

Former Met School Students' Perspectives on their High School Experiences:
Navigating the Trade-Offs of Alternative Schooling

by

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Abstract

In Canada and internationally, there is a movement toward educational pluralism evidenced by an increase in the number and types of alternative schools. Alternative schools are broadly defined as schools that offer something different than traditional, public schools. One specific type of alternative high school, the Met School, was recently adopted by a public-school division in Winnipeg, Manitoba. These schools are characterized as catering to the individual needs and interests of students by providing student-centered and experiential learning opportunities. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study obtained the first-hand perspectives of seven students who previously attended Met Schools in Winnipeg. Their perspectives regarding the advantages and disadvantages of being educated in a Met School and how it has impacted their life outcomes were obtained and analyzed through the lens of Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1980). Findings indicate that Met Schools provided personalized learning, real-world practical experiences, and mentorship, which were described as contributing to personal growth and enhanced social relationships. At the same time, participants identified several drawbacks with the approach including a competitive application process, limited academic choice, and a lack of important high-school experiences due to the small school size. Overall, although the stated goal of Met Schools was to provide equitable access for all students, participants' narratives suggest that students with greater access to social capital experienced advantages within this model. Recommendations for

policy and practice to address issues of equity, access, and quality of educational experience are presented.

Keywords: alternative schools, school choice, Met Schools, inclusion, interpretative phenomenological analysis, career readiness, social capital

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

There is a trend toward educational pluralism, which is reshaping the Canadian educational landscape, evidenced by an increasing number of “alternative schools” (Van Pelt, 2023). Educational pluralism is a concept where multiple options exist for schooling outside of neighbourhood schools and families have the choice as to where their child should attend. Many different types of alternative schools have arisen due to this trend. While there is a lack of consensus in the literature about the definition of an alternative school due to their ownership and operation by diverse groups, serving different populations, and having disparate purposes, programming, governance and funding sources (Perry et al., 2024; Te Riele et al., 2020), alternative schools can be broadly defined as a type of school that offers something different from traditional, public schooling (Guerrero et al., 2024; Maton & Nichols, 2020; Sliwka & Yee, 2015). The universal characteristic of alternative schools is the shared belief that the needs of students will be better met outside of a traditional school setting (Aron, 2003; Carnie, 2003; Koetzsch, 1997; Raywid, 1988; Sliwka, 2008; Young, 2002).

In Canada, the alternative schools that operate outside of the public school system include both for-profit and not-for-profit independent schools, also referred to as private and non-government schools. These schools are regulated and described differently in each province, with 5 Canadian provinces providing government funding to independent schools if they meet specific eligibility criteria, such as employing provincially certified teachers and using the provincial curriculum (Van Pelt et al., 2017).

To capture the diversity of alternative schools in the Canadian context, Hunt and colleagues (2022) developed a typology of independent schools in Ontario, which has subsequently been applied in Alberta (Hunt & Dejong Vanhof, 2024) and other provinces. The typology defines 6 distinct independent school types and include (a) Religious - schools which have a religious identity, purpose, or formal affiliation; another type are (b) Special Emphasis schools that serve a specific student population (e.g., students with special or diverse needs), provide a particular curricular emphasis (e.g., the arts), or follow a specific educational philosophy or pedagogical approach (e.g., Montessori); (c) Top Tier schools are another classification that are regarded as elite schools, with competitive admissions, high academic standards, state of the art facilities, and high tuition rates; (d) Preparatory schools provide conventional schooling, but have a primary focus on university preparation and high-quality instruction at a lower cost than Top Tier schools; (e) Credit Emphasis schools focus on offering courses or credits toward completing a secondary diploma, charge fees on a per credit basis and/or recruit international students; finally, (f) Other schools are classified as schools with identifiable specialities that differ from those outlined in the other categories. Some independent schools have a primary and secondary focus and thus bridge more than one category in this typology.

Within each of the six types of independent schools, Hunt and DeJong Vanhof (2024) also defined distinct subtypes, of which Special Emphasis schools are the most diverse with 13 subtypes, including but not limited to: Advanced Placement (AP), Arts, Sports, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math disciplines (STEM), Experiential Learning,

International Baccalaureate (IB), Language/Culture, Special Education, with some schools having multiple foci. This typology of independent schools reveals the extraordinary diversity of the alternative school landscape and the range of educational options that exist.

The growth of Canadian alternative schools is highlighted by Statistics Canada (2022), which reported that independent school enrolments from kindergarten to grade 12 from 2006 to 2022 grew by almost one quarter at 23.8%, while public school enrolments only increased by 4.5%. Across Canada in 2023, approximately 9% of school-age students attended independent schools or engage in homeschooling (Statistics Canada, 2023), with British Columbia having the highest percentage of students enrolled in independent schools at 13.2%, followed by Quebec at 11.7%, and Ontario at 7% (Zwaagstra et al., 2023). A more recent study found that independent school enrolments in Alberta had increased by 45% since the 2013-14 school year, triple that of the province's public school enrolment, with one in three students in Alberta educated outside of a public, government-run school (Hunt et al., 2024).

In Manitoba, schools are classified as: (a) public, (b) funded independent, and (c) non-funded independent (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). Public schools are overseen by elected local school boards and school divisions and are funded by the provincial government. Both funded and non-funded, independent schools are typically overseen by boards of parents, donors, and other community entities, with the former receiving 50 percent of the provincial government funding that public schools

receive and the latter, which includes homeschooling, receiving no provincial government funding. To receive provincial funding in Manitoba, funded independent schools must employ certified teachers, follow the provincial curriculum, and be subject to annual inspections. As non-funded independent schools do not receive provincial government funding, they are not required to employ certified teachers or teach the provincial curriculum (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). Like other provinces, Manitoba has witnessed growth in non-funded independent school enrolments. In 2022, enrolment in non-funded independent schools increased by 11%, while public school enrolments rose by only 3% (Macintosh, 2023a). The number of new school start-ups in Canada is also a strong indicator of the trend toward alternative schooling. For example, Ontario saw a 51.5% increase in new independent school start-ups, from 954 in 2013-2014 to 1445 in 2022 (Hunt et al., 2022). The increased interest in homeschooling is additional evidence of a desire for alternatives. In 2023, Manitoba indicated a 10.3% increase in the total enrolment in homeschools (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024).

While the growth of independent schools, homeschooling and new school start-ups are indicators of an increasing desire for alternative schooling, it is important to point out that alternative schools and alternative programming are also increasing within publicly funded government-run schools, as a part of the continuum of supports that they provide. A 2016-2017 study involving alternative schools that are operated by the Toronto District School Board found that there were 39 alternative schools operated under such

arrangements, with 20 at the secondary level and 19 at the elementary level (Brown, 2017). Similarly, a review of websites of publicly funded school divisions in Manitoba such as the Seven Oaks School Division and the Pembina Trails School Division reveals an increasing number of alternative schools that operate as a part of the continuum of support in these divisions (Pembina Trails School Division, 2024b; Seven Oaks School Division, 2024). As the number of alternative schools in Canada continues to grow in both independent and public government-run schools, it is important to consider the philosophical underpinnings of the alternative school movement and the factors that contribute to its growth.

Philosophical Underpinnings and Growth of Alternative Schools in Canada

The philosophical underpinnings of the alternative school movement in Canada and internationally can be traced back to two main schools of thought, the Progressive and Libertarian traditions. The Progressive tradition was based on the work of American philosopher John Dewey, the Steiner (Waldorf) schools in Europe, the Hall-Dennis Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education and the Worth Commission on Educational Planning reports for Ontario and Alberta (Levin, 2006). This tradition espoused the value of experiential learning over rote memorization, with a special focus on providing individualized learning experiences that were interactive and interdisciplinary. The Libertarian tradition emphasized non-interference, natural progress, individual freedom and choice over all matters related to education (Levin, 2006). The Libertarian philosophy was also reflected by A. S. Neill's (2024) original Free School, Summerhill School, which

originated in England and then emerged in the United States in the late 1960s and spread to Canada during this period. The Free School movement was rooted in an anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment sentiment, which contributed to the emergence of hundreds of alternative, independent schools throughout the United States and Canada (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Lillard, 2019; Meier, 2002; Rothstein, 1999). Both traditions were fueled by growing dissatisfaction with public schooling and a desire to return to an educational approach that existed before mass schooling, characterized by a more personalized, family and community-centred approach (Maton & Nichols, 2020; Sliwka, 2008; Woods et al., 2005).

Grounded in these traditions, alternative education continued to gain momentum in Canada in the 1960s and has continued to the present day. The most significant growth of alternative schools has occurred in some of the largest urban centers, including Vancouver and Toronto, where parental concerns over low academic standards, a perception that children were not being adequately prepared for high school and post-secondary education, and increasing taxation have continued to fuel the desire for alternative education (Bascia & Maton, 2017; Ellis & Yoon, 2019). Also increasing in rural areas, alternative schools in these contexts were primarily faith- and/or culture-based and driven by the desire of specific religious and cultural groups to preserve and strengthen their identities.

Mounting dissatisfaction with public schooling and parental advocacy also prompted the school choice movement. This movement gave families the right to choose the school

that their children would attend by enabling them to apply to schools outside of their geographic catchment area, which has led to increased competition for student enrolment in both independent schools and publicly funded government-run schools (Perry et al., 2024). As schools undergo marketization, which includes the application of market principles like choice, competition, and operational autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Perry et al., 2024; Whitty & Power, 2000), the need to offer diverse educational options to attract students has also risen (Ellis & Yoon, 2019), as evidenced by the development of charter schools in Alberta (Brown & Lawton, 2013), magnet programs in Ontario, and choice programs in Vancouver (Government of British Columbia, 2023). While the ability of independent schools to accept non-local students has always existed, expanding this option to public schools has increased competition in the public sector and raised concerns about the potential of school choice to exacerbate existing educational inequalities (Perry et al., 2024; Ellis & Yoon, 2019).

While some alternative schools emerged in response to parental advocacy and a desire for a more personalized, family, and community-centered education, others were developed by government bodies to serve as mechanisms of segregation for children with disabilities and those with challenging behaviours (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Freeman, 2023; Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). For the parents of these children, alternative schools were preferable to institutions or incarceration, as they provided some opportunity for an education, nonetheless their children remained segregated from their non-disabled peers

and were often transported outside of their local communities (Freeman, 2023; Perzigian et al., 2017).

Despite the philosophical movement toward the provision of an inclusive education for all and the protection of the right to an inclusive education articulated in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), segregated, alternative schools for children with disabilities persist. This is noteworthy in the current examination of alternative schools because marginalized individuals such as children with disabilities may not have comparable choices for education, despite much parental advocacy (Freeman, 2023; Perzigian et al., 2017; Wilkerson et al., 2018). These students may instead be placed in an alternative school that would not typically be their school of choice; a stark difference from the experiences of more privileged groups with the option of choice, demonstrating how alternative schools may advantage some and disadvantage others (Perry et al., 2024). Given these concerns, it is important to examine the profile of students who attend alternative schools, and the accessibility to such schools by specific groups.

Who Attends Alternative Schools?

Much of the research on the profile of students who attend alternative schools has been conducted in the United States. It is important to note that many alternative schools in the United States are intended to provide students who have struggled academically and/or who have been suspended or expelled with another avenue for academic success, which Raywid (1994) referred to as “last-chance schools.” Research in the United States

indicates that these alternative schools are most often located in urban settings and have a remedial and/or disciplinary focus, and most students who attend these types of alternative schools are racialized, disabled, English as Additional Language learners, male, low achieving, and from low-income households (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). Not surprisingly, there are significant concerns about the disproportionate representation of marginalized students in these settings, as well as concerns about lower rates of per-pupil spending and limited resources, including access to school counsellors and social workers, when compared to non-alternative school settings (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). While the range of alternative school options is also expanding in the United States, the continued disproportionate representation of marginalized students in under-resourced, remedial, and disciplinary settings warrants attention (Freeman, 2023; Stewart, 2020; Te Riele et al., 2020).

In the Canadian context, there is increasing research regarding the profile of students who attend alternative schools. The types of alternative schools in Canada are diverse, and a divide appears to exist between alternative schools for remediation or discipline from those that provide new and innovative pedagogies. A study in Toronto revealed that alternative schools that provide new and innovative pedagogies primarily serve students with higher socioeconomic status (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Brown, 2017). Related research in Toronto also indicates that most students who attend alternative schools do so by choice, as their parents have selected schools that prioritize their children's creativity, intellectual, and identity-based needs (Maton & Nichols, 2020; Stewart, 2020).

While in theory, educational options and choice would seem to enhance the quality of education for all (Walberg & Bast, 2003), an examination of who avails themselves of these opportunities, and the limited resources in some settings, raises significant concerns about educational equity and the potential for social and economic inequalities resulting from alternative schooling (Ellis & Yoon, 2019). Given these concerns, the advantages and disadvantages of alternative schools must be considered.

Debates About Alternative Schools in Canada

Amidst the differing views that will be noted in the literature, one thing to keep in mind throughout the discussion is the fact that the literature available on alternative schools is quite broad. As scholars defend and critique alternative schools, each study is conducted within its own context of alternative schools. As such, there are concerns that much of the existing research regarding alternative schools fails to examine each according to its type, pedagogical approach, population served, and outcomes (Glavan et al., 2022). This may be due in part to the lack of consensus about the definition of what constitutes an alternative school, and the nebulous use of the term “alternative” to encompass an increasingly diverse array of educational options (Engelmann, 2022). Considering these limitations in the research about alternative schools, when possible, contextual information about the studies being reviewed will be provided and overarching themes will be presented.

Facilitators of Effective Alternative Schools

Proponents of alternative schools argue that positive relationships, individualized programming, community partnerships, and inclusive environments attract families to these settings. The smaller settings of alternative schools have been found to foster strong, positive relationships (Stewart, 2020). When positive relationships are developed between students, families, and educators, programming may be more precisely tailored to students' needs (Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Other related research involving alternative schools has found that flexible instruction and assessment within these settings may provide a more personalized learning experience that promotes student engagement and self-directed learning (Bascia & Maton, 2017; Brown, 2017; Stewart, 2020). Community partnerships, including internships, service learning, and health services, may build on established positive relationships, further enhancing the effectiveness of alternative education. These components of alternative schools collectively may establish inclusive environments, fostering a sense of belonging, care, and empathy within the school community (Stewart, 2020). Moreover, inclusive environments in alternative schools strive to create equitable and supportive environments for students historically marginalized by factors such as poverty, race, and disability, or by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, two-spirited or more (LGBTQ2S+) identities (Phillippi et al., 2021; Stewart, 2020). While these characteristics of alternative schools may enhance the educational experience for some students (Ross & Angelidis, 2020; Stewart, 2020), other research explores the barriers posed by alternative schools.

Barriers Posed by Alternative Schools

Some scholars have critiqued alternative schooling as a “band-aid” solution to the systemic failures of public education (Stewart, 2020). Afacan and Wilkerson (2024) describe how students may resort to alternative schools when the public school system has failed to meet their needs. While some elements of alternative schools are effective, some of the barriers of alternative schooling can hinder students from addressing the very issues that led them to leave mainstream schools in the first place. These barriers include social isolation, limited access, inequitable resource distribution, and relaxed academic standards.

The smaller size of some alternative schools may contribute to stigmatization, as they may have disproportionately high numbers of students with disabilities and behavioural challenges (Freeman, 2023). While the smaller settings may help foster relationships with teachers and peers, some students report social isolation and a lack of connection with peers in their local communities due to attending schools outside their neighbourhoods (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024).

Furthermore, alternative schools may perpetuate inequities. Families with more social capital are often better positioned to apprise their children of opportunities to attend highly coveted, well-resourced, alternative schools due to greater access to information, the ability to navigate a rigorous application process, and financial resources (Brown, 2017; Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Some alternative schools, however, lack resources compared to mainstream schools, offering fewer courses, limited

extracurricular activities, and reduced support services (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Freeman, 2023). Conversely, certain alternative schools boast innovative programs and better resources, exacerbating inequities among some students.

The flexibility in instruction and assessment within alternative schools may also lead to variability in educational quality, resulting in inconsistencies in students' school experiences, knowledge gaps, and insufficient preparation for post-secondary education (Glavan et al., 2022; Malcolm, 2024). Stewart (2020) argues that a more systematic approach to educational reform is needed to ensure that all students, regardless of the type of school they attend, receive a high-quality education.

Reflecting on these debates, the research regarding the facilitators of and barriers to excellence in alternative schools is mixed and their impact on students' academic and future life outcomes is difficult to discern. As such, there is an urgent need to define and examine specific typologies of alternative schools, so that a robust understanding of their pedagogical approach may be determined and clearer insights regarding their impact on students may be obtained. One alternative school that offers a specific pedagogy across all of their schools are Big Picture Learning (BPL) Schools. A closer look at BPL schools' origins, pedagogy, and mission will be taken to determine clearer impacts of a specific type of alternative school on students' life outcomes.

Big Picture Learning (BPL) Schools

Big Picture Learning (BPL) is a non-profit organization in the United States that has a network of 275 alternative high schools in Australia, Canada, India, Kenya, New Zealand,

the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Big Picture Learning, 2024a). It was initially developed to address low graduation rates and to provide a vocational pathway for marginalized and underserved students (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), with its first alternative high school “The Met” promoting “skills for tomorrow,” and reportedly having increased graduation rates (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). The BPL approach embraces a “one student at a time” model that emphasizes positive relationships, personalized/individualized learning experiences, and opportunities for real-world work and community involvement that are tailored to each student’s interests and needs within an inclusive school culture (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

Distinct from other types of alternative schools, BPL focuses on relationships, relevance, and rigour (Bradley & Hernández, 2019), through establishing strong, positive relationships with students and their families, providing meaningful and relevant education, and challenging students through deep project-based learning and community-based internships (Big Picture Learning, 2008). BPL strives to build students’ social capital by prioritizing equity-driven practices such as personalization, low student-teacher ratio, ensuring the same subject teachers and peer group for four years, real-world learning through internships and service learning, interest-driven project-based learning, and authentic assessment (Big Picture Learning, 2024c).

BPL provides a specific model of alternative education that further separates itself from other alternative schools, through what it refers to as its “distinguishers,” and they include: (a) “one-student-at-a-time” approach, (b) advisory classroom style, (c) authentic

real-world learning, (d) leadership development for teachers, (e) positive school culture, (f) authentic assessment, (g) flexible school organization, (h) on-going professional development for staff, (i) family involvement, and (j) post-secondary planning (Big Picture Learning, 2024b). With a specific pedagogical approach (Glavan et al., 2022) and these distinct features, a closer look at BPL schools can shed light on its global influence and impact on students in the city of Winnipeg (Big Picture Learning, 2024c).

BPL Schools in Winnipeg

In Winnipeg, within the Seven Oaks School Division, research authorization was obtained from the superintendent to conduct research on the Met Schools; there are 3 BPL Met Schools with a total student enrolment of approximately 350 (Seven Oaks School Division, 2024). Met Schools are considered Special Emphasis – Experiential Learning alternative schools, in accordance with the typology of Hunt et al. (2022). Their pedagogical approach also aligns with the Progressive tradition articulated by John Dewey (1938) given their focus on experiential learning. The Met Schools implement BPL pedagogy to help students uncover their passions guided by the 10 BPL distinguishers. Within this framework project-based learning, internships, and exhibitions of learning serve as three central pillars of the model.

In 2009, Seven Oaks Met School was the first publicly funded Met School established in Winnipeg. Initially this Met School operated within Garden City Collegiate, however, it is currently a standalone, alternative high school (Seven Oaks School Division, 2024). In 2016, Maples Met School was established within Maples Collegiate, and it

continues to operate as a part of the continuum of support provided within Maples Collegiate at the present time. The third Met school, Exchange Met School, opened as a standalone alternative high school in 2021 in downtown Winnipeg. Since 2009, all Met schools have instituted an application process, like the application process in Met Schools in other countries, that requires students to be independent learners and parents to be actively involved in their education (Seven Oaks School Division, 2024).

Research Regarding BPL

With the expansion of BPL schools, there is emerging research about the efficacy of its pedagogical approach and the outcomes it achieves. However, some studies and publications must be interpreted with caution as they have been conducted by the BPL organization. To illustrate, in 2014, BPL in partnership with Innovation Unit published a data-driven infographic depicting demographic characteristics and performance indicators of students within the network across the USA. The infographic noted that 95% to 100% of BPL students in the USA were accepted in 2 to 4-year college programs, 88% of those not in college had secured full-time employment or established a career, and 74% of those working had secured employment through their internship experience that they were afforded while attending a BPL school (Big Picture Learning, 2014). Some of the emerging research in the United States has also highlighted the following as indicators of the success of BPL schools including improved: (a) college enrolment rates, (b) employment rates, (c) independence, and (d) communication skills (Arnold et al., 2009; Arnold et al., 2016; Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Zeiser et al., 2014). However, closer scrutiny reveals concerns

about BPL's model and its potential to contribute to social isolation, limited access for some students, and inequitable resource allocation, as these factors are known to hinder access for marginalized students and have not yet been thoroughly analyzed. These gaps in the literature raise doubts about the model's ability to break down barriers to entry and build social capital for marginalized youth. Moreover, research involving the first-hand perspectives of students who have attended BPL schools is limited (Alger, 2016; Arnold et al., 2016; Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Emery et al., 2020; Fischetti et al., 2024). Importantly, no research has been conducted on BPL in the Canadian context. These gaps provide a strong rationale for examining BPL from the perspective of students who have attended these schools in the city of Winnipeg.

Statement of the Problem

Within the public-school context of Manitoba, there are an increasing number of alternative schools which are Met Schools. There are assumptions made by educators that the Met Schools in Winnipeg offer a rewarding experience for students and that they contribute to an improvement in future life outcomes (i.e., graduation rates, post-secondary education, employability, and well-being), which is evidenced by their continued expansion in a publicly funded school division. However, there is limited research about the efficacy of BPL and Met Schools in Canada, the first-hand perspectives of the students who attend these schools, and the outcomes they achieve.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, my purpose is to investigate former Met School students' perspectives about Big Picture Learning. Since Met Schools have been in existence in Winnipeg since 2009, many students have attended these alternative high schools and likely have unique insights about the BPL model and perceptions regarding its impact on their life after high school (i.e. graduation, post-secondary education, employability, and well-being).

Through the lens of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1980), questions will direct students to share their perspectives regarding their experiences at Met Schools and their perceived impact on their life outcomes will be explored. Specifically, social capital theory is used to investigate the bonds and bridges (Bourdieu, 1980) that an individual has and relates this form of social capital to their overall life outcomes. Social capital theory also employs the components of relationships, trust, and shared norms and values. Former Met School students' social life outcomes which include graduation, post-secondary education, employability, and well-being will be investigated, using the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of former Met School students about their high school experiences?
2. What do former Met School students perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages of the Met School experience?
3. How do former students perceive the impact of Met School on their life outcomes?

Significance of the Study

There is a considerable amount of research about alternative schools in the United States, while the research about alternative schools in Canada is emerging (Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Maton & Nichols, 2020; Perry et al., 2024; Rothstein, 1999). It is difficult to draw conclusions from some of the existing research because of the variability in the definitions of what constitutes an alternative school and the diversity of programming they provide (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Bascia et al., 2017; Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Hayes, 2012; Maton & Nichols, 2020; Perry et al., 2024). By examining a specific typology of alternative school and its pedagogy, this study will fill a void in the literature by contributing to an enhanced understanding of BPL and Met Schools. There is value in obtaining the first-hand perspectives of former students about their experiences as their unique insights and lived experiences may inform and potentially improve Met Schools' policies and practices. Furthermore, conducting a study that amplifies students' voices aligns with the pedagogical approach of Met Schools, which prioritizes a student-centered educational model.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

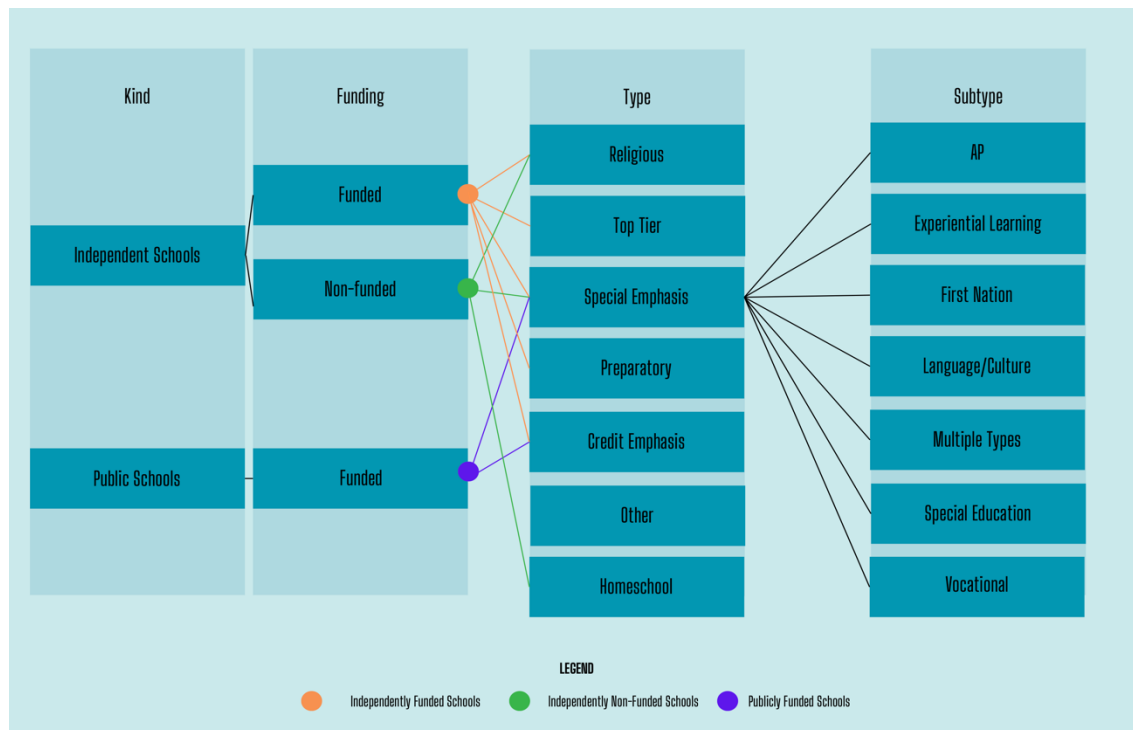
To provide contextual information for this study, this chapter begins with a description of alternative high school programming and alternative high schools in the city of Winnipeg. Publicly available information including school division's websites, school handbooks, community reports, and government documents were reviewed to provide a "first look" at the alternative high school landscape in Winnipeg, of which Met Schools are a part. The typology developed by Hunt and DeJong Vanhof (2024) to classify independent schools in Alberta, was subsequently applied to all high schools in the city of Winnipeg, including Met Schools, to identify the typologies that currently exist within this context. Following a description of the alternative high school landscape and programming in Winnipeg, a critical review of the literature on facilitators of and barriers to alternative schooling will be provided including student outcomes (i.e. graduation rates, employment, and overall well-being), students' perspectives, as well as the relevant literature related to BPL schools.

Description of High School Alternative Programming in Winnipeg

A comprehensive search of school divisions' websites, handbooks, community reports and government documents were conducted to identify the presence of alternative high schools and/or alternative high school programming in Winnipeg. The search identified 79 high schools in Winnipeg, of which 51 are government-run and publicly funded, 26 are independent and funded, which means they receive 50% of their funding from the provincial government, and 2 are independent and non-government funded. It is

important to note that the province of Manitoba also has institutional schools. Institutional schools include separate schools for individuals with complex needs (e.g., disabilities, justice involvement, and multi-system support needs). These schools often have multiple funding sources and were considered as independent funded schools for the purpose of this review. As First Nation schools are federally funded, they were outside of the scope of this review.

Hunt and DeJong Vanhof's (2024) typology of alternative schools/education includes 8 distinct types of alternative schools/programming (i.e., Special Emphasis, Religious, Top Tier, Preparatory, Credit Emphasis, Other, Unclassified, and Auxiliary). Homeschooling was added to Winnipeg's typology as there has been a significant increase in homeschooling in Manitoba in the past 5 years (Hunt & DeJong Vanhof, 2024; Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). Hunt and DeJong Vanhof (2024) characterized schools that fit more than one subtype as multitype. See Figure 1 for an illustration of this typology and the classification of Winnipeg's high schools.

Figure 1*A Typology of Schools in Winnipeg***Publicly Funded Government-Run High Schools**

Some publicly funded, government-run high schools in Winnipeg are separate, alternative schools with a particular pedagogical focus, while others offer alternative educational programming as a part of the continuum of programming they provide. Out of the 51 publicly funded, government-run high schools in Winnipeg, there are 15 separate, stand-alone, alternative high schools, of which six were classified as Credit Emphasis schools because they primarily focus on supporting students to graduate by recovering credits flexibly. The remaining nine stand-alone alternative high schools were classified as Special Emphasis schools because they employ a particular pedagogical approach. Within

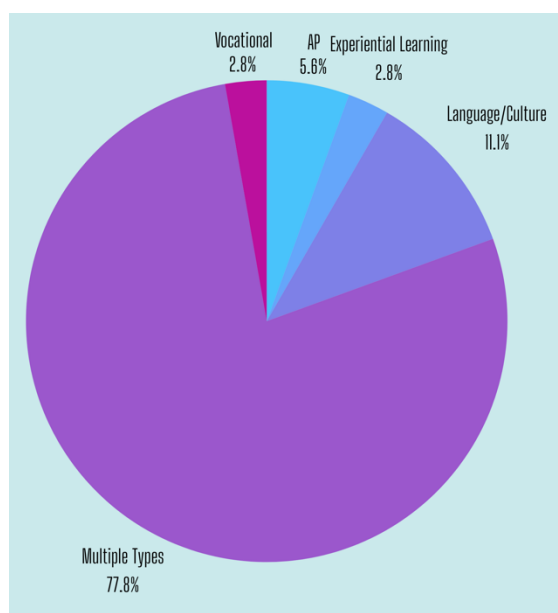
these Special Emphasis Alternative schools there were diverse sub-types, which included: two First Nation alternative schools, two Special Education alternative schools, three Vocational alternative schools, and two Experiential Learning alternative schools. Two out of the three Met Schools in Winnipeg were classified as Special Emphasis alternative high schools because they are in a separate physical space, and they employ a specific pedagogy. The Met Schools were further classified within the subtype of Experiential Learning because of their focus on real-world learning and student-driven project-based learning (Hunt and DeJong Vanhof, 2024). Since one Met School is located within a public high school, it was not classified as a separate, alternative high school, but rather, as a high school that provides alternative programming as a part of the continuum of support within a high school setting.

All 36 out of the remaining 51 high schools in Winnipeg were noted to provide some form of what Hunt and DeJong Vanhof (2024) characterize as alternative educational programming. These high schools all met the criteria for being Special Emphasis, meaning that they serve a specific student population (e.g., students with special or diverse needs) or provide a particular curricular emphasis (e.g., the arts). Almost all the high schools provided a broad array of programming as a part of their continuum of support, which included several Special Emphasis subtypes (i.e., Advanced Placement (AP), Experiential Learning, Language/Culture, Vocational, and Multi-types – schools that have several special emphasis). See Figure 2. For example, the Maples Met School located within Maples Collegiate is a part of the continuum of support provided within that school. While

the Maples Met School provides experiential learning opportunities, there are other subtypes of Special Emphasis programming offered within Maples Collegiate such as skilled trades, culinary arts, and broadcast programming (Seven Oaks School Division, 2024). As another example, Pembina Trails Collegiate reflects multiple Special Emphasis subtypes including information technology (IT), AP, and technical vocational education (Pembina Trails Division, 2024). École Secondaire Sisler High offers animation, network cyber security, AP, dual-credit and pre-employment special emphases programming (Winnipeg School Division, 2024). These diverse educational offerings reflect the changing landscape of high school education in Winnipeg and the broad range of programming from which students may choose. The exception to this trend was observed in the French language high schools within the Division Scholaire Franco-Manitobaine (DSFM), where only one special emphasis was noted, which included French language and culture.

