrate learning. Teacher expectations for success meet the criteria defined by the school structure. Pass rates and number of credits attained by a student population become the more important measures. The chances for students to succeed in various realms in later life become more open than closed. If students lack a self-concept aimed toward success and teachers perpetuate that either willingly or unwillingly, it is not surprising that clear and well-defined learning outcomes are not articulated within the larger alternative program structures, nor in the individual classrooms. Lack of experience on the part of the teachers, as well as low expectations from students of themselves and of their teachers seem to suggest that students are attaining credits without thinking deeply or demonstrating a high level of mastery of course material.

My questions about the educational priorities for schools and students on the margins led me to the documents and mandates proposed on the government website as a part of the review of education that is currently underway. In my view, they also support and perpetuate the focus of educational success as credit acquisition and “on time” graduation. (Provincial Education Website, 2019). Individual schools are to report statistics regarding credit attainment and end-of-year standards test scores in both Grade 12 Mathematics and English. There is an implicit assumption that credit attainment means that material has been *learned*. Stories told by these students suggested otherwise. Julie graduated, but needed to go back and upgrade in order to meet the requirements for her desired post-secondary program. Bruce needed to leave his alternative program and re-enroll in a traditional high school, and Denise felt that if she went back to school, she would be less desirable as a future employee for having attended an adult education centre. Leslie graduated with honours and has not (to my knowledge as of this writing) attempted to enroll in a post-secondary institution. While it is not my intent to suggest that university is the only option that is worth pursuing, all four participants believed in university or further studies as a way to have a better life. They assumed higher earning potential, more opportunity, and greater social status if one had credentials beyond a high school diploma. Unfortunately, in their cases, the high school diploma afforded in alternative programs had not yet opened the doors that they had hoped.

The government language perpetuates the idea that high school diplomas and credit attainment are a singular means to an end. Although there is a disclaimer on the website about how standardized test results cannot be used as the only measure of a student or school division's performance, it seems a contradiction to choose to post those results publicly in order to see which school divisions outperform the others. In my view, the ones at the top are seen as more

successful than the others which also plays in to the explicit and implicit notions of academic success leading to public accolades and non-academic success leading to public shaming.

One of the important implications of the stories that participants shared was that educators, both individually and collectively, must advocate for equity in all school programs. Learning must be more important than credit attainment. Therefore, educational research must continue to push policy makers to see the connections between all public institutions and their shared responsibilities to educate all children and youth in the ways demanded by their current contexts and realities. Teacher education is one part of the solution. Equity advocates have long demanded that “teacher education programs need to (a) take a stand on social justice and diversity, (b) make social justice ubiquitous in teacher education and (c) promote teaching as a life-long journey of transformation” (Nieto, 2000, p.182-183).

Another implication is the responsibility of academic institutions to highlight existing research and engage in studies that can be meaningful catalysts for change. As well, teachers need to be allowed and encouraged to put into practice the anti-oppressive practices they have learned in their post-secondary degrees. As discussed previously, schools have the potential to be sites of change, but too often they deny the diversity of experience within classrooms and continue to educate in ways that replicate the status quo. This leaves too many students looking for alternatives. The systems imposed on students are also imposed on teachers, and “as long as educators (including principals) are forced to work in hierarchical, disempowering structures, they will engage in strategies to “manage” their workloads and negotiate the moral community of public schools” (Fine, 1991, p.195).

The consequence of these pressures on schools and teachers have the potential to translate into lowered expectations for student performance and learning if there are not precise and well-articulated visions of alternative educational programming. Indigenous scholar Jennifer Tupper notes the importance of the role of teachers and their awareness of the educational expectations:

While teaching is an ongoing process of curricular negotiation, if teachers are not engaging in a critique of the curriculum they are mandated to teach, but simply making choices about how to deliver content, realize objectives, and evaluate students, the reproduction of particular knowledge traditions continues. (Tupper, 2009, p. 81)

Although Tupper is writing specifically about the undermined positioning of Indigenous knowledges within many educational settings, it could also be argued that many under-represented groups are suffering a similar fate. Many students in alternative programs represent persons of colour, LGBTQ2 youth, those who live with mental illness, addictions, poverty, and/or other social and systemic barriers. It seems particularly important for students in alternative programs to redefine their views of success in school in order to have more opportunity to enter the various spheres that could afford the futures that they want for themselves.

The stereotypical visions of possible futures that many silenced groups have for themselves need to be actively confronted and challenged. Therefore, their teachers need to be adequately and appropriately prepared to continually question the structures that demand accountability over acquisition of knowledge, and competencies and capacities that allow all students to enter the desired realms that they desire in their futures. Despite the government need

for quantitative data which minimizes and marginalizes student experiences, there is an opportunity to tell a different story within schools and classrooms. Educators “need to give up the notion of an ideal of an educated person and replace it with a multiplicity of models designed to accommodate the multiple capacities and interests of our students” (Noddings, 2005, p. 173). According to the research, too many programs designed for “at-risk” students do not allow students to learn and develop the skills that would enable them to thrive in the post alternative school context. New thinking about these programs must be infused with high expectations for students who already have many strengths and capacities. It is up to alternative programs to design ways to allow students to build and develop their many knowledges and literacies, not distill them into booklets and modules that lead to narrowing their futures instead of expanding them.

Grief, Trauma, and Perceptions of Success.

I would argue that the participants’ descriptions of their school experiences demonstrated ongoing grief and unresolved trauma in varying degrees. They felt and expressed losses of time, diminishing sense of self-worth, lack of confidence, and less belief in the system. There were many moments and tensions during the conversations where I felt that participants were actively avoiding naming their hurts and disappointments. It led me to wonder, both during the interviews with the participants, as well as in my interactions with my own former students, if the youth who attend these alternative models are more prone to see an unemotional and rational person as a success. Therefore, there is an attempt to silence negative emotions of sadness, shame, and regret in an effort to move on.

According to Indigenous, feminist, and anti-oppressive researchers, the lack of attention to negative emotion does not mean that it does not exist (Bendtro et. al, 2002; hooks, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002). If children live through painful experiences that have not been healed, as they grow “they have many layers of emotional and psychological issues that need to be resolved before cognitive/academic learning can again take place” (Battiste, 2010, p. 15). It follows then, that for many students who attend alternative programming, they have suffered the trauma and loss of having been defined unsuccessful in *at least* one other school or classroom. If alternative programming models do not develop ways of naming and allowing for the acceptance of this loss and trauma, the chances for academic success within these programs will continue to be low. Alternative programs may unwittingly be creating conditions for the continuation of “the reality that if people are alienated from their own knowledge they will more readily internalize the conditions of their own exploitation” (Coleman et. al., 2012, p. 144). The silencing of these negative past experiences for students who have chosen a different educational path could be seen as acceptance of the rules of the regular school game. Students in alternative school programs could be attempting to overcome the unsaid expectations to which they could not conform in their previous schools. Without surfacing and critically examining those assumptions and ideas, students could easily carry on with their negative narratives about themselves as learners and about the school’s responsibility for helping to create the story. Silencing the alternative voices and privileging the mainstream continues unless the mainstream voices and structures are challenged.

This insight regarding grief and trauma led me to look at research done in health to see how the connection between repressed negative emotions and physical health problems is viewed. Author and physician Gabor Mate (2003), a strong proponent of emotional healing to

promote physical wellness and recovery from disease, cautions against medical models that see illness as only an isolated physiological issue instead of a consequence of the highly pressurized, fast-paced, and individualized culture in which we live. It is only possible to recover from physical symptoms related to illness “if we first liberate ourselves from the tyranny of our ingrained biology of belief” (Mate, 2003, p. 239). Mate is suggesting that an individual’s beliefs about oneself, or their state of emotional well-being being is directly linked with their physical health. The ingrained negative beliefs that a person has can lead to physiological disease. If this is true of physical symptoms, it also made me wonder about the connection to learning. Mate argues that emotional trauma and repressed negative emotions can manifest in tangible physical diseases such as cancer and Parkinson’s. If this is true, is it possible that the ability to learn is also compromised?

