Exploring the Experiences of Students in Alternate Programs:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

The policies governing education have given schools the responsibility of meeting the needs of a diverse student population, including those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). To balance their need for individualized educational programs with their right to inclusion in schools, students with EBD may be placed in alternate programs within a mainstream school setting. However, little is known about student experiences that lead to this placement or their experiences in these programs. This phenomenological study explored how eight grade students in alternate programs make sense of their schooling. Six students participated in a mapping activity and an individual audio-recorded interview during which they described their school journey and educational experiences. This yielded visual- and text-based data that was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Results revealed four salient themes that included (a) struggling to develop and defend their sense of self, (b) schooling as an increasingly complex social process, (c) schooling as tumultuous, and (d) exploring ways to cope with stress. Using a developmental perspective to frame these students' experiences, this study presents a multi-level understanding of schooling for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Implications for educators, administrators, researchers, and policy-makers are discussed.

Résumé

Les politiques qui régissent l'éducation exigent de la part des écoles d'accommoder les besoins divers de la population étudiante, dont ceux des étudiants ayant des difficultés émotionnelles ou de comportement. Afin d'assurer un accès équilibré à ces étudiants qui ont besoin à la fois d'un plan d'éducation individualisé et d'être inclus dans les écoles conventionnelles, ces derniers sont parfois placés dans des programmes alternatifs au sein des écoles traditionnelles. Cependant, on dispose de peu d'information sur l'expérience des étudiants menant à un tel placement, ni sur leurs parcours dans le cadre de ces programmes. Cette étude phénoménologique explore comment des étudiants de 8ième année ayant été placés dans des programmes alternatifs expliquent leurs trajectoires scolaires. À travers des entrevues enregistrées, six étudiants ont décrit leur parcours et leurs expériences éducatives. Ce processus a permis de recueillir des données visuelles et textuelles qui ont été soumises à une analyse phénoménologique interprétative. Les résultats suggèrent quatre thèmes principaux : (a) des difficultés quant au développement et à la défense du soi, (b) l'enseignement comme processus social de plus en plus complexe, (c) les perturbations liées à la fréquentation scolaire, (d) l'exploration de la gestion du stress. Cette étude présente une analyse multi-niveaux de l'enseignement destiné aux étudiants en proie à des difficultés émotionnelles ou de comportement. Elle met en évidence les implications pour les éducateurs, les administrateurs, les chercheurs et les législateurs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For children and adolescents, school is a crucial component of their social world, and the basis for the development of interpersonal skills, supportive peer and adult relationships, and positive self-perceptions (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Historically, students with disabilities or high needs have struggled to find the programs and services they require. However, inclusion of all students into mainstream schools and classrooms is both a basic human right and a strategy to promote healthy development, engagement, well-being, and overall success. For students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), this right may be upheld through placement in on-campus alternate programs.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was intended to improve the teaching and inclusion of students with disabilities in the United States (Power, DuPaul, Shapiro, & Kazak, 2003). Indeed, Section 612 of IDEA (1990) states:

> to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

Although such legislation does not exist at the federal level in Canada, there are policies at the provincial level that also reflect the right for meaningful inclusion in school. For example, Ontario defined inclusive education as "based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). Similarly, Alberta's policy on inclusion aims to

"provide all students with meaningful learning opportunities and supportive learning environments to enable them to be successful" ("Inclusive Education: Support for Implementation, " n.d., para. 2) and to "ensur[e] that each student belongs and receives a quality education no matter their ability, disability, language, cultural background, gender, or age" ("Inclusion in Action in Alberta," n.d., para. 1). Both of these policies align with the notions in IDEA that assert that all students have a right to receive services, including special education services, in the least restrictive environment possible.

British Columbia, the targeted province in this study, espouses a similar inclusion policy "that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs," and they further elaborate that "inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with full integration in regular classrooms, and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others" ("Special Education," n.d., para. 10). This policy clearly stresses the importance of relationships and activities beyond the core curriculum for educational achievement and healthy development; this would be particularly important for students with EBD who have significantly impaired functioning in social environments such as schools. To this end, alternate programs within traditional schools have been implemented to provide individualized education programs while maintaining full access to regular school services, activities, and social opportunities.

Alternate programs such as these have been found to be effective with regard to academic, disciplinary, and socioemotional outcomes. For example, students with EBD who are enrolled in these programs have better grades, attendance, and self-esteem, and fewer behavioural issues (Cox, 1999; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Haughey, 2009). However, research tends to focus on individual factors over a narrow period to determine success. This does not truly assess whether the program has met the requirements of educational policy; for

example, examining these factors would not measure whether students are participating in a meaningful manner or achieving excellence in all aspects of schooling, as mandated in British Columbia, nor does it capture the complexity of their experiences.

Sadly, few studies provide a detailed account of students' perceptions of their school situation, despite its importance. Understanding students' experiences is vital because students who had negative school experiences have higher numbers of vulnerabilities as adults, including less education, limited or poor perceived future work life, and less general success (Andersson & Strander, 2004). Determining needs and the effectiveness of support strategies is clearly necessary, but should include the key people involved in student success—the students themselves (Cook-Sather, 2006; De La Ossa, 2005; Phillips, 2013). Instead of relying on information that comes from adults, students should be included in decisions about their own schooling that will have a significant impact on their development and well-being.

This study contributes to the literature by employing a methodology that highlights students as the primary stakeholders in their development and well-being, and focuses on their school experiences as a whole. Consequently, their insights can elucidate the ways in which their educational experiences are related not only to their own school success, but also to school practices and policies that impact their emotional and behavioural functioning.

Background to the Problem

Early efforts toward inclusion focused on students with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities, and now have shifted to also consider students with EBD. However, while these students have recognizable and often unmet emotional and behavioural needs, there are few targeted support services available for this group, and little research regarding whether those services are appropriate, effective, and inclusive.

Rationale for the Study

The term "alternative" and "alternate" are used interchangeably to describe a wide range of specialized school programs that offer courses, curriculum, and instructional strategies not generally found in traditional mainstream settings (De La Ossa, 2005). Many alternate programs target students who struggled in regular classrooms and require learning, emotional, and behavioural support beyond the scope and practice of the mainstream school environment and personnel. In essence, the purpose of alternate school programs is to attend to academic, emotional, and behavioural skills associated with positive development, while maintaining students' meaningful participation in the social activities of schooling.

To do this, alternate programs must focus on emotional and behavioural skills rather than solely on academic skills to adequately meet the needs of students with EBD. Furthermore, they must balance this with maintaining students' social interactions and engagement with both non-academic and academic aspects of school. However, few studies examine whether these parameters across various domains are being met from the perspective of the students themselves. The foci of current research fails to capture the broad, complex, and multi-systemic factors that impact students with EBD. Often, research focuses on individual factors such as absenteeism or lack of engagement (Joe, Joe, & Rowley, 2009), substance use (Morone, Kilbreth, & Langwell, 2001; Ross & Wu, 1995), or poor mental health (Oeseburg, Jansen, Dijkstra, Groothoff, & Reijneveld, 2010). Furthermore, few of these studies have been conducted in Canadian schools, whose educational system, mandates, and culture differ from the United States. If the purpose of educational research is to improve the policies and practices that serve Canadian students, more research is needed that highlights the complexity of the lives of students and their multi-faceted educational environments.

Purpose Statement

The emphasis of this exploratory phenomenological study is to understand and describe the educational experiences of adolescents enrolled in an alternate program in a large school district in British Columbia. The focus of this study was to explore eighth grade students' lived educational experiences, from kindergarten through their current alternate school program. These students have been placed there because they have not been successful in traditional school settings, and these alternate programs were designed to better address their specific difficulties. Therefore, this study aimed to uncover participants' sense of being a student while also contending with the specialized educational, emotional, or behavioural concerns that have likely contributed to their being placed in an alternate program.

As such, this study aimed to (a) understand the past and present lived educational experiences, rather than prescribed individual characteristics, of students who have been placed in alternate programs, (b) examine these perspectives from a Canadian context, (c) focus solely on student experiences and perceptions of schooling, and (d) situate those experiences and perceptions within a systemic developmental framework, with the intention of examining how to better meet the needs of students in alternate programs.

Construct Definitions

Understanding the experiences and perspectives of those who are potentially most affected by EBD would offer rich, meaningful, and pivotal information to guide educational policies and practices. To do this, there must be an understanding of the factors and constructs involved, which are presented in alphabetical order below. These definitions will be used to frame the dialogue in the subsequent chapters.