Figure 2

Special Emphasis Subtypes in Non-separate Public Government-Run High Schools

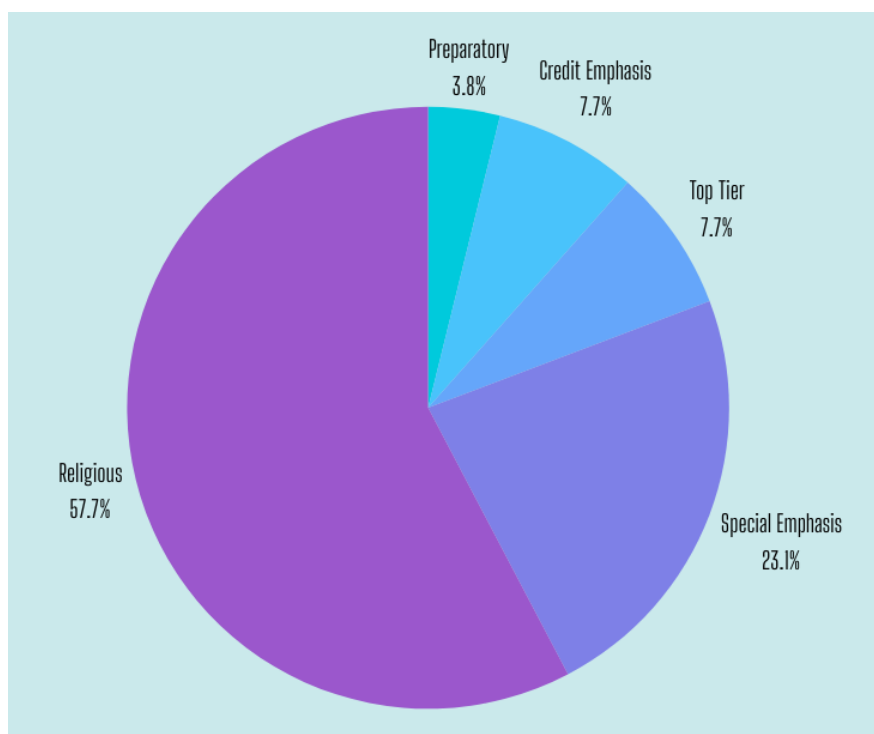


Independent Funded High Schools

Of the 26 independent funded schools, 15 were classified as primarily Religious or schools which have a religious identity, purpose, or formal affiliation. Six were primarily Special Emphasis, two were primarily Top Tier schools which are regarded as elite, with competitive admissions, high academic standards, state of the art facilities, and high tuition rates. Two were Credit Emphasis and one was primarily a Preparatory school because it provides conventional schooling, but its primary focus is on university preparation and high-quality instruction at a lower cost tuition than Top Tier schools. See Figure 3.

Figure 3

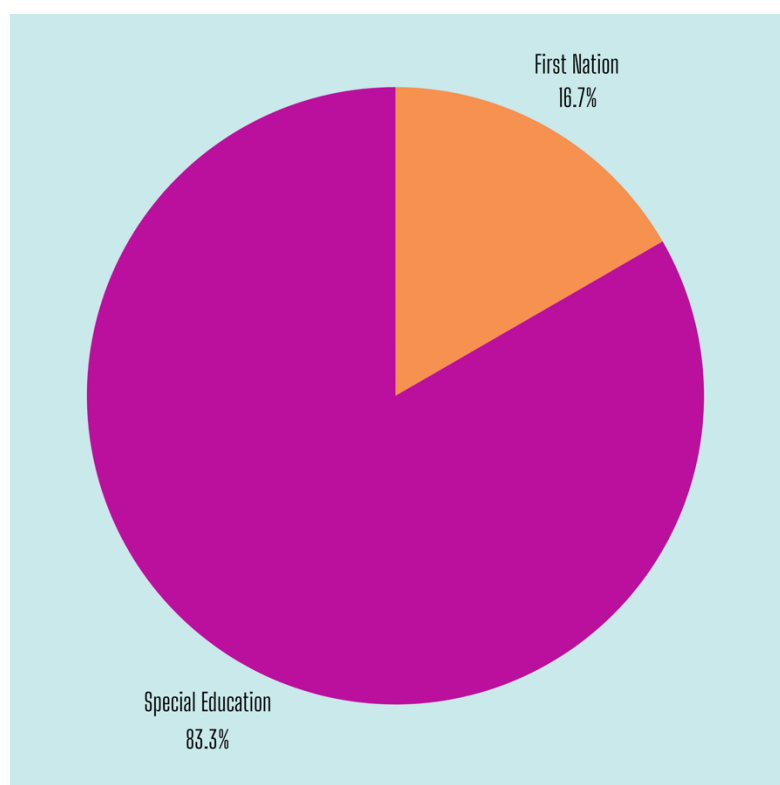
Typology of Independent Funded High Schools in Winnipeg



Of the six independent funded schools classified as Special Emphasis, five were classified as the Special Education subtype and one was First Nation. See Figure 4. Unlike the publicly funded government-run schools, none of the Special Emphasis-funded independent schools had multiple subtypes.

Figure 4

Subtypes of Special Emphasis Independent Funded Winnipeg High Schools



Independent Non-Funded High Schools

There are only two non-funded independent high schools in the city of Winnipeg according to the 2023 Manitoba Education enrolment report and they include Hosanna Christian School and the Twelve Tribes Community Training Program (Manitoba Education

and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). These schools were classified as Religious and Language/Culture schools respectively. Without public financial support, these schools rely on tuition fees and donations to operate. However, with this independence, they have more operational autonomy when compared to public schools.

Summary of Winnipeg's High School Landscape

In summary, Winnipeg's high school educational landscape reflects a diverse array of educational options in the publicly funded government-run and independent funded schools. In publicly funded government-run high schools, there are an increasing number of alternative schools and alternative programming options from which families may choose (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014; Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). Most public high schools incorporate multiple Special Emphasis offerings into the continuum of support they provide, and some, like two of the three Met Schools, are separate schools with a highly specialized focus. In contrast, independent funded schools are primarily religious in nature and tend to have less diverse educational programming, with some catering to wealthier families seeking a top-tier education. Also, independent funded schools were found to have the highest number of schools with a Special Emphasis on Special Education, and these were all segregated, physical spaces. There is also evidence of an increasing number of schools that focus on Language/Culture within the independent school's context, particularly for Indigenous peoples and newcomers, reflecting an increasing desire for cultural preservation, a trend

that has also been observed in Vancouver, Toronto, and Alberta (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Ellis & Yoon, 2019).

Given the continued expansion of educational options within the public school domain in Winnipeg, families have greater opportunities for their children to attend their “school of choice” outside of their geographic catchment area if it provides a particular educational program that they regard as beneficial (Macintosh, 2023b). This has contributed to increased competition for student enrolment in publicly funded government-run schools in Winnipeg, and thus the need for schools to differentiate themselves to attract students, a phenomenon that is also increasing in other Canadian provinces (Hunt & DeJong Vanhof, 2024). To illustrate, there is evidence that Met Schools accept students from outside of their geographic catchment (Seven Oaks School Division, 2024), and the numerous sports, arts, and STEM academies in other high schools do the same (Pembina Trails School Division, 2024; Winnipeg School Division, 2024).

Provincial funding cuts to education over the past ten years have also contributed to public school’s increasing reliance on business partnerships to fund their diverse educational programming (Ali, 2021). Business-school partnerships can increase school attractiveness and enrolment, but also establish vicious cycles of marketization as schools that struggle to form partnerships may have difficulties marketing themselves, resulting in a lack of competitiveness and reduced enrolment (Perry et al., 2024). While Top Tier independent funded schools in Winnipeg like Balmoral Hall School, and St. John’s-Ravenscourt School have long-standing relationships with businesses such as

Microsoft (Balmoral Hall School, 2024; St. John's-Ravenscourt School, 2024), public school divisions such as Louis Riel, Pembina Trails, and Winnipeg also are entering into these partnerships to enhance the array of programming they provide in areas such as science and technology (Louis Riel School Division, 2024; Pembina Trails School Division, 2023; Winnipeg School Division, 2024). The Met Schools in Seven Oaks School division also involve a public-private partnership with the Big Picture Learning organization in the United States (Seven Oaks School Division, 2024), providing further evidence of a shift toward the marketization of education resulting from the pressure on schools to offer unique and specialized alternative schooling experiences to compete for student enrolment.

As the range of educational options increases in Winnipeg's high schools, several critical questions emerge. First, do students from marginalized groups have equitable access to alternative educational options? Second, do these settings perpetuate existing inequities by serving students from more advantaged groups with access to social and cultural capital (Freeman, 2023; Perry et al., 2024)? Third, are alternative educational options beneficial or as Engelmann (2022) argues, is there a false dichotomy between mainstream and alternative schools, with mainstream schools being regarded as "bad" and alternative schools being regarded as "good" despite the lack of empirical evidence to support this claim? To examine these issues, in the next section, a review of the literature on alternative schooling is provided.

Effective Alternative Schools

Despite the lack of consensus on the definition of alternative schooling, prior research has indicated facilitators of and barriers to all types of alternative schooling, which will be discussed in this review. Emerging themes within the limited literature related to the BPL including positive relationships, individualized programming, community partnerships and inclusive environments will also be analyzed, yet nonetheless carefully conducted, in view of the diversity of alternative schools and the resulting lack of a standardized definition for them (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Barrett, 2021; Cante, 2022; Glavan et al., 2022; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Ross and Angelidis (2020) identified key themes of alternate education and will be referenced in the analysis of facilitators of and barriers to alternative schooling. Their review was conducted to inform their work at the Surrey Learning Centers and Delta alternative education programs in British Columbia, and consists of research from scholarly articles, action research studies, dissertations and reviews of Canadian school districts. The alternative schools reviewed were schools where learners needed an alternative environment that differed from the traditional secondary school. Their findings indicated that: (a) positive relationships, (b) individualized programming, (c) community partnerships, and (d) inclusive environments were key facilitators of successful alternative programs. These four themes commonly appeared in the literature on alternative schools and underpin the BPL model as outlined by Littky and Graebelle (2001). Conversely, barriers to alternative schooling were noted to include: (a) social isolation, (b) access, (c) resources, and (d)

academic expectations. In the following sections, these facilitators of and barriers to alternative schools will be further analyzed along with current scholarly research involving BPL schools.

Positive Relationships

A recurring theme in the literature on alternative schools is that they build positive relationships between teachers and students. A recent study conducted by Afacan and Wilkerson (2024) investigated the relationships between students and teachers in 11 different alternative schools in the Midwestern United States. The schools involved in this study included schools for students who had not been successful in traditional schools (e.g., special education, harassment-free learning environments, credit emphasis, rehabilitative supports, expulsion recovery, holistic needs and individualized learning), four of which, included schools where students had been referred by their previous school. Interviews revealed that both students and educators felt they developed more positive relationships compared to traditional school settings. A further analysis of the educators' perspectives revealed that a focus on: (a) community building, (b) a commitment to teaching in alternative schools, (c) positive school climate, and (d) parent and student engagement strengthened relationships between educators and students in these alternative school contexts (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024).

Another study conducted by Glavan et al. (2022) investigated relationships between students and teachers in an alternative school in Ohio that provided a combination of traditional schooling and online coursework. Former students were interviewed about their

experiences and most reported that they had developed positive relationships with their teachers, in part because they felt the setting was more inclusive, which contributed to increased engagement in their studies. Glavan et al. (2022) concluded that the teachers in this context attended to both academic and social-emotional needs and were thus better able to foster meaningful relationships with students.

In the Canadian context, Stewart (2020) noted the importance of meaningful relationships between educators and students in alternative school settings. In a study involving four small independent alternative schools in Toronto that served marginalized students, Stewart (2020) identified essential characteristics that foster meaningful relationships in these contexts, which included their small size and low student-to-teacher ratio. They argued that the small size of alternative schools provided greater opportunities for individualized instruction, which contributed to the development of positive and deeper relationships between educators and students, when compared to traditional high school settings.

Individualized Programming

A consistent theme throughout the literature on alternative schools is the claim that they offer individualized learning experiences that attend to the unique interests and needs of students (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Bradley & Hernández, 2019; Freeman, 2023; Ross & Angelidis, 2020; Stewart, 2020). The provision of individualized programming is one of the primary ways that alternative schools attempt to differentiate themselves from traditional schools. The lack of personalization in traditional school settings frequently drives

students toward alternative options that they think might better cater to their needs (Freeman, 2023). In a review of the literature on behaviour-focused alternative schools, Freeman (2023) described personalized or individualized educational experiences as a key factor in enhancing student academic achievement. Freeman (2023) argued that when students' personal needs and interests are attended to, they often succeed in alternative settings where traditional schools may fall short.

The study by Afacan and Wilkerson (2024) also emphasized the importance of an individualized approach to instruction because it allowed for flexibility, experiential learning and student-centered practices. They noted that in alternative schools, collaboration in the individualization of student learning was encouraged. Teachers also reported several benefits associated with flexible school programming including the ability to employ innovative pedagogies and explore relevant topic areas outside of the prescribed curriculum. Ross and Angelidis (2020) noted similar benefits related to the individualization of instruction in alternative school settings including enhanced student engagement and improved attendance.

Individualized programming in alternative schools also parallels differentiated learning, which can be implemented through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. UDL was designed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) (CAST, 2025). This framework is implemented by many schools to try and achieve an inclusive classroom. Much of what was described previously in the literature in terms of connecting learning to students' interests, offering flexibility, and individualizing instruction, can be

explained by the UDL framework. UDL prioritizes “multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression” (CAST, 2025).

Research has indicated that as a framework for individualized programming, UDL promotes equitable access and student success by anticipating learner variability and offering flexible options for engagement, representation, and expression that support motivation, agency, and meaningful participation amongst diverse learners (CAST, 2025, Al-Azawei et al., 2016; Almeqdad, 2023). By implementing UDL, personalized, flexible learning environments can make for a more inclusive space for students and remove barriers to learning where they may exist.

Community Partnerships

There is increasing evidence of the academic, social, and employment benefits that arise from school and community partnerships (Bartlett, 2015; Bartlett, 2018; Epstein et al., 2003). As a result, many alternative schools are leveraging these partnerships to provide diverse learning opportunities not available in traditional classrooms. Additionally, schools are leveraging the wraparound approach (Bartlett, 2015; Bartlett, 2018) and involving families and integrating services for students. In an increasingly competitive labour market, these schools provide students with employability skills, which serves as an incentive for some to attend these schools. In their book, *Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement: Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy*, Bascia et al. (2017) described the alternative school landscape of Toronto and the broad range of community partnerships that these schools are increasingly relying upon as part of the

continuum of educational opportunities they provide. They illustrate several types of partnerships that enable students to learn in different contexts including, but not limited to newspaper offices and courthouses, envisioning “a school without walls,” where students are not confined to learning within limits, like in the traditional classroom.

Ross and Angelidis (2020) also described the enhanced opportunities for community partnerships in alternative schools. These partnerships provide students with the opportunity to explore real-world learning and career development through volunteering and work experience. In the Canadian context, Inglenook Alternative School incorporated a program called, “Outreach,” that suspended regular classes once a week to allow students to engage with community, explore career paths, and gain work experience. Over time, the students who attended this program were able to find successful career paths (Bascia et al., 2017). Another related program called MacTECH was established in York, Ontario by the York School Board, Humber College and three local businesses – Standard Modern Technologies, Weston Machine and Tool, and Magna International. This program connected students to trade-based experiential learning opportunities, from which students could gain hands-on learning experience and certification from Humber College (Bascia et al., 2017).

Stewart (2020) found that the partnerships alternative schools formed with mental health clinics and hospitals provided significant advantages to both students and educators. In their study, teachers reported that these partnerships expedited access to services for marginalized students and enhanced their understanding of mental health

through direct connections to these professional groups. Maillet (2017) wrote an article from the perspective of an administrator of an alternative middle school re-engagement center in a large suburban school district that centered on the importance of community partnerships. In this context, they described how teachers embedded academic learning standards into action-oriented service-learning initiatives to build strong community partnerships. Maillet (2017) argued that the social-emotional and academic skills that students developed through service learning far exceed typical expectations in traditional classrooms (Maillet, 2017)

Inclusive Environments

While positive relationships, individualized programming, and community partnerships contribute to inclusion, creating truly inclusive environments requires a nuanced and harmonious approach. Many students turn to alternative schools because they lack a sense of belonging in traditional schools. Stewart (2020) described several alternative schools in Toronto that aim to address these issues by creating inclusive environments for students who have felt “pushed out” of traditional schools. Notable examples include the OASIS Triangle Program, which provides a supportive space for LGBTQ youth, Toronto’s Africentric Alternative School, designed to meet the needs of Black students, parents, and community members by providing culturally relevant programming, Vancouver’s “Kumtuks” program designed to re-engage Indigenous students with schooling, and Vancouver’s Cultural Enrichment Program, which employs Indigenous instructors to deliver culturally relevant programming (Ellis & Yoon, 2019;

Maton & Nichols, 2020). These initiatives underscore the importance of cultivating inclusive environments that foster empathy and care and allow students to feel safe in ways that are not always possible within larger, mainstream schools (Stewart, 2020).

Another study examining the factors that contribute to successful school completion in alternative schools also highlighted the importance of inclusive environments (Te Riele et al., 2020). Te Riele and colleagues (2020) argued that feelings of marginalization, which can stem from race, gender, disability, mental or physical illness, or pregnancy, are mitigated in inclusive settings. They refer to Vadeboncoeur and Vellos' (2016) framework, which identifies three key strategies through which alternative education programs cultivate inclusivity: (1) "being seen," (2) "recognizing the capacity to grow," and (3) "co-creating social futures." "Being seen" speaks to staff members' ability to acknowledge students as individuals, engaging with them personally and attuning to their needs. "Recognizing the capacity to grow" encompasses both staff and student commitment to self-improvements and the willingness to engage in challenging conversations about personal development. "Co-creating social futures" denotes a collaborative process where staff and students learn from one another, gradually creating new and shared possibilities (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016, p. 314). Establishing inclusive environments is crucial for young people, as a lack of connectedness can negatively affect their self-perception, life satisfaction, and overall engagement with school. The transformative potential of inclusive practices in alternative schools underscores the need for system changes across all educational settings.

Barriers of Alternative Schooling

Ross and Angelidis (2020) also identified several barriers of alternative schools, which include: (a) access, (b) exclusive referral processes, (c) attendance-based success measures, (d) recruiting and retaining staff, (e) limited research on outcomes, (f) lack of differentiated curriculum, (g) limited communication, (h) social isolation, and (i) stigma. Of the barriers, social isolation and access are particularly relevant to the present study. In addition, issues related to resources, and academic expectations, while not explicitly identified by Ross and Angelidis (2020), emerged in the broader literature and were reflected in participants' accounts of the Met School experience. These four barriers are examined in the discussion that follows.

Social Isolation

While in alternative settings students are typically able to form meaningful relationships with staff and their peers, they may be removed from their local neighbourhood. As a result, Ross and Angelidis (2020) highlighted that students in alternative schools may not have enough interactions with their peers who attend their neighbourhood schools. This can lead to diminished friendships, reduced access to previous positive adult mentors, and overall hamper the transition from an alternative school back to a neighbourhood school. Furthermore, this separation has the potential to unintentionally minimize student choice and agency. It may also materialize the unintended outcome of socially isolating students from their neighbourhood schools. To mitigate this, Ross and Angelidis (2020) advised that alternative and neighbourhood

schools need to work alongside each other to ensure that both are equally responsive to the needs of their student populations and that plans to support the transition of students back to their neighbourhood school are co-developed.

In 2017, the Toronto District School Board conducted a comprehensive review of alternative schools in Toronto from junior kindergarten to post-secondary. The review involved consultation sessions and a detailed examination of the academic literature on alternative schools. This review revealed that over 90% of students who attended alternative high schools in grade 9 were attending schools outside of their local neighbourhood. This migration from local neighbourhood schools to alternative schools affirms the concern about the potential for alternative schools to isolate students from local social networks and further reveals the willingness of students to seek out these non-local educational options. The pattern illuminates a growing trend toward choosing schools based on specialized programming rather than proximity. The implications of such choices are profound, as they may lead to a weakening of local ties and challenges with maintaining a connected and supportive community environment, thus reinforcing social isolation in alternative education settings (Brown, 2017).

Access

When considering issues of equity, access to alternative schools may pose a critical barrier for some students. Ross and Angelidis (2020) examined the factors that may contribute to this issue. First, referral processes whereby students are “sent” to alternative schools by their current school for issues including, not limited to, disability

and behaviour raise concerns about the equity of such referral systems and their potential to further marginalize specific groups. Second, the detailed application processes employed by highly coveted, and well-resourced alternative schools may serve as a barrier for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Third, the financial burden associated with tuition at some alternative schools may further exacerbate inequities, especially for low-income families. Finally, the geographic scarcity of alternative schools presents another challenge, particularly for families living in rural areas. Ellis and Yoon (2019) examined equitable access to public, government-run alternative secondary schools in Vancouver, which are Special Emphasis schools according to the typology developed by Hunt et al. (2022). These Special Emphasis alternative schools offer programming in sports, arts and technology, and tend to perpetuate existing inequities by primarily serving students from higher socio-economic backgrounds and greater access to social capital. Parents with social capital can apprise their children of these educational opportunities. Consequently, factors such as limited access to information about alternative education options and the rigorous application processes may effectively preclude some families from accessing alternative education (Ellis & Yoon, 2019). Additionally, many of these alternative schools are typically located away from neighbourhood schools presenting transportation barrier issues, however when transportation is provided, research has indicated that educational gaps are narrowed (Cordes & Schwartz, 2019; Valant & Lincove, 2023).

Freeman (2023) expanded upon the issue of access by examining the demographic disparities in alternative school enrolment from the lens of a school psychologist, commenting on the National Association of School Psychologist's Social Justice Committee's stance on alternative education placements in the United States as a social justice issue. They argued that the very structure of alternative schools, often limited their acceptance of students to specific neighbourhoods, which perpetuated imbalances in terms of gender, race, and social capital. Freeman (2023) identified that males, LGBTQ+ youth, Black and Hispanic students, and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in alternative schools. This overrepresentation raises critical questions about whether these students are being funneled into alternative settings due to systemic biases, discriminatory practices, and structural racism. In contrast, Maton and Nichols (2020) have suggested that alternative schools in Toronto, when socially integrated, can address the needs of marginalized youth more effectively than traditional schools. Furthermore, evidence from studies on socioeconomic status, social backgrounds and equity (OECD, 2010, 2013; Sirin, 2005) indicate that a school's socioeconomic composition is a more reliable predictor of students' academic achievement than the socioeconomic status of individual students.

Resources

Resource inequality is a common theme in the literature on alternative schooling. Some alternative schools struggle with insufficient resources, which significantly impacts the quality of education they can provide. Fresques and colleagues (2017) conducted an

extensive analysis of alternative school data across the United States, revealing that resource shortages are a critical issue. Their study, which combined federal databases with local data from 13,000 districts over 15 years, indicated that nearly one-third of the alternative school population is shortchanged by at least \$500 per pupil, compared to traditional schools in the same district. This funding gap often results in the absence of crucial services such as counselling, educational assistants, and specialized staff, which are readily available in larger, better equipped, and sufficiently funded traditional schools (Addis et al., 2020; Wilkerson et al., 2018).

The lack of resources in alternative schools may force students and their families to choose between the specialized programming offered by alternative schools and the comprehensive support provided in traditional schools (Ross & Angelidis, 2020). This dilemma raises significant equity issues, as students who require additional support may find their needs unmet in alternative settings, leading to feelings of exclusion and alienation (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024). Moreover, the small size of many alternative schools, combined with limited staff, may exacerbate these challenges, leaving students and their families to navigate external support systems on their own.

Conversely, some alternative schools have access to a surplus of resources, often due to unique funding structures that include public, private, business, and higher education partnerships (Ellis & Yoon, 2019). These well-resourced schools can offer a wide array of services, such as guidance counsellors, educational assistants and specialized courses. Additionally, they can cultivate robust business-school partnerships

that further enhance educational opportunities. To illustrate, a high school in Winnipeg offers a specialized program in skilled trades, that was developed in collaboration with a local college (Pembina Trails School Division, 2021). Another program within the same division, supported by Tech MB, a local technology organization, focuses on software development, coding and cybersecurity, aiming to prepare students for post-secondary education or employment in the informational technology sector (Pembina Trails School Division, 2023). Moreover, a career pathway in aerospace is available in the Winnipeg School Division through partnerships with major industry players such as Boeing, StandardAero, and Magellan Aerospace, designed to transition students into a ten-month work-ready program after high school (Pembina Trails School Division, 2023, 2024a; Winnipeg School Division, 2024). Within the same division, supported by Tech MB, a local technology organization, focuses on software development, coding and cybersecurity, aiming to prepare students for post-secondary education or employment in the informational technology sector. Beyond these trade-based and post-secondary pathways, some schools have developed partnerships with businesses like the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and The Rink to offer academy programs tailored to students with specific interests. While these programs are often associated with private schools, they are also present in public schools, though they typically require tuition fees (RINK Hockey Academy, 2024; Royal Winnipeg Ballet, 2024).

While these partnerships can enrich students' educational experiences, they also raise concerns about equity and the motives behind such collaborations. Benes and

colleagues (2016) conducted a scoping review of Canadian and international sources, identifying several challenges associated with business-school partnerships, which include: (a) fragmented career pathways for Canadian youth, (b) greater risk of not making a successful transition to work for vulnerable youth, and (c) education systems and business communities not placing a priority on building pathways to work. Additionally, the involvement of businesses in education can sometimes result in a misalignment of goals between non-profit schools and for-profit businesses, leading to failed partnerships (Badgett, 2016). There is also the risk of exploitation, where businesses exert undue influence over educational content and priorities, potentially compromising the integrity of the educational experience (Rowe, 2024).

The disparity in resources between alternative schools also negatively impacts staff and students. Afacan and Wilkerson (2024) highlighted that the limited course and extracurricular options available in under-resourced alternative schools created undesirable work environments for staff, often leading to burnout. These schools struggled to provide even basic elective courses, such as science, art and physical education, which are standard offerings in more resource-rich settings. The lack of extracurricular activities such as sports, diverse food services, and dances further diminished the student experience in these contexts, leaving them feeling disconnected and underserved.

Ultimately, the lack of resources in some alternative schools not only affects the availability of courses and extracurricular activities, but also negatively impacted

instruction and academic rigour. As a result, students in these schools may not receive equitable educational opportunities, which may impact future life outcomes.

Academic Expectations

One of the challenges facing alternative schools is a lack of standardization in curriculum and instruction. Many alternative schools adopt specialized curricula designed to be flexible and tailored to students' unique needs, which Ross and Angelidis (2020) have argued can become a barrier to student learning due to the potential for a lack of rigour. The flexibility of the curriculum can also lead to inconsistent educational quality, which makes it difficult to ensure that students are meeting essential academic standards. While flexible curricula may benefit some students in the short term, it can create difficulties in the long term when students transition to more structured post-secondary options like university or employment (Fresques et al., 2017; Ross & Angelidis, 2020).

This challenge is exemplified in the study by Glavan and colleagues (2022), which explored students' perspectives on alternative schooling. The study highlighted significant issues with the academic expectations in these settings, particularly when online curricula were utilized. Glavan et al. (2022) found that the openness of the curriculum allowed students to "cheat the system," resulting in an environment where it was difficult to measure actual learning outcomes. Despite students in this study graduating from high school, half of them were unemployed nine months after graduation, suggesting that the curriculum failed to prepare them adequately for life beyond school. The authors

suggested that integrating more vocational programming, career exploration, and life skills could have mitigated these negative outcomes.

Afacan and Wilkerson (2024) identified the aspects of alternative schools that may interfere with meeting academic expectations, and they included: (a) lack of resources, (b) low instruction/teacher quality, (c) lack of instructional guidance, and (d) mission mismatch. They described how the openness of the curriculum often required teachers to develop their own materials and lesson plans. In turn, this lack of structure and support led to a diluted educational experience, where students were not adequately challenged or prepared for future academic or career opportunities. They further cited how limited resources contributed to the use of outdated textbooks and inadequate technology, further reducing the quality of education that students received. Overall, the limited research on the long-term impacts of alternative programs on students' life outcomes makes an assessment of their effectiveness difficult (Freeman, 2023).

Student Outcomes of Alternative Schools

Acknowledging these limitations in the literature, the following section will explore student outcomes associated with alternative schools, specifically graduation rates, employment and overall well-being.

Graduation Rates

In the Canadian context, research by Bascia et al. (2017) recounted several stories of students successfully graduating from a variety of alternative schools across Toronto to indicate the effectiveness of these alternative programs. The school programs included:

(a) Triangle Program, (b) SEED, and (c) City School. Bascia et al. (2017) illustrated how these alternative schools were filling a gap in the current educational system by modifying provincial course content to cater to students' individual needs and by creating a greater number of pathways to graduation for students who may have typically dropped out of school.

Another study in Toronto, conducted by Brown (2017) measured graduation rates from alternative schools in the 2016-2017 school year. This study found that students who attended elementary alternative schools had a 77% graduation rate, while students who attended secondary alternative schools had a dismal 16% graduation rate. The significant differences in graduation rates were primarily attributed to socioeconomic factors. Brown (2017) noted that the students who attended elementary alternative schools were typically from families of a higher socioeconomic status as compared to the students who attended alternative secondary schools. Moreover, the students who attended alternative secondary schools were more likely to be enrolled in non-academic courses. This study further illustrates the complexities associated with attempting to use graduation rates as a measure of alternative schools' effectiveness.

Concerns over graduation rates from alternative schools have also surfaced in the United States. A report by the United States Government Accountability Office (2020) analyzed the United States Department of Education's most recent alternative school data from the 15 states that had the highest concentrations of alternative schools. Findings indicated that in 10 out of 15 states, alternative schools had lower four-year graduation

rates when compared to mainstream schools, and as a result, some of these states started to measure graduation rates beyond four years (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). Within this sample, Black and Hispanic students, were noted to have significantly lower graduation rates as compared to white students. Additionally, graduation rates were also lower for students of lower socioeconomic status and students who spoke limited English.

Another study conducted a nationwide analysis consisting of 15 years of data on 100,000 schools from 13,000 districts across the United States, including almost 4000 alternative schools (Fresques et al., 2017). The researchers noted that nearly half of the alternative schools across the country had graduation rates below 50% (Fresques et al., 2017). This study noted that many students were leaving for-profit alternative schools without diplomas, but they were not being counted as high school dropouts, painting a dubious picture of the effectiveness of alternative schools. They also noted that when graduation rates increased in mainstream school settings, alternative school enrollments increased by at least 5%. Fresques et al. (2017) argue that this finding suggests that low-achieving students may have been pushed out or referred to alternative schools to increase the reported graduation rates in mainstream schools by as much as 10%. The pressure to be a high-performing school and meet State standards may have contributed to these efforts to mask student achievement, again making the effectiveness of alternative schools difficult to discern.

Employment

Research on the employment outcomes of students attending alternative schools in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada are also mixed. Glavan et al. (2022) interviewed a small sample of 4 students who attended an alternative school that blended online learning with traditional education in an Ohio district, and half of the students that they interviewed, were unemployed after nine months of completing this alternative school experience. Glavan et al. (2022) suggested that although students were able to graduate on time or even early within this alternative setting, more time should have been spent on vocational or post-secondary planning. Aligning with this thinking, Malcolm (2024) conducted a study on the long-term outcomes for students who attended alternative provision schools in England. Findings indicated that there was a drop in employment rates post-graduation. However, Malcolm (2024) highlighted that students in alternative provision schools in England do not typically attend university immediately after completing high school, suggesting that long-term studies of students' outcomes after attending alternative provision schools were needed to gain a better sense of the impact of their alternative education experience on their post-secondary enrollment.

Phillippi and their colleagues (2022) conducted a specific study on the outcomes of youth of colour who attended an urban alternative education program in the United States. They collected data on grade-level enhancement, employability, and decreased risk for justice involvement. Findings indicated that 8% of the 62 youths surveyed had full-time employment immediately after completing the program (less than 30 days), 17% were

employed part-time and 42% were enrolled in post-secondary education. One month after the program, 25% were employed full-time, 25% employed part-time, and 75% had not been involved with the justice system since completion of the program. The results of this study are somewhat encouraging and indicate that positive outcomes for marginalized students may be achieved in some alternative school contexts.

Some alternative schools focus on career development and assisting students with the transition from high school to employment. A case study conducted by Lea et al. (2023) involving a strength-based alternative school explored how proactive and protective approaches can improve employment outcomes for adult Black men who were previously incarcerated (Lea et al., 2023). With a focus on career and technical education that consisted of: (a) soft skills training, (b) work-based learning opportunities, and (c) school-based partnerships with institutions, the previously incarcerated Black men who enrolled in this alternative school were able to build resilience and become employed. Moreover, the types of employment that the men secured were from legitimate sources, where they were able to gain financial resources to pay bills and live the lifestyle they desired with their families (Lee et al., 2023). While this study involved a qualitative account of the students' experiences of alternative schools, it illustrated the importance of a strength-based, student-centered approach to alternative education and the benefits that can be realized from a focus on pre-employment skills.

Well-being

Research regarding alternative schools and students' well-being is also mixed. A recent study commissioned by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Social Justice Series on Alternative Educational Placements (Freeman, 2023) identified the specific elements of alternative schools that contribute to students' overall well-being, which included: (a) personalized education, (b) smaller class sizes, (c) lower student-to-teacher ratio, and (d) greater access to support staff (i.e. psychologists, counsellors and other related service providers). Another study that explored the sense of belonging experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in an alternative school environment found that in addition to a more personalized approach that prioritized students' social and emotional needs, the removal of students from schools where they experienced bullying, academic struggles or social difficulties also led to improvements in overall well-being (Phillippi et al., 2021). A recent study conducted by Wright and Campbell, (2022) compared the mental health and well-being of students in mainstream schools to students in alternative schools and to students who were neither at school nor employed in Australia. The study revealed no significant differences between the well-being of students in alternative schools and the well-being of students who were out of school or unemployed. In this study, the students in mainstream settings reported the highest scores of positive well-being. However, it is important to note that there was a large variation in the well-being reported by the students who attended alternative schools. The study also found that

many Indigenous students were excluded from mainstream schools and were over-represented in the alternative schools that were studied (Wright & Campbell, 2022).