Although education is not the focus of Mate’s research, there are some interesting parallels between his work and the educational research regarding equity. Educational researchers also acknowledge the privileged position that is given to Western, white, patriarchal, heteronormative views of the world. If particular groups of students are continually being taught that they are inferior, it is not surprising that they internalize that inferiority and blame themselves for a lack of academic success. In many classrooms and schools, “the traditional canons of the humanities have a long record of firing cannons of inhumanity” (Coleman et. al, 2012, p. 143). The potentially oppressive nature of schools has been well documented and discussed in the literature review. Therefore, it is very likely that many young people who attend alternative programs have lived daily micro-aggressions within their school communities that have not been grieved nor exposed as such. More often, it is just a part of the normal routines of

a school day. The damage caused to these students' self-concepts deeply affects their notions of their own future potential for success, academically or more broadly.

An important implication and recommendation is that effective alternative models may need to engage in explicitly and intentionally reteaching students to first mourn their losses and then to move forward in creating a different narrative for themselves. Freeing students from these oppressive caricatures of themselves as “unsuccessful learners” or “at-risk” youth may be more than a human rights and equity issue. It may, indeed, be a health issue. Psychological pain leads to manifestations beyond mental health. If one is suffering from physical and emotional harm, their ability to learn will also be compromised. The cycle of low expectations for success will continue unless it is broken in an intentional way. From a purely practical perspective, failing to address these issues in one public system will have consequences in many others. From a human perspective, the obligation to educate all citizens equally, regardless of background, requires rethinking the current methods. Designers of and practitioners within alternative models need to understand that “respect for different knowings means consciously turning to different knowers as authorities and sources of knowledge” (Coleman et. al, 2012, p. 143). Students need to be reminded that they are important sources of knowledge within their communities as well. Alternative programs can be sites of recovery and reconciliation for wrongdoings and marginalization of underserved populations within our schools.

Despite having described many successes in their school and non-school lives, all of the participants named emotions that ranged from disappointment to disgust that they hadn't completed high school in the traditional time period, and that they had not taken advantage of the opportunities that had been offered. These participants had personally owned the ways that

schools had tried to make up for inequities perpetuated by the larger educational system. Perhaps had their initial school experiences not taught them that they were unsuccessful, they would not have needed the alternative. If this sense of failure, on the part of the students and on the part of the program remains unspoken, the silence can be viewed as complicity and acceptance that the student was the problem. Students who carry that negative stigma will have a hard time shaking it in a new environment. Discourses of problematic, badly behaved, underachieving youth must be challenged and changed. Programmatic decisions which include time in the schedule for work on past trauma could be an effective way to improve student self-image and subsequently their academic success.

Alternative Models and Perceptions of Success.

Alternative models need to be *truly* different if they are to have any chance of improving student achievement. Continuing to define programs by accepting behaviours and attitudes that are not conducive to either academic or broader definitions of success is not helping students. The participants' descriptions of lowered expectations of student on-task behaviour, inconsistent attendance policies, and individual work packages sent messages that their education was solely their responsibility. The participants in this study did not hold the programs accountable at all for their lack of success. Despite the hard work of the teachers within those programs, there seemed to be a lack of a clear and consistent vision for how to design a true educational alternative for students who needed and wanted one. Bruce and Denise told stories of kind and competent staff who could not have possibly attended to the needs of the high numbers of students who all had different subject booklets at different grade levels. Julie didn't feel challenged in the one-on-one tutoring program and had to travel too far to get there. Leslie loved the staff and felt emotionally

cared for, but admitted to having needed more of a push when she was attending her first alternative school after leaving her traditional high school. These experiences, while all different, speak to a larger systemic programming issue for students who do not fit the institutionally imposed educational norms. From listening to participants' perspectives, it seemed to me that the system doesn't know exactly how to create an alternative that is truly responsive to the constantly changing needs and complexities embodied by the students whose learning has been compromised in more traditional environments. I am also conscious that the government standards must be adhered to by all schools and programs, regardless of program design. Therefore, allowing more time for credit or high school completion, or new ways of demonstrating competence or learning outcomes does not always show up favourably in the narrow government reporting structures. This could mean, that even if there is a will to experiment with innovative school initiatives, well placed fear of losing funding or status during an uncertain moment in education may well be preventing these kinds of improvements.

As I see it, there is an unspoken plea by the participants in this study for program designers and educators to do better, to create and design alternative models that engage students' hearts and minds. Doing so will improve not only their academic performance, but also their possibilities for the future. The implication for educators is to create explicitly stated visions for programming, and specific academic course requirements. These do not have to be maligned in the service of providing something different. These participants wanted a school experience that prepared them for the lives that they had imagined. All of them were willing to work hard in order to do what was necessary to earn their credits and diplomas. Alternative models should be no less challenging nor accept less from their students, despite the fact that there may be a variety of emotional needs and academic gaps.

According to the literature I reviewed and my own experience within the educational system, I know that there are programs in existence that are working to improve the social and academic well-being of students on the margins. Unfortunately, people who work within the system are rarely given time or support work together to examine and analyze the effectiveness of the program for the students. With demanding workloads and lack of government support for models that don't fit the standard norms, it is possible that those who have the power to make real and lasting systemic changes are becoming cynical. Usually "in settlerstream education, measures such as standardized testing, benchmarks, and exemplars help determine how far students are located from the normalized centre of curriculum (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016, p. 17). The recent outcome of the provincial election has given the government its continued mission of re-evaluating the education system as a whole. Through my current position in education, I am aware of recent conversations where government officials have signalled their intentions to add more summative evaluations at different grade levels. It is quite likely that more standardized measures will be in place in the future, despite the research that shows that many are ineffective in truly evaluating student understanding. These tests continue to provide data that is already known. Students who are already doing well in school pass, and those who aren't fail. We are again given statistics about the *what* (the pass and fail rates), but not the *why*.

The normalized centre, where the mainstream knowledges and power structures are held, must be continually challenged in order to meet the rapidly changing needs of learners in all contexts. Many educators have been trained in content and teaching strategies and have not defined themselves as advocates. The implication of the participants' stories in this study is that alternative educators not only need to learn to teach differently, they also need to see their roles differently. In many cases, they are working in spite of a system instead of with it. Educators

who are working to create an equitable experience for all learners “have an ethical responsibility to reflect constantly on students they may be disposing of, and how to rework their practices” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 203). Too many students have been left behind by a system that continues to plan for those who come from the dominant classes. Educators that seek to be responsive to their students’ emotional and educational needs must be constantly rethinking and relearning ways to best program for and engage their students. As long as society is changing, the students who enter our schools and classrooms will be too.

The participants’ stories also demand a different narrative of education—one that values their life experiences and works to push them beyond their current skills and capacities into new and different contexts. With the vision of education’s purpose being to “nourish the learning spirit”, Marie Battiste (2010) shares her belief that to change educational outcomes for all students:

it is about every educator making a commitment to unlearn and learn – to unlearn the racism, and superiority so evident in our society and to learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners. (p. 18)

This concept of learning and unlearning is only possible with educators who believe that they have a role to play in questioning the dominant story of both educational structures and more dominant societal ones. As we have learned with students who internalize negative stories about themselves and their cultures, it is also true that those of us with privilege and capital need to acknowledge how that has served to position us at the top of the hierarchy. Intentionally or not, many of us also have internalized stories that are difficult to surface and question; especially

when the questioning challenges one's own powerful status. Understanding this, it may be that true alternative programs have the radical task of creating programs with staff who have critical literacies and anti-oppressive educational models in their work or study experience. As well, students need to see themselves represented in their classrooms by teachers who have diverse backgrounds and skills and strengths in ways of knowing and literacies valued by students.

Perhaps the teaching of students who have demanded a choice requires a specialized skill set that not all teachers have. Until all teachers have the capacity to provide equitable education for all their students, alternative programs should have the authority to do so. In order to achieve this though, there would need to be a conscious naming of the lack of consistency in teacher preparedness. Alternatively, teacher specialization would have to be valued and nurtured, instead of expecting teachers to be generalists who can and should do everything at every level.