Alternative/Alternate programs. For this study, an alternate program refers to a specialized program that is designed to provide more individualized academic, emotional, and

behavioural support for struggling students with the larger aim of providing remediation and social support to assist students in returning to a regular school program. This study targets students who have received numerous supports, including various special education services; students currently in alternate programs would have first-hand perspectives of different approaches, interventions, and programs prior to finally being placed in a less-inclusive educational setting.

EBD. Many students in alternate programs are identified as having significant emotional and behavioural needs. The BC Ministry of Education ("Special Education," n.d.) defines EBD as a condition requiring coordinated inter-service/agency intervention and assessment processes to address specific emotional and behavioural needs to maintain them in their school and community. Difficulties include profound internalizing (emotional) or externalizing (behavioural) difficulties that persist over time and across settings, and significantly impact the learning environment, social relations, or personal adjustment.

Educational experiences. Educational experiences include the practices, viewpoints, and objectives of schools and programs from the perspective of the eighth grade students. This could include descriptions of social relationships, curricula, academic requirements, peer interactions, teacher-student dynamics, school staff training and conduct, and/or school environment and culture. It is important to note that as an exploratory study, other factors or definitions of educational experiences may arise based on the meanings presented by the participants during the course of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Inclusion. This refers to a student's entitlement to appropriate access to learning, achievement, and growth in general education settings (Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2012). Inclusion is focused on placements that involve meaningful participation in school, social interactions with

others, and engagement with academic and non-academic services and activities to meet student needs in the least restrictive means possible.

Schooling. This term refers to the training, guidance, and discipline of students in formal educational settings that is shaped by interactions among social and cultural influences, school and district level policies and practices, teacher leadership, and social relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Well-being. Griffin (1986) defined well-being as what is needed for "... a single life to go well" (p.7). More specifically, this can be viewed as a positive state or thriving based on achieving a balanced satisfaction of diverse needs in an individual, which involves the needs of people and the systems in which they interact (Prilleltensky, 2012).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2013) states that schools should provide individualized educational programs (IEP) for a diverse group of students with different needs; this also includes providing a safe, prosocial environment that offers a full range of educational opportunities in the least restrictive environment. This involves balancing the need for small group or individualized instruction and flexible learning environments with the need for interpersonal connections, extracurricular activities, and standardized curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013). To this end, some students with EBD are placed in alternate programs with the hope that the benefits of smaller settings with more intensive support and flexibility counter the social detriments of a more restrictive environment. However, this hope may not always be realized as there is often a disconnect between the perceived needs of students in alternate programs and the services that they receive (Merrell & Walker, 2004; Streeter, Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2011). This suggests that creating space for students' voices about their specialized needs is paramount to ensuring educational success (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2003), especially in alternate educational settings.

Accordingly, this study aims to better understand the experiences of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties who are placed in alternative programs (G. Clarke, Boorman, & Nind, 2011; Phillips, 2013); this is an important step in identifying educational practices and policies that shape their educational experiences, and, consequently, their educational outcomes. In order to situate this study in the larger body of literature, this chapter discusses the educational construct of EBD, a profile of students with EBD, and an overview of school-based services, within the context of an ecological systems perspective of development. The significance of the proposed study and specific research questions conclude this chapter.

Ecological Systems Perspective of Adolescence

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a theoretical lens through which to view adolescent development. This perspective suggests that adolescents do not develop in isolation from their environments, nor do any difficulties they have, and that these environments interact to influence their development. This perspective is markedly different from models that place the problem primarily within the control and influence of the individual. From an ecological systems perspective, these environmental levels vary from most to least proximate to the individual, and include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem; individual factors also influence development by interacting with the environmental levels.

Development of the individual. In addition to the environmental influences on development, there are also internal influences, such as the adolescent's physical, emotional, and social maturation, that are specific to this stage of development and are subject to the external influences of the environment.

Physiological maturation. According to Feldman (2008), part of adolescence is marked by physical changes such as puberty, growth spurts, and weight gain that occur at varying rates and ages (Geithner, Satake, Woynarowska, & Malina, 1999; Shirtcliff, Dahl, & Pollak, 2009). These physical changes are important because they can affect adolescents' perceptions of themselves (Labbrozzi, Robazza, Bertollo, Bucci, & Bortoli, 2013; Williams & Currie, 2000), the way they behave toward others (Tremblay et al., 1998) and their feelings of self-consciousness (Feldman, 2008) which, in turn, impact other developmental domains.

Emotional maturation. Part of adolescence is learning to regulate emotions (Yurgelun-Todd, 2007), that often cycle rapidly between positive and negative states (Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002). During this period, adolescents are learning about their emotions

and those of others, as well as how to manage emotional reactions (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009). These emotions have a role in shaping behavioural responses, including those at school (Feldman, 2008).

Social maturation and identity development. During adolescence, young people begin to gain more autonomy from their parents and begin to value friendships to a higher extent (Feldman, 2008). Adolescents are also learning to build and keep relationships, which impacts their emotional development and well-being (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993). Indeed, identity development is an important part of becoming psychosocially autonomous (Heisler & Friedman, 1980; Steinberg, 2008), and as adolescents discover themselves as individuals they also begin to search for their place in society (Feldman, 2008).

Microsystem. The individual's internal development—physical, emotional, and social—is largely influenced by the levels of the environment around him or her. The microsystem is the level of the environment closest to the individual and includes the interactions that occur between the individual and his or her family, school, and community. This level influences adolescents directly, for example through parenting practices and school environment factors, such as school climate and disciplinary practices.

Adolescents' physical maturation is impacted by their environment (Poltorak, 2009), in particular by the resources that are available, such as access to medical services, space for physical activity, and nutritious food. The microsystem also shapes emotional and social maturation through interactions that adolescents have with parents, friends, and teachers (Fischer, Wang, Kennedy, & Cheng, 1998). Schools have a particular influence development (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000) by impacting how adolescents shape their identities (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser et al., 2008) through experimenting with aspects of the self (Nakkula &

Toshalis, 2006), including appearance, social relationships, extra-curricular activities, and risk-taking behaviour.

Mesosystem. This system comprises the interactions between the levels of the microsystem, such as between parents and their work environments, or between parents and adolescents' school environments. During early adolescence, the mesosystem gains complexity and depth as the number of teachers, classes, and behavioural demands increase in secondary school. While the mesosystem is further removed from the adolescent than the microsystem, both peer interactions and parent interactions are predictive of problem behaviour in schools (Veronneau & Dishion, 2010). Other mesosystemic influences on development include teacher and parent interactions and the manner in which either adult then interacts with the adolescent. Overall, the interactions between the individuals in an adolescent's life and the adolescent are less direct than interactions in the microsystem, but still affect adolescents' development.

Exosystem. This level focuses on the interactions between people in the individual's microsystem and larger environmental influences, and how those indirectly impact the individual. According to this perspective, work policies at parents' places of employment can also influence adolescents' development. While this level of the environment may seem too removed to be meaningful, these interactions significantly influence adolescents through ripple effects (Lean & Colucci, 2010). For example, a variable work schedule policy at a parent's place of employment may give more flexibility for him or her to be able to meet with and collaborate with teachers, or to attend to any of the adolescent's physical or emotional needs, such as illness. Again, schools and their policies are important exosystem level factors that influence adolescents' development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Macrosystem. The macrosystem encompasses the cultural values that influence each of the above levels of the environment. For example, cultural norms that define expectations for

adolescents' behaviour in each of their environments are included here. These expectations are especially salient in schools where adolescents are expected to abide by the behavioural norms defined by the macrosystem. As such, this level of the environment impacts the way in which adolescents develop, particularly their socioemotional development (Fischer et al., 1998). Also included at this level are the policies that determine eligibility for social services, such as educational supports or household supplemental resources, which also impacts development.

Chronosystem. Apart from the physiological changes associated with puberty, adolescence is marked by milestones and events that impact their development and well-being. The chronosystem encompasses these occurrences that happen over an adolescent's life; this could include personal and family history, as well as specific developmental sequences such as increased goal-oriented behaviours (Newman & Newman, 2010). These events are temporary in nature, but can have a significant influence on an adolescent's development, such as the transition to high school.

Transition to high school as a milestone. The transition to high school is a milestone related to role strain (Fenzel, 1989), as students experience stress due to the changes in their school environment. For instance, transferring to high school is associated with decreased feelings of self-worth (Fenzel, 2000; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991) and to high levels of stress (Akos, 2002; Fenzel, 2000), and these changes are more difficult and last longer for girls than boys (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Successful transition involves perceived social abilities, level of support (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Fenzel, 2000), finding positive peer groups (Fuligni, Eccles, Barber, & Clements, 2001), and becoming involved in new activities (Bohnert, Wargo Aikins, & Arola, 2013). Overall, these studies the transition to high school is particularly salient for adolescents who struggle socially.