Stewart (2020) also explored the well-being of students attending alternative schools in Toronto. In this research, one student shared their personal experience and described how teachers equally valued well-being, alongside academics and how they benefited from this holistic approach. The teachers in this study recognized that only by first meeting students' social and emotional needs, could they then meet students' academic needs. However, Stewart (2020) cautioned that alternative schools may be trying to do too much by providing food, clothing, shelter, and safety in addition to an education. Given the challenges marginalized youth face, Stewart (2020) characterized the holistic support provided by alternative schools as providing youth with a sense of "deferred hope" (p. 37).

Students' Perspectives about Alternative Schools

Research involving students' firsthand perspectives about their alternative schooling experience reveals several key themes in the literature including the importance of relationships, individualized programming, and inclusivity. Cantey (2022) conducted a study in South Carolina with at-risk students who had been struggling within traditional school settings and who were at risk of failing or dropping out of high school. Their perspectives regarding the effectiveness of their alternative school experiences were obtained using semi-structured interviews. The students indicated that positive student-teacher relationships had the greatest influence on their perceptions of their alternative schooling experience, followed by flexible programming, improved grades, and the

provision of mentorship classes to assist with goal setting. Moreover, students reported that empathetic, creative, and holistic teachers were most effective in addressing their academic and behavioural needs (Cantey, 2022).

Lopez-Cobar (2022) examined the Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) programs in Southwestern Ontario, an intervention program for at-risk youth who may be experiencing mental health, behavioural or academic issues. Lopez-Cobar (2022) set out to determine what the student experience of these programs was like, since they had been in place for over fifteen years. Using narrative inquiry, Lopez-Cobar (2022) determined that although students found academic success, the program was limited to courses promoting vocational and hands-on work instead of academic knowledge. In terms of inclusivity, students welcomed the small, inviting classrooms. The students reflected that small class sizes with low student-to-teacher ratios minimized distractions and helped them to be successful. However, students did not appreciate being referred to these programs and felt that attending these programs further stigmatized them. Additionally, students found that teachers were inadequately prepared to teach the course content and did not have the skills to support behavioural and care needs. Overall, Lopez-Cobar (2022) concluded that if alternative programs provided: (a) meaningful academic curriculum, (b) positive classroom spaces, (c) courses for future academic/employment opportunities, and (d) enhanced teacher preparedness, students would be better prepared for high school graduation. (Lopez-Cobar, 2022)

Vallee (2019) also examined students' perspectives about their experiences at alternative schools in a small Western Canadian town. Students in the study shared recommendations for improvement, some of which included: increasing funding, reducing the stigma associated with attending an alternative school, improving access to mental health education and resources, incorporating relevant curriculum, and reducing pushouts. The students also shared their positive experiences at alternative schools including strong relationships with teachers, flexibility in the academic demands, refuge from the threat of failure or expulsion in traditional schools, emphasis on future planning, and the inclusive nature of the school, especially for the LGBTQ+ community. Findings from Vallee's (2019) study are consistent with the findings of Lopez-Cobar (2022), reinforcing the importance of positive relationships, small class sizes, and inclusive environments for the students who attend these alternative settings, as well as the need for a stronger curricular focus, enhanced post-secondary preparation, and increased resources (Vallee, 2019).

While the research on BPL schools is emerging, in the next section, a review of the existing research on BPL schools will be provided with a focus on the elements of BPL that may distinguish it from other approaches to alternative education

Positive Relationships in BPL Schools

A critical component of BPL schools is their emphasis on relationships (Bradley & Hernández, 2019; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Emery et al. (2020) conducted an evaluation of Launceston Big Picture School in Australia, from 2017 to 2020 for the Department of

Education Tasmania. Findings revealed that the school valued, prioritized and facilitated the development of strong, meaningful relationships among students and staff, families and mentors. This study found that the provision of a dedicated teacher who was responsible for all courses, regular interactions with a teacher and mentor several times per week and learning experience in real-world contexts contributed to enhanced student engagement and improved graduation rates (Emery et al., 2020). The study also highlighted how teachers regular, personal contact with parents and parents' active participation in student learning also strongly contributed to improvements in students' outcomes. The above insights suggests that the relationships developed at Launceston played a significant role in supporting student' overall achievement (Emery et al., 2020).

A qualitative study exploring students' perceptions of their experiences at Green Valley Big Picture School, a rural school on the Eastern coast of the United States found that quality relationships between students and teachers, school counsellors, administrators and parents facilitated the creation of a supportive learning environment (Alger, 2016). According to Alger (2016) students ranked teachers' efforts to understand their personal lives in the 96th percentile. Students also described the school as having a familial feeling because of the small class sizes of 10 to 15 students. Both students and parents also reported that the teachers conveyed genuine care for the students in their charge (Alger, 2016).

Individualized Programming in BPL Schools

Research involving the first 20 months of implementing the BPL model across five different schools in Western Australia, funded by the Australian Federal Government, noted students had increased levels of engagement after only one term in a BPL setting. Down et al. (2018) outlined the instructional steps that were followed within these BPL schools, and they included: (a) students sharing their interests with their teachers, (b) students, teachers and families collaborating in the development of a learning plan that encompassed the students' individual learning goals alongside relevant curriculum, (c) students pursuing a project that reflected their learning plan, and (d) students having access to a mentor in the community to deepen their understanding. Down et al. (2018) attributed the increased student engagement to the following factors: (a) students' opportunity to negotiate curriculum and instruction, (b) ongoing teacher support, (c) parent accountability and involvement, and (d) the receipt of mentorship. A distinguishing factor of BPL schools is their focus on student-centered learning design. BPL schools claim to provide a "one student at a time" approach, meaning that the learning experience is tailored to each student's individual interests and learning needs and is not a "one size fits all" model (Littky & Graebelle, 2004). While disengagement from mainstream schooling has been a long-standing issue that alternative schools have sought to address, BPL schools have experienced positive outcomes utilizing personalized programming to combat this issue (Down et al., 2018).

Community Partnerships in BPL Schools

BPL schools' emphasis on experiential learning through community is another distinguishing feature of the model. The model provides students with the opportunity to participate in a voluntary internship placement two days a week. Students have a voice in deciding the field of work they want to explore. They are out in the real-world, developing new relationships with mentors, and aspiring to develop practical skills and knowledge relevant to their chosen fields (Fischetti et al., 2024). While traditional schools and some alternative schools may offer opportunities to engage in service learning or volunteering, the approach BPL schools take is centered on students' interests and interconnected with the rest of the students' educational experiences (Hayes et al., 2013; Down, 2018). According to Emery et al., (2019) it is often the student-driven internship opportunities that serve as a catalyst for individual projects and the identification of future career paths.

In a study commissioned by BPL, student perspectives from 15 BPL schools were obtained through "connectors," or adults who had information about students who had left high school two to three years prior (Arnold et al., 2016). This study found that 74% of students who were working and no longer in school had secured a job through a connection from their high school internship. In addition, 46% of the former students were reported to be studying or working in a field related to their internships. While these accounts reflect positive student outcomes and the benefits of internships in securing employment, it should be noted that this study was commissioned by BPL and reflects second-hand accounts.

Academic Expectations in BPL Schools

A major critique of alternative schools includes the lack of academic rigour in these settings (Emery et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2013). Since students typically have personalized learning plans, flexible curriculum and alternative assessment methods, there are concerns about the expectations placed on students and the quality of education they receive. Hayes et al. (2013) conducted an independent research report on Big Picture Education Australia to determine the experiences of students, families and teachers at BPL schools across the country. Using a phenomenological approach, researchers interviewed students, teachers, and parents from several BPL schools to obtain their perspectives on the approach. In this study, parents had some concerns regarding academics including: (a) learning being not structured enough, (b) students giving up on subjects too early, and (c) lack of teacher expertise leading to subjects not being taught or incorporated.

Teachers affirmed these concerns and shared that they had difficulties with ensuring academic rigour and depth. Specifically, teachers reported that they found it difficult to meet curriculum standards while pursuing student-driven interest-based learning (Hayes et al., 2013). Students also echoed the concerns about academic rigour and described how inadequate teacher expertise and/or insufficient resources created barriers to their learning. While these were some of the critiques about academic barriers, the study also noted positive feedback from some students which included: (a) authentic opportunities for learning through interests, (b) increased motivation, (c) feelings of overall improvement

in academic performance, and (d) learning and doing more in a BPL school. As individualized programming can give way to nebulous academic results, academic expectations within alternative schools and BPL contexts remain a concern.

Access and Resources in BPL Schools

It is not uncommon for alternative schools to establish admission policies and procedures that include applications, letters of intent, portfolios, references, and interviews (Balmoral Hall School, 2024; St. John's-Ravenscourt School, 2024). Similarly, there is an application process and admission criteria to attend a BPL school. Students must complete an application and to be admitted they must be independent learners, have access to transportation, and their parents must be actively involved in their education (Emery et al., 2020; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Seven Oaks School Division, 2024). Complex application processes and rigid admission criteria may have both intended and unintended consequences. They may narrow the pool of applicants to those who meet specific admission criteria when spaces are limited and create barriers to entry for marginalized groups.

Emery et al. (2020) found several inequities with the BPL model implemented in Launceston Big Picture School, which stem from the socioeconomic status of the students. They noted that: (a) access to resources, (b) support systems, and (c) post-school outcomes were all limited by socioeconomic status. In terms of access to resources, BPL students are typically expected to pursue interest-based learning and internships independently. This often requires funds for project materials and access to

transportation to and from internships, and these requirements may preclude some students from attending these schools. Emery et al. (2020) further noted that support systems were not uniformly distributed for all students, with some receiving more and better support, guidance and mentorship from teachers and staff. This inconsistency further contributed to disparities in student experiences and outcomes. Finally, the review pointed out that inequities also existed in the opportunities that were available to students after graduation. Factors such as socioeconomic status and community networks influenced students' abilities to secure internships, employment or further education, leading to unequal outcomes in their post-graduation lives.

Post-School Outcomes of BPL Students

One of the most robust longitudinal studies on BPL schools to date was conducted by Arnold and Mihut (2020) and it was partially funded by the BPL organization. This study tracked 1900 graduates from six classes at BPL schools to determine their post-secondary outcomes. The research involved surveys of students and their advisors, along with college enrolment data. Findings indicated that the students who attended BPL schools had a 95% graduation rate and an 88% college enrolment rate. However, only 54% continued into their second year of college, and only 36% completed their sophomore year. Remarkably, BPL students were found to have a six-year college graduation rate of 29%, which is twice the national average of 14% for low-income students (Arnold & Mihut, 2020). Additional findings also noted that BPL's focus on facilitating student-centred learning, building social capital, supporting personal and vocational development, and

ensuring high school completion for marginalized students were key factors contributing to student success.

Another study contracted by the BPL organization and conducted by Arnold et al. (2016) measured the longitudinal outcomes of students who attended BPL schools. This study provided more detailed insights into the students' career plans and achievements after high school. It found that at least 19% of students pursued other post-secondary plans outside of college, which included training as nursing assistants, emergency medical technicians, other job training, or attended vocational or technical schools. Additionally, 66% of students were employed in paid jobs, while some students who were not yet committed to a specific career were pursuing independent businesses or engaging in the arts and civic activities. Teachers also reported that at least 46% of the former students were studying or working in a field related to their high school internship experiences from their BPL schools (Arnold et al., 2016).

A recent longitudinal study conducted by Fischetti et al. (2024) involving Big Picture Australia examined the factors that led to the success of Year 12 students at BPL schools as they pursued university studies. The study investigated the academic performance of former BPL students who were admitted to universities post-graduation, in comparison to other students enrolled in similar programs, as well as how BPL students perceived their academic, social, and emotional progression at university. Students from BPL schools in Australia required an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) before being accepted into university. This meant that students who had attended a BPL school had to return to a

mainstream school to receive additional education prior in order to be admitted to a university. Recently, this requirement changed, and students can create a graduation portfolio to enter university programs.

Fischetti et al. (2024) indicated that upon acceptance to university, there were challenges and possibilities for former BPL students. Students' perspectives were obtained in this study, and the students recommended several improvements to support their experience at post-secondary schools, including: (a) the need for the university to have an enhanced understanding of diverse students' needs, limitations, and challenges, (b) a more supportive transition process, and (c) the provision of flexible teaching and academic support at university. The study also identified the ways that BPL had prepared students for post-secondary education including emphasizing self-motivation and independence and developing confidence in public speaking (Fischetti et al., 2024).

While there are mixed results regarding BPL, the progress in post-secondary institutions' acceptance of BPL students, as noted by Fischetti et al. (2024), indicates increasing recognition of the education that BPL schools provide. Similarly, Arnold and Mihut (2020) found that the proponents of BPL focus on facilitating student-centred learning, building social capital, supporting personal and vocational development, and ensuring high school completion for marginalized students were key factors contributing to student success. However, BPL schools still face challenges in sustaining successful outcomes for marginalized students after graduation, including addressing barriers to post-secondary education. Studies on BPL have mainly been conducted in Australia and

the United States, highlighting the need to explore BPL in other contexts, such as Winnipeg's Met Schools.

Upon review of the literature, it is evident that there is both promise and persistent challenges of current alternative school models, such as the Met Schools. While prior research identifies some of the effective practices of alternative schools as well as the barriers that exist, less attention has been given to how these elements intersect in practice within the Met School context. To explore this intersection, I have used a qualitative approach designed to examine participants' experiences in depth. The following chapter details the methodological framework guiding this study.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

In this study I obtained the perspectives of former Met School students about their alternative high school experience and their insights regarding its impact on their life outcomes (i.e., post-secondary education, employment and well-being). Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996), former Met school students were invited to share their thoughts and experiences on their schooling experiences. IPA uses in-depth, open-ended interviews to examine participants' lived experiences and meaning making to understand a given phenomenon. The interpretative approach acknowledges both the participants' responses as well as the researcher's analysis of them, thus it is considered a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2017). It further requires the application of three theoretical principles including: Husserl's (1927) approach to phenomenology, Heidegger's (1927) concept of hermeneutics, and Smith's (2017) model of idiography which are described below.

Phenomenology

According to Husserl (1927), phenomenology includes the study of participant experiences and how people make sense of a phenomenon by finding the most important elements of the experience. This approach involves thoroughly exploring participants' experiences using a variety of probing questions to dive deeply into their lived experiences. IPA aims to understand participants' experiences through an interpretative process, where participants are asked to make sense of their experiences, as the researcher interprets what they share.

Hermeneutics

Heidegger (1927) emphasized that phenomenology is an interpretative process and that understanding a particular phenomenon requires pre-existing knowledge of the new experience being interpreted. IPA makes use of a double hermeneutic, whereby both the participant and the researcher are involved in understanding the essence of the participant's experience. As participants interpret their own experiences, the researcher attempts to understand their interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Heidegger (1927) emphasized that the interpretative process is an ongoing process of trial and error, where the researcher's understanding is inductive, as overall understanding is adjusted as the study proceeds, allowing them to explore multiple perspectives and better interpret the information, rather than following a straight, linear path (Smith et al., 2021).

Idiography

IPA aims to first understand the specific experience of each participant's case in detail. Each participant's experience is treated individually, and their individual experience is fully analyzed before comparing it with others. Researchers work to understand the smaller parts of a study (i.e., a single interview) and then use this information to understand the whole (i.e., the entire research study), using the latter to further interpret the former. In this way, IPA uses an idiographic approach by acknowledging each participant's unique experience before considering general patterns and drawing conclusions (Smith et al., 2021).

Rationale for IPA and Research Questions

Using IPA, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for the free flow of conversation to obtain the perspectives of a small group of participants (7) who participated in the same alternative educational program. Ultimately, using IPA, I attempted to capture the essence of the participants' experiences as accurately as possible to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of former Met School students about their high school experiences?
2. What do former Met School students perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages of the Met School experience?
3. How do former students perceive the impact of Met School on their life outcomes?

For this study, I recruited and interviewed 7 former Met School students to obtain their perspectives regarding their Met School experiences. According to Creswell (2013), this number of participants is within the recommended range for conducting a qualitative study about participants' lived experiences. The participants' perspectives were subsequently analyzed through IPA and the lens of social capital theory (Smith, 2022; Bourdieu, 1986).

Role of the Researcher

It is important to acknowledge my positionality concerning this research. Over the past eight years, I was a teacher advisor at the Seven Oaks Met School and in 2023, I became the principal of the Exchange Met School. In these roles, I have been directly

involved in the teaching and administration of the BPL pedagogy. This has included supporting various facets of experiential learning, including building positive relationships, providing individualized programming, facilitating community partnerships and establishing inclusive learning environments. Given my direct involvement with the Met Schools, I tried to be objective in my research and bracketed potential biases, assumptions, and preconceived ideas about this approach to instruction. I conducted member checking to ensure that my interpretations were confirmed by the participants. I used reflexive journaling throughout the research process as a strategy to limit any potential biases I may have. I also asked my advisor to review my interpretation of the data to ensure accuracy and objectivity.

While I am a strong advocate for BPL and the Met Schools' approach, I recognize that it may have limitations, and further, that there may be ways to improve its programming and increase its inclusivity. I hope that the results of this research will amplify the voice of former Met School students and improve the Met School experience for future learners. I also hope that this research will contribute to an enhanced understanding of Met Schools and fill a void in the Canadian research base regarding this form of alternative education programming.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I applied social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1980) as a framework to analyze participants' perspectives of their Met School experiences. Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986) explains that social life consists of unequal access to resources that extend

beyond purely economic means. He argues that advantage and inequality are produced and reproduced through the accumulation, distribution, and conversion of multiple forms of capital which include economic, cultural, and social capital. Together, these forms of capital shape individuals' opportunities, trajectories, and capacity to navigate institutional contexts, such as education.

Economic capital refers to material resources that equate to money, including income, wealth, and property. While economic capital provides the most visible form of advantage, Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that it does not operate in isolation. Instead, it interacts with and enables the acquisition of other forms of capital, particularly cultural and social capital, which often play a decisive role in educational success.

Cultural capital consists of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and credentials that dominant institutions value. Bourdieu (1986) identifies cultural capital as existing in embodied forms, such as: language use, habits, ways of thinking, and objectified forms which include books or cultural artifacts, and institutionalized forms which include academic qualifications. In educational settings, cultural capital influences how students interpret expectations of them, it can demonstrate students' competence, and it can also be used to indicate success by educators and institutions.

Central to this study is social capital, and it is defined as the actual or potential resources accessible through durable networks of relationships between individuals characterized by mutual recognition and trust (Bourdieu, 1986). Relationships are the foundation of social capital, a fundamental resource that allows for the development and

accumulation of human assets. This forms the basis of social capital theory (Machalek & Martin, 2015; Woolcock, 1998). Pierre Bourdieu (1980, 1986) described social capital as the resources found within social networks that individuals can access and use when necessary. While Field (2008) iterated that social capital is about harnessing the power of relationships and learning to value this type of resource, the theory suggests that those with higher social capital typically have better socioeconomic statuses, which lessens psychological distress, improves self-esteem and overall health, and impacts educational achievement for youth (Holland, 2009; Lin, 2001; Lin et al., 2008). Furthermore, social capital is not merely the existence of relationships, but the benefits that arise from social networks and the ability to mobilize relationships within the networks for support, information, and opportunity. Unlike individual traits, social capital is relational and context-dependent, shaped by the size, quality, and composition of one's social networks.

To apply social capital theory, the concepts of field and habitus articulated by Bourdieu (1986) must be considered. Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital does not function in a social vacuum, rather, its value and effects rely on the social spaces in which it is applied, and the dispositions individuals bring to those spaces. Field is defined as a social space in which individuals and groups occupy different positions and compete for valued forms of capital. Fields are governed by their own rules, norms, and hierarchies, which determine what types of capital are recognized and rewarded. Examples of fields include education, art, politics, and the labour market. Within each field, individuals possess varying amounts and combinations of economic, cultural, and social capital,

shaping their relative power and influence. Importantly, the value of social capital is not fixed, but depends on the specific field in which it is mobilized. For instance, relationships that are highly advantageous within one field may carry less value in another, depending on institutional priorities and expectations (Bourdieu, 1986).

Habitus refers to the system of durable, embodied dispositions through which individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to the social world. Developed through past experiences and socialization, habitus shapes individuals' beliefs, aspirations, and practices. Habitus influences how individuals recognize and utilize available forms of capital, including social capital, and how they navigate the rules of a given field. Since habitus is shaped by one's social position and accumulated capital, it tends to reproduce existing social structures, as individuals come to see certain actions, opportunities, and outcomes as natural or attainable (Bourdieu, 1986).

The relationship between field and habitus is dynamic and reciprocal. Fields structure the conditions under which habitus is formed, while habitus, in turn, guides how individuals act within and respond to the field. This interaction helps explain why access to social capital alone does not guarantee equal outcomes; individuals' capacity to mobilize relationships effectively depends on whether their habitus aligns with the dominant norms and expectations of the field. In educational contexts, this alignment or misalignment can significantly influence students' engagement, sense of belonging, and academic success.

The concepts of field and habitus extend social capital theory by highlighting the structural and dispositional dimensions of inequality. They provide a critical lens for

examining how relationships functions as resources within education, why these resources are unevenly accessible, and how institutional contexts may either reinforce or disrupt patterns of advantage and exclusion.

Building on the work of Bourdieu (1986), Neves et al. (2019) and Stanton-Salazar (2011), described bonds and bridges to social capital. Bonds refer to the existing connections people have with their family, friends, schools and communities. While bridges are the establishment of new connections and the strengthening of weaker connections for those from marginalized groups.

Within educational contexts, social capital is particularly salient, as relationships with teachers, peers, families, and community members can significantly influence students' academic engagement, motivation, and postsecondary pathways. Bourdieu's (1986) framework highlights that access to social capital is unevenly distributed and often linked to broader social structures, thereby contributing to the reproduction of inequality. At the same time, educational spaces have the potential to serve as sites where social capital can be intentionally cultivated, expanded, and leveraged to support student success.

Social capital theory is an appropriate theory to be applied in this research because it reveals the degree to which Met Schools serve as bonds or bridges to social capital. During the interview process, students were asked about their admission process to their school. Understanding how students accessed Met School could yield information about the social capital bonds they had and if it influenced their enrolment to the school. This

can also shed light on the habitus of the participant and how this could translate to the field of Met School. Additionally, questions posed ascertained if social capital bridges were made during students' Met School experience (e. g., internships, advisors, or mentors). This is an important concept when examining Met Schools because not all students may have access to the social capital needed or the aligned habitus, to avail themselves of this educational opportunity, which may perpetuate existing inequities. Research indicates that families and community connections play a significant role in youth's overall social capital and determine educational placement (Behouti & Strömerg, 2020; DeAngelidis & Ross, 2020; Glavan, 2020; Stewart, 2020).

If students lack access to social capital, it is important to consider whether Met Schools serve as a bridge for these individuals. Students who are more engaged in social networks and relationships in high school are more likely to have positive life outcomes such as success in postsecondary education, employment, and wellbeing (Acar, 2011; Coleman, 1988; Bradley & Hernández, 2019;), further indicating the potential for schools to serve as bridges to social capital. Additionally, depending on students' habitus and the fields they occupy, their potential for developing social capital may differ. In summary, obtaining the perspectives of former Met School students will provide a nuanced understanding of their social capital, which may contribute to recommendations for improving the policies and practices of Met Schools in the future.

Research Process

Upon approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB 2) at the University of Manitoba Fort Garry campus in December 2024, I contacted the Superintendent of the Seven Oaks School Division (SOSD) to request their support in disseminating recruitment information about this study (see Appendix A) in January 2025. I also requested that the principals from the Seven Oaks Met School and Maples Met School disseminate recruitment information about this study (See Appendix B). Specifically, the principals were contacted by email and asked to share a digital recruitment poster on their social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook) as well as to print and post physical posters on their school premises (See Appendix C). The recruitment poster provided information about the study, including the criteria for participation, research methods, the technology requirements for participants, as well as the contact information of the principal investigator.

When I received approval from the Superintendent to support the recruitment process and approval from the principals of the Seven Oaks Met School and Maples Met School to disseminate the recruitment information, I shared the recruitment poster with them. I requested that they disseminate the electronic copy of the poster broadly on social media and that they publicly post a print version of the poster in visible places within their school buildings. I informed the school principals that I would send them a follow-up email every 2 weeks reminding them to re-circulate the recruitment poster until 4-7 participants were obtained (See Appendix D).

Participant Recruitment

Convenience sampling was used to recruit between 7 former Met School students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The inclusion criteria for participation included students who were 18 years of age or older who had attended a Met School for at least 2 years and had graduated since its inception in 2009. The exclusion criteria consisted of former students who I had previously taught at Seven Oaks Met School or any former students who attended Exchange Met School when I served as principal. Establishing exclusion criteria helped to mitigate any undue pressure on former students to participate. It also reduced the potential for teacher/student power differentials to occur. Recruiting former students who had graduated from Met Schools in Winnipeg ensured that participants possessed relevant experiences related to the research questions and allowed for the exploration of their diverse perspectives and insights on their experiences.

Potential participants were invited to contact me directly by telephone or email to express their interest in participating in this research. 27 people expressed interest in the study and I selected the first 7 participants who responded to the invitation and who met the inclusion/exclusion criteria based on the previously mentioned requirements. The objective of the intentionally small sample size was to focus on each participant's experiences and perspectives in detail, to yield deep, rich, and authentic data.

When a participant contacted me by telephone or email to express their interest in participating in the study, I ensured that they met the inclusion/exclusion criteria and then provided a brief overview of the study and what their participation would involve. If they

were interested in participating, I obtained their email contact information and/or telephone contact information and emailed or texted them a copy of the consent form. I invited the participant to read the consent form thoroughly and then to contact me by email, or telephone if they had any questions. During the initial contact, I scheduled a 1-hour interview conducted by Zoom or by telephone at a mutually agreed upon time. Prior to the interview, I asked the participant to email, text, or physically mail me a signed copy of their consent form.

Interview Process

Participants received the "Consent to Participate in Research" document in advance by email or text, which outlined the study's objectives, structure, and sought approval for audio recording (see Appendix E). I reviewed the informed consent form with all participants before the start of the interview to ensure they understood the study's objectives and their role in the research process. I reminded the participants that all efforts would be made to ensure their confidentiality and that the only people who would have access to the raw data would be those who have signed oaths of confidentiality and ethics approval.

I conducted one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews via UM Zoom during the months of February – April 2025. Video conferencing was used to reduce barriers related to time and location, making participation more convenient and accessible for a broad range of participants. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length. A follow-up interview was requested over the course of one to two

weeks after the initial interview to ask additional questions, follow up on key issues that were raised, and to enhance the validity of the study. Asking for a second interview within this timeframe checked for internal consistency in what participants said. As a part of the informed consent process, participants' consent to be audio recorded was obtained.

The interview protocol (See Appendix F & G) was comprised of 2 parts. The first part consisted of a demographic questionnaire, and the second part included more in-depth questions about the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding Met Schools. I also employed prompts and probes to encourage participants to expand on their perspectives.

The participants in this study were invited to participate in one 60-minute, in-depth, individual interview and one 60-minute follow-up interview via UM Zoom that took place from February 2025 to April 2025. Prior to the initial interview, participants were also invited to provide demographic information and some background information about their Met school experience, which included their age, gender, ethnicity, where they currently live, the Met School they attended, the year they attended a Met School, the grade they enrolled, the year they graduated, their parent's education levels, and their parents' occupations. Participants were asked to share their post-Met School experiences including, whether they received any scholarships, their highest level of educational attainment, current employment status, current participation in any community organizations, and current participation in any form of mentorship. Six out of the seven participants completed both interviews, and one participant completed the first interview

but did not respond to invitations for a follow-up interview. Each interview was transcribed by using UM Zoom's transcription service in combination with manual transcription. Once transcribed, the transcripts were sent to participants via email or text for member checking, verifying the accuracy of the transcript. The participants had 10 days to review the transcripts and request any changes by email or telephone. All participants were satisfied with the transcripts, and no changes were requested during the member checking process.

Withdrawal

Participants were informed that the interviews would be transcribed verbatim using a University of Manitoba-approved transcription service. They were also reminded that they were free not to answer any question and that they could withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. If they chose to withdraw from the study their data would have been permanently deleted. They were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study up until their data was analyzed (approximately February 2025).

Data Storage

Prior to the interview, participants were informed that in addition to recording the interviews, I would keep field notes during the interviews to help me remember important points that were raised. Participants were further informed that direct quotations would be used in the dissemination of this research, however all identifiers would be removed, and participants would be referred to by a pseudonym that was chosen through consultation.

The digital recording of the interview was stored on my password-protected computer using OneDrive, a University of Manitoba secure platform and then permanently deleted after it was transcribed. All confidential digital research records including consent forms, interview transcripts, and the participant code book was also securely stored on my University of Manitoba OneDrive account. All paper records, including consent forms and field notes were securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. After the conclusion of the study, (approximately January 2026) all research records will be permanently deleted and destroyed.

Compensation

Participants received a total of \$40.00 in Tim Horton's gift cards for participating in this research. A \$20.00 gift card was provided prior to the first interview and participants were informed that they are entitled to keep the gift card whether they complete the interview or not. Participants were also given a second \$20.00 gift card before participating in a second follow-up interview. A \$20.00 gift card for participating in each interview was reasonable compensation for the time of the participant and did not constitute undue pressure to participate.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. The interview protocol was comprised of 2 parts. The first part consisted of demographic questions and the second part, applying IPA included more in-depth questions about the

participants' experiences and perspectives regarding Met Schools. I also employed prompts and probes to encourage participants to expand on their perspectives.

Member checking. After each interview was transcribed by a University of Manitoba approved transcription service, the transcripts were sent to participants via email or text for member checking purposes after the final interview. The participants had 10 days to review the transcripts and request any changes by email or telephone. If no response was received from the participant within that time, I assumed that the participant was satisfied with the transcript.

Data Analysis

In carrying out interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) through the lens of social capital throughout the months of February to July, data analysis was inductive and followed the six steps outlined by Smith et al. (2022). The steps consisted of reading and re-reading transcriptions, making initial notes/comments, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. As the framework of analysis, social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1980) grounded this analysis. The next section outlines in detail, the steps involved in data analysis.

Reading and Re-Reading. To actively engage with and immerse myself in the data, starting with the first case, I read and reread the transcripts multiple times to identify how the participants made sense of their experiences. I also used memos in an Excel

spreadsheet to document my initial thoughts, feelings and impressions while examining the data, drawing inspiration from the method proposed by Smith et al. (2022).

Initial Coding. I implemented multiple iterations of coding, defined by Smith et al. (2022) as “line-by-line commentary on the data” where patterns were drawn and then refined into experiential statements. These were inserted into a column adjacent to my initial thoughts, and I took my thoughts and made them into assertions.

To amplify participants’ voices, I also took in-vivo direct quotes from participants that best characterized their experiences. This coding process continued for each interview transcript until saturation was reached and where no new experiential statements could be discerned. The emerging experiential statements were all organized in the same excel spreadsheet, with a dedicated tab for each participant, which contained all the identified experiential statements that aligned with the research questions. Memos were employed throughout the process to allow for reflection on the significance of the experiential statements.

Developing Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). Once the identified classification system was established, I organized the data into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), grouping all the related experiential statements that were generated from the interviews into a single, common cluster (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant’s interview was accurately summarized to capture their individual voices, stories and themes that arose in conversation to accurately represent their perceptions and experiences as former Met

School students, and how they were able to either use or develop social capital throughout their experiences.

Searching for Connections Across PETs. Important themes were established next through the identification of similar patterns and themes in each participant's interview and chronologically ordered. Memos were consistently made to note common patterns, regularities and any thoughts or questions that surfaced.

Move to Next Case. The previous four steps were applied to each individual participant, allowing for an in-depth analysis of each participant's experience.

Looking for Patterns Across Cases. The final step consisted of determining which themes were most significant to the study, which were then categorized thematically. A new column was created to organize shared themes across participants' interviews, these are called Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (Smith et al., 2022). Once GETs were established across the cases, a new tab within the spreadsheet was created to summarize the number of participants that was associated with each GET. A narrative account was established by examining the connection between the data and my understanding of what the participants experienced in their described context to develop a more interpretative analysis (Smith et al., 2022), through highlighting examples of elements that mattered to participants, noting my interpretations of the participants' accounts, and emphasizing any data that did not fit into the identified patterns. This is further explained in the *Findings* section. See Table 1 for an outline of these steps.