The alternative environments that were described by the participants were very familiar to me as an educator who has worked in those contexts. Despite knowing that there were barriers to completion within them, the participants, either because of personal responsibility, affection toward program staff, or lack of confidence, did not offer many concrete suggestions for how the programs might be changed for students in the future. Julie suggested that alternative educators needed to think of ways to make school more fun and most important, "talk to your students". Leslie advocated for caring staff and a comfortable environment. Bruce wanted an educational system that was equitable and ensured that alternatives were no longer needed because learners' needs were being met during their initial school experiences. It should not be necessary to fail first. Denise wanted clearer deadlines and distracting behaviour on the part of her peers dealt with quickly and strictly by her teachers.

The participant's suggestions are all consistent with the design that researchers are describing in educational models for students who have not found success in traditional schools. And yet, in my experience, many of suggestions have been followed in various programs and students are still not having academic success. Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants' insights regarding more effective models are not specific. They likely have not seen examples from which to draw. This is the case in the research that I reviewed as well. There are theoretical discussions about the philosophical and pedagogical ideas for designing equitable education programs, but there is little that would guide educators in the practical day to day application in a program or classroom set up. Educators who are interested in working within alternative models should be encouraged to try new things and have the skills and tools to measure the impact on student learning. Teacher research within this educational sphere needs to be valued and accepted for the possibility of changing teaching practice in ways that allow for real change for students who have been continually failed by the system. Much of the "school effectiveness research does not include the lived experiences of students and teachers" (Riele, 2006, p. 63). This is particularly true for those who have been marginalized by the system. Voices outside the mainstream models must be more represented in future conversations regarding the best educational structures and models for all students.

Conclusions

The implications discussed in the previous section are all possible places for future research. What are the best ways to design alternatives to decrease barriers for students? The participants' stories seemed to suggest a need for clearly defined purpose and vision, advocacy for change in standard methods of evaluating success, well trained and compassionate teachers,

and intentional places and spaces to mourn past losses and redefine future possibilities. As well, rigorous, challenging, and relevant curriculum that assumes that all students have capacities and strengths is desperately needed, so that students will see themselves as learners within a system that values them in the present and opens up their opportunities for the future.

The participants' stories also suggest a need for further research in this area. It seems clear that an anonymous educational researcher was not able to gain the trust of many of the youth who have walked away from alternative educational programs because they did not serve to meet their educational needs. I was only a name and an email address on a recruitment poster and had no connection to their current circumstances. My only access to these stories was through teachers and guidance counsellors who had relationships with former students. Although I had many of these same contacts due to my previous teaching experiences, I could not, because of the research ethics as well as my professional code, contact those students. The power relationship that is inherent between teacher and student is seen by the university as potentially problematic and should be mitigated. My professional association demands that I not use student contact for personal gain. Recruitment for my Master's thesis could be seen as a conflict of interest. There is a tension within this reality that limits the possibilities for students who have been silenced to have a voice. I respect the ethics and professional teaching code, but they limit the possibilities for future studies of this kind by a classroom teacher who is known to students; especially when the teacher is responsible for their marks. Perhaps an ethnographer or narrative inquirer who identified as a researcher and became seen as a regular staff person would have greater success in recruiting more people.

The timing of this study is particularly important to me because of the assumption by most educators that the current provincial government intends to amalgamate six school divisions into one. Concerns that I have heard from colleagues are that the larger the system, the less local control particular schools have to meet the needs of their communities. It is not a large leap to assume, based on the research I reviewed about who succeeds in schools, that the voices of the participants in this study will continue to be pushed outside of the spaces where the dialogue about educational priorities is taking place. These participants, as well as the many youth who I know, who are not being served by current educational environments have a right to be in those spaces and places. Hopefully, this study offers a very small beginning of a different story.

As well as the important insights that I gained from the participants' stories, I also wanted to keep their voices with me as I wrote and thought and imagined. Although this was not a surprise to me, they challenged every possible stereotype that exists about "at-risk" students with their thoughtful insights and their generous and respectful manners. Their stories highlight some potential areas to think about in the future:

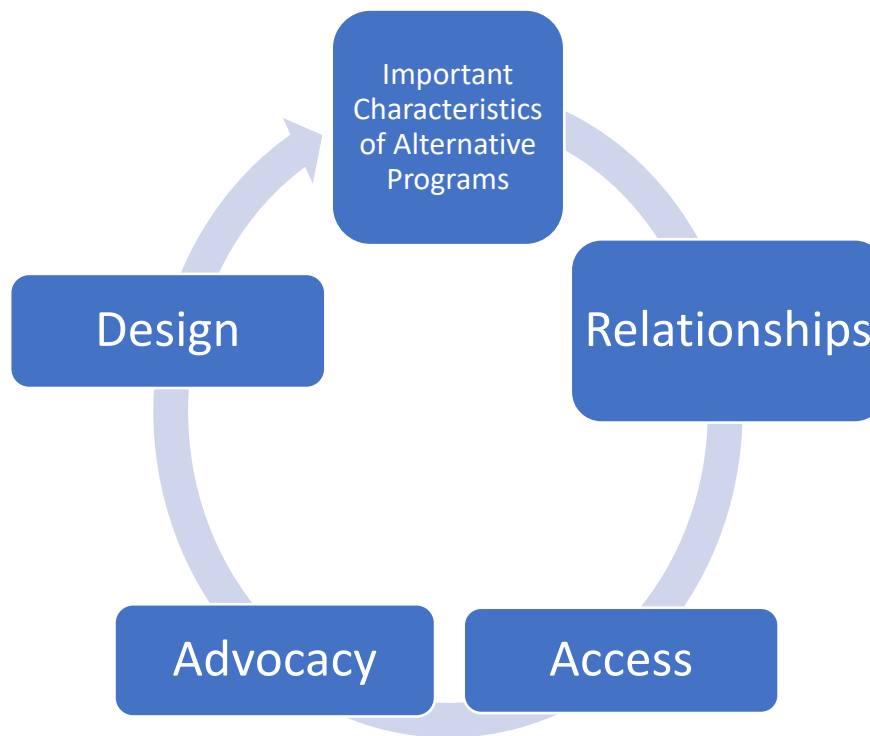


Figure 9. Concepts to Consider in Future Alternative Programs

Leslie spoke the most about the importance of **relationships** between staff and students in alternative programs. She valued teachers who could see that “everybody’s got their own issues and their own umm you know, ways of learning and stuff so I commend them for adapting to each and every student and not just having a basic, “this is how we’re learning” and “this is how we’re doing it” kind of thing. So I love that about the alternative schools for sure”. Her continued references to feeling comfortable and comforted were echoed throughout the conversations with Bruce, Denise, and Julie. All of them wanted to be seen. They wanted their teachers to know them beyond the confines of the school walls and believe that they could be successful both presently and in whatever path was chosen for their futures. While relationship building is important in all educational contexts, it is especially so in those where students are dealing with the trauma and grief of having been previously undermined and excluded.

Bruce highlighted the importance of **access**. When asked what might make future programs better, he described a world where “there would be no public or private school, there would just be neither public nor private sort of thing. That would level the playing field you know so it would be much more accessible. Better education and much more accessible”. Alternative programs, as Bruce’s point illuminates, exist because of a gap in the current system. All of the participants discussed issues of access. Distance, feelings of physical and emotional safety, and ability to receive the help they needed all contributed to their abilities to engage with the programs and/or the educational materials provided within them. Perhaps, as Bruce recommends, these alternatives should not be necessary, but while the larger system is learning to catch up to the students it is obligated to teach, alternative programs should be providing a high quality choice to any student who attends. Teacher calibre should be high and educational programming should be diverse and rigorous.

Denise appreciated the **advocacy** provided to her by the program staff. She remembered the program staff talking to the decision maker who cut her funding. The “teachers talked to her and you know she’s a good student. She comes to school every day. And they even asked me like, well why did you get cut off funding”. The others also appreciated their teachers or school leaders recognizing their potential and fighting for them in different ways. Both personally and academically, all of the participants acknowledged that the level of support and solidarity expressed by alternative program staff was far beyond the level they had experienced in much of their previous school experiences. Teachers in alternative programs need to continue to insist that their students are valued and that their capacities and knowledge be seen and strengthened, instead of weakened and silenced.