The transition to high school also impacts academics and the frequency of students' behavioural problems. For example, problem behaviour and academic achievement in grade 8 was associated with the same in grade 9, which marks the transition to high school (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). This suggests that students who are struggling with their behaviour during this transition may also have challenges with their academic functioning. Additionally, there appears to be an increase in the frequency of disciplinary problems from elementary school to high school (Theriot & Dupper, 2010). This may be from lack of knowing how to adapt to the high school context, from struggling to regulate their behaviour, or from a natural progression towards autonomy. Although these struggles are reflected in an individual's behaviour and academic performance, they are a result of interactions among the systems, including school level policies and practices and sociocultural expectations of students.

In addition to a negative impact on academic achievement, students also struggle with their psychological functioning which may last through high school (Benner & Graham, 2009). It is possible that this decline in psychological functioning may be associated with changes in peer and teacher support. For example, decreases in peer and teacher support were related to decreases in students' self-esteem and increases in depressive and anxiety symptoms (De Wit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011). As a whole, these results demonstrate that temporal events can shape physical, emotional, and social development even though they are not constant in nature.

Summary

The secondary school years are developmentally significant because adolescents are experiencing many biological, psychological and social changes (Christie & Viner, 2005), and these impact how they see the world and interact with their surroundings. The influences they receive through messages, social interactions, practices, and policies across contexts shape their emotional responses and behavioural patterns, which can significantly alter outcomes. Often

developmental pathways are considered in terms of physical and cognitive domains rather than social, emotional, and behavioural domains, and this is particularly true in schools. Adolescence is, however, an important period for considering well-being, and taking an ecological systems perspective of development emphasizes the impact of the interactions between the adolescent and the levels of the environment on students' emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Indeed, behaviour is situated in the context of the environment which has clear norms for behaviour. For schools, "problem behavior… is a product of social interaction" (Cooper & Upton, 1990, p. 309). An adolescent's behaviour is shaped by the environment through the social constructions of what is considered typical or acceptable (Fischer et al.,1998), and these constructions of behaviour are clearly evident in schools. Using the ecological systems model to understand development clarifies environmental influences, especially when examining emotional responses and behavioural patterns. This perspective also deemphasizes individual psychopathology (Avison, 2010), and provides a holistic lens for understanding the multi-systemic factors that influence development.

Students with EBD

EBD is an educational designation reflecting a categorization of students who have high emotional and behavioural needs that are often not adequately addressed in the regular classroom program (Quinn & Poirier, 2004). The overall prevalence of EBD designations has been approximated at one percent of the overall student population (Lane, Wehby, & Barton-Arwood, 2005; Olympia et al., 2004), with approximately 25% of those designations being for girls (Trout, Nordness, Pierce, & Epstein, 2003).

History of EBD. The term EBD originated from "emotional disturbance[s]" (ED) (IDEA, 1990, p. 9), previously referred to as "serious emotional disturbance[s]" (United States' federal law PL 94-142; Bowers, 2001), and was revised to lessen the language intensity of the

designation. While the acronym of EBD is widely used, the specific designation varies in its inclusion criteria. For example, EBD can refer to emotional and behavioural disturbances (IDEA, 1990), emotional and behavioural (E/B) disorders (Olympia et al., 2004), and emotional and behavioural difficulties (Banks, Shevlin, & McCoy, 2012). According to Olympia et al., E/B disorders must encompass (a) "[the] inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors," (b) "[the] inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with pees and teachers," (c) "inappropriate types of behaviour or feelings under normal circumstances," (d) "general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression," and (e) "[the] tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems" (p. 836). This is quite similar to E/B difficulties, a revised terminology used to shift away from a diagnostic perspective toward an educational psychology approach. Though not explicit in the literature, some authors in the United Kingdom have used the term E/B difficulties (Bowers, 2001), whereas authors in the United States have employed the term E/B disorders (McDuffie, Landrum, & Gelman, 2008; Sacks & Kern, 2008). As is evident from the variations of the EBD acronym and its uses, there have been several issues with the specific application of this term in educational settings to identify students in need of further supports.

Profile of students with EBD. Although a relatively broad and encompassing term, there are some generalities that have been made about students with EBD.

Socioemotional characteristics. Students with EBD can be described as lacking in social competence skills (Cook et al., 2008; Desbiens & Royer, 2003; Gresham, 2000), such as finding and maintaining friendships (Al-Hendawi, 2012). This suggests that the designation of emotional disturbance, the specific subset of EBD examined in this case, is determined "more on the basis of social-behavioral difficulties rather than 'emotional disturbances'" (Cook et al., 2008, p. 131). It is likely that these students conform to behavioural patterns that fall outside of

societal norms (MacLure, Jones, Holmes, & MacRae, 2012), and are labelled with EBD when it is possible that the problem is a social one; indeed, EBD could be appropriate responses to the school environment that are created and maintained through systemic issues. These students also experience higher perceptions of mental health challenges than their peers (Hackett et al., 2010), and have a lower self-concept (Banks et al., 2012). Overall, this suggests that socioemotional development, specifically poor strategies for managing emotional responses and stress, is important for understanding which students will be designated with EBD.

Behavioural characteristics. Students who are identified with EBD often have behaviour patterns that are not appropriate for the context (Erickson, Stage, & Nelson, 2006), including violence, drug and alcohol use, disrespectful behaviour, skipping class, and fighting (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The typical profile of EBD is divided according to behaviour: externalizing behaviours that exist outside the individual, or internalizing behaviours that are directed toward the individual (Austin & Sciarra, 2010); externalizing behaviour is associated with oppositional tendencies and aggression, while internalizing behaviour is associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and isolation (Lane et al., 2005). These differences among the profiles of students with EBD, warrant a holistic perspective of student struggles, and inform which services and supports should be provided for specific emotional and behavioural needs.

Academic characteristics. Students with EBD often have concurrent academic difficulties. In general, they have overall lower academic achievement than their peers (Al-Hendawi, 2012; Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein, 2004; Trout et al., 2003), and a higher likelihood of being disengaged in school and of dropping out.

Disengagement. Students with EBD have been associated with a higher likelihood of disengagement (Al-Hendawi, 2012), which is associated with feeling isolated, not belonging, and an overall distaste for school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Furthermore, these feelings are

experienced across cognitive, behavioural and emotional domains (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Low levels of engagement have been shown to be one of the primary reasons for skipping classes (Fallis & Opotow, 2003) and a significant predictor of high school dropout (Christenson & Thurlow; Janosz et al.), which is why improving connection to schooling is paramount for improving educational outcomes.

Dropout. Students with EBD served under IDEA, have roughly a 50% probability of dropping out of high school (Aron & Loprest, 2012), which is significantly higher than the 30% of the United States' 2010 class (Snyder & Dillow, 2010). This approximate proportion of students dropping out of high school was similar for students with EBD (Kauffman & Landrum, 2006). Indeed, students with EBD already have the highest dropout rates (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001) compared to students with other types of special educational designations (Kauffman, 2001).

Given that dropout can best be understood as a process that occurs over time (Christenson et al., 2001; Rumberger, 2011), it is important to support students' engagement in school before they become disengaged and have a higher likelihood of dropping out. Therefore, there is a strong need to intervene with students with EBD, as a means of decreasing the probability of their dropping out of high school. This is crucial given all of the personal and societal consequences that dropout entails (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

Problems with the EBD Label/Designation

There have been several critiques regarding the use of EBD as a categorical designation in schools. These critiques have targeted definitional variability, designation rates, and problems concerning servicing the needs of these students.

Definitional variability. As is evident by the number of variations in the 'D' in EBD, the construct is not clearly defined (Landrum, 2000). Contrary to mental health diagnoses that

are comprehensibly described by diagnostic manuals EBD is generally understood as a designation that students receive when they are struggling academically, emotionally, and behaviourally without a diagnosable intellectual disability (Cullinan, 2004).

In the United States, each state is responsible for interpreting who meets the EBD criteria (Olympia et al., 2004), because the criteria set by the federal legislature IDEA are very vague. This lack of clarity over the type of emotional responses and behaviour patterns that qualify for school services is a significant issue with EBD because there is no consistent profile that defines students with EBD (Landrum, 2000). This demonstrates that the category of EBD encompasses a very broad array of student profiles, and at the same time may not include students with EBD who are still functioning well in the classroom.