Table 1

Steps for analysis in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022)

1. Reading and re-reading transcriptions
2. Initial notes/comments
3. Developing experiential statements
4. Searching for connections across experiential statements and developing personal experiential themes
5. Move to the next case, repeat steps 1-4
6. Look for patterns across cases and developing group experiential themes

These themes provided an understanding of the relationships within the data and allow for an analysis of how it contributes evidence towards answering the research questions. Patterns and regularities within the data were examined to determine how social capital played a role in the lives of former Met School students, and how their social capital was impacted while being students at Met Schools. To identify these patterns and to determine if they provided evidence towards the research questions, a cyclical process of analysis was conducted for the description of themes (i.e. the number of participants who talk about experiences related to social capital and the way in which they are being iterated), comparing themes (i.e. how themes occurred across individuals), and relating themes (i.e. how conditions and circumstances impacted prevalence).

To amplify students' voices, direct quotations are provided to illustrate the themes that were identified in the interviews. To identify alignment of the identified themes with

Bourdieu's (1980) theory of social capital, participants' sources of social capital identified within their networks, patterns in how these sources of social capital are used, and factors that contribute to how these social capital sources are mobilized will be noted. A second member check took place once themes were determined to enhance the validity and credibility of the study by inviting participants to review my interpretation (Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked to review the identified themes for accuracy and to share their feedback with me. Throughout the process, I maintained a reflexive journal that captured my own perceptions, conceptions and processes, in the hopes of revealing my biases where possible to minimize their impact on the overall study (Smith et al., 2022).

In summary, I used IPA to conduct interviews that allowed participants to share their authentic experiences and voice their opinions about their Met School experiences. The data analyses in the steps outlined above was used to organize participants' narratives into themes. The analysis was ongoing as I interviewed different participants and analyzed their transcripts. These findings consolidated, summarized, and written from July through to December 2025.

The IPA methodological approach provided a framework for understanding how former Met School students made sense of their high school experience and their perceived life outcomes. The iterative and interpretative nature of IPA allowed for both convergence and divergence across participants' experiences to surface. The themes that emerged from this process are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological investigation was to give voice to the lived experiences of former Met School students to better understand their perspectives about the Big Picture Learning model. In this chapter I describe the data gathered from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven participants and then outline the findings using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I will include brief introductions of each of the seven participants to contextualize their unique perspectives and to allow the reader to connect with each participant's story as they share their lived experiences. Following the introductions of the participants, the emergent themes are described in detail and in-vivo quotations from the participants' interviews are provided to amplify their voices and illustrate their perspectives.

Participants

As mentioned in the methodology section, the participants were invited to select a pseudonym to ensure their confidentiality and, as such, they will be referred to by their pseudonyms in the discussion of the findings. The pseudonyms selected by the participants do not necessarily reflect their gender so all participants will be referred to using the pronoun "they." Prior to the initial interview, participants were also invited to provide demographic information as is referenced in the methodology section. See Table 2 for a summary of participants' demographic and background information.

Table 2. Summary of Participants' Demographic and Background Information

Pseudonym	Age	Year of Enrollment	Grade Enrolled	Graduation Year	Scholarships	Education	Employment	Community Involvement	Mentoring	Parent's Education Levels
Emily	20	2018	9	2022	N	High School	N	Y	Y	College
Josh	19	2019	9	2023	Y	Some University	Y	Y	Y	University
Judy	18	2020	9	2024	N	Some University	Y	N	Y	High School/College
Matthew	25	2013	9	2017	N	College	Y	Y	Y	College
Max	24	2021	10	2023	N	College	N	Y	N	Master's/Ph. D
Morgan	20	2018	9	2022	Y	Some University	Y	N	N	High School/College
Myla	23	2015	9	2019	N	B.A	Y	Y	N	College

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their gender, ethnicity, parental occupation and the Met School they attended are reported in aggregate. Four out of the seven participants identified as female, and three identified as male. Most participants identified as White, whereas some identified as Filipino, South Indian, or Black. Four out of the seven participants attended Maples Met School and three attended Seven Oaks Met School. Most participants graduated within the past four years, however two out of the seven participants graduated six and eight years ago. All participants are currently living in Winnipeg and its surrounding areas. In terms of each participant's post-Met School experiences, most pursued post-secondary university education in Manitoba, two pursued a post-secondary college education in Manitoba and one has not pursued any formal post-secondary education. Two out of the seven participants were awarded scholarships to assist with their post-secondary studies.

In the area of employment, most of the participants (five out of seven) are currently employed. Most of the participants (five out of seven) are also actively involved with community organizations in a volunteer capacity. Four out of the seven participants also reported that they currently mentor individuals in some capacity. When asked about their

family background, all of the participants reported that their parents had some form of post-secondary education. The reported fields of work of the participants' parents included: administration, business, health, education, trades, and some were self-employed.

Each participant will now be introduced, and a summary of their individual demographic information will be provided. What motivated them to attend a Met school, their experiences and perspectives about the Met school, and their post-school life will also be described.

Emily

Emily is 20 years old and enrolled at a Met School in 2018 when they were in grade 9. Emily attended all four years of high school at the Met school and graduated in 2022. Emily expressed an interest in participating in this study because they felt that they had a unique perspective to share. Specifically, Emily characterized themselves as a person who held contrasting religious and social views that differed from the majority of their peers and from the ethos of the school, which led to them feeling conflicted and on the margins at times. Emily describes these tensions in their description of their schooling experience.

As background, Emily enrolled at a Met School because they had an older sibling who previously attended the school and they were seeking a similar experience to that of their sibling. Emily shared that their sibling received an opportunity to participate in internships and project-based learning and while they had different interests, they were seeking similar non-traditional learning opportunities. At the Met School, Emily described how they

were able to explore their personal interests in areas such as videography and world religions and how they participated in a variety of community-based internships that furthered their theoretical and practical knowledge in these areas. After graduating from the Met School, Emily continued to work at one of the sites where they were an intern and they are currently exploring post-secondary options. Emily's firsthand experiences at a Met School provide critical insights into the strengths of the program as well as the ways in which holding nondominant views can contribute to feeling silenced and devalued, which they describe as being exacerbated in a small high school setting.

Josh

Josh is 19 years old and enrolled at a Met School in 2019 when they were in grade 9. Josh attended all four years at a Met School and graduated in 2023. Josh decided to take part in this study as they described themselves as a "...big advocate of Big Picture Learning and Met Schools," and felt that they had an overall positive experience that they wanted to share. Josh also felt there was a "very large misconception about what Met is, and what Met can provide," and so they felt compelled to share their perspective and experiences and clarify these misunderstandings, in the hope of helping future students and families.

Josh shared that they first heard of the Met School through their middle school teacher who encouraged them to apply as they thought it would provide an academically challenging experience. Josh was apprehensive at first because of their peers' perceptions of Met, "...someone asked me, are you still applying to Met School? And I said, yeah, I am... And then he said to me... That's where the special kids go. And I didn't know what to do

with that...” Josh’s parents were also concerned about sending them to Met as, at the time, Met was a fairly new school and utilizing an unconventional approach to education, “My parents were very wary about it because it was still very much a new thing.” Fighting the misconceptions of peers and wariness of their parents, Josh eventually decided to apply. Despite their apprehension, Josh was drawn to the Met School because they were unsure about what they wanted to do after high school, and they felt that the Met School would provide more opportunities than a traditional high school to explore different career paths.

Josh shared that the opportunities he received at the Met helped them to receive several post-secondary scholarships, and they are currently enrolled in a university program. Josh is also employed part-time in a field that is related to the internships that they received at the Met School and reported that they received their first job through a Met School internship. In recounting their experiences at Met School, Josh emphasized the overall benefits and positive impact that attending a Met school had on their life, while also offering an honest critique of what they felt were limited academic offerings, and at times high expectations during their internship experiences.

Judy

Judy is 18 years old and enrolled at a Met School in 2020 when they were in grade 9. Judy attended all four years of high school at a Met School and graduated in 2024. Judy was interested in taking part in this study because they felt that they had much to share about their first-hand experiences at a Met School. Judy characterized their participation

in this study as an opportunity to speak their truth about their experiences, which were both positive and negative. Judy praised the authentic assessment opportunities they received through public exhibitions of learning, which they contrasted with the more test-driven nature of traditional schools. However, Judy also emphasized frustrating moments during their Met School experience including the high expectations associated with project-based learning and internships, negative student-advisor relationships, and the absence of large typical high school events (e.g., dances, pep rallies, school trips, etc.).

Judy first heard about Met through older peers who attended their neighbourhood Met School. These peers would visit the middle school where Judy was a student to talk to potential students who might be interested in attending a Met School. Judy happened to be friends with one of the students who attended the Met School and they were particularly “...lured in by like the fact we didn’t have any exams” and appreciated the opportunities for authentic assessment as well as learning through internships. As they progressed through Met, however, Judy felt there were shortcomings and felt pressured to always present the school positively, describing that they often felt like they had to “...pretend like Met School was like the most wonderful place on the planet, and act like it was a perfect school...” In their interview, Judy describes these pressures and how they navigated them.

After graduating from a Met School Judy decided to pursue post-secondary education at a university. Like some other participants, Judy found her first job after high school through an internship they had received through the Met School, and they are currently employed part-time. Judy reported that participating in this study provided an opportunity

to share their conflicting feelings about their Met School experience in a safe space where they felt they wouldn't be criticized or judged for their opinions.

Matthew

Matthew is 25 years old and enrolled at a Met School in 2013 when they were in grade 9. Matthew attended all four years of high school at Met and graduated in 2017. Matthew is one of the oldest participants in this study and they attended a Met School close to its inception in 2009. Matthew chose to take part in this study because they felt appreciative about their Met School experience. Matthew stated, "...the school gave me quite a bit during my time there" and because of their gratitude Matthew wanted to share their insights about what the school has to offer and how it has impacted their post-school life. Matthew offers a bit of a historical perspective because their experiences are based on a time when the Met School was a school within a school model and then when it transitioned to a stand-alone school. Matthew describes these shifts and their impacts in their description of their Met School experience.

Matthew came to attend a Met School because they heard about it through their sibling, who first expressed an interest in attending the school. Ultimately, they both enrolled in the Met School at the same time. Despite having a sibling at a Met School, Matthew characterized the transition to a Met School as difficult because their friends from their middle school were "...expecting [them] to follow them" to their catchment high school, and they felt pressure to follow their peers. Matthew resisted these pressures because he was looking for a different high school experience than that of his peers. After

graduating from the Met School, Matthew earned a college diploma and is currently working in a field related to their studies. Matthew's perspective of Met School is largely positive because they felt that they had an opportunity to pursue their personal interests through various internships and expressed a particular appreciation for the project-based learning approach that was offered at the school. Despite these strengths, Matthew also surfaced a desire for more support during their internships and expanded opportunities for elective courses that are offered in a traditional high school setting.

Max

Max is a 24-years-old and enrolled in a Met School in 2021 when they were in grade 10. Max attended Met for two years of high school and graduated in 2023. Max shared that they were interested in participating in the study because they had a desire to share their experiences and saw value in the research. Max explained that he was drawn to the Met School because they wanted to build relationships with professionals in their field of interest and they were attracted to the small class sizes that the school offered. Max first heard about the Met School through their parents and was strongly encouraged by them to attend the school. As the interview with Max progressed, some concerns arose related to the validity of Max's statements. For instance, they shared that they were currently 24 years of age and that they enrolled at a Met School in 2021, when they were in grade 10. However, the average age of a grade 10 student who attended high school in 2021 would be 18 and not 24.

This interview was also challenging to conduct due to the vagueness of the

participants' responses and some seemingly inaccurate descriptions of the Met School. These inconsistencies raised concerns about the authenticity of their account. However, in keeping with the interpretative nature of IPA, I did not treat the interview as invalid but instead approached the data with heightened reflexivity. Rather than excluding Max's account entirely, I analyzed it cautiously, attending to the ambiguity and keeping sections that were relevant to the study. The interpretative lens was therefore used not only to explore content, but also to examine tone, coherence, and the potential motivations or uncertainties shaping the narrative. Where meaning could be reasonably interpreted, the data was included.

Given these concerns, this participant's contribution was weighted lightly in the development of thematic findings and is discussed with appropriate qualifiers throughout. This experience underscores the importance of researcher reflexivity in IPA, particularly when interpretative clarity is compromised. It also highlights how the interpretative process must remain open to the complexities of human expression, even when those expressions appear uncertain, fragmented, or possibly performative.

Morgan

Morgan is a 20-year-old and enrolled at a Met School in 2018 when they were in grade 9. Morgan attended all four years of high school at Met and graduated in 2022. Morgan was intrigued that a study was being conducted on Met Schools in Winnipeg and felt that they had a unique experience that was worth sharing. In middle school, Morgan was experiencing bullying and wanted reprieve from this negative school experience.

Morgan said, "...I was kind of looking for like a school that nobody I knew was gonna go to for high school," During this stressful time in middle school, a local Met School principal conducted a recruitment presentation at Morgan's school, and they saw this as an opportunity for a fresh start during a very difficult period in their life.

Despite Morgan's strong desire to attend a Met School, their parents were not supportive initially. However, their family ultimately agreed to support Morgan's decision to attend a Met School and over time came to appreciate the school's approach to teaching and learning. In addition to providing a safe haven from negative peer interactions, Morgan highlighted the strong relationships that they forged with the mentors they had, some of whom they continue to be involved with to the present day. Upon graduation, Morgan was awarded scholarships to support their post-secondary education at a university and is currently employed part-time. While opportunities to build positive peer and adult relationships while attending a Met School were highlights for Morgan, the smaller school size and more limited resources detracted from the experience in some ways.

Myla

Myla is 23 years old and enrolled at a Met School in 2015 when they were in grade 9. Myla attended all four years of high school at Met and graduated in 2019. When asked why they wanted to participate in this study, Myla emphasized that the opportunities they received at Met had a very positive impact on their life outcomes, and they wanted to share these experiences so that the possibilities of the Met School could be made known to

others. Myla said that they were “... proud of myself, not only of what I got to accomplish in high school and like what others did, but... how they translated into who I am now.”

Myla first heard about the Met School through a recruitment presentation at their middle school, and after their best friend decided to apply, they felt compelled to apply as well. During the recruitment presentation Myla learned that the Met School did not use traditional tests and instead provided alternative ways for students to demonstrate their learning. Myla found this particularly appealing and cited the removal of high stakes tests as a motivating factor for them to attend the Met School. Post-graduation, Myla decided to pursue post-secondary education and has earned a Bachelor of Arts. Myla is currently working in a field aligned with their interests and is currently in the process of completing a second university degree. Myla credits the Met School experience with putting them on a positive trajectory by providing them with the skills and confidence to succeed academically and professionally.

Findings

As described in the methodology section, IPA was used to analyze the interview transcripts of the participants in this study following the six-step framework outlined by Smith et al. (2022). To begin my analysis, (1) I read and re-read the first transcript of the participant I interviewed, while also listening to the recording of the interview; (2) I made initial notes in an Excel spreadsheet, of interesting comments the participant made; (3) upon reviewing the entire transcript, I then analyzed those comments and refined them into experiential statements which were inserted into a column adjacent to my initial

comments, taking my comments and making them into assertions, (4) I next looked at these experiential statements and developed Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) that reflected commonalities (conceptual, theoretical, semantic, practical, etc.) and placed them in an adjacent column to the experiential statements; (5) upon identifying the PETs, I then looked for connections across the PETs and reviewed and refined them; (6) I then repeated the process (1-4) for the next participant, (7) upon conducting the process for all participants, I then looked across all of the PETs to identify patterns across the participants, resulting in several subthemes. Of all the subthemes (derived from PETs and experiential statements), four Group Experiential Themes (GETs) emerged that best reflected the participants' experiences and showed the greatest consistency across the seven cases, while addressing the research questions.

Group Experiential Themes (GETs) across Participants

After analyzing the interview transcripts using IPA, and member checking the transcripts with all participants, four overarching GETs were identified across the participants. They included: (1) access and equity, (2) school priorities, (3) personal growth, and (4) relationships, which are illustrated in Figure 5. Each of these GETs broadly encapsulate the perspectives of former Met School students about their high school experience and they are defined and described below.

Figure 5 – Group Experiential Themes Across Participants

Within each GET subthemes were also identified. These subthemes will also be defined and described below and the ways in which they capture the unique perspectives of former Met School students at a more granular level will be discussed. In figure 6 below, the subthemes that relate to the GETs are outlined.

Figure 6 - GETs and Associated Subthemes

The table below shows the GETs that were identified within this study and indicates which participant is associated with the identified GETs.

Table 3: Group experiential themes and subthemes across participant population

Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes	Emily	Morgan	Myla	Josh	Max	Judy	Matthew
1. Access and Equity							
1a. Pathways to Entry	x	x		x		x	x
1b. The Application Process	x	x	x			x	x
1c. Logistical Constraints		x	x	x	x	x	x
1d. Stigma		x		x			
2. School Priorities							
2a. Individualized Programming	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
2b. Resource Availability and Limitations	x	x	x	x		x	x
3. Personal Growth							
3a. Career Readiness	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3b. Confidence	x	x	x	x			x
3c. Independence	x	x	x	x	x		x
3d. Identity			x	x		x	
3d. Retrospective Appreciation	x	x	x				
4. Relationships							
4a. Advisor relationships	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4b. Family relationships	x	x	x	x			x
4c. Mentor Relationships	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4d. Peer Relationships	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

GET 1: Access and Equity

An overall theme that emerged during interviews with participants was ‘access and equity.’ This theme reflects the uneven ways in which students and families were able to access, apply, and ultimately attend the Met School. In this study, access refers not only to the formal eligibility or application processes, but also to the informal networks, time, and knowledge to navigate them. Equity, in turn, highlights how these conditions advantaged some families while simultaneously disadvantaging others.

Participants frequently described learning about the Met School through personal connections, such as siblings who had previously attended, middle school teachers who

recommended the program, or through individual research conducted by families. These accounts illustrate how access was often mediated by social capital and available time, rather than being equally available to all students. As a result, participants' accounts suggested that families with fewer connections or competing responsibilities may have been less able to access information about the school or complete the application process.

This theme encompasses several interrelated subthemes which are organized as follows: 1(a) pathways to entry, essentially the factors that influenced participants to attend a Met School, 1(b) the application process, which also consists of the people who guided the participants, 1(c) logistical constraints, which speak to the roadblocks that participants encountered, and 1(d) stigma, referring to participants' experiences associated with attending an alternative school, which may influence a student's willingness to enroll in this type of setting. Each subtheme reflects a distinct, yet overlapping, dimension of how access and equity shaped participants' experiences and opportunities to attend a Met School. The subthemes within the GET of 'access and equity' are further described below.

Subtheme 1.a: Pathways to Entry

Participants described several factors that influenced their entry into the Met School and these experiences reveal both facilitators and barriers in the process. For many participants, connections to a range of stakeholders played a crucial role in facilitating entry to Met School. Morgan shared how encouragement from their middle

school teacher spurred them to apply as they shared that their teacher thought, "...it would be a really good fit for me. So that kind of pushed me." Similarly, Josh described how the guidance from their former classroom teacher influenced their decision to apply. Josh stated their teacher "... really encouraged me to consider looking into applying."

In addition to teachers, some participants described the way that peers and siblings influenced their decision to attend a Met School. Emily, for example, noted that "my older brother was a part of it, and I figured that the opportunities that I would get would be different. I guess. The draw, especially of internships, was pretty high. I figured I probably could have done well in your traditional school, but I also wanted to just see what else I could learn in a different learning environment." This early awareness and encouragement from family members provided a clear pathway into the school. Judy shared that they drew inspiration from a friend, and another friend's sibling, explaining, "so the two people that really kind of inspired me the most... So, first person like I mentioned, there's this one girl that I'm like kind of close with. I would say we're kind of friends like. So right now, in my current time, I actually work with her at work as well...And then my second person that really inspired me, so one of my best friends, she had a sister who graduated through Met and her sister really like, she sat down with like a bunch of us, and she told us, like what we could like, what we're going to get out of Met."

For some participants, parents played a key role in facilitating their entry into a Met School. Matthew emphasized how their parents helped them to see the potential benefits of attending a Met School. Matthew stated, "...they really were honing in on saying if you

want to explore some of these opportunities, maybe this could be a good idea for you.”

Interestingly, while Josh’s teacher encouraged them to apply to a Met School their parents were hesitant about the school. Josh said, my parents were, “very wary... because it was still very much a new thing.” Similarly, Morgan’s parents did not want them to attend a Met School. Morgan stated, “So my mom was really against Met school at first...my parents did not want me to go to Met School.” While both Josh and Morgan’s parents were initially opposed to them attending a Met School, they were eventually persuaded when provided with more information about the school and what it had to offer. Morgan shared that attending an open house and meeting their advisor shifted her parents’ perspective.

Subtheme 1.b: The Application Process

Several participants also discussed the application process that is used to determine students’ admission to the Met School and the ways in which it may influence students’ access. Some participants shared that the application process was easy and with the support of their parents, they were able to obtain the information and additional materials that were required. In general, the participants described that the application process consisted of: (a) letters from the student and parent (or another significant adult) about why they want to attend a Met School, (b) something they were proud of that they had created or performed (student submission), (c) and an online application form. Myla recounted how they received support from their mother to create a video as part of their application, “I still, I do vividly remember my mom helping me put together my application and making this, this bad video that I can't believe worked on our old desktop computer.

But we made it work... I guess I had a bunch of different like artwork I did... even though I'm not really an artsy person at all. And some of it was good. Some of it was not that good...But then I like had music and then put some words explaining what these things were. Maybe I had a write up." Judy also had support from their mom with the application process, they stated "I wouldn't say it was difficult like, actually look, I did kind of mess up on one step...I actually like, I know, that we're supposed to send, like in our best piece of like work to Met School, so they can evaluate it, and I accidentally sent my best piece of work to the entire school. So everybody had access to that...So I was kind of embarrassed by that fact, but otherwise it was really straightforward, because after I figured it out, I sent it to the correct email... I would say I, me and my mom kind of sat down and figured it all out."

Emily said their mom also assisted with the application, specifically she "tried to help be an idea generator." However, Emily did not characterize the application process as easy, but rather as very stressful for a 13-year-old student. Specifically, Emily described the expectation to identify an artifact that they were proud of as an abstract and overwhelming task. Emily stated: "I think it was really hard as a 13 year old to be like, what is something that I'm really proud of, that I can share like that was a bit of a weird thing to try to figure out. I mean, I would still probably struggle with that with having, like a physical thing that I could show that I was really proud of." Morgan described other aspects of the application process that were surprising for them including the expectation to write a letter describing why they wanted to attend a Met School. They stated, that: "Yeah, it was not

difficult, but like I thought it was maybe a bit interesting that I had to write a letter of, why I wanted to go to a school.” Myla captured the competitive nature of having to apply to the Met School and its potential impact on prospective students. Myla said, “I think there was fear amongst me and some of the people who wanted to apply to Met School, because you had to apply.” While several participants relied on parental assistance with the application, others like Matthew described working on the application independently, they explained, “I remember me handling most of everything else... it was orchestrated by only me.” These experiences with the admission process not only illustrate its complexity, but also the multifaceted ways that parental and other support (e.g., teachers, peers, siblings) may advantage some students over others and even potentially deter some students from applying. It also illustrates the competitive and selective nature of the school application process, which seems to contradict the principle of universality of public education.

Subtheme 1.c: Logistical Constraints

Within this subtheme, logistical constraints refer to the transportation-related demands placed on students and families once attending a Met School. If a Met School is located outside of a student’s neighbourhood, access to transportation to and from the school is a critical issue in determining a student’s ability to attend the school. When a student chooses to attend a school outside of their catchment area, school divisions in Manitoba, which include Met Schools, are not mandated to provide bussing or bus tickets to assist students with transportation. This means that the students who attend Met Schools outside of their catchment neighbourhood are responsible for meeting their own

transportation needs. For some students, their parents were readily available to drive them to and from the school. Myla and Matthew described how parents helped with transportation, particularly before they were able to drive themselves. For Myla, “for every day like school, like day to day things...I would probably always take the [school] bus. My parents both worked at least 8 to 5, if not, my dad traveled lots, so it was like my mom home alone as well. But when I got a license it was nice like I could leave school when I wanted, and not saying I would skip classes, but, like, let's say, at 2:30 early dismissal I could leave...” Myla recalled that obtaining their license and being fortunate to have access to their parent’s vehicles provided flexibility for them to get to school on their own, instead of needing to rely on the school bus. Matthew also received support from his mother with transportation skills. Matthew described how his mother taught him, “fundamentals... like getting up on time, making sure I knew which buses to get on, how to search the buses... I would have been lost... if I didn’t have that I probably would have never learned to navigate a bus and gotten past that part even.”

However, for other participants, logistical constraints posed significant, ongoing challenges. Max described difficulties with “getting to school” and characterized the distance from the school from their home as a “long distance.” Having to navigate public transit systems for the first time, as early as grade 9 proved to be intimidating for some of the participants as Judy shares: “the buses [*were*] totally fine, but it just felt really weird where we were just like such young kids, like we would have to find the buses by ourselves, get on the buses and sometimes it would be really dangerous and like bad.” Morgan also

found it worrisome to take the bus on their own: “I didn't necessarily appreciate *[there]* was also the commute to a lot of these internships...like it...taking the bus by myself downtown was always really scary... I usually couldn't get a ride home.” Myla also shared that taking public transit to their internship was also a cumbersome task, “I vividly remembered hating to bus to my practicum [internship], which is silly and as much as times some weeks I really didn't want to go to practicum, or sorry an internship but I had to go. But then, as I got older and I started driving, I was like, oh, this is nice like, you know what I mean. I don't have to worry about bussing. I can go and do my other things. Yeah.” Josh also highlighted that it was intimidating at worst, but that they felt accomplished after they learned how to take transit: “The confidence of being able to take public transit on my own like I feel like, if I told my younger self that I took public transportation on my own all the time...I never would have been able to have the confidence that I did to be able to do that if it wasn't for the self trust that I built in myself through the like, outside of my comfort zone experiences that I had in Met.” Beyond the act of taking public transit itself, the additional costs associated with purchasing bus tickets served as a potential barrier for some students. The need for transportation not only included getting to and from school, but also included transportation to and from internships throughout the school day, and this too was the responsibility of the students attending the Met School. Upon committing to attending the school, the students’ families were required to commit to meeting their own transportation needs for internship transportation, and school transportation if they lived outside of catchment. This included access to reliable transport and the ability to

independently organize and plan these trips. These requirements for transportation to and from school and within the school day, were overcome by the participants in this study. However, their concerns about these issues demonstrate how the requirement for transportation may serve as a significant barrier to entry for students from families of lower socio-economic status, working parents, and surfaces important questions about equitable access to this alternative school.

Subtheme 1.d: Stigma

As the Met School is an “alternative school” some participants described that there was a stigma associated with attending it. There are a limited number of alternative schools in Manitoba and interestingly some participants described how the school was regarded by some as a “special education” setting for students with disabilities or other “problems,” who were unable to succeed in a traditional school setting. These negative stereotypes weighed on some of the participants when they were considering whether to apply to the school. For some participants, family members expressed concerns about who the school was intended to serve. Morgan recalled, “my parents did not want me to go to Met School. They thought that it was like a school for bad kids, or maybe kids who didn’t, who like just weren’t able to do regular school. But I kind of knew like I wanted to try it out at least, and I did feel like I had to go there, like there’s no way I was gonna do just regular high school. I was looking like any alternative.”

Peers also reinforced negative stereotypes about the Met School. Josh described how a classmate questioned their choice about attending a Met School. Josh said,

“someone asked me, ‘are you still applying to Met School?’ And I said, yeah, I am... and then he said to me, ‘You’re going to Met? That’s where the special kids go.’ And I didn’t know what to do with that, but I distinctly remember that because that was definitely one of the misconceptions around what Met was made out to be.” For Josh, the label of “special kids” did not sit right, and it underscored how peers positioned the Met School as distinct from, and in some ways inferior to, mainstream high schools.

These accounts illustrate how discriminatory attitudes and beliefs about alternative schools and the students who attend them continue to persist. These biases and misconceptions from some families, peers, and even the students themselves may position Met Schools as deficient, thus stigmatizing the students who attend these settings.

Despite these negative stereotypes, students like Morgan and Josh, demonstrated agency and commitment to an unconventional path, suggesting that students may need to be particularly motivated to seek out alternative educational placements in the face of these obstacles. In the case of Morgan, they were experiencing bullying, which was driving their desire to attend an alternative school. It is possible that Morgan was willing to overlook the potential stigma associated with attending a Met School because the alternative of continuing to be bullied in their current school was a far more negative experience. In the case of Josh, their parents were initially opposed to them attending a Met School and Josh continued to persevere, further illustrating a strong personal desire for an alternative educational experience.

The participants' discussion of the stigma associated with the Met School illustrates the pervasiveness of discrimination toward diverse learners and alternative schools and draws into question the ways in which these factors may serve as a barrier to entry and the ongoing enrolment of some individuals.

In sum, the participants' reflections related to access and equity at Met Schools reveal that their experiences were shaped by a combination of social, economic, logistical, and attitudinal factors. The participants' experiences illustrate how their networks, access to resources, and personal circumstances influenced their ability to pursue attend Met School. Overall, the commonality in the participants' experiences reveals that access to a Met School is deeply influenced by structural factors, which may create and perpetuate inequities in educational opportunities for some groups.

GET 2 – School Priorities

'School priorities' emerged as a second theme across participant interviews, reflecting how students interpreted and experienced the values emphasized by the Met School in its design and daily practices. In this study, school priorities refer to the instructional, structural, and resource-related choices that shaped students' learning experiences and signaled what the school valued the most.

Participants frequently commented on the school's approach to project-based learning, internships, and flexible assessment, often reflecting on both the benefits of these approaches and the limitations they encountered. These reflections revealed tensions between the school's stated priorities and students' experiences navigating

available resources and supports.

This theme includes two interrelated subthemes: 2(a) individualized programming, which captures participants' experiences with project-based learning, internships, and flexible assessment; and 2(b) dual realities of resource access - opportunities and trade-offs, which explores participants' experiences with course selection, mental health supports, extra curricular opportunities, small class sizes, and access to technology. Throughout the interviews participants drew attention to particular priorities of their school, commenting on both elements they valued, experiences they wished were different, and the trade-offs they navigated as a result of these priorities. The subthemes within the GET of 'school priorities' are described further below.

Subtheme 2.a: Individualized Programming

A key pedagogical approach of the Big Picture Learning model that Met Schools embrace is "student-centered learning." At the Met School student-centered learning is employed through programming that is individualized to each student's interests – individualized programming. It is a central priority of the school as the staff work to tailor students' learning experiences to align with their interests, strengths, and aspirations. Through flexible project-based learning approaches, to student-selected internships, and flexible assessment, students are encouraged to deeply engage in meaningful learning while developing professional skills and exploring potential career paths.

Participants emphasized the value of having the freedom to pursue topics that resonated with them personally through their project-based learning experiences. Judy

explained, “I’m also a very hands-on learner... Met School promoted that... I knew that I wouldn’t be able to fully succeed there [in traditional settings], but I could excel at doing presentations.” Students were aware that upon enrolling as a student at a Met School, the approach was unique in that by taking a “one student at a time approach,” students with diverse learning profiles would be met where they’re at. Meaning that accommodations would be made to take a strength-based approach, utilizing students’ interests to help motivate students to pursue curricular content. Josh agreed that having the opportunity to voice choice in their projects was very beneficial to them, “I really enjoyed the personalized approach. I was able to really dive, again, really dive into those things that I was passionate about doing. It really inspired me. And I think that was able to motivate me to pursue, to pursue things that I otherwise would not have been able to do in traditional high school.” Similarly, Myla described the sense of accomplishment and skill-building derived from independent projects: “I did the biology programming on my own... I felt so accomplished and proud of myself... doing these big projects in grade 11 and 12 were subconsciously already learning what we’ve been doing in grade 9 and 10.” Morgan described the iterative nature of discovering their interests through personalized projects: “I kind of found my interest along the way... personalized programming was really helpful, because I could explore all of these different topics... I ended up focusing really heavily on writing... my advisor taught me how to write university level papers through a project.” Myla shared that, “I’ve always loved interior design, and I would always do like online stuff,” and that their interest in design was supported through a school project that

blended math and art, an experience they later recognized as distinctive compared to peers' more traditional learning paths. For Matthew, while there was no one on staff at their school that had formal training in their interest area, they were able to provide opportunities for them to still explore their interests, "Getting the opportunity to, I guess, tailor major portions of my project or my courses curriculum throughout the year, and make it around my interests and... things like that. I was able to incorporate, because I mentioned at the time it was personal interest, computer building and whatnot. I made some whole projects about just explaining to the class about, here's a computer."

These participants highlighted how individualized or personalized learning benefited them by meeting their unique learning needs and interests. These descriptions reveal that for some students individualized programming provided a much needed accommodations that enabled them to demonstrate their learning in novel, non-traditional ways, that they thought might not have been possible in a traditional school setting. For others, individualized learning was highly motivating and fostered a high level of engagement in the learning process. While others characterized the individualized learning opportunities that they received as accelerating their learning beyond what may have been available in a traditional school setting.