When asked about future **design** models, Julie suggested that educators should “ask for student’s input honestly. See what they think would be better for them. That’s, alternative schools should be like that. It took me five years to be able to go back to them, but I still got to go back. I still finished”. Julie is highlighting the need for programs that exist for students wherever and whenever they need them. There should not be a point at which the opportunity for education ends. If we are truly encouraging and celebrating life long learning, designs should emphasize different student needs. School programs should constantly be evolving to challenge, support, and build capacity within every student.

These participants’ words will continue to inform my thinking and imagining educational environments that allow those students whose voices have been silenced an opportunity to speak, to be heard, and to be recognized within the educational communities of which they are a part. Considering different approaches to forming meaningful relationships, equitable access, strong advocacy, and evidence based design approaches could increase the numbers of students who feel successful as a result of attending alternative education programs. Eventually, these approaches should be used for all students so that instead of being seen as failure or punishment, alternatives exist as an authentic choice for every student.

References

- A Guide To Addressing Concerns in Manitoba Schools. (n.d.), *MAPC Advocacy Project*. 46.
- A quote by Richard Wagamese. (n.d.). Retrieved April 7, 2018, from
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/757371-all-that-we-are-is-story-from-the-moment-we>
- Al, S., Sari, R. M., & Kahya, N. C. (2012). A Different Perspective on Education: Montessori and Montessori School Architecture. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 1866–1871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.05.393>
- Aman, C. (2010). *The relationship of student mobility to academic success in three kindergarten to grade 4 cohorts and three kindergarten to grade 7 cohorts in British Columbia*. Ottawa, Ont. Canadian Council on Learning = Conseil canadien sur l'apprentissage. Retrieved from <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/228549>
- Anderson Moore, K. (2006). Defining The Term Child “At-Risk” *Child Trends*. 1–3. <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/01/DefiningAtRisk1.pdf>
- Anonymous. (2013). These schools are our schools; Canada’s First Nations. *The Economist*, 409(8858), 42.
- Bissell, A., & Korteweg, L. (2016). Digital narratives as a means of shifting settler-teacher horizons toward reconciliation.(Apple iMovie)(Report). *Canadian Journal of Education*, 39(3), 1–25.
- Brendtro, Larry K., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: our hope for the future* (Rev. ed.). Bloomington, Ind.: National Educational Service.
- Byrne, G. (2017). Narrative inquiry and the problem of representation: ‘giving voice’, making meaning. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 40(1), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2015.1034097>

- Clandinin, D. J. (2007). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: mapping a methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Clandinin, Jean D. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: practitioner research for the next generation*. New York ; London: Teachers College Press.
- Cohen, D. K., & Mehta, J. D. (2017). Why Reform Sometimes Succeeds: Understanding the Conditions That Produce Reforms That Last. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(4), 644–690. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217700078>
- D'Angelo, F., & Zemanick, R. (2009). The Twilight Academy: An Alternative Education Program That Works. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 53(4), 211–218. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.53.4.211-218>
- Darmanin, M. (2003). When students are failed: “love” as an alternative education discourse? *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 13(2), 141–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210300200108>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a Model of Investment in Applied Linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol.35, 36-56 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000191>
- Dei, G. J. S. (1993). The challenges of anti-racist education in Canada. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, pp. 36-51 Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://search-proquest-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/docview/215641573?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo

Dei, G. J. S. (2002). *Inclusive schooling: a teacher's companion to Removing the margins*.

Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Dei, G. J. S., Mazzuca, J., Mcisaac, E., & Zine, J. (1997). *Reconstructing "Dropout" - A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press.

Delpit, L. D. (1992). Acquisition of literate discourse: Bowing before the master? *Theory Into Practice*, 31(4), 296–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543556>

Dewey, John. (1997). *Experience and education* (1st Touchstone ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Duncan-Andrade, J. (2007). Gangstas, Wankstas, and Ridas: Defining, Developing, and Supporting Effective Teachers in Urban Schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, 20(6), 617–638.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701630767>

Easton, F. (1997). Educating the whole child, "head, heart, and hands": Learning from the Waldorf experience. *Theory Into Practice*, 36(2), 87–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849709543751>

Ecclestone, K. (2007). An identity crisis? Using concepts of 'identity', 'agency' and 'structure' in the education of adults. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 121–131.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2007.11661544>

Edgar-Smith, S., & Palmer, R. B. (2015). Building Supportive School Environments for Alternative Education Youth. *Preventing School Failure*, 59(3), 134–141.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2013.865587>

- Editor, V. T., Editor, J. D. K., & Ciabattari, T. (2010). Issue in Education: Cultural Capital, Social Capital, and Educational Inequality. *Childhood Education*, 87(2), 119–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2011.10521456>
- Eisner, E. W. (1988). Discipline-Based Art Education: Its Criticisms and Its Critics. *Art Education*, 41(6), 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193084>
- Eith, Christine. (2005). *Delinquency, schools, and the social bond*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.
- Fine, M. (1989). Silencing and nurturing voice in an improbable context - urban adolescents in public school. In *Critical pedagogy, the state, and cultural struggle*. (pp.152-173). <http://search.proquest.com/docview/839239241/>
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts notes on the politics of an inner city high school*. Albany, New York: Suny Press.
- Fine, M. (1992). *Disruptive voices : the possibilities of feminist research*. Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press.
- Fine, M. & Weiss, L. (2003). *Silenced voices and extraordinary conversations: re-imagining schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Flinders, D. J. (2004). *The Curriculum Studies Reader* (2nd ed.). Hoboken: Hoboken : Routledge.
- Flum, H., & Kaplan, A. (2012). Identity formation in educational settings: A contextualized view of theory and research in practice. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 37(3), 240–245. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2012.01.003>

- Foley, R. M., & Pang, L.-S. (2006). Alternative Education Programs: Program and Student Characteristics. *The High School Journal*, 89(3), 10–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2006.0003>
- Francis, B., & Mills, M. (2012). Schools as damaging organisations: instigating a dialogue concerning alternative models of schooling. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 20(2), 251–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2012.688765>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York : Continuum.
- Gee. (2012a). *Situated Language and Learning A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Gee. (2012b). *Social linguistics and literacies: ideology in discourses* (4th ed.). Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P., & Green, J. L. (1998). Discourse Analysis, Learning, and Social Practice: A Methodological Study. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 119–169.
- Going to School in Manitoba | Manitoba Education and Training. (n.d.). Retrieved May 15, 2018, from <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/schools/gts.html>
- Gregory, T. (2001). Fear of Success? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(8), 577.
- Haight, M., Quan-Haase, A., & Corbett, B. A. (2014). Revisiting the digital divide in Canada: the impact of demographic factors on access to the internet, level of online activity, and social networking site usage. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(4), 503–519.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.891633>
- Hanson, C. (2013). Structuralism and post-structuralism. In R. Chapman, & J. Ciment (Eds.), *Culture wars in America: An encyclopedia of issues, viewpoints, and voices* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge. Retrieved from

https://uml.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sharpecw/structuralism_and_post_structuralism/0?institutionId=1217

Hare, J., & Pidgeon, M. (2011). The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous Youth Navigating the Challenges of Schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, 34(2), 93–111.

Harper, A. O., & Thompson, S. (2017). Structural oppressions facing Indigenous students in Canadian education. *Fourth World Journal*, 15(2), 41–66.

High School Graduation Rates and Student Achievement Statistics | Manitoba Education and Training. (n.d.). Retrieved January 20, 2018, from http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/grad_rates/index.html#hs

Hildebrandt, K., Lewis, P., Kreuger, C., Naytowhow, J., Tupper, J., Couros, A., & Montgomery, K. (2016). Digital Storytelling for Historical Understanding: Treaty Education for Reconciliation. *JSSE - Journal of Social Science Education*, 15(1), 17–26.
<https://doi.org/10.2390/jsse-v15-i1-1432>

Honeyford, M. A., & Serebrin, W. (2015). Staging Teachers' Stories: Performing Understandings of Writing and Teaching Writing. *Language and Literacy*; (3), 60-81.
n/a.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress : education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching Critical Thinking Practical Wisdom*. New York: Routledge.