Classification system. There are two perspectives that explain how a student can be classified with an EBD label in the school system (Cullinan, 2004). The first posits that everyone experiences problems with thought patterns, emotions, and behaviour to some extent in their school journey, but students with EBD have an amplified experience. More specifically, this typical experience of minor emotional or behaviour problems in relation to events or stressors is said to be different for students with EBD only in that they experience these problems with a greater frequency, intensity, and duration (Cullinan, 2004). The second perspective follows a medical model, which views problem behaviour as a dichotomous categorization of either non-existent or existent and differing widely from the norm. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013) is used to diagnose mental disorders that are accepted under the category of EBD in schools. These include conduct, oppositional defiant, attention-deficit/hyperactivity, anxiety, depressive, bipolar, and autism spectrum disorders, as well as suicidal and other risky behaviours (Austin & Sciarra, 2010).

Disparities in EBD designations. Even if there was a clear definition of EBD, there are significant diagnostic disparities within the field of EBD beyond those to be expected from inconsistent definitions. These can be seen when examining socioeconomic status (SES), racial/ethnic backgrounds, and gender in the EBD literature.

SES. Living in disadvantaged contexts is associated with a higher prevalence of being designated with EBD (Banks et al., 2012; Flink et al., 2012). This stems from the relative lack of social capital that those living in disadvantage are more likely to have, and the interactions between the individual and the environment. Children living in disadvantaged contexts are not learning necessary academic, social, and behavioural skills and this can manifest as emotional and behavioural problems at school (Fox, Dunlap, & Powell, 2002). These disparities are not surprising given that there are also social inequities in mental health diagnoses (Gudino, Lau, Yeh, McCabe, & Hough, 2009; Miech et al., 2008; Wan, 2008).

Racial/ethnic backgrounds. There are also racial/ethnic disparities EBD designations (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Banks et al., 2012; Cluett et al., 1998; Landrum, 2000) that remain even after controlling for severity of the emotional responses and behavioural patterns (Simpson, Cohen, Bloom, & Blumberg, 2009). Because racial/ethnic minority groups are disproportionally represented in lower-income groups, it is not surprising that there is a greater proportion of racial and ethnic minorities who are given the EBD designation. However, racial disparities remain after controlling for SES (Flink et al., 2012; Miech et al., 2008; Snowden & Yamada, 2005). These disparities suggest that cultural and sociopolitical factors in the macrosystem influence the dynamic between the student and school in the designation process.

Gender. Research studies have also indicated that there is a higher prevalence of boys with EBD than girls (Banks et al., 2012; Cluett et al., 1998). This may be because boys tend to

display more externalizing behaviours than girls and these behaviours are more likely than internalizing behaviours to cause problems in schools, and result in referrals for services.

All of these inequities indicate that there is a problem in the EBD classification itself in that there is over-representation of boys, racial and ethnic minorities, and students with lower SES. Furthermore, EBD designations are not consistent across schools, so there is a lack of objective validity in the rates of designation (Banks et al., 2012). Given that designations can be associated with stigma and have a clear impact on students' lives, the criteria and methods of classification need to be clear as do the factors that influence the designation of this label.

Lack of proper services. According to experts, services should emphasize "developing a positive social/emotional climate to ensure that learning is conducive to these children with difficult behaviour" (Banks et al., 2012, p. 231). While it makes intuitive sense that emotional and behavioural support services would be provided simply because these components are featured in the name, this is unfortunately not always the case. One significant issue regarding students with EBD is that they are largely under-identified in comparison to national estimates of those who could benefit from services (Quinn & Poirier, 2004), and the available services focus on academic needs while neglecting behavioural or emotional ones (Merrell & Walker, 2004).

Given these factors, academic support should not be the primary focus of services provided to students with EBD. According to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, socioemotional needs must be met before higher-order ones such as learning. Consequently, if students do not have these foundational needs met, they will not have appropriate effort and focus on learning. However, the relationship between learning and emotional and behavioural outcomes is reciprocal (McIntosh et al., 2008), which suggests that addressing the emotional and behavioural needs of students with EBD first may have a positive impact on learning. This shift in perspective can only occur by applying changes and resources across the different levels in the

ecosystem, including supporting interactions among parents, teachers, and students, and supplemental policies.

In response to the problem of under-servicing, Merrell and Walker (2004) recommended three levels of support—universal services for all, selected support to those displaying early emotional and behavioural struggles, and targeted support for students who are identified as having more extreme emotional responses and behavioural patterns. This model of service provision recognizes the needs of students with EBD, and employs a preventative model of providing services to students.

Relationship between EBD/Mental Health and Education

Reciprocity between educational and mental health outcomes. The argument to emphasize students' socioemotional and behavioural needs, and not solely academic needs, is intended to support adolescents' development, well-being, and learning while in school. The research does suggest that students with poor well-being may underperform academically due to increased absenteeism and lack of engagement (Joe et al., 2009), poor grades or achievement (de Bruyn, 2007; Flisher et al., 1997), poor cognitive functioning (King et al., 2005), or high rates of drop-out (Lean & Colucci, 2010). In fact, study of EBD in children revealed that learning was the domain of functioning most negatively impacted (Simpson et al., 2009). Again, though counter-intuitive, the supports that are being provided for these students should not be primarily academic. Instead, students with EBD may struggle with learning because they have more urgent emotional and behavioural needs that must be met before they can focus on academics, as Maslow (1954) suggests.

As much as mental health impacts learning and education, education impacts mental health. For example, school engagement is related to healthy living and health-seeking behaviours (Ross & Wu, 1995) and general mental well-being (Oeseburg, Jansen, Groothoff,

Dijkstra, & Reijneveld, 2010). Individuals who reported negative school experiences reported a greater number of vulnerabilities later in life, including poor health and feelings of worry and depression (Andersson & Strander, 2004). This suggests that schools have a significant impact on adolescents' mental health, and that the relationship between EBD and educational outcomes must be viewed as reciprocal and addressed as such.

Educational gradient of health. There is strong evidence to support the reciprocal relationship between educational success and positive health outcomes (Acrey, Johnstone, & Milligan, 2005; Braverman, 1989; Murray, Low, Hollis, Cross, & Davis, 2007; Ross & Wu, 1995; Wolford Symons, Cinelli, James, & Groff, 1997; Woolf, Johnson, Phillips, & Philipsen, 2007); higher levels of educational attainment are associated with better physical health outcomes (Ross & Wu, 1995). Though less documented, this same relationship exists between education and health and well-being. The reality is that the amount of time that young people spend in educational environments can be a potent opportunity to impact long-term health and improve outcomes of young people with mental health issues. Indeed, education is a powerful social determinant of health (Metzler, 2007), and the reform of educational practices and policies based on the voices of students could have a significant impact on improving their well-being while in school and later in life (Andersson & Strander, 2004; Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Bulotsky, 2003; Kampsen, 2010; Knis-Matthews, Bokara, DeMeo, Lepore, & Mavus, 2007).

Summary. A sole focus on academic outcomes, to the exclusion of social, emotional, and behavioural ones will likely not support a holistic notion of adolescent development. It is significant that there is such a strong association between student disengagement and dropout among students with EBD because there are many social, economic, and health consequences later in life, such as reduced social participation, lower economic returns, and higher health care costs (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). The reciprocal relationship between well-

being and education, which could promote better academic outcomes and mental health among students with EBD, must be considered.

School Programs for Students with EBD

Given the characteristics and needs of students with EBD, targeted support is necessary to foster positive educational experiences. In some cases, this support is beyond the scope of the mainstream school environment, and specialized programs, such as alternate school programs, may be the best option for students with EBD. Alternate school programs exist within the school system as a means of providing students who have specific needs with adaptations and accommodations (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Mottaz, 2002). In particular, alternate programs generally provide additional support for social, emotional, and academic needs (Farkas et al., 2012). This section reviews the history and primary models of alternate schools used in Canada and the United States.

History of alternative programs. The first alternative school programs in the United States emerged in the 1960s with the goal of providing extra support to students who were struggling in mainstream school programs (Mottaz, 2002). Over the years, and as educational policy has evolved to reflect the importance of providing students and their parents with choices regarding school environments and available services, the number of these programs has increased (Mottaz, 2002). These programs currently serve students who are considered to be "at risk" of failing, being suspended, or being expelled (Lehr et al., 2009).

Models of alternative education programs. There are many different models for working with students with EBD in specialized school programs (Lehr et al., 2009). The most common models include school-wide programs, interim programs, and alternate programs.