While the project-based learning approach was described as beneficial in some respects, it also raised some critiques from participants. Emily noted that while projects allowed them to explore their interests, they did not appreciate the requirements that went along with them. In particular they noted that they would have appreciated the opportunity

to pursue a project out of pure interest, and they did not enjoy having to connect their project to curricular outcomes, “I noticed that picking a project simply because I wanted to do it didn't necessarily seem to be like a good enough reason... sometimes I just wanted to do something because I was like, when am I ever going to get the chance to just research random stuff and learn things that don't necessarily have to do with what I think I want to do.” Emily also expressed frustration with the requirement of formatting final projects beyond essays and needing to choose an end product that demonstrated her creative skillsets, “...sometimes it would have been nice to just be able to do that [write an essay] because I struggled a lot with...creating the final product...after researching, then having to make something creative when I didn't always feel like I was very creative...” Emily also noted that while there was the opportunity for choice in projects, they were under the impression that there would be full autonomy with project design, “I was hoping to experience greater freedom in what I chose to learn and go deeper in.”

Judy also felt that as much as there were opportunities for student input with projects, they felt that projects were more so pushed on to them and that they had less of a say in them: “like our independent learning project, it felt like for me, it felt like it was, some of those projects were kind of pushed on to us, and we weren't like interested in them at all.” Judy also went on to say that over the years projects increased in depth and scale, and they did not see the value in pursuing such deep projects, “I don't think any of those projects like those really big projects that we did really helped me, like Senior Thesis Project like we did it, and then it's done.” Judy also critiqued the mandatory expectations

of the school as they felt that the expectations in general were excessive, "...because the expectations in that high school are way too high, and it just feels like you guys are pressuring students to do things that they're not into." They felt they were so excessive to the point that they could have exerted a similar effort within a traditional high school setting and received better grades, "I felt like the amount of energy and work that I put into certain projects, could have gotten me better grades in a regular high school I would have excelled, whereas in Met School I got like not bad grades, you could say, but grades that like didn't reflect the amount of effort and work I would put in." Additionally, in terms of the school's expectations in regard to its ideological and cultural priorities, Emily reflected critically on this dimension: "I think I saw a little bit of a double standard in some ways, I guess. Just of... you know, like share your opinion, and you're free to be yourself and do your thing as long as your opinion falls into this specific category of beliefs." They further recalled: "I don't think having like a basically mandatory field trip to a protest is probably appropriate... if you don't particularly feel the need to protest that... do I come to school to be part of a protest that I am not actually invested in?" Such accounts highlight the way in which school priorities extended beyond academics to encompass broader ideological commitments, which were not always experienced as inclusive.

All participants also referenced their internship experiences, and it was generally the most valued part of the students' Met School experiences. Through their internships students applied their learning in real-world contexts, built professional skills, and explored potential careers. Josh emphasized the formative impact of hands-on

experiences, noting, "working with the community, really being frontline, that was definitely very formative for me... the internship component... really provides that opportunity... to explore different career options." They also noted that they found it to be formative for exploring their individual interests, "going into the Met School and coming out of the Met School, I definitely believe that the internship experience allowed me to have access to the things that I was hoping for." Max described that having real-world experience in the field they were interested in was practical experience for them, "I really want to own a farm, and I was just operating a kind of a small farm. Yeah, so, and that was just what what one of the things that was just helping, supporting, supporting my education." Emily also described that over the course of their four years at Met School they had the opportunity to experience so many professions that interested them: "...I was a videographer assistant...I was at a café that was great... I had a brief stint with some different charitable organizations...I did what I could, but it was good to be there, and I had great mentors, which was great." They also noted that it helped them to narrow down paths to explore after high school, "like I had an idea of the area that I wanted to be in, but I definitely got a chance to narrow some things down..." Morgan noted that the internship opportunities at Met School: "...were the biggest draw for me...Met would probably have a better opportunity to do that than [the traditional high school], because [it] is just like such a huge like school." Myla also shared that they really valued Met School prioritizing learning through internships as they shared, "I remember we went to like an internship fair and the prof who I still work for today, she was there, and we made that connection...I also

remember there was other friends, like that one best friend...she also knew she wanted to be a teacher. And so for the first two years of high school, she explored that. And then she realized, no, I do not want to be a teacher...and so she went into event planning, and she loved that...I feel like if you told normal high school teachers this that maybe didn't know about Met or like your grandma or someone random, they'd be like blown away by these type of interactions and experiences because they aren't normal..."

On the other hand, Josh recalled the intensity of the Grade 9 internship preparation: "I think that the internship boot camp... was really positive... but when I was in grade 9, it was definitely overwhelming. And like, I'm not entirely sure if there's anything you could do about that, because it's just very intensive." Josh added: "When you have to learn how to like cold call, cold email. It's incredibly nerve-wracking... I found all of that terrifying. But it's also very rewarding once you kind of overcome that." Resource limitations were also evident in the internship process, which could be seen as empowering and independence-building for some, but also daunting for students. Josh explained their perspective of the early stages of internship readiness: "I think that the internship component is definitely a challenge, though, because it really requires like students as an individual, to not be afraid and not be deterred by rejection. Because it's definitely, it's almost like you're searching for a job and not every person is going to be able to take you on as an intern. Not every person is going to be able to take you on as a mentor or like mentor you as a student, and certain subjects and fields have restrictions that prevent students from accessing them in the way that, like students hope like, for example, like the medical field that's really tough,

or like the counseling and psychology field that's really tough to get an internship in. So you have to be a little more creative for fields like that.” Morgan shared a similar tension when describing the school’s approach: “they would always put everybody who was still at the school into one room and just make them sit on the computer until they found an internship. And... I never really liked that at all. But it did lead to me finding an internship.” Judy however, experienced this focus as excessive pressure, stating: “It always felt like I was being pushed to do things I never wanted to do. Pushed to like, go to exhibitions, pushed to sign up for internships that I was never interested in.” The approach that was used to hurdles and barriers in securing internships were frustrating as described by some participants. Emily also shared their dissatisfaction with the need of having to independently secure internships and find their own way to the internship: “I didn't like finding them...So now I have to set up an interview somehow and figure out like the logistical getting there was annoying. Which is why, when I found the internship that I liked, I just stayed in it, because I really do, I didn't want to try to figure out another one, and I was still learning like it wasn't like I had just stagnated I loved being here. They loved having me there. It was a win-win. It was great.”

Met School’s flexible assessment practices through exhibitions of learning, anecdotal assessment, co-designed rubrics, opposed to solely high-stakes testing, were attractive to students. Flexible assessment provided students with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning from a strength-based approach as Judy highlights, “... I was kind of more scared about having doing those like really big exams, like, for example, like I

think it's every semester like they do like a big exam [in a traditional high school], whereas we do exhibitions. I was kind of afraid of exams - where I knew that I would excel at doing presentations [at Met School]." Myla appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate their learning at quarterly exhibitions throughout their school year and lamented that it not only gave them an opportunity to authentically share what they learned and learn about their peers' work as well since this was prioritized for every student in the school: "You're not just presenting about your school-based project... but you're presenting a wider scope of basically who you are and what you did this quarter...because not only do people get to sign up to go to other people's exhibitions... and so naturally...you're getting to know the grade nines, tens, nines vice versa, not only who they are like what they did for their project, but who they are, maybe like in their other classes, or outside of school, because you really could talk about anything."

The pedagogical approaches that are used at Met Schools including project based learning, internships, and flexible assessment were characterized by the participants as having both strengths and weaknesses. Some participants felt that there were many benefits to the individualized programming when it came to projects and internships, while others felt that there were significant barriers to finding internships and unfair assessment methods. While internships were characterized as positive real-world learning experiences, the "boot camp" process that was used to obtain the internship process was described as very extremely stressful and beyond the scope of what should be expected of a high school student. Similarly, although students often perceived project-based learning

as offering full autonomy, some felt that their projects were too heavily shaped by teachers and that they did not truly get to pursue their work independently. The discussion of assessment also yielded interesting comments about students' desire to avoid tests. Some students leaned heavily into attending a Met School because they knew that high-stakes testing was minimal and that an emphasis on exhibitions, oral demonstrations of learning and projects were prioritized. However, some students felt that the effort they put into exhibitions and projects was not fully recognized by their advisors, and that a traditional school might have graded them more favourably.

Subtheme 2b: Dual Realities of Resource Access - Opportunities and Trade-offs

Resources that were prioritized at the Met Schools varied according to the participants. Some resources presented opportunities like the priority of small class sizes, makerspaces, or access to technology. Many participants also shared their dissatisfaction with limited access to resources that consist of traditional courses, extracurricular activities, internships, and mental health supports that are commonly available in larger high schools. Additionally, some participants described some resources as assets, such as hands-on learning, whereas some felt that very resource was also a detriment. For instance, Judy recalled that "I knew that I wouldn't be able to fully succeed there [larger traditional high school]. In like the early years, like in grade 9 like I wouldn't. I knew that I wouldn't be able to do good there, because I am such a hands on learner" explaining that they knew they needed something different from a traditional approach as a learner. However, Judy also noted that even though with a hands-on approach through project-

based learning, which is an emphasis of the Met Schools, they felt that “If you were to do that same project in regular high school, you would get A+, or even like a hundred. But if you did that same project in Met School, you would get like a 70 or 80” emphasizing that they felt that the effort put into their projects was unappreciated.

Josh recounted missing out on regular physical education classes because of their schedule limitations as a Met School student and their other commitments, “[In your] grade 12 year in Met like you don't actually have a designated gym period, it's like time you have to pursue physical activity on your own and then just log the hours. And so, um. I was sad that I didn't get to that. Play dodgeball. Or do fun gym things like that.” Matthew proposed increased collaboration between the Met Schools and larger high schools to improve access to the desired elements of larger high schools, “If the schools could you know, try to match what's out there at other high schools, other curricula, either through connections with those schools, or by incorporating that into the larger schools that are out there now from Met School.” These limitations largely stemmed from having fewer staff, smaller facilities, and tighter budgets, reflecting both human and financial resource challenges.

Overall, students emphasized that choosing Met meant balancing academic opportunities with certain sacrifices. Emily, for example, recalled their experiences with course electives and extracurriculars: “I was in band and choir... so I did that band in grade 9, choir grade 9 and 10, had to drop it in grade 11, which was really sad.” Emily needed to give up choir when they started grade 11 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also

because they chose to prioritize their internship and project experiences, where timetabling would not allow for both interests. Other participants shared similar challenges. Josh recalled also being unable to continue both band and choir due to scheduling constraints with their internship: "... because of the way that classes are structured, just like the way that the schedule is in Met, I wasn't able to, I was no longer able to do both. I had to pick one and so I ended up going with choir."

Josh further highlighted both the strengths and limitations of the academic offerings of Met. While they appreciated that subjects like biology were approached in creative and engaging ways, they acknowledged that "I had classmates who were doing physics and that was really tough because we didn't have like a designated physics teacher. And I mean, things like that are very hard to learn independently. Your mentor is not going to be able to teach you the key things in chemistry that a chemistry teacher would." Without specialized teachers, students felt that they may be missing out on knowledge required to pursue STEM fields at the post-secondary level. Matthew also emphasized the lack of pre-existing resources to support project work, recalling that "if the resource didn't exist, we found ways to create it."

Emily also wished that more traditional content was delivered at the Met School in terms of its academics, "that's probably the biggest thing was like some of the mandatory stuff [advisor chosen texts] wasn't my favorite. I don't know. It'd been fun to read like an old book, but I also I love the classics." In addition, for more traditional content, Emily also desired more flexibility in course offerings. For example, they expressed a desire for the

option to choose more than one math course, when they had to choose between Essential or Pre-Calculus later in high school, to illustrate their preference they shared, “even if you like the more complicated math, it’s still important to understand how a mortgage works and those different like adulting things.” They also critiqued the difficulty of fitting certain subjects, such as science or music into a project, noting that they would have preferred if electives were offered as a standalone course instead of a holistic project-based offering: “...trying to get different credits or electives and having to instead of it just being a class... was definitely a struggle sometimes.” For context, at the Met Schools most electives (besides band or choir where offered) are woven into students’ projects and/or internship experiences in addition to supplementary assignments from the advisor. Emily here refers to the fact that she wished she could take a biology, chemistry, or physics class traditionally, opposed to co-designing projects with her advisor to meet these curricular outcomes. These struggles point to how the school’s priorities in terms of its resources, while offering flexibility, also created barriers to equitable access to breadth of coursework.

Myla drew attention to the lack of resources in terms of traditional supports like guidance counselors at the Met School. They observed that the small staff of Met School were required to take on working through mental health issues and guidance counselling: “because we’re such a small school... it got thrown onto advisors.” For students who required specialized supports, this limitation meant that access to these supports often depended on individual advisor capacity rather than specialized staff.

There was a clear desire for large traditional high school experiences amongst some of the participants. Judy shared this sentiment in terms of desiring the larger school-wide events seen typically in high schools as they shared: “There was never a place where we all got together and actually like did like school activities together. I thought there was no school spirit.” Judy further noted that attending Met also meant giving up the elements of traditional school culture, such as pep rallies and large community events. While these activities may seem superficial to some, they represented moments of collective spirit and shared identity that were not as prominent in the Met setting. Similarly, Morgan recalled that their local high school “... would always have their own events... big prom in the gym and... athletic events...” and that even though these events were in close proximity to their Met School, they never crossed over to participate.

Emily also explained that some students with specific interests, may have found it challenging to pursue them while at Met School, due to the school’s limited breadth. They admitted that not all interests were easy to pursue at Met School due to course offerings and delivery: “It depends on the person... certain interests are harder to pursue which is a weird thing to say, like within a Met environment... there tends to be a lot of people who are more interested in like the arts and the creative aspect of things. So it’s harder if you’re someone who’s really into sports to really enjoy your experience, just based on like what you can and cannot do.” Due to Met School’s small size, Emily refers to sports not being offered within the school as there typically are not enough students to form teams for team sports.

While shortcomings in school resources at Met Schools were emphasized by some participants, others praised the unique resources that were available at Met Schools due to their instructional focus and smaller size. For example, Josh highlighted the increased access to specialized spaces, noting that their makerspace was “a lot more accessible than I think it would have been in a bigger high school.” Having a makerspace, a space equipped with tools and 3D printers, so readily available for students working on projects was seen as an asset by Josh, as this equipment while available in larger high schools, is usually only available to students enrolled in specific industrial arts electives, whereas it was open to any student willing to learn about the equipment, at the Met School. Judy reinforced this by praising the school’s technological infrastructure, describing, “Technology-wise Met School was excellent at that point. A 100% like I know that.” Judy here refers to the fact that the Met School was well-equipped in terms of providing technology access to students. Overall, the participants felt that the Met Schools were well-resourced in terms of technology access.

Some participants highlighted the benefits of having a small school and small class sizes as a resource. These participants described small class sizes as helping to facilitate the development of close relationships. Myla noted, “Okay, I love the small classrooms...15 students per [advisory]... Having the one on one, advisors... I think that's one of the biggest staples. And when you think of, like how people compare universities and how it's nicer to have more one-on-one support, but also like less students in the class, the environment as a whole is just different, and I think people do not understand

that or fully like know what it looks like unless they experience it...” and Emily echoed these comments, “the smaller sizes was a nice draw, too, and like yeah, relational aspect of knowing people in a smaller space.” Myla also reflected on how collaboration was embedded across the school community: “Met School is set up and the collaboration that's just naturally ingrained and intertwined within everything... You get to like interact with the different advisors...like everything, was just cross-curricular, I guess.” Josh also valued the smaller class sizes, which allowed greater involvement in activities like dissections. For some students, the small school design allowed for close relationships with administrators and advisors which translated into personalized resource supports, as Josh recounted how principals “were very open to problem solve with me, to work around like compromises or things like that.” Myla also recounted the benefits of having a small class size for their pre-calculus course, “...like an hour and a half block set aside for pre-cal during the schedule it was literally like paying for a tutor. It was great.” Matthew highlighted the importance of Met School’s structural design, contrasting their experience of Met School as a ‘school within a school’ with their preference for a separate small school: “I do remember that experience [school within a school] and it's what actually led me to almost consider potentially going back into the public [traditional] school stream...” But, for many, these priorities aligned with their desire to avoid large, impersonal environments. Matthew explained, “I really, really wanted to explore the internships... and I also kind of had that small bit of fear of like giant schools.”

However, the close-knit structure also created constraints. Morgan described the

challenge of being, “stuck with the same people” in her advisory group and recalled considering switching schools because of difficult peer dynamics. Even after enrolling, some students internalized aspects of this misunderstanding. Judy reflected “when I started, I realized that it really isn’t that big and that not a lot of people go to this school. So I was kinda at that point where, like, did I make the right decision? Like, did I go to the school I should have gone to?” Here, Judy reveals the ambivalence that can emerge when students weigh the prestige and legacy of more conventional schools against the smaller, newer, less widely understood, Met School. Judy also has made clear throughout their interviews that they desired the large-scale events of the larger high schools and did not realize how small the Met School is upon enrolling.

For Josh, they described that in order to be successful at Met, “I do think that it takes the right kind of student to really excel in the Met School. And if you're like like, you have to be open to expanding your comfort zone, and you have to be open to learning independence, even if you have not yet gained that independence like when I was in middle school. I don't think that I like, yeah, I was very shy and was very timid, and I would not have considered myself an independent person or a confident person, but I was willing to try and if, though if those key things are not there, then I do think that a person would have a difficult time in the Met school like... I'm not sure if I've said this already in my previous interview, but I a hundred percent believe that part of...part of the beauty, but also the challenge of Met is that it gives you as much as you give it.”

Overall, students’ reflections highlight that resource availability at Met School was

both an advantage and a disadvantage, deeply shaping their educational experiences. While the small school model fostered personalized support and enhanced access to certain resources, it simultaneously constrained access to the breadth of courses, extracurricular activities, and supports typical of larger high schools. These experiences illustrate how resource distribution can inadvertently create inequities: some students thrived in the personalized and flexible environment, while others struggled with gaps in opportunities and supports that larger schools could provide. Collectively, the participants demonstrate that choosing Met School requires weighing the opportunities for independence and personalized learning against the loss of certain academic structures, extracurricular activities, and school traditions. This negotiation reflects the school's priorities: in prioritizing relevance and student-centered growth, students were continually navigating the trade-offs that came with this alternative model of education.

GET 3: Personal Growth

Personal growth emerged as a third theme as participants reflected on how their experiences at the Met School contributed to their development over time. In this study, the theme of personal growth refers to the development of skills and qualities that the participants developed and attributed to the structure and experiences of the Met School, particularly through real-world learning, internships, and increased responsibility.

Participants described moments in which they recognized changes in their confidence, independence, and readiness for life after high school. In many cases, this growth was not always evident to participants while they were enrolled, but became more

apparent through reflection after graduation.

This theme includes several interrelated subthemes: 3(a) career readiness, capturing the development of skills and habits that participants perceived as preparing them for careers after high school; 3(b) confidence, reflecting increased self-esteem and willingness to take risks through exposure to new opportunities; 3(c) independence, highlighting participants' growing ability to manage responsibilities through real-world learning experiences; 3(d) identity, referring to increased self-awareness and understanding of personal interests and strengths; and 3(e) retrospective appreciation, which captures how participants, upon maturing, came to recognize the value of their Met School experiences. The subthemes within the GET of 'personal growth' are described further below.

Subtheme 3.a: Career Readiness

All participants spoke of career readiness being a significant part of their Met School experience and commented on how they grew in this area over time. At the Met School participants developed their career readiness skills primarily through projects and internships. The participants described a variety of different career readiness skills that they were able to develop during their time at Met School. Through these experiences they had the opportunity to develop both soft and technical skills.

Transferable soft skills, such as time management and adaptability were described as an area of growth by participants. Myla shared that they learned how to juggle many things at once during high school and this skill has translated into them being involved with

a variety of opportunities after high school. They reflected that “if I didn't go to Met, I think, especially in my grade 12 year, I wouldn't have been normalized to those things because I wouldn't have been getting those extra opportunities.” Matthew highlighted how internships helped them develop professional behaviours: “I have to value their [mentors] time... be there, be professional, be on time... like what a life lesson there.” Josh described their internships as providing “soft skills that are transferable even after Met and then more tangibly as well,” while Max summarized their experience as simply being “exposed to skills that you know, you just need to do things.”

Participants also recalled developing career readiness skills through projects. For some, project-based learning offered opportunities for them to explore interests while in high school and to develop a knowledgebase that typically happens later on via formal post-secondary education. As Emily shared, “...getting to work on the projects that I did was very helpful in showing that I had a background in... being able to show, ‘Hey, I did this. I did that,’ was very helpful.” Emily’s ability to draw on concrete experiences from high school, while in post-secondary settings demonstrated competence beyond her age group. Emily described how when applying to her current program of study: “I think the different just random projects that I did, that I sometimes even forgot that I had actually done when it came time to applying for the program that I'm currently in, I was like they were asking what prior experience I had within the area that I was in. And I was like, wait, I actually like, I didn't go to school for this really. And I didn't do a lot of work in this capacity, necessarily. But I've actually done a lot just based on like elective projects that I got to do

which was really helpful and made it look like, I've spend a lot more time in the area than I maybe have formally, which was really interesting." Participants' projects also translated into tangible advantages in post-secondary education. Josh credited their project work with directly supporting their university funding: "I don't think I would have earned the scholarships that I have today, if it was not for the project work that I did while I was in Met... that has really made such a large tangible impact in my university life to not have to worry about my tuition." Beyond finances, they emphasized how the confidence gained at Met gave them the capacity to apply for scholarships, research assistant positions, and other academic opportunities that they might otherwise have considered out of reach.

A key distinguisher of Met Schools is authentic assessment, and students often had the opportunity to demonstrate their learning through oral exhibitions of their projects and internship experiences. Myla explained that repeated exhibitions of her learning over her years at Met School led to long-term benefits as she decided to enter the teaching profession, noting that over time, she became highly skilled at speaking and lesson delivery: "...I dreaded exhibitions, even though it was like whatever I'm going to get better at it. And eventually I did get better at it, and I honestly probably... wasn't as grateful for it until probably my third or fourth year, when I was good at presentations, and I'm still good at presentations. [Not] only was I building that skill in university, but then into the university job, and then into classes, and I think a lot of your ability to present to people and to like, construct a presentation is correlated to how you plan lessons, or how you give a lesson, and how you talk in a classroom and your natural presence in front of a group of

people in a way.” Myla also added that: “I think if I didn't have a basis of presenting I wouldn't probably be who I am in the role I have in that project that I'm doing now.” Emily also agreed that Met School provided “...extra opportunities to hone in on like presentation skills” and that it was a safe space to practice conversing with diverse audiences.

Technical skills that students developed through Met School that contributed to career readiness were also developed through internships. These skills often centered on communication which consisted of crafting emails, making phone calls, and public speaking. Emily shared that not only did she learn how to make phone calls to potential mentors for internships, but she had many opportunities to practice over her time at Met, “...oh, and how to make a phone call. I've done that before, so if I ever have to do it again, which I'm sure I will, then I'll have already done it in high school.” Similarly, Judy reflected that Met School not only gave them the opportunity to learn how to communicate, but established an environment where students could focus on developing these skills quickly: “I've definitely gotten better at sending emails, writing emails and stuff like that. I would say, like, I'm not afraid to send the email anymore. I'm not afraid to make a phone call...I'm not afraid to being like, oh, if I want something I'll give the business a call, I'll call them. I'm not afraid to do that...But with Met school I would say they was just kind of fast tracked, which was nice because they helped with like finding jobs for some people who wanted to work and other things... even if you're in university now, like, I'm in university. So I would say, it's easier sending your professors emails because you don't feel scared, like you're more confident sending emails.”

Internships provided many opportunities for personal growth as participants reflected on how they helped with career readiness. Morgan recalled that “we had to make a resume for every internship...it definitely taught me how to make a resume, which is a skill that not everyone has and how to do like an interview with a potential employer.” Matthew reinforced this, stating that “I'd say definitely the interview parts of the internships. I would say the most is the most those skills I learned, like how interviews go I feel like that has not changed at all how an interview starts.’ They also linked the importance of early internship lessons in business etiquette, like “good eye contact, handshakes, interviews, professionalism...” to their current work in the IT sector. In addition to basic career readiness skills, there was also the opportunity for job-specific skills. Morgan cited learning “a lot about how to write an article from that internship. I've learned what is like a news story and what isn't. So it gave me a lot of journalistic skills.”

Participants framed these competencies as lasting assets that extended well beyond high school. Morgan emphasized both the professional and personal benefits of such experiences: “I’ve been able to build my resume so much more than anyone else my age which, like, I'm not trying to brag, but you know, that's been a really great benefit for like getting different jobs. Others reflected on how Met School’s focus aligned with their career goals, essentially giving them a head start in their desired fields. For Matthew, the value of internships was in clarifying their career direction as it helped: “...lead me down a path of knowing what I didn't want to do, as opposed to spending as much time focusing on having to figure that out like, I figure a lot of others would otherwise.” Myla observed,

“...I was furthering myself in this like realm, that was all education-based...and I wanted to be a teacher. So how could I not come out of this being better than other people?” Myla’s internships also resulted in relationships that later re-emerged in her practicum placements and employment, including a long-term position at the university she attends that allowed her to work in her chosen field throughout her studies. This sense of continuity shaped her pride in taking an unconventional, but meaningful pathway: “I actually love that I’m not like any other university student, and I got to do all of these things and use them to the best of my like advantage.” Josh pointed out that the relationships they formed during high school internships were long-lasting and had an impact on their career well beyond graduating: “if you end up like I did working in an actual paid position with them later on, during or after your internship those references and those connections continue over time and so those references just become even stronger in later applications, while you’re in university for other scholarships for other programs and for other jobs as well.”

Over time at the Met School participants shared how their networks developed through internship experiences. Myla described entering higher education already equipped with an extensive professional network, reflecting, “...I know all these people. I know all these connections... within the being of what [Met] produces you are actually networking, but I never would have thought about that.” She credited her mentor and advisor with reinforcing the importance of relationships, even though she had not consciously recognized their significance while she was a student at Met School. Similarly,

Matthew now maintains career connections through LinkedIn and in-person networking, tracing these skills back to his high school experiences, “now I have career connections, either through LinkedIn or personal connections that I've made while networking out in my field.”

Several participants identified internships as the bridge to their earliest and most formative employment experiences. Emily described how her grade 11 and 12 internships “ended up being the only employer I’ve basically ever had,” noting that it led to multiple jobs within her community, and eventually guided them into their current academic program. They reflected that “my internship, yeah, led to pretty much all of my earnings which has led to all of my adventures,” highlighting the direct correlation between their internship and financial success that led to enjoyable life experiences. Similarly, Judy shared that their advisor connected them to their first internship, and that led to their first job: “I found it through my advisor in grade 10 and so that's why I started my first job. It was a wonderful place to work for my first summer job. It was my very first job ever it was wonderful.” Judy also recognized that “if you actually go to an internship that you enjoy, you can such valuable experiences that can really help you further on in life.” Interestingly, Judy points out that the internship needs to be enjoyable in order to develop skills. However, this also alludes to the fact that there may have been some internships that were not enjoyable, which could have led to potential time wasting in internships that were perceived to be not beneficial.

Josh described that internship opportunities were the most meaningful part of their Met School experience as they shared, “as a whole, I found, and still do like believe, that the internship component of Met School is like one of the most valuable pieces. It really provides that opportunity.” They went on to contrast these opportunities with the experiences of peers in traditional schools: “It's not enough anymore to just be a good student ... you have to have those outside experiences and Met provides you with those... when I was applying for jobs... I had things on my resume that I was able to show that I had experience and skills, whereas friends that I had who were in traditional schooling, they were job searching for a longer period of time because they didn't have any experience.”

Subtheme 3.b: Confidence

The majority of participants shared that Met School helped to build their confidence over the years. In particular, when participants were asked about the impacts of Met School on their post-school life outcomes, accounts of improving self-esteem and increasing confidence were often shared through project and internship experiences. Morgan described that their project work was rigorous: “my advisor taught me how to like write university-level papers through a project. And just that kind of stuff was really impactful,” and they described having the opportunity to work on large projects in high school where they were “able to take my learning in my own hands, and also being able to create a big project in high school was really great for my uni and confidence.” Myla recalled how opportunities both inside and outside of projects allowed her to strengthen their “...presentation skills, networking skills, just talking abilities” noting that by the time

they reached university, peers were surprised they had developed these skills in high school.

For some, internships were a source of confidence building. Emily described working at a café where they “...got to learn some people skills which was really fun...in potentially high-pressure situations, but like, not that high pressure” which they valued as an accessible way to build their confidence. Morgan similarly reflected that their internship “really like boosted my self esteem to the point where in university, I think, that helped me so much for my life, and in university to be able to have that at such a young age and to learn like independence and responsibility with work, and then also, of course, like how to do things right.” These real-world experiences gave students a chance to apply themselves in professional settings earlier than most of their peers.

Finally, several participants emphasized confidence growth in their social lives. Josh explained that the “...confidence in myself kind of seeped into my social interactions as well.” While Matthew reflected on his personal transformation from being “...very shy, very introverted” to becoming more comfortable speaking with people outside of his friend group, “It got me comfortable... talking to people, and it helped me build a familiarity.” Morgan pointed to the role of the school in preventing social isolation and supporting their transition to university: “I was able to find community and friends at Met School... it just led to me like being a functioning member of society, and... the fact that I’m in university now, I would say, is the positive life outcome.” These experiences suggest that confidence-building at Met School was not confined to projects or internships, but

extended into the broader ethos of preparing students to engage meaningfully with the world around them.

Subtheme 3.c: Independence

Themes of independence arose amongst several of the participants as they talked about their reasons for choosing Met School, internship experiences, and individual projects. Deciding to choose Met School at the beginning was likely the participants' first opportunity of demonstrating independence, if it was the participant's choice in attending the school. Emily shared, "Yeah, I figured there was like a risk in in going with the less, the path less traveled. But I figured even if I didn't have a great experience, I would have some things that I learned along the way, and it would probably be okay." Emily makes an interesting statement here as she demonstrates that going to Met School was a 'risk' as she was aware that the majority of her peers weren't going to this school, and that it was less common to attend. Despite this, she owned her choice, believing that even if the school turned out not to be the ideal fit, she would still gain valuable learning. Her decision, made without external pressure, reflects independence and a desire for something different from traditional schooling. Myla described a similar sense of agency but framed it in more pragmatic terms: "You need to milk the system...you get out what you put in in certain cases, but you also have the opportunities at Met...there were so many opportunities. You wanted to go to something...you're going to introduce it to your advisor or to the principal, and maybe they can make it happen..." For Myla, independence meant actively seeking and asking for opportunities, something they carried forward into

university life. At the same time, their statement implies that success at Met was not automatic; students who were less confident or less comfortable advocating for themselves might not have benefited in the same way.

Several participants described how they developed their independence through internship experiences. Morgan explained that “I like feel so much more independent, and I was able to learn this kind of independence like pretty early on in my life, like, you know, when someone at an internship would task me with something, because they actually trust me, even though I’m 16 years old, they like and then I’m actually doing work on something that’s like important for this person’s job,” noting how being trusted with meaningful tasks at such a young age helped them grow in terms of their independence. This sense of early independence was reinforced through practical tasks such as making professional phone calls, which participants noted were skills typically developed much later in life. Similarly, Max described how their internships gave them “...a good learning autonomy and also, you know, help me to be more independent.” Both emphasized that being relied upon in real-world settings provided opportunities to practice and strengthen their independence. Josh explained that something as simple as learning to take public transit independently became a personal growth milestone: “I never would have been able to have the confidence that I did to be able to do that if it wasn’t for the self-trust that I built in myself through the through the like, outside of my comfort zone experiences that I had in Met.” Matthew also traced his independence back to his internship search process, recalling that they were trained as early as grade 9 to cold-call businesses independently

for internships: “so there definitely felt like some doors closed prematurely on during those times from me being the initial contact. That I still use to this day now. Where I can easily go out and make these connections with businesses now that I am of the appropriate age to be doing that, but back then I was aimed really high.” Matthew explains that learning to face rejection at a young age ultimately gave them the confidence in networking and resilience when opportunities did not work out.

For some, independence was most clearly fostered through academic projects. Myla shared how they completed a biology independent study on their own, noting that “...some people or parents, might be like oh, my God, you literally just took the textbooks and like did the work on your own... but clearly they found that I was capable at that time to do it, and it was nice, because I probably finished it within a month or so.” While Myla appreciated this autonomy, Josh raised a contrasting perspective, reflecting that “...certain things would be easier in traditional high school, like doing biology, like doing physics... we didn’t have a designated physics teacher. And I mean, things like that are very hard to learn independently.” At the same time, Josh also highlighted the long-term benefits of being pushed to learn on their own, arguing that “...a lot of university learning is very independent, like you go to like you're expected to study the material on your own, and like the class sizes are huge. You can't always ask your professor for help directly, because if they just don't have the time to do that, so a lot of the learning in university you have to take on independently. And the SBP nature and the project work nature of Met really prepared me to take on my university learning independently like it wasn't something

that was new to me to have to do so I think that it really prepared me for that.” For Morgan, independence was experienced most clearly through project-based learning. They explained, “I really liked being able to go through like all the learning outcomes in the curriculum...and then making my own rubric or syllabus for projects, like it was so personalized to me, and I think it enabled me to be able to do like really big projects that like, I like and like through my internship.’ Morgan’s autonomy to design their own assessments reinforced her ability to pursue large, meaningful projects, blending personal interest with academic accountability. Overall, these accounts suggest that while independence was both a strength and a challenge of the Met School experience, participants recognized a lasting impact on their overall personal growth.