Huang, F. L., Moon, T. R., & Boren, R. (2014). Are the Reading Rich Getting Richer? Testing for the Presence of the Matthew Effect. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 30(2), 95–115.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2013.789784>

Justice, M. (n.d.). Manitoba Laws. Retrieved May 15, 2018, from

http://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/_display2.php?p=&f=ccsm%2Fp250e.php&query=alternative+education+definition

Kearns, L.-L. (2011). High-stakes Standardized Testing and Marginalized Youth: An

Examination of the Impact on Those Who Fail. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, 34(2), 112–130.

Kempf, A. (2016). *The Pedagogy of Standardized Testing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137486653>

Kennedy-Lewis, B. L., Murphy, A. S., & Grosland, T. J. (2016). Using narrative inquiry to

understand persistently disciplined middle school students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 29(1), 1–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.974718>

Kim, J.-H., & Taylor, K. A. (2008). Rethinking Alternative Education to Break the Cycle of

Educational Inequality and Inequity. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 101(4), 207–219. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JOER.101.4.207-219>

Kumashiro, K. K. (2002). *Troubling education: queer activism and antioppressive pedagogy*.

New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Lagana-Riordan, C., Aguilar, J. P., Franklin, C., Streeter, C. L., Kim, J. S., Tripodi, S. J., &

Hopson, L. M. (2011). At- Risk Students' Perceptions of Traditional Schools and a Solution-Focused Public Alternative School. *Preventing School Failure*, 55(3), 105–114.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880903472843>

Lange, C. M. (1998). Characteristics of Alternative Schools and Programs Serving At- Risk

Students. *The High School Journal*, 81(4), 183–198.

- Larson. (2015). *Making literacy real: theories and practices for learning and teaching* (Second edition). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Laura, C. T. (2013). Intimate Inquiry: Love as “Data” in Qualitative Research. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 13(4), 289–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613487875>
- Lee, P. (1999). In their own voices: An ethnographic study of low- achieving students within the context of school reform. *Urban Education*, 34(2), 214–244.
- Leone, P. E., & Drakeford, W. (1999). Alternative Education: From a “Last Chance” to a Proactive Model. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 73(2), 86–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098659909600154>
- Lessard, S., Caine, V., & Clandinin, D. J. (2015). A narrative inquiry into familial and school curriculum making: attending to multiple worlds of Aboriginal youth and families. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(2), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.944121>
- Lipman, P. (2004). *High Stakes Education Inequality, Globalization, and Urban School Reform*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Lorde. (1984). *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical Literacy: Foundational Notes. *Theory Into Practice*, 51(1), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2012.636324>
- Macdonald, D., & Wilson, D. (2016). *Shameful Neglect Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada* (pp. 1–36). Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2012). Alternative education sites and marginalised young people: ‘I wish there were more schools like this one.’ *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(8), 843–862. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2010.529467>

McMillan, J. H. (2016). *Fundamentals of Educational Research* (7th Edition). USA: Pearson Education Inc.

Munns, G. (2007). A sense of wonder: pedagogies to engage students who live in poverty. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 11(3), 301–315.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701237571>

Niesche, R., & Gowlett, C. (2015). Advocating a Post-structuralist Politics for Educational Leadership. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(4), 372–386.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2014.976930>

Nieto, S. (2000). Placing Equity Front and Center: Some Thoughts on Transforming Teacher Education for a New Century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 180–187.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487100051003004>

Noddings, N. (2015). A Richer, Broader View of Education. *Society.*, 52(3), 232–236.

Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: an alternative approach to education* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

O’Gorman, E., Salmon, N., & Murphy, C.A. (2016). Schools as sanctuaries: A systematic review of contextual factors which contribute to student retention in alternative education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(5), 536–551.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1095251>

Olsen Harper, A., & Thompson, S. (2017). Structural Oppressions Facing Indigenous Students in Canadian Education. *Fourth World Journal*, 15(2), 41–66.

O’Neill, T. (2017). State of Inner City_Infographic.pdf. (2017). Retrieved from
https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba%20Office/2017/12/State%20of%20Inner%20City_Infographic.pdf

- Parent, A. (2011). "Keep Us Coming Back for More": Urban Aboriginal Youth Speak About Wholistic Education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education; Edmonton*, 34(1), 28-48,104.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.982l873k2ht16m77>
- Peters, M. A., & Giroux, H. (2012). Henry Giroux on Democracy Unsettled: From Critical Pedagogy to the War on Youth. *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, 4 (1), 156–174.
- Pinar, W. F., Reynolds, W. M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (1995). *Understanding Curriculum. An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses. Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education, Vol 17*. New York.
- Pollack, M. (2017). *Schooltalk: Rethinking What We Say About - and to - Students Every Day*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Quinn, M. M., Poirier, J. M., Faller, S. E., Gable, R. A., & Tonelson, S. W. (2006). An Examination of School Climate in Effective Alternative Programs. *Preventing School Failure*, 51(1), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.51.1.11-17>
- Richards, J. (2017). Red Flags for Educators: Lessons for Canada in the PISA Results. Commentary - C.D. Howe Institute Commentary 488. , 0_1,0_2,1-16.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3037129>

Riele, K. T. (2006). Schooling practices for marginalized students — practice-with-hope.

International Journal of Inclusive Education, 10(1), 59–74.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500221750>

Rowse, J., & Pahl, K. (2007). Sedimented identities in texts: Instances of practice. *Reading*

Research Quarterly, 42(3), 388–404. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.42.3.3>

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage Publications.

Salole, A., & Abdulle, Z. (2015). Quick to Punish: An examination of the school to prison

pipeline for marginalized youth. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, (72/73), 124–168.

Appendix A - Recruitment Poster

Are you a former alternative education student?

Did you attend an “off campus” program or alternative school for at least a month during high school?

Did you leave the program without the credits you expected to get?

Would you be willing to share your experience?

I am looking for students who did not have success in an alternative program or school and would be willing to share their stories.

If this describes you, I welcome you to participate in a study about negative experiences with alternative education programs. Participation will include an hour-long interview, a follow up email, as well as a focus group with other participants.

You will receive a \$15 gift card for Starbucks, Tim Hortons, or Subway in appreciation of your time.

Please contact Jill Cooper at cooperk4@myumanitoba or use this link to express interest and answer a few questions <https://www.surveymonkey.ca/r/S7C2V9B>

All information will be kept confidential and will only be used as a part of my research.

Appendix B – Informational Letter Regarding Study for Organizations**UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA****Faculty of Education**

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

230 Education Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-9014
Fax (204) 474-7550

Principal Investigator:

Jill Cooper

cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

(204) 474-7243

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Jill Cooper and I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba. My research interest is alternative education. I am most interested in reasons why students have not found success in alternative programs that are designed to meet the needs of students who have had difficulty in more traditional school environments. I am looking for youth who have attended alternative programs within the city and were not successful in earning credits toward graduation.

I have attached a recruitment poster which includes a link to further information about the study, my contact information, and requirements for participation. I would appreciate it if you would post the information in a visible location within your organization and/or refer youth who may be interested.

Feel free to contact me at cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca with any questions or concerns.

Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Jill Cooper

Appendix C - Youth Organizations

Graffiti Art Programming
109 Higgins Ave
Winnipeg, MB, R3B 0B5
Telephone: (204) 667-9960

Studio 393
393 Portage Ave
Winnipeg, MB R3B 3H9
Telephone: (204) 504-8962

st. Art Programming Locations:

Turtle Island Recreation Centre
510 King St
Winnipeg, MB R2W 2P9
(204) 986-7812

Studio 5 - Beaconsfield Youth Action Centre
5 Beaconsfield Street
Winnipeg, MB R2W 3M1
(204) 667-9960

North Centennial Recreation and Leisure Facility
90 Sinclair Street
Winnipeg, MB R2X 3C7
(877) 311-4974

Ralph Brown Community Centre
460 Andrews Street
Winnipeg, MB R2W 4Y1
(204) 586-3149

Norquay Community Centre
65 Granville Street
Winnipeg, MB R2W 3L9
(204) 943-6897

Pritchard Park
295 Pritchard Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R2W 2J2
(204) 667-9960

Appendix D - Letter of Consent**UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA****Faculty of Education**

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

230 Education Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-9014
Fax (204) 474-7550

Principal Investigator:

Jill Cooper

cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

(204) 474-7243

Research Project Title: What's their story? Students' share their experiences and understandings of barriers or success within alternative programs designed for "at-risk" youth.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

My name is Jill and I am a Master's student in Education at the University of Manitoba. My research interest is in alternative education. I am most interested in reasons why students have left alternative programs that are designed to meet the needs of students who have had difficulty in more traditional school environments. I am looking for six to eight people who have attended a program defined as "alternative" in some way. The program might have been an off-campus, a special classroom within a regular school, or a separate alternative school. If you attended any of these kinds of programs but were not able to get your credits or graduate, I am very interested in hearing your story. Your participation would involve an interview lasting approximately an hour and your attendance at a focus group with the rest of the participants that would last approximately three hours. The focus group will allow us to discuss common ideas and themes that came from your interviews. A part of the focus group will be spent talking and another part will be spent working with the ideas through writing, drawing, or taking photos as a different way to communicate your ideas than just talking. After the focus group, I may email you to make

sure that I have understood your ideas and perceptions accurately or to ask questions about something you said or created as a result of our gathering.