School-wide programs. In this model, students with EBD participate in the school-wide program and receive differentiated levels of intervention depending on the intensity of their

emotional responses and behavioural patterns. Generally, school-wide programs employ a multi-level approach that increases the level of services in response to the students' needs (Kern, Hilt-Panahon, & Sokol, 2009).

School-wide positive behaviour support programs are implemented within the mainstream school and support behavioural functioning and decrease the frequency of behavioural problems (George, George, Kern, & Fogt, 2013; Sugai & Horner, 2002). These approaches teach emotional and behavioural regulation skills to better support students with EBD (George et al., 2013). Such programs generally involve setting goals with the aim of developing practices that will foster systemic changes (Farkas et al., 2012). This program model uses three levels of prevention in relation to the intensity of the exhibited behaviours, and is effective at decreasing negative behaviours in schools (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Farkas et al., 2012; George et al., 2013; Horner et al., 2009). Overall, a school-wide program aims to improve the socioemotional development of all students, not just those with EBD.

Interim programs. Interim programs for students with EBD are used for short periods of time when the students' behaviours are severe enough to necessitate a change of school (Peterson & Smith, 2002). These programs are typically used for between one and 45 days, and most often for disciplinary purposes while a long term solution is negotiated (Lehr et al., 2009). These services are offered based on the severity of behaviours and on their functional impact; they do not, however, include supports for emerging difficulties nor programs for prevention.

Alternate programs. There are two primary models for defining alternate programs based on the purpose, location, strategies, and focus of the program. Peterson and Smith (2002) discussed four types of alternate programs: traditional programs, separate programs that exist within a school, disciplinary programs, and special education programs. Raywid (1994) discussed three models of alternate programs: Type I (Popular Innovations), Type II (Last-

Chance Programs), and Type III (Remedial Focus). Though the models of these authors have different names, they have considerable overlap and are combined and described below; this joint model frames the literature review and constructs for this study.

Continuation programs. These are programs for students who have dropped out of high school and would like to finish their education, and are similar to traditional school programs (Peterson & Smith, 2002). The standards of behaviour are similar to if not higher than those of a mainstream school program because students attend voluntarily and are generally highly motivated to continue their education.

Dynamic within-school programs. These programs are housed within a mainstream school but run separately, and are typically designed for students who struggled with the mainstream program due to social or academic reasons (Peterson & Smith, 2002). Raywid's model of alternate programs (1994) fits with these criteria, but her model suggests that these programs are often pedagogically innovative to suit the students' needs for curricular differentiation through specialized content or instruction methods. For example, some schools employ an innovative instructional design and other schools may have specialized music or sports programs would be dynamic within-school programs.

Disciplinary programs. These programs are designed for students who have been suspended or expelled from mainstream schools for an extended duration. Participation appears voluntary and based on parental input (Peterson & Smith, 2002). However, if students are not permitted to return to their school of origin due to safety concerns, participating in such programs may become the only viable option (Raywid, 1994).

Remediation-focused programs. These educational programs can be based within an existing school, as in the separate programs within the school model, or they can be located in a separate facility. As suggested in the name, these programs are generally more structured, are

designed to meet students' specific needs (Peterson & Smith, 2002), and are focused on adaptive and flexible curricula and environments. The aim of this type of program is to develop academic, social, and emotional skills through remediation so that the student will have the option of returning to a mainstream school (Raywid, 1994).

Characteristics of alternate programs. Regardless of the diverse models of alternate programs, there are several commonalities among them. A review of effective alternate programs highlights the importance of a high teacher to student ratio, a structured classroom environment, behavioural support, a social skills component, involvement of adults in mentorship, an emphasis on positive rather than negative behaviour, and of high-quality teaching (Tobin & Sprague, 2001). The most robust of these characteristics is a high teacher to student ratio (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011).

Outcomes of alternate programs. Alternate programs are mandated to support the educational experiences of students who have specific emotional and behavioural needs. As such, these programs are designed to improve achievement, disciplinary, and socioemotional outcomes of these students.

School achievement outcomes. The main purpose of alternate programs is to support student's academic learning, the domain most negatively affected for students with EBD (Simpson et al., 2009). As such, it is important that alternate programs provide adequate and targeted support to these students in a manner that also improves the student's learning, often measured through school achievement. One study found that students had higher grades in their alternate program than in their mainstream programs (Cox, 1999). Alternate programs are also associated with a higher student attendance rates (Haughey, 2009) even after students return to a mainstream school (Cox, 1999). Alternate programs may also help students to address gaps in their learning (Vann, Schubert, & Rogers, 2001).

Disciplinary outcomes. Another area that alternate programs target is student behavior. This is often measured through the frequency of disciplinary measures that are a direct result of the student's actions. A unique alternate program for high school students with severe behavioural problems found that the frequency of behaviours that necessitated disciplinary measures decreased when students were at the alternate school (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Alternate programs may also reduce the frequency of delinquent behaviours (Vann et al., 2001).

Some researchers have asserted that alternate programs should implement explicit behavioural programs (Miller, George, & Fogt, 2005; Simonsen, Britton, & Young, 2010; Theodore, Bray, & Kehle, 2004). Specifically, a review of effective practices in alternate programs found that strictly delineated behavioural management programs were effective (Tobin & Sprague, 2001), but an additional review found that only 25 percent of programs reviewed implemented such programs (Flower et al., 2011). These behavioural management programs could take various approaches to support students' behaviour and are associated with fewer and less severe disciplinary issues (Simonsen et al., 2010), suggesting that alternate programs may benefit from using specific measures to improve students' behavioural patterns.

Socioemotional outcomes. Alternate programs are also mandated to support students' social and emotional functioning. This ensures that these needs are explicitly addressed through the program, which is important because students in alternate programs often engage in risk-taking behaviours such as drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, violent acts, and suicidal attempts (Denny, Clark, & Watson, 2003). Students who are in alternate programs may also struggle with poor coping as compared to their peers in mainstream schools (Weist, Lowie, Flaherty, & Pruitt, 2001), indicating that their socioemotional development may be different than that of their peers. A program that included mental health counselling to support this development of stress management skills found that this service was associated with better

behavioural and emotional functioning (Wisner & Norton, 2013). Additionally, one study found that students' self-esteem increased while in alternate programs, though the effect was not found at the one-year follow in the mainstream school system (Cox, 1999). This suggests that alternate programs should emphasize developing socioemotional skills by providing services to support students with their particular socioemotional needs.

Current Legislation Involving Alternate Programs

As previously mentioned, government educational policies have shaped inclusive practices, particularly the types and nature of services offered to students with special educational needs. There has also been state and provincial legislation that reflects this in their treatment of alternate programs. For example, the government of British Columbia defined alternate education programs as "focus[ing] on educational, social, and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. An alternate school program provides its support through differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students' needs" ("Alternate Education Program," n.d., para. 3). This statement highlights that the aim of these alternate programs is to provide academic, social, and emotional services that are specific to the needs of the students.

As the definition from the government of British Columbia demonstrates, students with EBD who are being educated in alternate school programs should be receiving specific services for their emotional and behavioural needs in addition to an individualized curriculum and instruction plans. In remediation-focused alternate programs, students are often at widely varying academic levels, and part of the overall rationale for these programs is to provide this differentiation (Goodman, 1999).

Successful Placements and Program Effectiveness

The concern for educational inclusion and meeting students' needs is a question of balancing the resources of the mainstream school environments with students' needs. For example, according to BC provincial legislation, schools must provide equitable access to learning in a meaningful capacity that fosters students' active participation in whichever school or program they are enrolled. In the end, successful placements may be less a matter of location than of meeting students' needs.

With the increasing number of alternate school program and the developmental importance of school transitions, there is a need to understand why and how students transition from mainstream schools to alternate programs. Precursors to being placed in an alternate program include fighting, frequent absences, academic difficulties, and engaging in risk-taking behaviour such as smoking, drinking or early sexual activity (K. E. Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012), with students transitioning to different types of alternate programs depending on their needs. For example, if students are placed in an alternate program due to fighting, they will likely be placed in a program with a disciplinary or remediation-focused model.

It is important, then, to evaluate which programs are suited for particular students, whether the programs are meeting the emotional and behavioural needs of their students, and whether they are doing so in the least restrictive environment possible.

Summary

This literature review has demonstrated that adolescence is a time of physical, social, and emotional change that is influenced by the interactions between individual and environmental systems. Milestone events, such as the transition to a new educational setting, can cause turmoil and confusion as students negotiate a new environment with new courses, teachers, friends, peer groups, and social norms. This time of transition is important because students who struggle

with this change have a higher likelihood of dropping out (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Curran Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008).