Subtheme 3.d: Identity

Several participants described opportunities for identity development during their time at Met School which allowed for overall personal growth and development during their time at Met School. They generally spoke of appreciating the opportunities to pursue learning that would help them make decisions in their later life and having the opportunity to pursue learning that was relevant to them, as well as the environment that nurtured identity development and overall self-exploration. Josh emphasized the value of individualized programming when it came to learning more about themselves, noting “I was able to really dive...into those things that I was passionate about doing. It really inspired me and I think that was able to motivate me to pursue to pursue things that I otherwise would not have been able to do in traditional high school.” For Josh, the freedom to follow

interests allowed them to explore their identity more deeply. Myla described the way their Met School experiences formed the foundation of their professional identity as a teacher, suggesting that “the entities, and the like behaviours or things that I embody now... they all stem from those experiences, and those were the beginning stages of it.” Judy’s reflections extended beyond high school, as they explained that the environment at Met reinforced their preexisting outgoing nature, affirming their inclination to take risks and explore new opportunities: “...just like confirmed my like mindset, whereas, like now, even in like university or any everyday life, I carry myself in the way that's like, I'm always down to like, try new things, even when I'm at university.” Josh described one of their most significant takeaways of personal growth through Met School, which contributed to their identity today, is when they learned to “...never self-select out of an opportunity and to always at least try which again led to scholarship applications, university applications, other programs, and like, even in my personal life, too.”

Subtheme 3.e: Retrospective Appreciation

Looking back, participants acknowledged that certain opportunities, which were not initially recognized as impactful, became meaningful as they matured and gained perspective. Morgan acknowledged the personalized nature of Met School that allowed autonomy, but also acknowledged that this freedom sometimes led to them taking the easy way out, as they candidly admitted, “I didn't take advantage enough of like all of the resources that we had there. I guess I was a bit of like a lazy student, so I would try to like cut corners in different ways. I feel like I probably could have done even more with the

project. But I, you know, because it was so personalized. I kind of got to set my own pace with things. But if I could go back, I definitely would have taken more advantage of the opportunity that I had there.” Myla also did not realize at the time how young they were, as well as their peers, when they had access to high-level internships and came to appreciate this later on in life: “I and this other student who was in grade 11 we were, she was like working with like a I don't know, some kind of university science lab and I was working at the university at that time on education research. And I remember thinking like, oh, my gosh, I was like, we're so smart and not just that we're so smart, but like I felt so accomplished and like like proud of myself, like there's value in any time any type of internship and project but just like putting it all together and talking in front of people. I was just like we've done a lot, and we're only 17 and 18 or 16.”

Overall, participants described Met School as a setting that helped them develop their personal growth through fostering autonomy, encouraging risk-taking, and providing opportunities for personalized learning. This allowed them to make meaningful choices about their education and develop personal growth that continued to influence their decisions beyond high school. The participants illuminated consistently that through projects and internships, they were able to develop their personal growth. However, there were both pros and cons as they reflected on personal growth as with the Met School model it requires significant independence, and motivation to reap its benefits. As such, the benefits of this model may not have been equally accessible to all students. For instance, those who were less outspoken, less confident, or who needed greater external

structure might have struggled to “milk the system” in the same way, raising questions about equity and who ultimately thrived in this environment.

GET 4: Relationships

Relationships emerged as the final overarching theme across participant interviews, highlighting the central role interpersonal connections played in shaping students’ experiences at the Met School. In this study, relationships refer to the academic, social-emotional, and professional connections participants formed with advisors, family members, mentors and peers, which functioned as key sources of support, guidance, and, at times, tension.

This theme included the following subthemes: 4(a) advisors, as providing not only academic support, but also sustained social-emotional support throughout their high school experience; 4(b) family relationships also played a role during participants’ high school experience as some participants relied on their family members for assistance with exhibitions, internships, projects, and moral support. Through internships and community-based learning opportunities, participants formed 4(c) mentor relationships, through which they learned valuable workplace skills, and in some cases developed long-lasting connections beyond high school. Participants also recollected that 4(d) peer relationships were a significant aspect of their experience as these relationships helped them navigate challenges together, and some participants reported maintaining these connections after graduation.

Importantly, participants also reflected on instances in which relationships were

strained or ineffective. Some described negative experiences with advisors or peers that led to feelings of disengagement, desires to change advisories, or considerations of transferring schools. Others shared adverse mentor relationships that negatively shaped their internship experiences. Together, these findings highlight that relationships functioned as both supports and barriers within the Met School experiences. The subthemes within the GET of relationships are described further below.

Subtheme 4.a: Advisor Relationships

One of the distinguishers of Met Schools is the advisor-student relationship, which participants consistently identified as one of the most influential aspects of their educational experiences. Advisors provide long-term relationships of up to four years of a student's high school experience. Participants described them as facilitators of learning, and they were found to play a pivotal role in students' academic progress, personal development, and sense of belonging within the school community. However, participants' reflections highlighted a duality: while strong advisor relationships could be transformative, inconsistency or lack of connection sometimes hindered students' engagement.

For many participants, the strength of the advisor relationship was directly linked to their overall satisfaction at Met School. Emily emphasized the importance of "clicking" with an advisor, noting that "I think that your Met School experience can be very heavily influenced by whether you and your advisor click. I know some people who didn't necessarily have that, and it was more of a struggle, or they just ended up going to a

different high school or different things ended up happening just based on that. I think it was really helpful having the same person over 4 years provided with the fact that he was great. And yeah, we had a really good relationship. Yeah, I think by the end of 4 years it was like really good to to have that and to just yeah, to get to like, know teachers on a on a bit of a deeper level.” For Emily, having the same advisor for four years provided continuity and trust, something they contrasted with the impersonal interactions in traditional high schools. Similarly, Josh credited the longevity of their advisor relationship with enhancing both their project work and their confidence. Since their advisor “knew [their] weaknesses” and areas for growth, they were able to provide tailored support. This trust extended beyond high school; Josh shared that, “I’m still connected with my advisor, and we’ll catch up for coffee sometimes, and when I’m struggling like in an academic sense, or if like, if I’m if I feel any sort of like academic self-doubt I know that I can kind of reach out to her to also talk through it. And again, I feel like that’s only provided because we had such a long relationship for 4 years, so she can speak to the qualities that I demonstrated while her student.”

Other participants highlighted how advisor relationships extended beyond academics to include emotional and personal support. Myla described advisors as “literally becoming like your little therapist,” pointing to the depth of care advisors provided in moments of difficulty. Matthew similarly reflected on how his advisor offered emotional support during a difficult life moment, “And because I had that one-to-one connection there at the school I had somebody I could reach out to, when I was potentially

one of the lowest points in my high school experience and getting that immediate response being like... 'I'm so sorry to hear that. Don't worry about school today. Take care of what you need to in your house, like in the household. But if you need anything. You're always a text away.'" They continue to remain connected to their advisor, describing the relationship as a long-term source of guidance years after graduation. These narratives illustrate how advisor relationships at Met School often transcended the conventional teacher-student dynamic, functioning instead as relationships rooted in care, trust, and continuity.

In addition to individual relationships, the small-school environment facilitated broader connections between students and multiple advisors. Morgan explained that "I feel like with all of the advisors in our school... we all knew all of them, because there is like kind of a small amount, right? But it was a small school, so you could just go to any of them for help, and like they would help you," suggesting a culture of collective care. Myla also echoed this sentiment as they shared, they would always be excited to see other advisors they had connections with, even though they weren't her primary advisor, "I'm always excited to see [them], and I'm like [they're] not even my teacher. But it's just like everyone in the school. Of course your relationships are going to differ. They might be like closer, and for some advisors, and not for others. But like you're all people, it's like your siblings. You're all people who've seen each other for the last 4 years. So naturally, you're gonna have relationships in that sense of comfortability." Morgan also described how the advisor relationship extended to families as they shared that during the COVID-19

pandemic, their advisor held meetings at their home, where their mother became an active participant in supporting their learning. This unusual level of family involvement, they explained, was “a really unique relationship” that strengthened both their academic experience and their parents’ trust in the school.

Not all advisor experiences, however, were positive. Both Judy and Myla described challenges related to advisor turnover. Judy noted that they “went through four different advisors,” which prevented them from building the kind of meaningful relationships their peers enjoyed, but what was promised by the school model. The lack of continuity left them feeling disadvantaged, particularly when they observed classmates who had stable advisor relationships throughout high school. They also recalled instances where advisor support felt misaligned with their needs, such as when projects were “pushed” onto students, or when they felt advisors siding with certain peers, “...there would definitely be students in my classroom who had mental issues or like they were facing with mental health problems and it felt like she was always on the side of the other student.” These accounts highlight that while advisor relationships could be a significant strength of the Met School model, inconsistency and misalignment could also serve as barriers to student engagement.

In consideration of all of the participants’ reflections, they all work to underscore the importance of advisor relationships in shaping their overall experience of Met School. When relationships are consistent, trusting, and personalized, they facilitate academic growth, emotional resilience, and long-lasting connections. Conversely, the disruptions in

advisor continuity or misaligned relationships undermined students' sense of support. The overall picture suggests that advisors are both powerful facilitators of student success and potential vulnerabilities within the Met School model, making the quality and stability of advisor-student relationships critical to ensuring equitable student experiences.

Subtheme 4.b: Family Relationships

Ongoing emotional and practical support from family members was central to navigating the demands of the school. Several participants emphasized the role of parents in providing encouragement, brainstorming ideas, and offering reassurance during stressful periods. As Emily reflected, her family were “really great supports... to just either vent frustrations to or ask ideas... to make sure that I was... not feeling too crazy, overwhelmed.” Similarly, Max highlighted that his family not only met his “basic needs” but also offered “emotional support and...advice... working towards actualizing my dreams.”

Family involvement also meant having an active role in the lives of their children at school. Over time, Morgan's mother developed a “really close bond” with their advisor, often participating in project discussions and attending every exhibition. Myla jogged their mom's memory and shared that “apparently she did actually come to all of my exhibitions” demonstrating parental interest of their child's learning. Judy described a similar pattern, with their mother and sister provided support throughout high school, “My mom was always always on top of it, like if I would tell her like there was like an event that I had to go to. She was always make time for us and take us to like, she like took us to

the...like open house, and then I also had my sister like she was really nice as well” making time to attend events and visit the school. These examples illustrate how proactive family involvement can strengthen students’ connections to their learning environment.

Leaning into family as an academic resource was also shared as, Josh mentioned turning to their brother for academic help, particularly with mathematics, “I have an older brother and he attended collegiate and... if I needed any academic supports asked him as well. Usually it was about math, which conveniently was the thing that he likes most. So there was that.” Myla also reached out to their father for help, similarly with math, “but when I do think of like the role that maybe they played a little bit, especially probably in grade 9 and 10 math, and probably 11 and 12. But I do remember necessarily is like my dad helping me with math.”

Taken together, the accounts of the participants revealed family support in a variety of forms: providing emotional and academic support, facilitating relationships with the staff, and helping students overcome academic barriers. Taking a step back and looking at the impact of these family relationships, such support represents a critical advantage, one that may not be equally available to all students and therefore plays a role in shaping who is able to thrive at Met School.

Subtheme 4.c: Mentor Relationships

The importance of mentors from internship experiences were critical in every participant’s story. Participants shared that having a mentor connected to an industry that they were interested in, extended their learning beyond the classroom and allowed for a

more authentic and genuine learning experience. Having this intimate connection with mentors went beyond the role of a workplace supervisor, rather mentors were role models, confidants, and ongoing supports who shaped students' future trajectories well after high school.

Several participants echoed the enduring nature of these connections. Emily reflected that many of their mentors remain relevant in their life today, stating: "there's obviously people that I'm like, still actively in contact with today that I like literally worked with after graduating and I still see them on a very regular basis." Similarly, Morgan described staying in touch with their mentor from when they were in Grade 12 noting: "we talk pretty often about the kind of work that I did in my internship, and that's been like a really great relationship to have in my life." For Myla, mentor relationships carried them well into their post-secondary and professional career. A teacher they interned with in Grade 10 later hosted them for practicum in university, and another university mentor eventually hired them: "I got to spend the last six years working at a job that actually related to what I wanted to do and built that resume... if it wasn't for that internship I would have had to get a part-time job somewhere else." Emily also noted that if it wasn't for their relationships with their mentors during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the opportunity for in-person internships, they would have possibly left the Met School, "...they were the reason why I stayed probably in the last year or two at Met... the ability to have an in-person internship during like that whole, like my grade 11 and 12 years was really really helpful and kind of kept me sane." These instances demonstrate how strong student-

mentor relationships provided career advantages and long-term professional growth, often creating “full circle” experiences that reinforced students’ sense of belonging and purpose.

Mentors were also described as being very significant for participants’ career and skill development. Participants shared how mentors placed their trust in them with responsibilities and created environments where they could practice independence, communication, and networking. Judy explained how being given responsibility made them feel trusted, and that their mentor “was always open to me, using him as a reference on any resumes.” Similarly, Josh emphasized that one-on-one mentorship in internships provided a different kind of growth than classroom settings, particularly when it came to student advocacy: “when it comes time like grade 12 having to do like scholarship references when you’re in university, those references... can really push and advocate for you.” Matthew shared that they valued the criticism they received from their mentors as this was an authentic learning moment from them because it was coming from someone within the industry they were interested in, “so with this mentor in particular, I got very good criticism when I was there, like a very constructive feedback.” For others, strong relationships with mentors led directly to employment. Judy connected an internship to a summer job that lasted two years, while Myla and Emily described how their mentors’ trust and going support led to sustained work opportunities in their chosen fields.

While some mentorships were ideal and had many post-school benefits, some experiences with mentors were not as equally beneficial. Morgan recalled feeling

underutilized in one placement: “the manager just kind of handed me over to an employee there who didn’t know what to do with me... there were a lot of times where I just kind of sat around, and I was like nobody really knew what to tell me to do.” Emily also described inconsistencies in the quality of their mentors noting that they had some really strong mentors that pushed them, and some who were more laid back and let them propose the bulk of their learning where they were “very chill, sometimes too chill.” Judy had an unfortunate experience before a mentorship even began as they recalled, “so when I went to my informational interview, the first thing that they said to me was, ‘it might be really rare that you get an internship here, because the last student that we had, they really left a bad and like a sour taste in our mouth, because they were always on their phones.’”

Morgan and Emily reveal that while mentors yielded positive impacts, their effectiveness was not guaranteed, and it depended heavily on the mentor’s engagement, clarity, and investment. As with advisor relationships, these findings highlight the importance of sustained, authentic connections in relation to the overall theme of ‘Relationships,’ illustrating how access to meaningful mentorship can shape not only student’s immediate educational journeys, but their long-term futures.

Subtheme 4.d: Peer Relationships

In addition to advisor and mentor relationships, peer relationships came across as significant to the participants’ Met School experience. Some participants were convinced to attend Met School from the beginning because of peer influence, and some relied on their peers throughout their education as a source of belonging and academic support.

The transition into Met often involved negotiating old friendships while developing new ones in a smaller, more tightly knit school environment.

For some, the shift to Met created distance between themselves and peers who attended larger traditional schools. Emily reflected on this process, explaining that while they initially maintained close ties with friends at the associated larger high school, “after the first year... differentiation kind of started happening where you’re like, well, we want to also have relationships within our school.” They also noted that since they were not on social media, this limited their ability to maintain those outside connections, which further reinforced their ties within Met. Similarly, Judy described how some friendships persisted across schools, but their strongest bonds remained with peers at Met: “I still talk to the group of people that I was really close within Met School and like I’m friends with. So I still have those relationships as well. Morgan, who missed a close friend for their first year at Met, convinced the friend to join for a much better experience going forward, “I ended up convincing her to join Met school with me the next year. So that was nice.” Josh also describes how it was difficult not following the path of the majority of her peers when making the decision to go to Met: “I had two friends that I was particularly close with at that time and then both actually also went to Met. We kind of went to Met together. And I think that was also helpful because like going back to what I said earlier, like it’s it’s scary to not go with the majority, but even if you’re not with the majority, when there’s people that you’re close with that go with you, it kind of feels a little better.”

The smaller size of Met School created a distinct social environment, which many

participants perceived as fostering closer and more meaningful connections. Morgan noted that unlike the isolating and often negative peer interactions they experienced in middle school, Met provided the opportunity to “build a community within my school and get to know my peers better.” For Myla, peer relationships were a central motivation for enrolling: “I probably really wanted to get in because my best friend was going, and we really both wanted to go... it was probably a grade 9 girl’s dream.” Josh did not think peer relationships would be so significant upon considering Met School for high school, “... the relationship that I was able to build with friends in my advisory and with my advisor, I think were like, I... that wasn’t something that was on my radar when I was applying into Met school. But that’s something that I really valued...” These accounts demonstrate how the promise of smaller, more supportive peer networks factored into some students’ initial decisions to attend Met as well as became more significant once students experienced the advisory model.

Once participants started attending Met, peer relationships often became intertwined with students’ learning experiences and personal growth. Josh described how friendships within their advisory and beyond were not only socially supportive, but also academically inspiring: “being able to watch my peers also pursue things and go after these big internships... lifts up the class as a whole.” They also noted the professional value of these networks, as they could reach out to former classmates for support or connections in their respective fields. Matthew similarly reflected on the importance of peers to their daily school experience, remarking that “they were a strong reason for me to

go to class every day, see those familiar faces.” These accounts suggest that peer networks at Met were not only a source of friendship, but also contributed to students’ motivation, persistence, and even future opportunities.

At the same time, peer relationships were not without their challenges. Emily recalled occasional conflicts within the small community, where “the occasional offhand comment or disagreement” could escalate quickly due to the closeness of the group. Morgan also described difficulties in their first year when placed with peers they found “really mean and loud,” which undermined their sense of belonging until they were able to bring a friend into the school the following year. These tensions illustrate that while smaller school sizes facilitated deeper bonds, they could also magnify interpersonal conflict when it arose.

Ultimately, peer relationships at Met emerged as both a motivator and a source of continuity in students’ lives. For many, these connections provided the support and inspiration needed to navigate the school’s unique structure, while also forming friendships that endured beyond high school. As Myla reflected, even though they now speak to fewer peers from their advisory, they still value the closeness they shared: “we were like a very close group... and even now I’m sad that I probably talk to two people.” Josh also emphasized how these connections extended into professional and personal support systems, noting, “I know that I can reach out to them if I know someone’s like, really good at this specific thing. I’m able to reach out to ask them for support.” Such reflections underscore the lasting impact of these bonds on students’ sense of identity

and belonging, both during their time at Met and in the years that followed, reinforcing the central role of relationships in the Met School experience.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This study set out to examine former Met School students' perspectives about their high school experiences and answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of former Met School students about their high school experiences?
2. What do former Met School students perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages of the Met School experience?
3. How do former students perceive the impact of Met School on their life outcomes?

I wanted to hear directly from former students to gain an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences with the ultimate goal of supporting improvements in both policy and practice. As insiders, the participants in this study provided critical insights about Met Schools that can only be known and truly understood by those who have experienced them. In this way, their stories have revealed how this model is truly experienced and surfaced key issues that likely have not been considered by teachers, administrators, and families, that warrant close examination. This research also fills a void in the literature as it is the first to examine Met Schools in the Winnipeg context from the perspective of the high school students they support.

In this chapter, I will make connections between the findings and the scholarly literature reviewed in chapter 2. I will further apply the lens of Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) to analyze how the participants' experiences contribute to an overall understanding of Met Schools and alternative schools more broadly. I will conclude with a

summary of the key insights and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Access and Equity

The theme of access and equity revealed how structural features of the Met School shaped who was able to attend and how students experienced participation in this alternative setting. Participants' accounts highlighted the role of application processes, logistical constraints, and social networks in mediating access to the school. In the following sections, these findings are discussed in relation to existing literature on alternative schools and interpreted through the lens of social capital.

Application Process

Participants frequently described the application process as a defining feature of their entry into the Met School, noting both the opportunities it created and barriers it posed. To better understand how this process functions within alternative school contexts, the following discussion situates these findings within existing literature on alternative school admissions. An application process is often used in alternative schools because they are small in physical size and have limited staff, and therefore the application serves as a means of limiting enrolment (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024). The literature on alternative schools also indicates that applications are used to ensure that the student and family actively engage in learning about the school and thinking critically about whether it is a suitable fit for them. In this way, applications often require students and families to do “homework” to learn about the school and ensure they understand the

teaching and learning philosophy, the expectations, and supports provided. At the same time, the application allows the school to gauge each student's readiness, abilities, interests, and potential future commitment to the school, and then to select those candidates whom they determine best meet their criteria (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Ross & Angelidis, 2020; Wilkerson et al., 2018). Met schools in Winnipeg state that the purpose of its application is to "...make sure the Met is the right fit" for potential students, while also addressing its limitation of 15 students per advisory (Seven Oaks School Division, 2025).

While the rationale for an application process for Met Schools may seem necessary given space and staffing limitations, the participants in this study identified several barriers associated with the process. For example, Morgan described how the application process was interesting, "Yeah, it was not difficult, but like I thought it was maybe a bit interesting that I had to write a letter of, why I wanted to go to a school." Given that Met Schools are public schools funded by the provincial government, Morgan alludes to the fact that the application process draws similarities to private schools' applications processes. Participants also characterized the need for a personal letter, a letter of support from a family member, a student project submission, and an interview as excessive and highly stressful. For example, Emily and Myla shared that it was difficult for them to identify and submit a project they had completed in the past and they worried how it would be judged by the admissions committee. They also experienced anxiety and worry about the interview and if they would be deemed good enough. Matthew, Judy, and Josh

described how they relied heavily on their parents or other supportive adults for assistance with the admission process, including the project submission and preparation for the interview. The research literature affirms these concerns and indicates that the use of applications to determine access to schools may serve as a mechanism of exclusion and students from marginalized groups are most at risk (Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Hunt et al., 2022; Ross & Angelidis, 2020).

Given the participants' concerns about the application process, it is important to consider the multiple ways that the application process that is used by Met Schools may create barriers and serve as a mechanism of exclusion for some students. Through the lens of Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), it seems that students from families with lower levels of social, cultural, and economic capital may be particularly disadvantaged by the application process. The need for a supportive letter from a family member and the ways in which family members were described as assisting with the project submissions that was required for admission reveal that parents with higher levels of education, fluency in English, and discretionary time were better able to provide this kind of support. It further illustrates how families' resources create pathways to more competitive and coveted educational opportunities for their children (Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Freeman, 2023). In reference to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of "field," dependent on a family's occupied field (i.e. their unique workplace or social circles), one family may have a better "field advantage," than another family depending on the social networks and bonds and bridges to social capital that their field allows. Additionally, one family's habitus compared to

another family's habitus would yield advantages as the upbringing, cultural knowledge, and values that one family may possess over another family can contribute to a more advantaged application process. For example, one family that values language, work ethic, and time, may spend more time on an application to communicate about their child's interest in the school, whereas another family who does not uphold these values may be at a disadvantage. The findings also reveal the potential for the application process to unintentionally deter students from marginalized groups from considering it as an option for them. From a social capital perspective, some students may lack informational and relational networks to learn about the Met School. For example, several participants in this study knew someone who had attended a Met school (i.e., peer or sibling) which may not be available to all potential students. Moreover, the requirement to submit a project and participate in an interview may disadvantage students with diverse learning needs including those with disabilities who may find it difficult to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in traditional ways (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Even if diverse learning styles are valued by the Met school, students who have not experienced academic success may lack the confidence to consider an educational pathway that utilizes a competitive application process (Brown, 2017; Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Given these barriers, over time, the demographic composition of an alternative school may not reflect a diverse range of socioeconomic, cultural, and learning characteristics. In summary, the descriptions of the application process provided by the participants in this study raises several questions about the degree to which Met Schools foster access and equity for all.

Transportation

Access to transportation is also a requirement in the admission criteria for Met Schools. The transportation requirements are significant because students are required to provide their own transportation to and from a school that is often outside of their neighbourhood and they are required to provide their own transportation to internships within the school day. While the participants in this study found a way to access transportation, their experiences were not seamless and their stories illustrate how access to transportation was highly dependent upon economic capital (i.e., money for bus tickets, access to a vehicle) and social capital (i.e., parental support including being driven by one's parent, having connections with other families to establish car pools, and having their parents teach them how to take multiple bus routes). Again here, dependent on the family's field and habitus, more advantages may apply. For instance, a family that values public transportation and that has practiced using it together, would have an advantage over a family that is unfamiliar with the system. Similarly, families where it is normalized to have a vehicle and normalized to learn how to drive a vehicle would also benefit from a reduction in the transportation barrier. The research literature also shows that the need for transportation often precludes marginalized students from attending alternative schools (Valant & Lincove, 2023; Weinstein et al., 2022). Due to the barriers that access to transportation may create, some alternative schools provide transportation to and from school, which has been found to increase educational opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds (Cordes et al., 2019; Cordes & Schwartz, 2019).

School Priorities

The theme of school priorities captures how participants interpreted the instructional values emphasized by the Met School and how these priorities shaped their learning experiences. Participants frequently reflected on the school's strong emphasis on project-based learning, noting both the opportunities it created for personalized learning and the challenges that arose from its centrality. The following section situates these findings within the literature on project-based learning, the Universal Design for learning, and alternative education.

Project-based Learning

Participants consistently described project-based learning as a defining feature of their Met School experience, often positioning it as both a strength of the model and, at times, a source of tension. Met Schools embrace the Big Picture Learning philosophy, which emphasizes project-based learning, internships, and exhibitions of learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). This means that personalization, individualization, strengths, and experiential education form the basis of every student's unique experience (Arnold & Mihut, 2020). This approach deviates from "a standardized, mechanical view of curriculum" and focuses on "critical engagement, interactive meaning-making, and self-realization in the context of real-world experiences" (Ravitz, 2010, p. 291).

Much of what the participants shared in terms of their positive experiences with this approach aligned with what has been found in the literature on alternative schools. Specifically, that personalized learning that is strength-based contributes to high levels of

student engagement and achievement (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Bradley & Hernández, 2019; Freeman, 2023; Ross & Angelidis, 2020; Stewart, 2020). Research suggests that when students' interests, strengths, and learning needs are intentionally incorporated into curriculum design, they are more likely to experience success in alternative settings than in traditional, standardized schooling environments (Freeman, 2023).

Josh's account illustrates this alignment, as they described that through project-based learning they found motivation to pursue areas that they felt they would not have been provided in a traditional school setting. Specifically, Josh shared how they could challenge themselves to take on large-scale projects that were typically out of the scope of traditional curriculum, illustrating how the school accommodated their giftedness, a benefit noted in the literature on personalized learning in alternative schools (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Ross & Angelidis, 2020).

Similarly, Judy's experience reflected research findings that emphasize the role of flexibility and individualized instruction in reducing barriers to learning and improving student outcomes (Freeman, 2023; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Judy described that with additional learning support they felt that the flexibility that project-based learning provided, reduced barriers to learning and afforded them an opportunity to achieve success as a learner, which was something that they found more challenging in a traditional school setting. This is confirmed with broader findings that flexible, student-centered programming in alternative schools enhances engagement, attendance, and persistence by offering multiple pathways to success (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Down et

al., 2018; Littky & Graebelle, 2004).

Some of the participants' descriptions of their teaching and learning experiences at Met Schools also demonstrated parallels between the Met School's pedagogical approach and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) (CAST, 2025). UDL places the learner at the center of their learning and ensures that learning is "purposeful and reflective, resourceful and authentic, strategic and action-oriented" (CAST, 2025, para. 2). UDL is underpinned by three pillars, which include multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. Multiple means of engagement includes the application of pedagogical approaches that maximize students' motivation to learn, which was evident in some participants' descriptions of how they were encouraged by their advisors and mentors to pursue their interests and engage in projects that mattered to them. Multiple means of representation refers to providing information and content in diverse formats, and from diverse perspectives so that it is accessible and meaningful, which was evident in the participants' descriptions of their internships where they engaged in practical, hands-on learning and in the guidance, they received from advisors and a network of mentors. While multiple means of action and expression refers to the ability to demonstrate one's learning in novel ways, which was evident in how some of the participants described their agency in determining how they demonstrated their learning, often through events like exhibitions of learning (CAST, 2024). The alignment of the pedagogies used in Met Schools with UDL is noteworthy as there is growing evidence in the

literature that the application of UDL contributes to enhanced learner engagement and motivation, improved educational outcomes, greater learner agency and self-regulation, and more inclusive learning environments by proactively reducing barriers to participation and improving access for diverse learners. When UDL principles are fully enacted, they foster an inclusive environment that better meet the needs of all students, especially those who are marginalized (CAST, 2025, Al-Azawei et al., 2016, Almeqdad et al., 2023).

In traditional settings, standardized testing and limited flexibility can constrain how students demonstrate learning, frequently positioning some students as unsuccessful or disengaged. From a social capital perspective, repeated experiences of limited success can restrict students' access to institutional resources, academic recognition, and future opportunities, thereby limiting the accumulation of social capital. When students are unable to demonstrate competence in ways that align with dominant school norms, their participation in meaningful learning experiences and access to supportive pathways may be diminished, contributing to disengagement and increased risk of school dropout.

The impact of the Met School's pedagogical approach can be understood through the lens of social capital theory. Specifically, UDL illustrates how personalized, flexible learning environments reduce barriers to learning, and when this is facilitated in schools, it can help build students' social capital. By providing alternative ways for students to access instruction and demonstrate their understanding, students are able to build social capital through finding academic success where they may not have been able to in traditional settings. Project-based learning facilitates the development of bridging social

capital by extending learning beyond the classroom. Through exhibitions of learning and public demonstrations of their work, students further build social capital by increasing their visibility, credibility, and recognition as learners, which can enhance trust, reciprocity, and future opportunities. In this way, applying the UDL framework with project-based pedagogies not only support academic engagement, but also functions as a mechanism through which students can accumulate both bonding and bridging social capital within and beyond the school community.

The development of social capital among Met School students can be further understood through Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field and habitus. Traditional schooling operates as a field that privileges particular forms of knowledge, behaviour, and achievement, often disadvantaging students whose habitus does not align with these dominant norms. In such contexts, limited academic success can constrain students' access to recognized forms of capital and restrict opportunities of social capital accumulation. In contrast, the Met School constitutes a reconfigured educational field in which experiential learning, student interests, and multiple forms of competence are legitimized. As students experience academic success and sustained engagement, they are afforded increased access to institutional resources, community-based learning opportunities, and future-oriented supports. These experiences enable students to accumulate social capital by enhancing their legitimacy as learners, expanding their participation in educational and experiential opportunities, and supporting informed post-secondary transitions. Rather than becoming disconnected from schooling, students in

the Met School context are positioned to navigate pathways beyond high school with greater continuity and purpose.

Despite the benefits of the Met School's pedagogical approach that were identified by some participants, other participants surfaced contradictions and tensions that accompanied this approach. Specifically, some participants described that project-based learning was presented as a process that would provide them with autonomy and agency over their work, but in reality, they felt it was largely controlled and determined by their advisor. For example, participants like Emily felt their advisors often pushed them to go deeper and connect their project to their electives when that was not their desired focus or redirected their ideas in ways they did not fully understand at the time. While others like Judy, described feeling pressured to pursue projects they were not fully invested in and described the expectations that were placed on projects as excessive. These descriptions raise questions about the degree of flexibility, agency, and choice that students are actually afforded through this approach, and the ways in which a lack of perceived choice can limit students' sense of ownership and amplify feelings of stress. It also surfaces questions about how project-based learning is described and presented to students and if the approach is applied consistently by all advisors. This tension is reflected in the project-based learning literature, which cautions that an over-reliance on individualized projects can constrain curricular variety, limit students' perceived autonomy and restrict opportunities to demonstrate learning in diverse ways (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

Another interesting finding reported by some participants was that project-based

learning was over-emphasized as the primary approach to learning and that there was in fact limited choice for students over their learning. This observation contradicts the stated intentions of Met schools and the central tenets of UDL, which are to foster choice and autonomy in the learning process (CAST, 2025). While the Met School de-emphasizes high-stakes testing (Littky & Grabelle, 2004) it does use tests and quizzes for subject areas, however the project and internship experiences are valued more than tests. Some participants found this limiting and wanted more options to demonstrate their learning, and they also wanted to be evaluated based on a range of products. This was particularly true for Judy who described themselves as a “hands on” learner who wanted to demonstrate their learning by doing. Judy and Emily also described the expectations and assessment of the project based learning assignments as beyond what was required in a traditional high school. For students who felt that projects were not the most effective way to demonstrate their knowledge, it is unsurprising that they preferred additional options that better reflected their diverse needs and abilities, and that some found the assessment process overly rigorous.