Your participation in the study has the potential to ensure that educators have descriptions from students about ways that alternative programs could improve chances of success for their students. If your experience in the school setting that you describe was a traumatic one, there could be a risk of bringing back unsettling or unpleasant memories. If this were the case, I would encourage you to contact Klinik Community Health Centre for free counselling services at (204) 784-4067 email them at dropin@klinik.mb.ca. You should also be aware that I have a legal responsibility to report any descriptions of abuse or neglect to the proper authorities. I will keep all of your information confidential unless you tell me that you in a situation where you are being or have been harmed.

Individual interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon location such as a coffee shop, or a public space such as a university common area or library. I will tape record the interview but will not take any notes during our meeting time. You do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable and you can stop the interview at any time. You will be provided with four bus tickets to cover the cost of your transportation to and from the personal interview location and for the final focus group. As well, you will receive a \$15 gift card to Tim Hortons, Subway, or Starbucks as compensation for your participation in the study.

Your name and any other identifying information will be taken off when I transcribe the interviews from the recording device. I will use false names for notes and the only other person to have access to the tapes of our conversations will be my advisor. I will make sure to keep them locked in an area in my house away from my other research materials. The original consent forms with your real name and signatures will be stored in a separate location from the data that has been stripped of your name. The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with provincial and federal privacy legislations. The audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and typed notes will be kept until June 2021 in a secure locked file cabinet.

During the focus group, I will invite you to comment on any common themes or conclusions that come from my initial readings of all of the participant stories. I will not identify you or the other participants by name but if I notice that you are all identifying some of the same issues, I may ask you to say more about your experiences. The data from the interviews and the focus group will serve as a basis for my thesis and will be published as a part of the eventual document as a part of the requirements for my Masters. Your interview will be a part of the data, but you will not be personally identified in any public document. My eventual findings and conclusions will be shared within the University and may be shared with other students, institutions, and professional associations.

Your signature below shows that you understand of the process and that you are willing to participate. You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview by simply telling me that you no longer wish to continue answering questions and that you no longer wish your experiences to be recorded or used as research data. You can email me either before or after the interview to withdraw your consent to participate. You can also have your

parent or guardian email me if you are under 18. Your attendance at the focus group will demonstrate your willingness to continue to share your experiences with others. You will also be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement that says that you know it is important to not share any personal information about the other participants after the focus group has finished. This could include names, school or program names, and or locations in the city where participants live or have gone to school. If I have not heard that you wish to withdraw your participation within three weeks of the final focus group, I will assume your stories can be used as a part of my study. After that time, it will not be possible for you to withdraw your consent.

Sincerely,

Jill Cooper
cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix E – Letter of Assent



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

230 Education Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-9014
Fax (204) 474-7550

Principal Investigator:

Jill Cooper

cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

(204) 474-7243

Research Project Title: What's their story? Students' share their experiences and understandings of barriers or success within alternative programs designed for "at-risk" youth.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

My name is Jill and I am a Master's student in Education at the University of Manitoba. My research interest is in alternative education. I am most interested in reasons why students have left alternative programs that are designed to meet the needs of students who have had difficulty in more traditional school environments. I am looking for six to eight people who have attended a program defined as "alternative" in some way. The program might have been an off-campus, a special classroom within a regular school, or a separate alternative school. If you attended any of these kinds of programs but were not able to get your credits or graduate, I am very interested in hearing your story. Your participation would involve an interview lasting approximately an hour and your attendance at a focus group with the rest of the participants that would last approximately three hours. The focus group will allow us to discuss common ideas and themes that came from your interviews. A part of the focus group will be spent talking and another part will be spent working with the ideas through writing, drawing, or taking photos as a different way to communicate your ideas than just talking. After the focus group, I may email you to make sure that I have understood your ideas and perceptions accurately or to ask questions about something you said or created as a result of our gathering.

Your participation in the study has the potential to ensure that educators have descriptions from students about ways that alternative programs could improve chances of success for their students. If your experience in the school setting that you describe was a traumatic one, there could be a risk of bringing back unsettling or unpleasant memories. If this were the case, I would encourage you to contact Klinik Community Health Centre for free counselling services at (204) 784-4067 email them at dropin@klinik.mb.ca. You should also be aware that I have a legal responsibility to report any descriptions of abuse or neglect to the proper authorities. I will keep all of your information confidential unless you tell me that you in a situation where you are being or have been harmed.

Individual interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon location such as a coffee shop, or a public space such as a university common area or library. I will tape record the interview but will not take any notes during our meeting time. You do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable and you can stop the interview at any time. You will be provided with four bus tickets to cover the cost of your transportation to and from the personal interview location and for the final focus group. As well, you will receive a \$15 gift card to Tim Hortons, Subway, or Starbucks as compensation for your participation in the study.

Your name and any other identifying information will be taken off when I transcribe the interviews from the recording device. I will use false names for notes and the only other person to have access to the tapes of our conversations will be my advisor. I will make sure to keep them locked in an area in my house away from my other research materials. The original consent forms with your real name and signatures will be stored in a separate location from the data that has been stripped of your name. The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with provincial and federal privacy legislations. The audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and typed notes will be kept until June 2021 in a secure locked file cabinet.

During the focus group, I will invite you to comment on any common themes or conclusions that come from my initial readings of all of the participant stories. I will not identify you or the other participants by name but if I notice that you are all identifying some of the same issues, I may ask you to say more about your experiences. The data from the interviews and the focus group will serve as a basis for my thesis and will be published as a part of the eventual document as a part of the requirements for my Masters. Your interview will be a part of the data, but you will not be personally identified in any public document. My eventual findings and conclusions will be shared within the University and may be shared with other students, institutions, and professional associations.

Your signature below shows that you understand of the process and that you are willing to participate. You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview by simply telling me that you no longer wish to continue answering questions and that you no longer wish your experiences to be recorded or used as research data. You can email me either before or after the interview to withdraw your consent to participate. You can also have your parent or guardian email me if you are under 18. Your attendance at the focus group will demonstrate your willingness to continue to share your experiences with others. You will also be

asked to sign a confidentiality agreement that says that you know it is important to not share any personal information about the other participants after the focus group has finished. This could include names, school or program names, and or locations in the city where participants live or have gone to school. If I have not heard that you wish to withdraw your participation within three weeks of the final focus group, I will assume your stories can be used as a part of my study. After that time, it will not be possible for you to withdraw your consent.

Sincerely,

Jill Cooper
cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix F - Letter of Consent from Parents for Participants Under 1

UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Principal Investigator:

Jill Cooper

cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

230 Education Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-
9014
Fax (204) 474-7550

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

(204) 474-7243

Research Project Title: What's their story? Students' share their experiences and understandings of barriers or success within alternative programs designed for "at-risk" youth.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

My name is Jill and I am a Master's student in Education at the University of Manitoba. My research interest is in alternative education. I am most interested in reasons why students have left alternative programs that are designed to meet the needs of students who have had difficulty in more traditional school environments. I am looking for six to eight people who have attended a program defined as "alternative" in some way. The program might have been an off-campus, a special classroom within a regular school, or a separate alternative school. If you attended any of these kinds of programs but were not able to get your credits or graduate, I am very interested in hearing your child's story. Their participation would involve an interview lasting approximately an hour and their attendance at a focus group with the rest of the participants that would last approximately three hours. The focus group will allow us to discuss common ideas and themes that came from the interviews. A part of the focus group will be spent talking and another part will be spent working with the ideas through writing, drawing, or taking photos as a different way to communicate their ideas than just talking. After the focus group, I may email them to

make sure that I have understood the ideas and perceptions accurately or to ask questions about something they said or created as a result of our gathering.