For students with EBD, this transition is especially difficult because they already struggle with their emotional responses and behavioural patterns, and they may not have developed adequate social skills to navigate the transition (Cook et al., 2008). They may also struggle with diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health problems (Hackett et al., 2010). In either case, they have particular needs that must be reflected in the practices and curricula of the school environment, and students' emotional responses and behavioural patterns should be considered in a holistic manner to better support positive development. Consequently, determining how alternate programs are and are not meeting students' needs is important for their current and future well-being and development.

Significance of the Proposed Study

The connection between education and well-being is important for understanding the impact of educational practices and policies on schools' abilities to meet their mandated objectives (Fantuzzo et al., 2003; Knis-Matthews et al., 2007). Yet to achieve this, the perspectives of students need to be included. However, students may not be consulted in any component of the process or asked about how they can be supported in school. Most students with EBD are simply removed from a mainstream school setting to a different educational setting when it becomes available.

To understand the educational experiences of adolescents with specialized academic, emotional, and behavioural needs, it is essential to ask them directly without guiding their responses based on a priori hypotheses and assumptions. In deductive research, salient factors are determined by researchers and then explored and assessed for significance. This does not necessarily capture what is meaningful to the students, and, therefore, more inductive research

that gives emphasis to student perspectives is needed. Indeed, while it is important to create space for students' voices (G. Clarke et al., 2011; De La Ossa, 2005), it is rarely done in practice.

This study addresses this need in the literature regarding students with EBD and their educational experiences. More specifically, this qualitative study allowed students to freely express their perspectives of their schooling, including removal from traditional school settings and their move into a remedial-focused alternate program. By highlighting the experiences of these students in the co-construction of knowledge and education, reform may have positive implications for their own well-being and for the promotion of social change (Lind, 2007).

This study took a phenomenological approach to exploring the educational experiences of students in a particular alternate program. The aim of this study's target program is to serve students whose academic, social, emotional, or behavioural needs have not been met in traditional settings; it is a remediation-focused separate program within the mainstream school setting. The program and curriculum are highly structured, but involve an adaptable component for individualization within a remediation framework; the overarching goal is for students to develop the requisite skills to return to mainstream school programs. These program characteristics highlight the commitment to educating students in the least restrictive environments, and underscore the intent to transition students back to a mainstream school program once they received adequate support and training to improve their academics and social, emotional, and behavioural skills.

Research Questions

An exploratory qualitative inquiry is best served by asking a few broad open-ended questions to allow participants to answer in ways that are meaningful to them (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), and so one central research question guided this study:

- How do students in alternate programs describe their school journey, including past and present educational experiences?

Secondary research questions are guided by the literature, though because the nature of such research is open and inductive, they may or may not be answered at the interpretative stage (Smith & Eatough, 2006). Still, given that this study focused on the educational paths of students with EBD, two secondary research questions are posed:

- What are the prominent themes or patterns of meaning about schools and schooling for these participants?
- What are the prominent themes or patterns of meaning about emotional/ behavioural development and well-being for these participants?

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview of Methods and Research Design

This chapter provides an overview of the philosophy, methodology, and methods framing this study. A general description of qualitative inquiry and a discussion of phenomenology, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis, are followed by a description of the data collection methods and the research team to provide context for the study. Next, the ethical considerations, participants, settings, and procedures for collection, analysis, and coding of data are summarized. Finally, a discussion of how credibility, trustworthiness, and academic rigour establishes validity in qualitative research concludes this chapter.

Choosing a Qualitative Approach

This study addressed both positive and negative factors impacting schooling and well-being for students in alternate school programs as they relate to student experiences and educational outcomes. The exploratory and inductive nature of this approach warranted the use of qualitative inquiry as the appropriate methodological choice (Creswell, 2013). Within the qualitative perspective, phenomenology was selected as the most complementary approach for the research questions that focus on students' involvement in schools and relation to schooling.

Phenomenology: Philosophy, Methodology, and Method

From its nascence, phenomenology was comprised of a philosophy, methodology, and method (Byrne, 2001) that examined lived human experiences. Specifically, it delved into inquiry and methodology to capture the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon that is based on the perspectives of those living through the phenomenon and those researching it (Moustakas, 1994). Through interpretation of participants' constructed meanings, the researcher explored patterns and relationships of meaning while setting aside her own experiences to understand those of the participants (Creswell, 2014). To truly comprehend the

phenomenological methodology utilized in this study, the roots of phenomenology as a complex tradition of inquiry must first be understood.

Philosophy. Lewis and Staehler (2010) offered a concise yet thorough introduction to the philosophy of phenomenology. They focused on the works and ideas of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1938), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), each of whom contributed to phenomenology as a tradition of inquiry.

Husserl was a mathematician who posited that the essence of experiences provided the structure for human consciousness; he sought an objective and logical method to understand consciousness that involved setting aside one's own experiences while describing a phenomena. He encouraged a more reflexive view of the world whereby viewed objects are influenced by perception and the act of memory and imagination, that required observers to put aside their beliefs (Husserl & Welton, 1999). He argued that the "individual essence" of an object escaped adequate human comprehension. This notion of focusing on essential characteristics of an experience is the foundation for phenomenological psychology, including interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Heidegger (1962) furthered phenomenological philosophy by asserting that personal meanings were co-developed through gender, culture, history, and related life experiences that were subjective yet still reflective of shared practices and meanings. He argued that the activities and relationships that individuals engage in were made meaningful through the intersecting and interpersonal nature of being in the world. From this perspective, it is not possible for observers to completely set aside their experiences; researchers need to acknowledge their assumptions and biases and the contexts in which their views and their participants' experiences are shaped.

Merleau-Ponty stressed an important limitation of phenomenology in that a total reduction of a world or experience is not possible (Merleau-Ponty &Landes, 2012. He

concluded that psychological factors, like memories and emotions, have physical and psychological natures that contribute to the essence of an experience, with the body as the vehicle that connects individuals to the world. He agreed with Husserl's view that experiential knowledge is second-order because it is based on an individual's descriptions, but added that the physical body shapes how individuals know the world and is a central element in experience (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2012).

Finally, Sartre connected phenomenology to empirical psychology, arguing that facts and true human consciousness cannot be captured but that the sciences can be used to describe and investigate actualized consciousness—one of multiple particular forms of consciousness. For Sartre, phenomenology organized facts from empirical science around a center by examining what they signify, and then reduced these facts to a finite whole. He argued that the process of attributing meaning to experience is action-oriented and self-conscious, with the absence of things being equally important to the presence of things used to define people's views of themselves and the world. However, these perceptions can only be understood within a relational context.

This overview of illustrates the continued evolution and the importance of thoughtful reflection in phenomenology. It also shows the common features among various perspectives, namely the importance of honouring participants' understandings of their experiences and the role of the researcher as observer and interpreter of those subjective experiences. These commonalities carry through to the contemporary application of phenomenological philosophy and methodology to IPA, and are discussed further below.

Methodology. In this study, the views of the participants are highlighted without preconceived notions of how they experience the phenomenon or what those experiences mean to them; instead understanding comes from an impartial, co-operative relationship between the

participants and the researcher (Haggman-Laitila, 1999). In this study, the students' voices have primary importance and meaning in the understanding of schools and their impact on students. As the most significant stakeholders in their learning and well-being, students' constructed meanings and experiences, both positive and negative, are vital sources of information to communicate to educators, administrators, and policy makers.

Phenomenology, then, is descriptive rather than experimental and relies on the researcher to verify understanding and encourage descriptions of the participant's own experiences (Knaack, 1984). As such, it is more of an attitude and investigative stance with a specific goal, rather than a prescribed set of instructions (Keen, 1982). Researchers must be invested in studying the phenomenon, be open to the participants' perspective and allow them to lead the conversation, and be prepared to change their views (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Haggman-Laitila, 1999; Moustakas, 1994)

Methods. While it is possible to employ phenomenology both as an approach and method of analysis, IPA was chosen as the specific method of analysis for this study. IPA emphasizes the process of interpreting participants' experiences in a manner that narrows the gap between the researcher's outside perspective and the participant's lived experiences (Smith & Osborne, 2003).

Interpretive phenomenological analysis

IPA originated in health psychology, but is widely used in other disciplines that focus on how people participate in and experience the world (Smith, 1996a; Smith, Harrè, & Van Langenhove, 1995). Briefly, as a phenomenological approach IPA is concerned with exploring the lived experiences of individuals, but it goes more deeply into those experiences by trying to discern their significance as they occur in a hierarchy of the daily flow of life (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In doing this, IPA attempts to understanding idiographic subjective experiences

and their underlying social cognitions (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Although the details of any experience may be disjointed across time, they will still have a common meaning and significance to the individual. This fluency of meaning fosters reflection, thinking, and feeling as the individual processes the composite of the moments or details that they have unified to be his or her experience (Smith, 1996b; Smith & Osborne, 2003).