The literature on project-based learning literature cautions the need to balance depth with curricular variety, suggesting that an overly narrow focus on individualized projects can limit exposure to broader content areas (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). While alternative school literature frequently emphasizes personalization and flexibility, fewer studies examine students’ perceptions of constrained choice within these models (Cantey, 2022). Likewise, research on student perceptions of alternative school environments highlights

that students do not always feel fully empowered to make choices about their learning, and that their sense of autonomy may be constrained by the structure of project requirements, assessment expectations, or curriculum priorities (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). This finding therefore extends existing research by highlighting how even personalized pedagogies may be experienced as restrictive when a single instructional approach is emphasized.

Reinforcing these participants' perspectives, the principles of UDL also highlight the importance of multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, suggesting that students may benefit from having varied options for demonstrating learning beyond PBL-only approaches (CAST, 2025). These findings align with existing research on PBL, which emphasizes the need for balanced scaffolding, clear expectations, and sustained inquiry (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; MacMath et al., 2017; Noble et al., 2020).

From a social capital perspective, students with stronger traditional academic skills and familiarity with self-directed learning, as well as those who have access to support networks may more readily navigate open-ended project requirements, whereas others who lack these skills and supports may require more intensive guidance and rely heavily on teachers/advisors for support (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020). If project-based learning is the primary pedagogical approach that is used in Met Schools, it may serve to disadvantage students with diverse learning styles in the same way that a lack of differentiated instruction disadvantages some students in traditional high schools. This contributes to potential inequities in how schooling is experienced across groups.

Internships

Met Schools and the Big Picture Learning model position internships as a cornerstone of student engagement, emphasizing interest-driven exploration and real-world learning (Hernández et al., 2019; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Participants in this study consistently described internships as one of the most meaningful and appealing aspects of their Met School experience. For many, internships were the primary reason they chose the school, as they offered opportunities to explore potential careers, develop skills, and experience real-world learning. Related literature similarly suggests that experiential learning through internships is generally beneficial for students, but appropriate scaffolding should be provided to ensure student success (Bascia et al., 2017; Maillet, 2017; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Participants noted that these experiences often led to part-time employment, helped expand their life-long professional network, and better prepared them for both the workforce and post-secondary expectations. All of the participants from this study are currently employed and most have enrolled in post-secondary institutions. These positive life outcomes have also been highlighted in related research. For youth navigating transitions into adulthood, early exposure to professional environments has been shown to improve long-term outcomes, including post-secondary enrollment and employment stability (Fischetti et al., 2024; Malcolm, 2024).

Despite these benefits, several participants expressed significant concerns about the process that was used by the Met School to obtain internships. Several participants characterized the process as a “bootcamp” model because it involved an intensive period

where students were required to “cold call” potential internships sites and secure their internship independently. During a concentrated block of time students were required to repeatedly call potential internships sites, introduce themselves, describe their skills and abilities, and request an internship. Josh and Judy found the expectation to cold-call potential internships to secure their own placement as well as coping with rejection, stressful and discouraging. As other students started to secure internships, participants described how this created a climate of competitiveness, which compounded the pressure students already felt. The barriers described by participants also raises concerns for students who are English as Additional Language learners, those with social anxiety, or those who do not have a lot of prior experience speaking with adults. All of these barriers compound the already difficult task of securing an internship independently (Mathews, 2025). On the other hand, research indicates that those with more experience with talking to adults, more family support, and better networking skills are able to secure internships more easily because of their social capital (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020).

While the stated intention of the “boot camp” approach to securing internships is to build the students’ independence, it is questionable why the schools did not take a more active role in establishing internship options for the students. The literature also affirms that the quality of the internship experiences depends heavily on the consistency of teacher support and the strength of the school’s community partnerships (Hernández et al., 2019; Minero, 2016). Research about Big Picture Learning also emphasizes that advisors play a critical role in helping students identify interests, approach potential

mentors, and co-create meaningful internship experiences (Down et al., 2018; Emery, 2019; Fischetti et al., 2024; Hayes et al., 2013) and yet this is not the practice that is employed according to the participants in this study. The participants' perspectives also align with broader experiential learning research, cautioning that overly independent models can disadvantage students who require more structured guidance to navigate professional environments (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007), suggesting that the current approach that is being used by Met Schools may place disproportionate burden on students and lead to inequities in access and support.

From a social capital perspective, the expectation that students independently secure internships places unequal demands on students depending on their existing networks, confidence, and familiarity with professional environments. Conceptually, internships can be understood as a distinct field with specific norms, expectations, and legitimate forms of capital, including professional knowledge, networking skills, and the ability to navigate adult workspaces (Bourdieu, 1986). Research shows that young people whose habitus aligns with these expectations, those with family connections, prior work experience, or exposure to adults who can model professional norms, can navigate internship outreach and workplace transitions more easily (Lin, 2001). Conversely, students whose habitus is less aligned with the professional field often rely heavily on institutional agents, such as advisors, to mediate access, translate the "rules of the field," and provide guidance to connect them to opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

At the same time, internships have the potential to build both bonding and bridging

forms of social capital. Bonding social capital occurs when students deepen relationships with familiar networks. This takes place when internship mentors become long-term supports or when advisors provide ongoing emotional encouragement or personalized guidance over the course of a student's high school experience (Kundu et al., 2024).

Bridging social capital emerges when students gain access to new professional communities, career fields, and adult networks they would not otherwise encounter, expanding their access to information, opportunities, and future pathways (Lin, 2001; Kundu et al., 2024). These forms of social capital can enhance students' legitimacy within the professional field and their capacity to navigate it successfully. These relationships also open doors to part-time jobs, future opportunities, and clearer post-secondary pathways, benefits that the participants recognized more fully after graduation. For many, these expanded networks played a crucial role in accessing career-related information and resources that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. These expanded networks are especially valuable for students from historically marginalized or low-resource backgrounds. However, without deliberate structures to mitigate differences in habitus and prior access to capital, the internship process may reproduce social capital inequities, rather than build beneficial forms of social capital. For example, some students at the Met School whose parents had already helped them secure an internship were exempt from the structured "boot camp," demonstrating how field-based processes can reinforce existing inequities rather than consistently build social capital.

Personal Growth

Participants described how the Met School supported significant personal growth that directly contributed to their career readiness and preparation for post-secondary education and adult life. Specifically, they identify how Met School supported significant personal growth across their academic, social, and career development domains. Across the interviews participants consistently described the Met Schools as a space that nurtured their confidence, both academically and personally. Internships and projects were particularly influential, allowing students to explore interests in depth, take on responsibilities, and experience success. These experiences provided students with a head start in career exploration, expanded their understanding of potential future pathways and provided them with opportunities to trial professional roles in supportive settings. This further established a sense of professional identity amongst the participants, and this supported their transitions beyond high school. Related research on the Big Picture Learning model has also noted that schools that emphasize authentic, interest-driven projects and internships can enhance motivation, build competence, develop career readiness, and promote stronger student identity formation (Fischetti et al., 2024; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013).

Participants also provided important examples of the ways in which the Met School facilitated their personal growth and independence, like learning how to navigate public transit, becoming more confident in a range of social environments, and feeling better prepared for workplace and post-secondary expectations. Interestingly, some participants

shared that only in high school were they able to fully appreciate the benefits that they had gained from the Met School experience, with some expressing regret that they had not taken greater advantage of the range of opportunities that were available to them.

Research on student voice and agency also highlights that environments that provide autonomy, relevance, and challenge contribute to improved confidence, independence, and identity-building (Bascia et al., 2017; Stewart, 2020; Te Riele et al., 2020).

The personal growth described by participants can be understood as a transformation of habitus that enabled students to accumulate and mobilize both bonding and bridging social capital across educational and professional fields. This was not simply through the formation of relationships, but through capacity building that enabled students to participate confidently within social and institutional spaces. For students who had previously avoided school due to experiences with high stakes testing or bullying, these shifts were significant. These developments reflect shifts in students' dispositions toward learning, authority, and participation, what Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes as habitus, shaped through engagement in the distinctive field of the Met School. The growth in students' social confidence with navigating public transit, improved communication skills, engaging with adults, and collaborating with various individuals, further reflects the development of what Lin (2001) describes as the mobilization of social capital, where students learn not only to access networks, but to use them effectively. These are forms of personal development that reflect growing autonomy, independence, self-efficacy, and institutional literacy.

For many participants, this transformation represented a significant change from their prior schooling experiences, where the dominant field of traditional education, often characterized by standardized assessment, rigid hierarchies, and peer stratification, produced a misalignment between students' habitus and the expectations of the institution. Experiences of school avoidance, bullying, disengagement, or social anxiety constrained students' sense of legitimacy within the school field, limiting their willingness to take risks, develop trust amongst peers and adults, or engage fully in learning. These conditions not only limited academic participation, but also restricted opportunities to develop both bonding and bridging social capital, as students were not able to overcome their personal barriers to school, and therefore not have the opportunity to establish social networks.

The Met School environment, by contrast, appeared to function as a reparative space in which students could rebuild confidence, re-establish trust with the school system, and reframe their identities as capable learners and contributors to society. Where participants once experienced fields and habitus that constrained their access to academic success, Met School was able to alter participants' habitus, allowing participants to accumulate and mobilize social capital. Conditions were provided so that students could safely reconstruct their habitus through repeated, supported interactions with peers, educators, and community members. Attending to students' individual needs within smaller, relational school settings further supported this process allowing students to develop confidence, independence, and a clearer sense of identity as learners and

emerging professionals, which is well-documented in the literature and supportive of students' career readiness development (Freeman, 2023; Maillet, 2017; Ross & Angelidis, 2020; Stewart, 2020). Consistent with Stanton-Salazar's (2011) findings, personalized learning environments may deepen bonding social capital by creating conditions in which students feel safe to take risks, accept feedback, and engage authentically with adults, while simultaneously supporting the development of bridging capital through engagement with adults beyond the school. Over time, students' evolving habitus enhanced their career readiness by equipping them to navigate multiple fields more effectively, generating durable personal and professional capital that extended into adulthood. Although some students realized these benefits only in retrospect, their reflections illustrate the role of personal growth as a foundational mechanism through which social capital is produced, sustained, and mobilized.

While participants overwhelmingly attributed their preparedness for employment and post-secondary education to their experiences at the Met School, it is important to consider the extent to which these outcomes can be attributed to being a student at the Met School alone. Many participants described having access to parental support, most of which were described to be employed and some having post-secondary education themselves, and reliable transportation, factors that may have facilitated their ability to engage fully in internships. These forms of family-based social and economic capital likely interacted with the Met School model to shape students' outcomes. Rather than being the sole determinant of success, the Met School may have amplified existing resources for

some students, while providing compensatory support for others through strong advisory relationships and mentorship. This finding aligns with social capital literature suggesting that schools often mediate, rather than eliminate, broader structural inequalities (Stewart, 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Overall, the participants' reflections suggest that the Met School played a meaningful role in preparing them for post-school life by helping them develop their career readiness skills, confidence, and professional identity, while also highlighting the importance of examining how individual field and habitus interact with alternative school structures to shape long-term outcomes.

Relationships

The importance of sustained relationships in alternative and small-school environments is well-documented. Participants' accounts suggest that these relationships did more than provide support, they actively shaped students' habitus and repositioned them within educational and professional fields. Many participants described how the relationships that they fostered with advisors, mentors, and peers were highly beneficial. Some participants reported that the continuity of having the same advisor over four years strengthened their sense of belonging, provided consistent academic and emotional support, and facilitated individualized planning. Participants described that the deep connections that they were able to develop with their advisors in a small school setting, over the course of four years, seemed stronger than the relationships they had with teachers in previous school experiences. Moreover, for some of the participants their advisors have become life-long mentors, underscoring the durability of these relational

ties beyond the school field. When these relationships were strong, students recalled them as pivotal to both their academic progress and personal development. This finding aligns with related research which has found that schools that emphasize, consistent, strong teacher-student relationships foster a greater sense of belonging, strengthen academic engagement, and provide social-emotional stability (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Glavan et al., 2022; Stewart, 2020). These observations also align with research on alternative and personalized learning environments, which suggests that students who struggle in traditional school structures often benefit from smaller, relationship-driven programs where they can engage deeply with meaningful work (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Bascia et al., 2017; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Stewart, 2020). From a Bourdesian (1986) perspective, these relationships functioned as structured social conditions through which students' habitus was formed and re-formed over time.

However, some participants reported that the advisory model had drawbacks. For instance, if a student did not connect with their advisor, some participants reported feeling "stuck," with few mechanisms for change. In contrast, despite the goal of establishing consistent, long-term student advisor relationships, unexpected staff turnover in some cases led to disrupted relationships, which undermined the consistency necessary for habitus transformation. From a field perspective, these disruptions altered the relational structure through which students accessed support and capital, limiting the intended benefits of long-term advisory relationships.

Mentor relationships at internships were similarly impactful. Emily described that

their mentors were the reason they remained at the school, crediting them with teaching responsibility, offering real-world tasks, and fostering accountability. Some mentors continued to play supportive roles in students' lives after graduation like in the lives of Myla and Josh. These mentors were able to provide participants with opportunities to engage in authentic tasks and to see themselves as legitimate participants in professional fields. Internship mentorship aligns with experiential learning frameworks, which argue that adult mentors provide the scaffolding necessary for students to translate real-world experiences in academic and personal development (Down et al., 2018; Fischetti et al., 2024; Hayes et al., 2013). Research on work-based learning further demonstrates that positive mentor relationships enhance students' sense of competence, professional identity, and future orientation (Bascia et al., 2017; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016; Washor & Majowski, 2013). Morgan exemplified this phenomenon as they shared how they found motivation to connect with university mentors to assist them in developing their writing skills, something that they could not see themselves having an opportunity to do if they attended a traditional high school. Experiential learning research underscores that real-world tasks paired with supportive adult mentorship are particularly effective in developing self-efficacy, problem-solving, and career readiness (Freeman, 2023; Maillet, 2017; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Internship mentors provided critical bridging social capital by connecting students to adult networks beyond the school field. Many participants leveraged these ties for part-time employment, career exploration, and post-graduation supporting, aligning with Lin's (2001) conceptualization of mobilizing social capital. Yet the quality of

mentorship also varied; while some were engaged and invested, others were less supportive, overly laid-back, or influenced by prior negative experiences with interns, resulting in limited or less meaningful learning opportunities as was in the case with Judy, this further limited the accumulation of bridging social capital.

Peer relationships also shaped students' experiences in complex ways. Some participants reported that the small school environment made it easier to make friends and feel part of a community, and students noted that these friendships supported their confidence and self-esteem. Some participants reported remaining connected to their peers long after graduation. This fostered the bonding social capital that supported confidence, identity development, and emotional security. These peer relationships reinforced a sense of belonging within the school field and contributed to positive self-perceptions as learners and community members. However, other participants acknowledged that conflict was difficult to navigate within a small school setting. For instance, Morgan described a situation where they struggled to get along with some of their classmates, and there was little opportunity to disengage and establish a different peer group, which heightened social tensions. Even though participants were in a small school environment, if bullying, or relationship breakdowns took place, for some students it was difficult to coexist within the confines of the advisory model. Having a small group of students in advisory or cohort all day together, three times a week, for four years, requires intensive support to navigate the complex relationships that may exist. Peer relationships have also been documented as being critical supports to students' success in school.

Studies show that small schools can foster stronger peer networks and more inclusive learning communities. From a habitus-field lens, these tensions highlight how social conflicts can also be magnified in small schools due to limited group size and constant proximity (Bascia et al., 2017; Cotton, 2001).

In addition to supporting the application and admission process, family relationships were also described as playing a pivotal role in the participants' overall Met school experience, either reinforcing or limiting access to social capital. Some participants described how their families were able to invest time in supporting their school experience by helping them with their projects and homework, and by attending exhibitions where they demonstrated their learning. Further, families who built relationships with advisors were able to participate more fully in wraparound care, creating a stronger circle of support for students, and strengthening the relational network surrounding students. Family engagement literature reinforces this finding that students benefit academically and emotionally when families partner with schools, though the level of involvement is unevenly distributed based on time, resources, and knowledge of the system (Epstein et al., 2003; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). These disparities illustrate how students' habitus and capital are shaped not only within the school field, but through the interaction of family and educational fields.

Across these relational contexts, participants' accounts reflect the Met School's significant role in generating both bonding and bridging social capital. Advisor relationships were a primary source of bonding capital, offering emotional support,

personalized feedback, and academic guidance. Advisors also functioned as brokers, bridging students to additional opportunities by connecting them with mentors, advocating on their behalf, and facilitating access to institutional resources. Through these interactions, students developed forms of cultural and social capital, such as communication skills, professional norms, and networking practices, that were particularly consequential for students from marginalized backgrounds (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). When these relationships were disrupted or misaligned, students lost access to key sources of capital, illustrating the fragility of relational infrastructure within alternative schooling models. These features of the Met School approach generate bonding capital (through strong advisor-student relationships), and these features of the Met School approach generate bridging capital (through internships and mentor connections), creating the relational infrastructure that support's UDL's emphasis on engagement, relevance, and student agency (Neves et al., 2019). In this way, the Met School not only personalizes learning, but also democratizes access to social resources that are often unequally distributed in traditional schooling.

Dual Realities: Opportunities and Trade-Offs

Participants consistently noted that attending the Met School offered unique opportunities, but it was also characterized as requiring “trade-offs” or giving up opportunities afforded in traditional high schools. Academically, students experienced limited specialized instruction and course offerings, raising questions about whether the project-based focus sometimes constrained their ability to explore certain subjects. While

individualized projects and internships were highly valued, some students felt that it was difficult to incorporate electives and interests into a project, leaving less room for other forms of learning or exploration. Relatedly, some participants noted that there were limited teachers with specialized subject area knowledge. In a traditional high school, there are chemistry teachers and physics teachers and at the Met School some participants were concerned that the absence of specialized subject area teachers may create gaps in their knowledge which may affect their future post-secondary success. Because of these limitations, some participants regarded the Met School as a “trade off” where they engaged in deep, personalized learning but gave up the breadth of learning provided in a traditional high school. These findings align with the research on small and alternative schools, which notes that smaller learning environments can enhance individualized support, but often face constraints in course breadth, extracurricular offerings, and specialized staff training (Cotton, 2001; Freeman, 2023).

Opportunities for extracurricular activities and social connections were also characterized as limited in Met Schools. Some participants lamented that the small school size limited opportunities to participate on sports teams. Additionally, participation in significant high school events like pep rallies, grade wars, and dances were either not offered or not on the same scale as the participants’ neighbouring high schools, leaving students feeling like they were missing out on these kinds of memorable high school experiences. Trade-offs are common in experiential learning models, where students may sacrifice traditional high school experiences to access enriched, personalized programs

(Bascia et al., 2017; Cantey, 2022; Guzman, 2019). As student internships took place twice a week, typically on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the internships were described by some as reducing their opportunities to engage socially with their peers and build a sense of the community in the school. Even though the participants were “technically” permitted to join their neighbourhood high school’s sports teams or extra-curricular activities, navigating the social complexities of joining these teams or activities would likely be difficult. Perhaps some students were comfortable within the small school setting and did not want to enter a large school setting to access the events they desired. This could be due to social anxiety, which research shows may be a significant motivating factor for students to opt to attend smaller, alternative schools (Alger, 2016; Freeman, 2023; Lopez-Cobar, 2022; Stewart, 2020; Vallee, 2019). Students may have wanted these opportunities for their own small school, but resource constraints may have also limited the provision of these opportunities. Studies of alternative or small schools highlight that resource constraints frequently necessitate prioritization, which can shape students’ experiences in both academic and social dimensions (Bascia et al., 2017; Stewart, 2020).

Some participants in this study questioned whether the trade-offs they made by attending a Met School like giving up coveted high school experiences like dances and pep rallies in exchange for a more personalized learning opportunity was worth it and they continue to ponder this question.

Another critical gap in the support provided at Met Schools that was noted by some participants was mental health support. Myla shared that students heavily relied on their

advisor for mental health support, even though they were not necessarily trained to provide support in this area. Some participants described how they were tasked with seeking external services to meet their needs. Sometimes students may not want to talk to their parents about social and emotional challenges increasing the need for school-based support.

When examining the issue of mental health, it is important to consider the needs and priorities of individual students and what motivates them to attend an alternative school. Some of the participants in this study described how negative experiences in a traditional school environment pushed them to seek out an alternative educational experience. For example, Judy and Myla sought out the Met School because they wanted to avoid tests and based on the information they received about the Met School, they thought that they would be able to avoid high stakes assessment in this alternative setting. Whereas Morgan enrolled at the Met School because they were experiencing bullying in their neighbourhood high school and wanted reprieve from this experience and a fresh start with a different peer group. These experiences are not uncommon, as related research on alternative schools indicates that students who attend them sometimes do so because they have had negative experiences in traditional school settings and may have additional needs that require support. Bullying is often cited as a reason for students wanting to choose an alternative school (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). While project-based learning and internships are important supports, so too are the social-emotional needs of the students in alternative schools who may be motivated to attend these settings due to more complex

profiles of need.

Several participants also described experiencing stigma associated with attending the Met School, including perceptions that it was designed solely for students with behavioural or diverse learning needs and intended for students who could not succeed in traditional settings. Such stigma reflects broader societal and institutional attitudes toward alternative education and operates as a form of symbolic power that can devalue the capital students acquire within alternative schooling contexts. This is also well-documented in the literature where students are often conflicted in attending a school outside of their neighbourhood school, for perceived benefits, but fear being “othered” for making a school choice that may better fit their needs (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2024; Freeman, 2023; Ross & Angelidis, 2020). Stigma also interacts with students’ access to social capital. Students with higher family or community-based social capital may be better equipped to counter negative perceptions by leveraging parental advocacy and they also may more easily supplement gaps through extracurricular activities. While those with fewer resources may rely more heavily on advisors to broker opportunities and validate their educational experiences, making the benefits of school participation more contingent on relational quality and institutional stability (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Similarly, students’ ability to navigate trade-offs, choosing to focus on internships over traditional extracurriculars to overcome the stigma with attending such a unique school, often depends on prior knowledge, confidence, and access to guidance, further highlighting the potential for social capital disparities.

Resource trade-offs have important implications for the types of social capital students can access. While small size and internships can foster bonding capital through close advisor relationships and strong peer connections, limited extracurriculars and minimal integration with the larger high school may restrict bridging capital, the connections to broader networks, adult mentors, and diverse peer groups that support future educational and career opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). From a Bourdiesian (1986) perspective, the Met School constitutes a distinct educational field with its own norms, priorities, and valued forms of capital. Students whose habitus aligns with this field, particularly those who are comfortable with independence, self-direction, and non-traditional pathways, may be better positioned to navigate these trade-offs and to recognize the long-term value of internships and relational learning over conventional high school experiences. Additionally, these students may navigate both the material trade-offs and the symbolic stigma associated with alternative schooling. In contrast, students whose habitus is shaped by expectations of broader course offerings, extracurricular participation, or traditional markers of schooling may experience these trade-offs as losses that limit their access to diverse networks and opportunities, but also the perceived legitimacy of their educational trajectory. Overall, the trade-offs associated with the Met School extend beyond resource limitations to include symbolic and relational constraints that actively shape students' habitus and their capacity to accumulate and mobilize social capital across educational and professional fields.

Limitations

In this study I employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which utilizes small sample sizes to allow for in-depth analysis of participants' lived experiences. A key limitation of this study is its small sample size, as only seven former Met School students were interviewed, and the findings cannot be generalized for the entire population of former Met School students. However, by using IPA, its small sample size allowed for a rich, detailed examination of each participant's case, contributing to nuanced insights to the limited literature on former Met School students' perspectives.

Another limitation was attributed to the participant recruitment process. Recruitment relied on social media posts shared through the Seven Oaks Met School and Maples Met School Instagram accounts, as well as physical posters displayed in the respective schools. This approach may have limited the pool of potential participants to those who had access to social media platforms or who physically visited the schools, thereby excluding former students who were less connected to these channels

I was the primary researcher for this study as I collected the data and with assistance from my advisor, I conducted the analysis. This collaboration helped me to minimize and account for bias, but the interpretative nature of IPA, resulted in findings that were inevitably shaped by our perspectives. To enhance trustworthiness, I followed the IPA guidelines set out by Smith et al. (2022) and direct quotes from participants were used where possible to preserve and reflect their lived experiences.

This study was also timebound, as I was only able to conduct 1-2 interviews with each participant over a defined period of time. As a result, I obtained snapshots of their experiences and did not have the opportunity to conduct a longitudinal study to more broadly capture their Met School experiences, to better determine long-term post-school outcomes.

Finally, this study captures only students' perspectives. Other stakeholders such as administrators, advisors, family members or mentors were not obtained, limiting the scope of the findings and this may have limited the development of alternate or additional GETs. Future research incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Met School experience.

Directions for Future Research

In consideration of some of the identified limitations of this study, there would be benefits to conducting additional studies on Met Schools from different stakeholders. These could include advisors, administrators, families, and internship mentors to help develop a more comprehensive understanding of how social capital is cultivated within the Met School model. As more students graduate from the Met Schools over the years, a quantitative study could be conducted in the future to allow for more data to be obtained from students via a larger sample size. To gain more insight into the impact of the Met School on students' social capital, a future longitudinal study that follows Met School graduates' post-secondary journeys could provide more depth on the students' experiences. Such a study would allow participants more time both to reflect on their

schooling experiences and to enact the longer-term effects of those experiences across subsequent educational and professional contexts. Together, these avenues of inquiry would deepen the understanding of the Met School student experience and the role of social capital in shaping post-school outcomes.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendation 1: Access and Equity – Application Process

Given the multiple ways that the application process may preclude some students from attending a Met School a comprehensive review of the application process is recommended. This should include evaluating historical enrolment data, including the demographic composition of the school, which might reveal the degree to which the application process is preventing some students from attending the school and perpetuating existing social hierarchies. The review of the application process should also involve reflecting on the degree to which an application and the stringent requirements for a high degree of parental involvement and other aspects aligns with the stated intention of the Met School, which includes providing equitable access to this learning opportunity. Bartlett (2018) found that in Community Schools in Manitoba the principal played a key role in bringing stakeholders together to collectively determine the vision for the school and to champion equity and access for vulnerable groups. In a similar way, the principals of Met Schools may be well positioned to facilitate a similar process.

A lack of alignment may reveal that the application process is perpetuating inequities and eliminating the application process entirely and replacing with a lottery system as is

done in other BPL schools could help to remedy the issue. For instance, the Met High School in Providence, Rhode Island is a charter public school that uses a lottery system for their applications where families who chose to enroll in a charter public school, go through a nonselective and random process. The lottery system exists because there is a greater demand for certain schools than there is capacity (Magee, 2014). Families complete an online form, choose the school they would like to apply for, and the lottery typically runs in the spring prior to the start of the applied school year. As part of the application, families can indicate if a sibling attends a Met School, and siblings are prioritized for admission within the lottery system. Additionally, students who live within the neighbourhood of their preferred school are also given priority (EnrollRI, 2026). Schools like the Met High School in Providence thereby give families from all backgrounds and neighbourhoods access to an alternative high school experience, as equitably as they can. If the current application process is creating barriers for students with more limited social capital and the school community determines that the application is creating a barrier, eliminating this requirement should be considered.

As per the participants' experience, it was noted that the aspect of selecting a piece of work for the student submission portion of the application proved difficult. Participants like Emily recalled that it was difficult to choose a single piece of work they were proud of, whereas Myla described a pressure to create something that would be deemed good enough for entry to the school, but not entirely sure what may qualify. To remedy this, suggestions of ideas and examples of what a piece of work could resemble could be listed

on the application website or explained during recruitment presentations. There is also the possibility that the student may not have done anything recently that they are proud of, so another way to address this barrier in the application process is to give students the opportunity to propose a project of what they would do.

Participants also described having parental support with the application process, however this aspect of the application should be broadened to include supportive adults outside of parents. During the recruitment process, prospective students and their trusted adults should be aware that extended family members, teachers, elders, faith leaders, coaches, instructors, tutors, respite workers, or any other trusted adult in the student's life, are welcomed to support a student's application. This form of support could include writing the letter of support for the student, but also supporting the student through their student submission and meet and greet meeting. Where a student may not yet be connected to a supportive adult, a supportive adult from the receiving Met School should offer support for the applying student. This would ensure that the student is supported from the beginning of their process throughout their high school experience.

Finally, to better support a diverse public school population, greater intentionality is needed within the admissions and application process. Alternative programs that rely on self-selection, interviews, or family advocacy may unintentionally privilege students with greater social capital, familiarity with educational systems, or access to adult support. Implementing an equity-informed admissions framework could help mitigate these biases. For example, admissions could be structured to ensure representation across multiple

student pathways, including those identified as marginalized, students who have experienced a recent academic or social disengagement, and students seeking a more personalized or enriched learning environment. In addition, a clearly articulated diversity policy could guide efforts to ensure balanced representation across gender identities, socio-economic backgrounds, racial and cultural communities, and varied learning profiles. Such intentional design would better position the school population to reflect the broader demographics of Manitoba while maintaining its commitment to personalized, student-centered learning.

Recommendation 2: Access and Equity - Transportation

Transportation is a significant expectation of a Met School student family, as it is often needed to and from the school, as well as to internships. It is recommended that the Met School conduct a review of its student access to transportation to assess whether they align with the division's commitments to equity and access. While transportation to and from the school is available for students who live within the division, it is not always provided for free. Based on the distance from the school and a student's address, as well as if there are special considerations for transportation needs, transportation may be provided at no cost (Seven Oaks School Division, 2025). This review should consider how requiring families to independently arrange transportation to both the school and internship sites may privilege students with greater family-based social and economic capital, while discouraging or excluding students who may otherwise benefit from the program.

As Met Schools often draw students from across a school division in ways that resemble private or choice-based schooling models, the provision of transportation should be considered as a mechanism to reduce inequitable access. Many private schools that enroll students city-wide provide bussing as a means of ensuring consistent attendance and broad access. If Met Schools are to operate as schools of choice within the public system, providing transportation, or subsidizing public transit, may be a necessary budgetary consideration to support equitable participation.

In particular, it is recommended that the school division explore options such as providing bus passes for students travelling to internship placements or offering school-based transportation supports similar to those provided for other specialized programs. While learning to navigate public transportation was described by some participants as a valuable life skill, reliance on families to fund fares, plan routes, or provide rides risks reproducing inequities linked to social capital. Addressing transportation barriers would support broader participation in Met School programming and reduce the extent to which access is contingent on family resources rather than student interest or fit.

Recommendation 3: School Priorities – Universal Design for Learning

Given the alignment between Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and the development of students' social capital within the Met School model, it is recommended that Met Schools intentionally structure learning experiences that deepen both personalization and network-building opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). This includes providing ongoing professional learning focused on

relationship-based approaches to student achievement and the strategic brokering of connections for students with limited access to social capital (Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). UDL's emphasis on multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression positions advisors to design learning that expands students' networks while honouring individual strengths and identities.

Given that students remain with the same advisor throughout high school, advisors require specialized skills to effectively support small advisories over time, including managing group dynamics and responding to social-emotional, mental health, behavioural, academic, and relational needs. Targeted professional development that focuses on small-school contexts, long-term advisory models, and differentiated instruction would better equip advisors to address the evolving needs of students. Training should also emphasize how to leverage technology and community outreach to broaden access to mentors, professional networks, and authentic audiences.

As advisors develop their relationship-building skills, it is recommended that they also attend closely to inequities in students' access to social capital and intentionally broker opportunities for students with limited networks. This may include structured internship support, partnerships with community organizations, and the development of school-based and digital resource hubs that connect students to mentors and learning opportunities. Inviting community members into the school as catalysts for inspiration, approaching partnerships reciprocally (e.g., "What could we contribute to you?"), and facilitating participation in initiatives such as citizen science, can expand both bonding

and bridging social capital.

Embedding these practices within project and internship implementation and design would operationalize UDL's emphasis on engagement and agency while strengthening students' social networks (CAST, 2025; Woolcock, 1998). With intentional guidance and enthusiasm, advisors can support students in identifying meaningful, generative projects that expand opportunity and ensure that personalization broadens, rather than reproduces, inequity.

Recommendation 4: School Priorities – Project-Based Learning

To address tensions associated with project-based learning (PBL), several refinements to practice are recommended. First, clearer guidelines for high-quality PBL should be established and explicitly taught. In addition to recruitment transparency, this may include current or alumni students explaining their projects and the sharing of project rubrics, the school should ensure that the project development process itself is systematically taught so students understand how to move from interest to rigorous inquiry.