Your child's participation in the study has the potential to ensure that educators have descriptions from students about ways that alternative programs could improve chances of success for their students. If your child's experience in the school setting that is described was a traumatic one, there could be a risk of bringing back unsettling or unpleasant memories. If this were the case, I would encourage you or your child to contact Klinik Community Health Centre for free counselling services at (204) 784-4067 email them at dropin@klinik.mb.ca. You should also be aware that I have a legal responsibility to report any descriptions of abuse or neglect to the proper authorities. I will keep all information confidential unless your child tells me that they are in a situation where they are being or have been harmed.

Individual interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon location such as a coffee shop, or a public space such as a university common area or library. I will tape record the interview but will not take any notes during our meeting time. Your child does not have to answer any question that makes them feel uncomfortable and can stop the interview at any time. Your child will be provided with four bus tickets to cover the cost of transportation to and from the personal interview location and for the final focus group. As well, they will receive a \$15 gift card to Tim Hortons, Subway, or Starbucks as compensation for participating in the study.

Your child's name and any other identifying information will be taken off when I transcribe the interviews from the recording device. I will use false names for notes and the only other person to have access to the tapes of our conversations will be my advisor. I will make sure to keep them locked in an area in my house away from my other research materials. The original consent forms with real names and signatures will be stored in a separate location from the data that has been stripped of names. The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with provincial and federal privacy legislations. The audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and typed notes will be kept until June 2021 in a secure locked file cabinet.

During the focus group, I will invite comments on any common themes or conclusions that come from my initial readings of all of the participant stories. I will not identify any of the participants by name but if I notice that you are all identifying some of the same issues, I may ask your child to say more about their experiences. The data from the interviews and the focus group will serve as a basis for my thesis and will be published as a part of the eventual document as a part of the requirements for my Masters. Your child's interview will be a part of the data, but they will not be personally identified in any public document. My eventual findings and conclusions will be shared within the University and may be shared with other students, institutions, and professional associations.

Your signature below shows that you understand of the process and that you are willing to allow your child to participate. They are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview by simply telling me that they no longer wish to continue answering questions and that you no longer wish your experiences to be recorded or used as research data. You can email me either before or after the interview to withdraw your consent for your child's participation. Your child's attendance at the focus group will demonstrate their willingness to continue to share their experiences with others. Your child will also be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement that

says that they know it is important to not share any personal information about the other participants after the focus group has finished. This could include names, school or program names, and/or locations in the city where participants live or have gone to school. If I have not heard that you wish to withdraw your child's participation within three weeks of the final focus group, I will assume your stories can be used as a part of my study. After that time, it will not be possible for you to withdraw your consent.

Sincerely,

Jill Cooper
cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to give permission for your child to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw your child from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you or your child should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at my research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Parent/Guardian's Name (printed) _____

Parent/Gaurdian's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix G – Letter to School Divisions**UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA****Faculty of Education**

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Principal Investigator:

Jill Cooper

cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca230 Education Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-9014
Fax (204) 474-7550

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

(204) 474-7243

Dear (name of Superintendent),

Research Project Title: What's their story? Students' share their experiences and understandings of barriers or success within alternative programs designed for "at-risk" youth.

My name is Jill and I am a Master's student in Education at the University of Manitoba. My research interest is in alternative education. I am most interested in reasons why students have left alternative programs that are designed to meet the needs of students who have had difficulty in more traditional school environments. I am looking for six to eight people who have attended a program defined as "alternative" in some way. The program might have been an off-campus, a special classroom within a regular school, or a separate alternative school. The information gained from this study has the potential to ensure that educators have descriptions from students about ways that alternative programs could improve chances of success for their students. I would appreciate your permission to approach teachers within your school division who know current or former students who fit the criteria for participation in the study. This criteria is outlined on a recruitment poster as well as an online survey that interested youth can complete in order to express their interest in participating. As well as yours and other school divisions, I am contacting community organizations whose mandate includes supporting youth. Participants who contact me through those organizations may be students within your school division. I would appreciate your consent to interview them. Participation includes: individual interviews lasting approximately one hour with me as the principal researcher, participation in a focus group lasting approximately three hours with other youth participants and myself, and a potential follow up email from me for clarification of any information. None of these activities will take place during regular school hours due to my full time job responsibilities as an employee with a school division in the city.

All participants will be informed in the consent forms, during the individual interviews, and during the focus group that their participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without penalty. As well, participants will be informed of the ways that I will keep their identities and the names of any schools, programs, or school divisions confidential. There is minimal risk to individual participants or to school divisions that the identifying information obtained from the research should become public. Names and any other identifying information will be removed when I transcribe the interviews from the recording device. I will use pseudonyms for notes and the only other person to have access to the tapes of any conversations will be my advisor. The only reason that I would break confidentiality is if one of the participants discloses that they have been harmed or are being harmed. I would have to report this to the proper authorities in accordance with my professional obligation as an educator. All participants will be informed of this duty in the consent materials as well as in the interviews. I will make sure to keep them locked in an area in my house away from my other research materials. The original consent forms with real names and signatures will be stored in a separate location from the coded data. The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with provincial and federal privacy legislations. The audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and typed notes will be kept until June 2021 in a secure locked file cabinet. The University of Manitoba may look at my research records to ensure that I have carried out this study in a safe and proper way.

During the focus group, I will invite participants to comment on any common themes or conclusions that come from my initial readings of all of the participant stories. The data from the interviews and the focus group will serve as a basis for my thesis and will be published as a part of the eventual document as a part of the requirements for my Masters. My eventual findings and conclusions will be shared within the University and may be shared with other students, institutions, and professional associations.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Board. Feel free to contact my research supervisor Dr. Michelle Honeyford at Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca or the Human Ethics Coordinator, Fort Garry Campus, at 204.474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

Your signature indicates your willingness to allow me to interview youth who may currently be attending schools or programs in your division. As well, I would appreciate the ability to contact staff who may help with recruiting former students. This could happen through word of mouth or distribution of recruitment materials to current or former students who may fit the criteria for potential study participants.

Sincerely,
Jill Cooper
cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Signature of Superintendent: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H - Interview Protocol

Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me to discuss your experience in an alternative program. I want to remind you that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time during or after the interview, and you can refuse to answer any question that I ask while we are in the interview. Do you have any questions about the consent form or any other parts of the study before we get started?

I know from the information you provided on the initial on-line survey that you attended (program name) for (period of time). I'm really interested in hearing about your experiences there. The reason that I am particularly interested in this topic is because I started my teaching career in an alternative program for middle years students who had not had great experiences in their regular classes. Until September of this year, I taught at an alternative high school in the city. Many of my former students were having similar struggles so I am really wanting to hear from students about the ways that schools, especially alternative ones, weren't working for them. I think it's really important for people in education to understand the problems from the students' point of view. Thanks again for being willing to help. I was planning to record our conversation using this device. Is that ok with you?

1. Tell me about your experiences in an alternative program or school. How did you get there? Did you choose it? Did someone choose for you? Why? How?
2. What parts of the school did you like? What were the best parts? Why? How was that a good thing for you?
3. What parts of the school did you dislike? What was the worst part? Why?

4. How long were you there? What kinds of schools or experiences had you had before coming to the alternative program? What were the best parts? Why? What were the worst? Why? How do you think back on those experiences now?
5. What led you to disengage from the program? Did you choose to leave? Did the school choose for you? How did you feel about leaving? How did it affect you? What were you thinking about that decision at the time? How about now?
6. Could the school/program have done to support you more?
7. Is there anything you might have done differently?
8. What might have helped you stay?
9. What's happened since then?
10. This has been really helpful.....go back to anything that I want more information on
11. If you could design a place that would have been your dream school, what would have worked for you? Imagine nothing being impossible.....
12. What would you want to say now to the school or people who are thinking about alternative students?