Philosophical assumptions. As suggested by its name, IPA is an interpretive enterprise that is based on theories of interpretation, or *hermeneutics*. According to Willig (2012), hermeneutics in IPA refers to the researcher's interpretations of the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Researchers must do this to reveal similarities and differences for each individual, relying on what a participant discloses about the experience (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic theorists, such as Heidegger, stressed the importance of detailed, systematic, and holistic analysis of language and its personal meaning—an iterative process that is influenced by the researcher's preconceptions, prior experience, and assumptions that can only ever be partially bracketed (Heidegger, 1962). Further, the interpretation of language provides an understanding of the text, not the participant, and is heavily swayed by the time at which the analysis is made (Smith et al., 2009).

Description and characteristics. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA involves moving from descriptions of a particular group in a particular context to a more interpretative understanding of their shared experiences; it is an iterative and inductive analysis focused on personal meaning-making . Texts are read closely for descriptive content, linguistic patterns and cues, and more interrogative concepts underlying the participants' accounts of their experiences.

Given the level of detailed analysis and interpretation required, IPA studies recruit a few participants to highlight convergence and divergence within the sample (Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 1995). To gain an understanding of the particular—phenomenon, perspective,

context—small, purposely selected, carefully situated, and homogenous samples are used (Chapman & Smith, 2002). The inductive analytic process yields a revised supposition of the phenomenon that encompasses most of the data for most of the individuals in the sample. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that "participants' and researchers' concerns [are] embodied, cognitive, affective and existential…and so a holistic phenomenological analysis is particularly apposite" (p.35). Researchers must be reflexive and must strive to be both empathic and questioning of participants' experiences through close examination of their accounts.

Ethical tensions. The major tensions in phenomenology, and also with IPA as a method of analysis, stem from the second-order knowledge of first-person experiences, referred to as *double hermeneutics* (Smith et al., 2009). More specifically, the researcher interprets the participants' descriptions of their experiences, and then summarizes their interpretations as findings. The findings are then interpreted again by those reading the results. Ultimately, participants' experiences are influenced, understood, and perceived through many levels of interpretation by the time they are included in a final written product. Indeed, if the individual's perspectives of experiences are influenced by sociocultural and interpersonal contexts, so are the ensuing interpretations of the researcher.

Because of this complex and hierarchical hermeneutic structure, researcher reflexivity is essential to IPA. Specifically, Willig (2012) stressed the importance the researcher's power on the interpretation and synthesis of the results because understanding this influence increases the ability to appropriately address it through explication of biases and assumptions. She also described the ethical issues that ensue when interpretations hurt or disadvantage any group of people, and stated that being cognizant of the social-political environment of the group fosters responsible interpretation. Still, phenomenology and IPA offer a framework for delving into the rich and complex principles that constitute human experience.

Rationale for utilizing IPA. To reiterate, IPA allows the researcher to analyze an experience common to the participants through an in-depth interpretation of the moments and details that comprise the essence of their experience. This method of analysis is particularly useful when working from a biopsychosocial framework (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), as is the case here. This study aimed to explore the experience of schooling, and IPA facilitated an in-depth analysis of the essence of students' experiences of being educated in various programs. Additionally, IPA supported the research questions that focused on participants' past and present lived experiences of schooling. To this end, Smith et al. (2009) offered guidelines for conducting and analyzing IPA studies which were followed for this study.

Methods of Data Collection

In qualitative research, triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods, data, or investigators in the research process (Duffy, 1987), attends to potential biases and strengthens the arguments. This limits the liabilities of using a single method and, thus, increases generalizability (Rohner, 1977). As such, three data collection methods were selected for this study based on their suitability within a phenomenological perspective, the needs of the targeted participants, and the necessity for managing researcher bias. These methods included visual data/mapping, semi-structured interviews, and field notes and participant observations.

Visual data/mapping. As Prosser (2011) stated, visual data are used in qualitative studies to gather a broad range of participant responses about a particular phenomenon. Visual methods can facilitate the discussion of sensitive topics, and simplify communication for participants who may more easily articulate their thoughts and feelings. This method recognized struggles the participants might have had with writing and speaking tasks, and as such was a creative approach for generating rich data even while preparing students to engage in the

interview. To facilitate meaningful exchanges in line with inclusive educational practices, participants were given multiple means of expressing themselves (Hall et al., 2012).

Semi-structured interviews. Interviews lend themselves well to qualitative studies and are often employed in phenomenology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through interviews, the researcher learns about an individual's personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, thereby highlighting places never visited and settings never occupied (Weiss, 1994), and develops a fuller caption of the thoughts and feelings associated with events. Participants' accounts are summarized, interpreted, and integrated (a) to develop detailed descriptions, (b) to integrate multiple perspectives, (c) to describe a process, (d) to develop a holistic description, (e) to learn how events are interpreted, (f) to bridge intersubjectivities and identify with a respondent, and (g) to identify variables and frame hypotheses for research (Weiss, 1994).

In conducting interviews, researchers must build rapport with interviewees so that they will feel a sense of trust that fosters a meaningful dialogue; participants' responses might be limited and lacking in significance without this trust (Polkinghorne, 2005). To help with this, researchers should begin with open-ended questions that slowly increase in specificity and sensitivity (Kvale, 2007), and be flexible, while using probes and clarifying questions as necessary. In adopting these techniques, the primary researcher allowed participants to lead the interview and focus on their most meaningful experiences (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), while both parties asked questions and offered comments (Haggman-Laitila, 1999). Probes, clarifying questions, paraphrasing, and summary statements were used throughout the interviews for immediate confirmation and explication of initial interpretations (Kvale, 2008)—this is crucial to the interpretative process of IPA and the management of researcher bias (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011).

Field notes and participant observations. In keeping with the guidelines for interviewing and building rapport with participants, the principal researcher made several site visits outside of recruitment and data collection times. This helped her understand the environment of the participants' current school experiences, which is important for IPA because it focuses on a specific group in a particular context. During these site visits, recruitment presentations, informal meetings, and data collection sessions, the principal researcher kept field notes of general and participant observations. This included descriptions of the school and alternate program location, the physical space and classroom set up, the policies and procedures as seen upon entering each classroom. This data provided a physical context for participants' present lived school experiences, and a better understanding of the social context and interactions among potential participants and their teachers and peers.

The principal investigator also kept notes during informal meetings and all sessions with the participants, and took additional summary session field notes at the end of each day. Pertinent non-verbal communication and the tone of data collection sessions were noted and later used to support the descriptive, conceptual, and linguistic analyses of participants' accounts, as well as to identify researcher assumptions and biases (Fade, 2004). Again, field notes and participant observations are synonymous with the nature of IPA, and allow for reflection and consideration of the impact of the social, environmental, and political factors that influence participants' experiences and the way they communicate those experiences.

Research Team

In qualitative research, the investigators are crucial tools in the research process, particularly in IPA when the interpretations of the primary researchers are the foundation for the conclusions and arguments brought forth (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2003). As such, researchers must provide a description of the people who had a role in the design, analyses, and

interpretations of the study, including the subjective stance of the primary researcher that influenced the research process and outcomes.

Primary researcher. Van Manen (1990) asserted that phenomenological research is not undertaken for the sake of conducting research, but because of the "deep interest that makes one an educator in the first place" (p. 2). The primary researcher was first and foremost an educator—reflected in her employment history, field of study, and research interests—whose professional focus is to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and responsibility for improving learning experiences and student outcomes. These experiences and perspectives established the rationale for the study and the necessity for reflexivity throughout the research process.

Subjective stance. The primary researcher was not only a trained and experienced special education teacher but also a certified mental health counsellor; she was recognized by the target school district as being qualified in several specialized educational positions, including as an alternate teacher and school counsellor. She had worked in both elementary schools and secondary schools, but most of her experience was with students in grades 8-10 in various special education programs. The primary researcher's experience in both education and mental health provided the necessary skills to conduct in-depth interviews that were open, responsive, and sensitive to the students involved in the study, but also influenced her perspectives.