Advisors should engage in ongoing professional learning focused on balancing student autonomy with appropriate academic scaffolding that includes explicit instruction in project design and goal-setting. Structured planning frameworks such as the Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) (Government of Manitoba, 2008) that focuses on backwards by design planning, or inquiry models including the Design Thinking Process (Dam & Teo, 2022) or the scientific method, can provide adaptable scaffolds that sustain

rigour while honouring diverse learners. Additionally, incorporating strategies such as co-designed projects, regular one-on-one conferences, and structured project reflections can help maintain student ownership. Teaching strategies for goal attainment and early “quick wins” may further strengthen students’ confidence and momentum.

Consistent with UDL principles, the school should provide flexible learning pathways or alternative formats for students who struggle with highly individualized PBL, recognizing that PBL may not be equally accessible for all learners. Intentional opportunities for collaborative or interdisciplinary projects may also reduce isolation and strengthen peer relationships. Collectively, these refinements may help ensure that PBL remains both rigorous and equitable across the Met School experience.

Recommendation 5: School Priorities – Internships

To address the issues that were raised in this study related to obtaining internships the Met Schools should focus on building and maintaining a centralized network of community partners, offering students structured options alongside some opportunities for independent outreach. Relatedly, it may be important to examine whether the reliance on students to obtain their own placements is a function of limited resources to support this process, and if so, to determine creative ways of resourcing the receipt of internship opportunities. Providing alternative pathways for students not ready for independent outreach would maintain the integrity of the internship model, while reducing undue stress and barriers to participation. For example, other school divisions in the city of Winnipeg that provide career and community experience opportunities employ teachers who are

responsible for forging partnerships with businesses and community organizations and then placing students with these field partners (Pembina Trails School Division, 2025). These placements are well vetted by the career and community experiences teachers to ensure that the opportunities that they provide align with the learning expectations of the school division and the strengths, needs, and interests of the student. Students still participate in an interview process, but they are not required to “cold call” prospective sites and secure their own placement. More consistent, direct instruction in professional communication and interview skills delivered throughout the year rather than during a single “boot camp” period in grade 9, could also reduce students’ anxiety and improve readiness to participate in an internship opportunity. Another option could include using a tiered support model, ranging from high-support to student-led exploration, which may better accommodate a diversity of students’ needs and abilities. This could also include providing more support for students in grades 9 and 10 where internships are identified for students, and then in grades 11 and 12 providing an option for students to identify their own internship if they choose to do so, but still providing a structured and supportive process. Establishing clear, school-wide expectations for advisor involvement and support would also help ensure equity and a more consistent school experience.

Recommendation 6: Personal Growth – Scaffolding Across Grade Levels

Participants’ reflections suggest that personal growth and professional identity development occurred unevenly and were sometimes fully appreciated only after graduation. It is therefore recommended that Met Schools intentionally scaffold

opportunities for personal growth and career readiness throughout students' high school experience, starting in grade 9. This scaffolding should extend beyond a single course or grade-level expectation and instead function as a coherent, developmental framework embedded throughout the school experience.

Advisors should support students in establishing individualized learning and post-secondary transition plans at the beginning of each school year and revisiting them at least quarterly. These plans should align projects and internships with students' evolving goals while explicitly teaching skills such as goal-setting, portfolio development, reflective practice, and how to ask generative questions. Regular student-led conferences and portfolio reviews can deepen reflection and make growth visible over time.

Since sustained relationships are central to the model, attention should also be given to strengthening advisory structures. As Judy noted, they experienced significant advisor turnover during their experience. Expanding mentorship beyond a single advisor through co-teaching models, small-group mentoring, or increased access to additional trusted adults can address this issue. Additionally, there should be a clear process for addressing advisor-student mismatch. When a relationship is not going so well, students, families, and advisors should be provided space to meet to reconcile differences or work alongside the principal to work out a transition if necessary. While meaningful relationships cannot be forced, schools can create structures that increase the likelihood of connection and prevent student disengagement from advisory.

Finally, inviting alumni students to speak about their post-school experiences may

help current students better understand the long-term value of internships, projects, and advisor relationships. Hearing from former students can support reflection, and not only be a source of inspiration, but also serve to get a sense of the post-school outcomes that are possible. Collectively, these strategies position personal growth as a deliberately scaffolded outcome of the Met School model rather than an incidental byproduct of participation.

Recommendation 7: Relationships - Mentors

Participants also illuminated that some mentorships were not ideal due to the mentor quality and expectations. To strengthen internship relationships, clearer relational foundations should be established from the outset. During internship initiation meetings, advisors should outline clear expectations for communication, feedback, supervision, and learning goals, ensuring that both the student and mentor understand their roles. If the mentor is new, the advisor should share the Met School mentor guide with the mentor, offer an orientation conversation that outlines the Met School philosophy, adolescent considerations, and strategies for supporting student growth.

Beyond initial expectations, ongoing relational scaffolds are recommended. Advisors should schedule structured early check-ins, within the first few weeks of the internship to assess the fit, clarify responsibilities, and surface concerns before patterns solidify. Providing mentors with brief feedback tools or reflection prompts may also support more meaningful supervision. When concerns arise, advisors should facilitate solution-focused meetings that center student voice while maintaining partnership with

the mentor. Where misalignment persists despite support, advisors should work alongside the student to transition to a more appropriate placement.

Additional strategies to strengthen mentorship quality may include developing a vetted mentor network, offering optional mentor workshops or appreciation events to build community among mentors, and creating opportunities for peer mentors to share effective practices. Intentional matching processes that consider personality, interests, communication style, and career aspirations may further enhance relational alignment.

Collectively, these practices position internships not only as experiential placements but as intentionally supported developmental relationships that expand students' professional identity and social capital.

Recommendation 8: Relationships - Peers

Given the intensity of peer relationships in small school settings, it is recommended that Met Schools strengthen proactive peer mediation and conflict-resolution structures. Interpersonal dynamics can become magnified within small learning communities; therefore, facilitated peer mediation, restorative practices, and advisor-supported conflict resolution should be embedded as preventative supports. As some participants described experiences of bullying, clear protocols and early intervention strategies are essential. Intentional bonding activities throughout the year may also foster positive peer relationships and reduce relational fragmentation.

School support staff, such as social workers should be proactively integrated into advisory programming through small-group counselling, or whole-advisory sessions, and

individual support when needed. This is particularly important during transitions for students who have previously experienced bullying, as proactive relational planning may ease adjustment to a smaller school context.

Recognizing that small schools may at times exhaust their relational capacity, formal partnerships with neighbouring high schools may provide additional flexibility. Collaborative programming, shared extracurricular opportunities, and access to alternative learning spaces can offer students both expanded peer networks and distance from conflict when necessary. In more complex cases, coordinated transitional planning with neighbouring schools may be required. Establishing a culture of inter-school collaboration in advance would strengthen the relational resilience of the Met School model.

Recommendation 9: Relationships - Families

As participants shared how their families were involved with the Met School, it was clear there was meaningful involvement; however, many families were balancing work and other responsibilities. To promote more equitable engagement, it is recommended that schools increase flexibility in scheduling exhibitions and family meetings. Offering varied meeting times, virtual options, and mutually agreed-upon community locations may reduce barriers to participation, particularly for families with limited time or transportation access. Where necessary, school could explore providing transportation support.

Beyond logistical flexibility, culturally responsive engagement practices are essential. For some families, particularly those with histories shaped by residential

schools or other experiences of marginalization, schools may be perceived as sites of exclusion or oppression and there may be distrust with the school system. Advisors should therefore approach family engagement with cultural humility, offering alternative meeting spaces when appropriate, inviting interpreters when needed, and demonstrating awareness of cultural needs, linguistic needs, and religious calendars. Incorporating culturally meaningful practices, such as opening gatherings with ceremony where appropriate, may further signal respect and belonging.

Schools should also create structured opportunities for families to contribute their knowledge and lived experiences to the learning community. Inviting family members to share aspects of their cultural traditions, family histories, or professional pathways can strengthen relational trust and broaden students' understanding of diverse life trajectories. Conversations about topics such as health education or career exploration may benefit from collaborative approaches that acknowledge differing family values and perspectives, rather than positioning the school as the sole authority. These practices position family relationships not simply as attendance at school events, but as reciprocal partnerships, where diverse histories, values, and forms of expertise are recognized while distributing the benefits of involvement more equitably across the school community.

Recommendation 10 – Dual Realities: Opportunities and Trade-Offs – Specialized Instruction & Extracurricular Activities

To address the trade-offs brought up by participants, mainly the concerns related to specialized instruction and extracurricular activities, the following is recommended. First,

where feasible, the Met Schools should explore ways to expand access to specialized instruction while preserving the depth of PBL. This could include shared or rotating specialist teachers, modular electives, or virtual course options to support students requiring greater subject-specific preparation for post-secondary pathways. Second, extracurricular engagement could be strengthened through collaborative events with the larger high school, cross-school clubs, or mentorship programs, ensuring students benefit from broader peer networks.

Recommendation 11 – Dual Realities: Opportunities and Trade-Offs – Mental Health Support

Participants advised that the mental health supports at the Met School were often insufficient relative to student need. It is recommended that mental health services be aligned proportionally with the needs of the student population, including consistent access to school psychologists, social workers, or community-based mental health partnerships. While budgetary constraints are a reality, reliance on advisors alone is insufficient without corresponding training and structural support.

Advisors should receive ongoing professional development in trauma-informed practice, co-regulation strategies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and relational-skill building. However, mental health support should not exist solely as crisis response. Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the daily fabric of the school would position emotional development as central to the Met School model rather than peripheral to it.

Schools may also normalize diverse lived experiences by intentionally inviting speakers and mentors who represent a wide range of identities and life pathways, including neurodivergent individuals, members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities, and those who have navigated incarceration or other marginalized experiences. Such representation can reduce stigma, broaden students' understanding of resilience, and affirm identities that are often hidden or misunderstood.

Addressing mental health challenges should be embedded within students' personalized learning plans rather than treated as issues students are expected to manage independently. When thoughtfully integrated, mental health and social-emotional development become part of the school's core mission in supporting students to develop the resilience, confidence, and relational capacity necessary for long-term growth.

Conclusion

The school choice movement has been growing across Canada (Ellis & Yoon, 2010; Perry et al., 2024), contributing to an increasingly diverse landscape of alternative schooling options in cities such as Winnipeg. This research contributes to that landscape by offering an in-depth examination of former students' experiences within one specific model of alternative education: the Met School. While this research acknowledges the broader range of high school choices available, its primary purpose was to center the voices of former Met School students in order to better understand their high school experiences and how it contributed to their post-school outcomes.

This inquiry is also informed by my positionality as a Met School educator. It is an

issue that is deeply significant to me, as early in my teaching career, the most common question I would receive from students, families, and colleagues would be, “How do students who attend the Met School fare after high school?” At the time, responses were often anecdotal and based on informal professional knowledge rather than systematic evidence. This study was designed to address that gap by centering former students’ perspectives and contributing empirical insight into a question that continues to shape school choice decisions. Given that on average 120 students graduate from Met Schools annually, and that the model has been established since 2009, examining graduates’ experiences is both timely and necessary.

When considering the literature, several studies conducted on Big Picture Learning, have shared students, advisors, and family perspectives on their experiences (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Fischetti et al., 2024; Hayes et al., 2013). However, no studies to date have yet shared the voices of students from the Met Schools in Winnipeg. In order to understand students’ perspectives and ultimately make recommendations for improving the Met School student experience, students’ voices need to be heard. Research studies (Hayes et al., 2013; Stewart, 2020) have indicated that when students’ voices are amplified, the output can be very useful when trying to understand and improve systems that involve students within those contexts. Similarly, this study has obtained the perspectives of former Met School students to inform their high school experience, to identify the advantages and disadvantages of their experiences, and to illuminate how they perceive the impact of Met School on their post-school life outcomes.

These students identified that the Met School experience is nuanced and, at times, contradictory. While the model offered meaningful opportunities to develop social capital, the shared students' perspectives also sparked important questions about who has access to such opportunities in the first place. Once enrolled, however, students shared how the Met School repaired strained relationships with school, and re-established a place of belonging, purpose, and possibility. Through internships, project-based learning, and sustained advisory relationships, students experienced significant personal growth that supported their transitions into post-secondary education and employment.

At the foundation of it all, the importance of relationships was amplified through all aspects of the Met School experience. Advisors played a central role in brokering both bonding and bridging social capital, supporting students' access to networks, opportunities, and guidance across educational and professional fields. This study implies that the Met School model supports positive post-school outcomes not simply by an alternative pedagogy, but through the intentional reshaping of students' habitus and the cultivation of social capital within a relational educational field. Personal growth emerged as a foundational outcome of students' experiences, one that enabled students to navigate multiple fields beyond high school with confidence and agency.

At the same time, the findings highlight that the benefits of the Met School model were not experienced evenly. Family support, transportation access, and pre-existing social and economic capital influenced students' ability to fully engage in internships and learning opportunities. This aligns with social capital literature suggesting that schools

strive to leverage the capital they do have, rather than eliminate, broader structural inequalities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). As such, this study underscores the importance of examining how alternative school structures interact with students' existing resources to shape long-term outcomes.

Through this investigation, I was able to capture the experiences of seven former Met School students. These students shared what it is like to be a former Met School student, and from their experiences, they have now contributed to the literature on Met Schools. These students were given the opportunity to have their voices not only heard, but honoured as an authentic contribution to research in this field. It is my hope that this study will not be the last of its kind and that others will be inspired to continue learning from former students' experiences to contribute to positive change. And to future Met School students, I hope that this research, and the research that follows it, will empower you to continue taking your learning into your hands, uncovering your passions, and sharing your gifts with the world.

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Appendix A: Letter to Superintendent**University
of Manitoba**

Faculty of Education

Educational Administration, Foundations &
Psychology
224 Dysart Rd
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204 474 9004
F: 204 474 7551

education@umanitoba.ca**Research Project Title:**

Former Met School Students' Perspectives about Big Picture Learning

Researcher:

Jane Suchy, Graduate Student: Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba

Principal - Exchange Met School (umsamarj@myumanitoba.ca)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Nadine Bartlett, Associate Professor

Educational Administration, Foundations, and Psychology

Faculty of Education

University of Manitoba

(Nadine.Bartlett@umanitoba.ca)

November 10, 2024

Tony Kreml

Superintendent

Seven Oaks School Division

830 Powers Street

Winnipeg, MB R2V 4E7

Dear Tony Kreml,

As a master's student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, I am conducting a study entitled, Former Met School Students' Perspectives about Big Picture Learning.

In this study, I plan to obtain the perspectives of former Met School students about their

experiences with the Big Picture Learning (BPL) educational model and their perceptions regarding its impact on their life outcomes.

Using qualitative research methods, I plan to interview 4-7 former Met School students aged 18 and up from Seven Oaks Met School and Maples Met School.

I hope to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of former Met School students about their high school experiences?
2. What do former students perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages of the Big Picture Learning educational model?
3. How do former Met School students perceive the impact of their high school experience on their life outcomes?

I am writing to you to request your permission to contact the principal of Seven Oaks Met School and Maples Met School to request that they disseminate recruitment posters for my study on their social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook) and on their school premises.

I would greatly appreciate your consideration of my request, and I have attached here an authorization form through which you could grant me permission to send this letter of permission.

I am available to meet with you in person to explain the research in more detail or answer any questions or concerns you may have regarding this study. You can also contact me through email (provided above).

Summary of Research

Within Manitoba, the first Met School implementing the Big Picture Learning educational model opened in 2009 within Garden City Collegiate. Since 2009, the model has spread throughout the Seven Oaks School Division with other Met Schools opening in 2016 within Maples Collegiate and 2021 in the Exchange District of Winnipeg, MB. The model serves as an alternative form of education that claims to offer experiential learning through a student-centred approach within the school division. The model further seeks to offer creative solutions for learners with diverse interests and needs. Every year there are approximately 75 students leaving these high schools upon completing their Met School experience.

Currently, there is a significant gap in the research regarding Met Schools in general. Moreover, there have not been any studies conducted specifically on Met Schools within Winnipeg. Met Schools within the Seven Oaks School Division could benefit from this research to have insights on students' perspectives on the BPL educational model, their life outcomes, and valuable data to refine practices going forward.

Should you wish, I will provide you with a summary of the research findings once this project has been concluded. The thesis will be a publicly available document once complete and I will also supply the link to participants if they wish.

Sincerely,
Jane Suchy



University
of Manitoba

Faculty of Education

Educational Administration, Foundations &
Psychology
224 Dysart Rd
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
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education@umanitoba.ca

Research Project Title:

Former Met School Students' Perspectives about Big Picture Learning

Researcher:

Jane Suchy, Graduate Student: Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba

Principal - Exchange Met School (umsamarj@myumanitoba.ca)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Nadine Bartlett, University of Manitoba

(Nadine.Bartlett@umanitoba.ca)

October 1, 2024

I, [Full Name] _____ signed below, in my capacity as superintendent of Seven Oaks School Division, authorise Jane Suchy to contact the principals of Seven Oaks Met School and Maples Met School to request their permission to share recruitment posters on their social media platforms and on their school premises for a study involving former Met School students. My signature in this authorization form in no way releases the researcher, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

[Signature]

[Date]

Please, send me a summary of the findings of this research to the following email address:

Appendix B: Letter to Principals**University
of Manitoba**

Faculty of Education

Educational Administration, Foundations &
Psychology
224 Dysart Rd
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204 474 9004
F: 204 474 7551

education@umanitoba.ca**Research Project Title:**

Former Met School Students' Perspectives about Big Picture Learning

Researcher:

Jane Suchy, Graduate Student: Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba

Principal - Exchange Met School (umsamarj@myumanitoba.ca)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Nadine Bartlett, University of Manitoba

(Nadine.Bartlett@umanitoba.ca)

October 1, 2024

[Principal name]

Principal

[Met School name]

[Met School address]

Dear [principal name],

I would like to request your permission to assist in sharing recruitment posters on your school's social media platforms and on your school premises for a study involving former Met School students. The purpose of this study is to investigate former Met School students' perspectives about the Big Picture Learning educational model. From this research, recommendations will be made for refining the BPL model in Winnipeg's context. Below I present a summary of the research study and its purpose. I have already obtained authorization from Tony Kreml to contact you regarding this research project (please, see attached signed form).

I would greatly appreciate your consideration of my request to share recruitment posters

on your school's social media platforms and on your school premises for a study involving former Met School students. I have attached a digital poster that can be shared on your social media platforms, as well as printed and placed on your school premises.

Should you wish, I will provide you with a summary of the research findings once this project has been concluded.

Sincerely,
Jane Suchy

Follow-Up Email

Dear [principal name],

I am following up to remind you to re-circulate the recruitment poster for the study I sent you previously. This was the poster regarding the research I'm conducting on former Met School students. Please share/re-share the poster on your social media accounts and ensure that they are physically displayed in your schools. I have attached it again for your reference. I will continue to follow-up until 4-7 participants are obtained for this study.

Sincerely,
Jane Suchy

Appendix C: Recruitment Poster

**University
of Manitoba**

HAVE YOU GRADUATED FROM A MET SCHOOL?

Participants wanted for a study about the Met School Experience

PURPOSE:

- gain students' perspectives on their Met School experience
- understand advantages and disadvantages
- gain insight for improvements to the model
- determine if Met School impacted students' life outcomes

To participate you must:

- be at least 18 years old
- attended Seven Oaks Met School or Maples Met School for at least 2 years and graduated
- participate in 2 separate, 1 hour UM Zoom interviews

Exclusion criteria:

- cannot be a former student I taught
- cannot be a graduate from Exchange Met School

Participants will receive a \$20.00 Tim Horton's gift card for each interview they participate in.

Interested in participating?

Email or call Jane Suchy at:
umsamarj@myumanitoba.ca or 204-589-9854

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus.

Principal Investigator
Jane Suchy
University of Manitoba - Graduate Student
Exchange Met School - Principal

Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Nadine Bartlett
Department of Education Administration, Foundations and Psychology
University of Manitoba
Nadine.Bartlett@umanitoba.ca



Appendix D: Follow-Up Email

Dear [principal name],

I am following up to remind you to re-circulate the recruitment poster for the study I sent you previously. This was the poster regarding the research I'm conducting on former Met School students. Please share/re-share the poster on your social media accounts and ensure that they are physically displayed in your schools. I have attached it again for your reference. I will continue to follow-up until 4-7 participants are obtained for this study.

Sincerely,

Jane Suchy

Appendix E: Participant Informed Consent Form



University
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Research Project Title:

Former Met School Students' Perspectives about Big Picture Learning

Researcher:

Jane Suchy, Graduate Student: Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Principal - Exchange Met School (umsamarj@myumanitoba.ca)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Nadine Bartlett, Associate Professor

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(Nadine.Bartlett@umanitoba.ca)

Conflicts of Interest and Undue Influence: I, Jane Suchy, am principal of the Exchange Met School and while I will not be interviewing any of my previous students, or students who have graduated from the Exchange Met School while I've been principal, I do acknowledge my interest in learning about former Met School students' perspectives to inform future policies and practices of Met Schools. I am committing to being impartial throughout this study and will do so by having my advisor and committee review my data collection and analysis to ensure objectivity.

This consent form, a copy of which you can download and print, 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 want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to ask any of the people named above. Please take the time to read this document and any accompanying information carefully. It is very important that you understand:

- what is being asked of you,
- what the risks and benefits of participation are, and

- how the information you provide will be used and stored.

Purpose of the Study:

I am doing this research for a thesis under the supervision of Nadine Bartlett. This research is about former Met School students' perspectives about Big Picture Learning (BPL). We are hoping to learn about the impacts of the BPL educational model has on student life outcomes and use their perspectives to improve the BPL model in a Winnipeg context.

Study Procedures:

If you decide to take part in the study, we will meet for a 1-hour interview through UM Zoom or via telephone. With your consent, I will audio and video record our meeting. After your initial interview, I will request a follow-up interview over the course of one to two weeks to ask additional questions and follow up on key issues that were raised to ensure accuracy. You will have the chance to review the transcript (the document of what you said). You can add, change, or delete information from the transcript as you see fit. I will email you a copy of the transcript and you will have 10 days to respond. If I don't hear from you after 10 days, I will assume that you are okay with the transcript as is. After I have analysed the data for themes, I will give you an opportunity to review the identified themes. I will email you the identified themes and you will have 10 days to respond. If I don't hear from you after 10 days, I will assume that you are okay with the identified themes. Your feedback will be considered, but changes to the overall analysis will not be promised.

Study Risks:

As the questions in this study are asking you to reflect and discuss your experiences as a former Met School student and how it relates to your life outcomes, it is possible that depending on your experience you may feel uncomfortable at points in the interview. Additionally, breach of confidentiality is a risk of harm, but a data security plan is in place to minimise such a risk. Also, some questions may make you feel uncomfortable. If that happens, you can skip those questions or withdraw from the study altogether. If you decide to quit the interview your responses will NOT be saved. Although unlikely, if you discuss any unlawful activities you were involved in as a student, there could be legal implications. If you share sensitive or personal stories about other individuals or events, it could inadvertently impact the privacy of third parties. Please do not disclose any information that might have legal consequences.

Study Benefits:

Some of the direct benefits of participating in this study include amplifying your voice by having a platform to share your perspectives, which can be rewarding and validating. Your

insights may inform school improvements, while also allowing you to reflect on your educational journey, recognizing skills, values, and growth you've gained. Indirect benefits include contributing to a lasting legacy, knowing your input could enhance the Met School experience for future students and inspire similar educational models. This participation may also renew your connection to the Met School community, fostering a sense of belonging and alumni identity. Overall, we hope to learn more about how former Met School students perceive Met School and its impact on life outcomes so we can develop and propose refinements to the model of schooling. This research would be valuable to the literature available on education as a whole, especially for educators and schools interested in adopting or refining parallel educational models.

Compensation:

You will receive a \$20.00 Tim Horton's gift card for your participation in each interview, up to \$40.00 in Tim Horton's gift cards.

Storage and Use of Data:

All the information you provide as part of this study is confidential. This means that only members of the research team will see your information. For safety, your information will be kept on a UM-approved secure platform.

We will have a file that links your name to your information using a code. We will keep the file with your name, contact information, and code separate from the research information you share with us. When we share the results of this study, we will combine everybody's responses. This means no one will see your answers, name, or contact information.

Only people on the research team will see your contact information and/or responses. We will destroy any information that identifies you (name, email address) by March 2025. The rest of the information will be kept until October 2025.

At the end of this document, you will have a chance to tell us whether you will allow your information to be shared outside of the University of Manitoba. Your information may be made publicly available. The information is being shared as part of the research study. It will not include your name or any information that could identify you.

We will do our best to keep your personal information safe. However, it is not possible to guarantee confidentiality. We will only share your personal information if the law requires us to.

The study results will be shared through 1) the publication of a master's thesis; 2) public defense of the thesis; and 3) a summarized report of the study results to be sent to interested participants.

Withdrawing:

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You can choose to answer only the questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the study for any reason. You do not have to explain why. You will not be penalized in any way. You may withdraw from the study until March 2025. Should you withdraw, all gathered responses will be destroyed. After this date, we will start to analyze the information so it may not be possible to withdraw your information. To withdraw, please contact Jane Suchy at the phone number or email above.

Questions or Concerns:

A designated University of Manitoba auditor may check that this study is being done safely and properly. To do this, they may visit the study site or review the research records. We will tell you if someone outside the research team will be there while you are participating. If this makes you uncomfortable, please tell the Student Principal Investigator, who will ask the auditor to return at another time. This study has been reviewed and approved by Ms. Martha Koch, the chair of the Research Ethics Board 2 at University of Manitoba. However, this does not mean that participation is risk-free. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, you may contact any members of the research team listed on the first page or the Office of Human Research Ethics at humanethics@umanitoba.ca or (204) 474-7122.

Appendix F: Demographic Questionnaire**University
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Demographic Questionnaire for Study

1. Pseudonym (First Name) - please identify how you would like to be identified in the study; this should not be your actual name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Ethnicity/Race:
5. Current location:
6. Met School attended:
7. Year of Graduation from Met School:
8. Any scholarships, grants, or financial support to further education?
9. Highest level of education completed:
10. Current employment status:
 - If applicable:
 - Industry of employment:
 - Job Title or Role:
 - Household income range:
11. Parents' education levels:
12. Parents' occupations:
13. Participation in community organizations (i.e. volunteering, professional organizations, alumni groups, social clubs)
14. Mentorship or coaching roles:

Appendix G: Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello, my name is Jane, and I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba working on a Master of Education degree. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. I am studying former Met School students' perspectives about Big Picture Learning. There is no right or wrong answer to any question I ask you. Your interview will help me better understand how former Met School students perceive their BPL experiences, the supports they used and developed, and in what ways being a BPL student impacted your life outcomes. I encourage you to be as open and honest in your responses as you can as I want to make sure that I am capturing your perceptions, feelings, and experiences as accurately as possible. We will conduct a follow-up interview in one to two weeks to follow-up on today's interview.

Your participation in this study is confidential. All information from our conversation will be anonymous which means no one will ever know what you said. Your identity will be protected in the reporting of the results of this research project. All the information you provide to me will be private and kept in a safe, secure location. Remember that when talking with me, you may stop at any time. You can choose to answer some questions and not others, and you can withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me or my Advisor and letting me know. No one will be upset with you, and there will be no negative consequences. This interview will last no longer than 60 minutes. Remember that I am going to record our conversation. Is that still okay with you? Do you have any questions before we begin?

(If the participant has no questions and does not object to being recorded, the researcher will proceed with the questions below).

Background Information on Interviewee

Pseudonym:

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration of interview: _____ minutes

Interview #1 - Questions

So first, I would like to start off by learning a little bit about you.

1. Can you share with me why you agreed to take part in the interview today?
2. Can you tell me how you first heard about your Met School?
 - a. Why did you make the decision to apply to Met School?
 - b. If someone inspired you, (without specifying names) can you share what about this person or experience inspired you to think about going to a Met School?
 - c. Can you tell me how involved were you with the application process?
 - d. Did you write a letter of interest?
 - e. Do you remember the role of the person who wrote your supporting letter?
3. If someone asked you to describe Met School, what would you say?
 - a. Tell me more about the different aspects you mentioned. How have you personally accessed or used these aspects of Met School within your high school experience?
 - b. Why do you think these aspects are helpful? Can you provide an example?
 - c. Were there any aspects of Met School that weren't helpful? Example?
4. Off the top of your head, in a few sentences, how would you sum up your overall Met School experience?
 - a. Can you tell me why you chose the word(s) to describe your experiences?
 - b. What memories or feelings popped into your mind when you were asked that question?
5. Research has shown that students do a lot better in school if they feel like they belong in a school. When you think about your overall Met School experience, how would you describe your sense of belonging?
 - a. This could be when you were physically in class at your school, or experiences related to Met School (production, sports, clubs, field trips, travel opportunities etc.)
6. Can you think of any Met School experiences that led to positive life outcomes (i.e. post-secondary education, employment, wellbeing)?

- a. What part of Met School really worked for you? How so?
 - b. What part of Met School helped you the most in life after school?
 - c. What part of Met School do you wish you had more of?
7. Can you think of any Met School experiences that led to negative life outcomes?
- a. Were there parts of Met School that didn't work for you? How so?
 - b. What part of Met School didn't help you in life after high school?
 - c. What was missing from Met School that you wish you experienced?

So now, let's talk specifically about your sources of support or the people in your life that have been significant to you as you transitioned out of high school.

8. In general, what kinds of support do you feel have been most positively impactful on your life outcomes?
- a. Who (without specifying names) or what have been your sources of support since you have transitioned out of high school? This could be both supported from Met School or outside of Met School.
 - b. Can you describe or provide examples of how they have provided support?
 - c. Are you still connected to them?
9. Can you tell me about a time you used your "home" network, this could be your friends or family to help you while being a student at the Met School?
- a. In general, how have these individuals from home, friends, family, provided support to you while being at Met School?
 - b. What are these people your go-tos for?
 - c. Why do you feel like they are the best people to support you in the ways you have described?
10. Now I'd like to ask you specifically about your teacher advisor from Met School for a bit. Overall, if someone asked you to describe your relationship with them, what would you say?
- a. Tell me more about this, are there examples you can give that you feel best demonstrates your interactions with them?
 - b. Did you feel supported by your advisor? How so?
 - c. Did you feel unsupported by your advisor? How so?
 - d. How has your advisor assisted you with transitioning out of high school?
 - e. Are you still connected to them?

Research indicates that internship experiences help students explore career paths and learn skills that can help them transition after high school. Next, I'd like to ask you about the internship experiences you had at Met School.

11. What were your perspectives on internships at Met School?
 - a. What did you enjoy about internships?
 - b. What did you not like about internships?
 - c. Do you feel that internships impacted your life outcomes?
 - d. Was there any influence of internships on your future?
 - e. Can you share one of your internship experiences? What was it? What did you do? What did you learn?

Next, I'd like to specifically ask you about the mentors you had over your time as a student.

12. Overall, if someone asked you to describe your relationship with your mentors, what would you say?
 - a. Can you identify a mentor (without specifying names) you had and share the interactions you had with them?
 - b. How has the mentor assisted you with transitioning out of high school?
 - c. Are you still connected to them?
 - d. Did you have a good experience with a mentor?
 - e. Did you have a bad experience with a mentor?
13. As a Met School student, you can develop relationships with a lot of people. Besides your advisor, and mentor(s) is there anyone else (without specifying names) that you could identify that has positively impacted your life outcomes?
 - a. Can you identify the person and share specifically how the relationship impacted your transition experience?
 - b. Do you maintain these relationships today? Are you still in contact with any of these individuals for support in your transition?

14. To wrap things up, I just want to make sure I have covered all my bases so I can have an accurate picture of your Met School experience and the supports you have accessed. Are there any other events, or anything else that you think has been an important aspect of your Met School transition experience that we have not discussed today? Is there anything else that you would like to share?

15. **Closing:** I appreciate you taking the time to participate and offer your experiences and perspectives for my research. If you have any questions or concerns about anything related to the interview moving forward, please feel free to reach out to me.

Interview #2 - Questions

1. Since our last conversation, have any new thoughts or reflections about your time at Met School come to mind?
2. Looking back now, are there specific experiences at Met School that you feel were more impactful than you originally thought?
3. Has your Met School experience contributed to where you are today, in terms of career, relationships, or personal development? If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?
4. Do you feel that attending Met School had an impact on your life outcomes compared to what you may have experienced in a traditional high school setting?
5. Are there ways that your Met School experience has shaped who you are today, both personally and professionally?
6. How have your sources of support or your social network evolved since you graduated?
7. Are there people or networks you became connected to after high school that were influenced by your time at Met School?
8. How would you describe the current role of your Met School connections in your life? Are they more or less relevant now?
9. Has Met School influenced your ability to seek out and build new relationships or networks after high school? How so? Or How not?
10. Looking back, do you feel your internship experiences at Met School prepared you for your career path?
11. Based on your experience, would you encourage others to pursue Met School? Why or why not?
12. Are there elements of Met School that you believe should be emphasized or improved for future students?
13. If you could change or add something about the Met School experience based on your journey since graduation, what would it be?