Appendix I – Confidentiality Agreement



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

230 Education Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-9014
Fax (204) 474-7550

Principal Investigator:

Jill Cooper

cooperk4@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

(204) 474-7243

Research Project Title: What's their story? Students' share their experiences and understandings of barriers or success within alternative programs designed for "at-risk" youth.

I understand as a participant in this research study that I will have an opportunity to meet with other participants to discuss our experiences within alternative schools. It is the obligation of the researcher to protect the privacy of all participants involved within the study. Therefore, I am being asked to sign this agreement to represent my understanding of the confidential nature of the research in which I will participate.

I understand that I am not to discuss any of the information shared by other participants during our focus group. This information includes names, experiences, school names, or geographical information given by the participants or the researcher. I also understand that any information that I share will also be kept private.

My signature below represents my understanding and agreement to protect the confidential nature of the study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix J - Participant Recruitment Questions

1. What is your name?
2. How can I contact you?
3. How old are you?
4. What kind of alternative program did you attend?
 - a) Classroom within a school
 - b) Off campus classroom or storefront
 - c) Alternative School
5. How long did you attend the alternative program?
 - a) I registered but never attended.
 - b) I attended a few days a month and then stopped attending.
 - c) I attended regularly (minimum 3 days a week) for at least a month and then stopped attending
 - d) I attended regularly (minimum 3 days a week) for several months.
 - e) Other (Describe your attendance pattern)
6. How would you define your experience as unsuccessful?
 - a) I didn't graduate
 - b) I didn't earn as many credits as I wanted
 - c) It took too long to get my credits.
 - d) I didn't attend.

Appendix K - Focus Group Preamble

Hi everyone. Thanks so much for being here today and being willing to share more of your stories with me and with each other. As you know from our discussions during your interview and your signature on the consent form, everything we talk about must be kept confidential. That means that you can't talk to anyone outside this room about what is said here. That includes names of others, school names and locations, or any information that people share. Does everyone understand that?

I would like to start today with a group discussion with some questions I have about common themes and ideas that I drew from your interviews. I am going to record this part of the session. Is everyone ok with that? After the group discussion, I have developed some activities that will allow you to show me your ideas in different ways. There are poster boards to draw or write on, pictures and images to choose from or draw yourself, and words and quotes for you to think and write about. This part of the session will not be recorded but I will walk around and ask questions and will write some notes about your responses or things that you may be saying to each other while you are working. Anything you create will help me understand your thoughts, feelings, and ideas about how alternative schools and programs could better serve their students. I will keep the tapes, writing, and pictures for eventual use as part of my thesis but all information that identifies you will be removed to protect your identity.

I would like to remind you that you can withdraw your participation at any time during the session. You don't have to answer any questions or participate in any activity. Thanks again for being here. I'm really excited to learn more from you both individually and as a group.

Appendix L – Focus Group Statements

Statements to Discuss

STUDENTS:

1. Students who attend alternative programs care less about their marks. They just want to get it done.
2. Schools don't have the power to change their students. Students have to change themselves.
3. Student behaviours and attitudes established in traditional schools affect success in alternative schools.
4. Students who have left traditional schools need a strong personal reason and internal motivation to go back.
5. Students back off from opportunities in traditional environments. There is too much competition.
6. Students create stronger bonds with other students in alternative programs because there are less students.
7. Students have a harder time hiding in alternative programs and therefore are more likely to succeed.
8. Student mindset is the most important part of their success.
9. Students get too comfortable in alternative programs and don't push themselves.

TEACHERS:

1. Caring teachers have been at the schools a long time.
2. Uncaring teachers prompt bad behaviour.
3. Caring teachers have a balance of good content knowledge, high standards, and good relationships. None of those things without the other makes a good teacher.
4. Effective teachers go beyond the content. They reach out to students at home and make students feel like they care.
5. Teachers who push to "get it done" are the best ones.
6. Good teachers care about their students as people.
7. Teachers are more prone to play favourites with so few students. Stronger relationships can be negative too.
8. Alternative school staff need to be specially trained in alternative methods. Strong guidance and support staff are key.
9. Alternative program staff push students into less flexible degree programs.
10. Teachers in alternative programs are under more stress from the demands of the students and the larger system.
11. Teachers at alternative programs advocate for their students far more than at a traditional school.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Alternative schools should remove attendance policy if students show other ways of completing the course work.
2. There should be many alternatives for schooling because leaving the programs that are not right allow students to graduate from the good ones.
3. Supportive programs within traditional school are more helpful than the ones that stand alone.
4. Prizes for student accomplishments help student achievement; especially for students who might not be eligible in larger, more traditional environments.
5. Alternative schools should have alternative entrance requirements (more flexibility in terms of number or type of credits earned).
6. Experiential learning should count toward credits in alternative environments.
7. Alternative schools need to break patterns established in previous schooling for their students (allow flexible schedules, relevant course material, challenge bad behaviour).
8. Successful school programs will provide the right balance of support and motivation.
9. All course content in alternative programs should reflect 'real life' skills.
10. Student input should be considered when designing alternative school environments.
11. Drama and peer groups are problems within all school environments. Alternative schools should try and deal with the problems differently.
12. All students should have to complete the coursework in order to earn the credit. Alternative should not mean less work. It should just mean more flexibility.
13. Rewards validate internal motivation but they don't create it.
Alternative schools need flexible structures to ensure that students attend and progress.
14. Alternative schools need to offer a wide range of programming for diverse students.

CULTURE:

1. Students in alternative programs are unsafe because of behaviour issues and being confined to one space all day.
2. Immediate consequences for bad behaviour are important no matter what the environment.
3. Despite significant problems outside of schools, students would continue to attend a supportive and challenging school environment.
4. It is motivating for students to set goals with the school leader and be held accountable.
5. In too many alternative environments, school staff don't keep students safe.
6. Smaller school settings make it easier for teachers to provide attention to students.

7. If alternative environments allow the same patterns of behaviour as traditional schools, the same behaviours will continue.
8. High expectations are not a problem at alternative schools. The problem is inconsistent expectations.
9. Relationships between students and teachers at alternative programs are stronger and more equal.
10. It is easier to take advantage of special programs offered in alternative environments.
11. Peer relationships can be harder at alternative programs because there are less people and you have to deal in closer quarters with people that you don't like.
12. Smaller settings allow for stronger bonds which increases student motivation to finish.
13. Lack of consistency in standards causes resentment between students. This issue is even worse at alternative school because it is more obvious because of the smaller setting.
14. Alternative schools are too lenient. They don't follow through on consequences.
15. Alternative schools should pay more attention to providing a comfortable and welcoming setting.
16. The academic work at alternative programs is easier than more traditional high schools.
17. Alternative programs provide preparation for more traditional high schools if you have been unsuccessful.
18. The caring environments provided in alternative programs are enabling students to fail.
19. Alternative programs are often placed in locations that are unsafe for students.
20. Alternative programs don't offer as broad a range of course options.
21. Alternative programs feel like a family.
22. Caring relationships between students and staff are important in alternative programs.

THESE ADDED March 26, 2019

Relationships between students and school principals are important in alternative settings.

Students in alternative programs have more of an expectation that relationships between staff and students should be equitable.

Alternative programs are inconveniently located.

Creating a community among peers is very important at alternative schools.

Students who attend alternative programs typically experience more barriers both within and outside of school systems.

Physical set up of alternative programs are more comfortable than traditional classrooms.

Providing food is a big motivator and makes students feel cared for and appreciated.

The students at alternative programs have more negative behaviours and can negatively influence each other.

The close physical location in some alternative classrooms means many distractions and a lack of privacy.

Providing food and opportunities for cooking is important in making students feel welcome and successful.

Alternative programs are more effective at seeing learning opportunities in non-traditional subjects.

Some of the chaotic behaviour within and outside of alternative programs makes for stronger bonds between students.

Alternative programs become a dumping ground for problem students.

Alternative schools are not understood and well supported by other systems that students must interact with. This lack of understanding creates further barriers.