The primary researcher's preliminary assumption was that adolescence is a crucial developmental period, with important psychosocial factors that gain importance and coincide with pubertal changes and the transition to high school. Furthermore, she believed that students who were struggling in early adolescence may have specific needs that extend beyond academic concerns, and should be addressed in schools. However, as a teacher she experienced pressure to focus on academic outcomes, and found few resources and supports to adequately meet non-academic needs, particularly in traditional school programs. The primary researcher's belief that

educational placement decisions were often based on perceptions by teachers, administrators, psychologists, counsellors with little inclusion of the student in the process was most salient to her subjective stance. She also believed that placements seemed to result from a poor student-environemnt fit, and that efforts to alleviate these tensions were focused on intervening with the student rather than adapting the environment. Furthermore, she experienced that academic remediation was the most frequent interventions even when the students' most significant areas of need were social, emotional, and behavioural.

The principal investigator noted that the three sites varied in structure, requirements, and scheduling. Indeed, teacher experience and training varied widely as did the needs of students in those programs; student difficulties in one group that the primary researcher taught included intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, severe mental health illnesses, fetal alcohol syndrome, polysubstance abuse, disordered eating, criminality, AD/HD, significant behavioural issues, grief and loss, and vulnerabilities resulting from family instability, poverty, abuse, and sexual exploitation. The primary researcher's experiences and her belief that educational policies and practices were focused on academics and determined outside of the environments in which they were to be implemented undoubtedly influenced these perceptions. The contexts of each participant must be considered in understanding their experiences, as must the presumptions of the researcher in her interpretations—acknowledging the dual roles of teachers who conduct educational research.

Managing assumptions and biases. The principal researcher recognized that her personal experience as a teacher and mental health counsellor may have influenced the participants and analysis. As such, the researcher established methods of trustworthiness to minimize bias generated by her experience.

The primary researcher's past position as a teacher contributed to a power imbalance between herself and the participants. Efforts to minimize impact of these factors included building rapport, establishing trust, minimizing participant risk and addressing safety concerns, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding coercive behaviours (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005). Her assumptions were bracketed through the use of open-ended questions that did not specifically ask about academic interventions, mental health, placement procedures, or EBD; participants were also encouraged to describe both positive and negative experiences.

The principal researcher kept a reflexive journal to provide an audit trail of interactions throughout the data collection and analysis process (Clancy, 2013), and, more importantly, to encourage awareness of assumptions, biases, and ethical considerations. To this end, the principal investigator recorded her experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the research process, creating transparency when analyzing the data and writing the final report. This acknowledged the influence of the researcher on the process and potential biases that impacted analysis and interpretation of the data which is key to conducting IPA (Willig, 2012).

To assimilate the roles of educator and researcher in a phenomenological framework, Van Manen (1990) suggested six research activities that are paramount for conducting thoughtful phenomenological research in education:

- focusing on a lived experience that "interests us and commits us to the world" (p.30);
- investigating that experience as it is lived rather than conceptualized;
- reflecting on the critical themes that characterize the experience;
- honing writing and rewriting skills to describe the experience;
- maintaining a strong commitment and orientation to pedagogy; and
- considering the parts and whole of the experience to balance the research context.

These activities founded this study and guided the research process from its design, through to data collection and analysis, and, finally, to the communication of the results.

Research team members. Professors and doctoral students were also involved in the research process. Three professors who were well-established in the fields of educational and counselling psychology offered their expertise in ethical research, developmental perspectives, qualitative methods, and working with young people from diverse backgrounds, which contributed to the validation of interpretations. One professor was the principal researcher's supervisor who also acted as the judge when verifying data points that supported the themes; another professor acted as the adjudicator when discrepancies existed between the principal researcher and the judge. The final professor offered guidance to address credibility and trustworthiness through a sound design and methodology. Two doctoral students in psychology with experience in qualitative theory and research were consulted not only to verify interpretations, but also to promote further reflection by the principal investigator through peer debriefing. This triangulation of investigators in coding and analysis aided reliability and reduced biases in the research process (Duffy, 1987).

Ethics

This section includes discussions of balancing the needs of stakeholders, outside agencies, and review boards without undermining the perspectives and voices of the participants in terms of defining constructs and establishing validity. The potential risks and harms and the mechanisms to reduce these risks for participants are also discussed.

General considerations. Approvals from McGill University and the ethics department of the target school district were obtained prior to beginning the study. Written informed consent/assent was acquired by signature on a single consent/assent form (See Appendix D). The letters were written in English, at less than a 9th grade reading level. Forms employed the

proper terminology (consent/assent) to reflect the need for student and parent/ guardian approval for participation. Verbal assent was also obtained at the start of each of the data collection sessions.

Informed consent. As part of informed consent, participants were reminded that they were able to withdraw at any time, to choose not to answer certain questions, and to speak only about topics and experiences with which they were comfortable. Participants were also provided with the researcher's contact information so they could discuss concerns at any time during the study. Each participant was provided with a list of free local youth services in case they experienced discomfort and wanted professional support.

Concluding the study. Creswell (2013) asserted that care must be taken to slowly and carefully withdraw from the research process to avoid triggering feelings of abandonment in the participants. All participants were given the opportunity to summarize their experiences and were thanked and compensated for their time after each session. They were also told that the principal investigator could still be reached should they have any questions or concerns after the conclusion of the final session. The principal investigator also visited each of the target alternate school programs one month after data collection had ended to answer questions and remind participants that the study concluded at the end of the school year.

Harms and risks. There were no known or foreseeable physical, social, legal, economic, or political harms and risks identified for this study. Audio recordings were only heard by the principal investigator and the external professional transcriber, which was approved by relevant ethical boards and made known to all participants and parents/guardians prior to obtaining assent/consent. Only the principal investigator viewed school journey maps as a whole; the digital images were viewed by members of the research team after identifying information was removed. Identifying information, such as names of people and places, was also removed from

transcripts, oral and written communication, and reports before being shared; participants selected pseudonyms to be used in all documents and exchanges. Only the principal investigator had access to the text and visual data in their entirety or to the participants' personal information.

Several steps were taken to ensure that students were stable enough to participate in the study, experienced minimal distress, and had adequate access to supports. First, the target program was selected because it required their students to be stable and participate in group settings, included integration into the community, and offered screening and assessment prior to placement. Second, students were asked open-ended questions, and were not asked about mental illness or past/present behaviours. Participants controlled what was discussed, and were reminded that they could choose not to answer any question or to stop at any time without penalty. Third, only students who had been in a program for at least 30 days were allowed to participate. This gave students time to adjust to potentially a new environment, and to complete evaluations of their needs to determine whether the placement was suitable for them. Finally, each participant was given a list of free age-appropriate resources and support services in their area, which were also provided to each staff member involved and posted in class.

Benefits to participating. The primary researcher hoped that participating in the study would be a positive experience. Several participants noted that the experience was enjoyable because it was creative, and gave them an opportunity to have someone listen actively to their point of view about school. Participants were also compensated for their time, in the form of $10 gift cards for Tim Horton's, Subway, or Starbucks; each participant received a $10 card for the mapping activity and another for the interview as an acknowledgment of their time and effort.

Participants

Smith et al. (2009) recommended three to six participants so as to not overlook the nuances that influence the nature of the participants' experiences. Following these standards, a

purposeful sample of six students in grade 8, ages 13-14, who were enrolled full-time in the target alternate program was recruited for this study.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria. This study attempted to include a representative sample of students enrolled for at least 30 days in the target alternate program. Initially, students who attended the recruitment presentation (See Appendix C) were invited to participate, but this invitation was then extended to all students in each program, including those who were absent for the presentation. For this study, only students who were in grade 8 were included.

Gender. Disruptive emotional or behavioural difficulties are often recognized more so in boys (APA, 2013), so the researcher attempted to achieve a representative sample in terms of gender. For example, approximately two-thirds of the students enrolled in the target alternate school programs were male, and so the researcher aimed to have this proportion reflected in the study. The recruitment presentations were given at all schools, and after the first four participants were recruited, the researcher attempted targeted males to achieve a gender-representative sample. However, all students interested in participating in the study were included to ensure that they did not feel excluded. As a result, ten students, six male and four female, completed the data collection activities, and the six grade 8 students were included in this study (two male and four female).

Grade level. All of the programs served students in grades 8 to10, but a majority of the students in these programs were in grade 8. Similar to the process in obtaining a representative sample based on gender, the principal investigator focused her recruitment and was successful in obtaining a representative sample based on grade; however, only eighth grade students were included in this study.

Race/ethnicity. Race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status were not used as selection criteria to target a diverse group of students who have similar educational standing. However,

even though the target school district was very diverse in terms of the race/ethnicity of its student population, the majority of the students in the target alternate program were Caucasian.

Geographic considerations. Because students do not necessarily attend the program closest to where they live, sampling parity across the targeted programs was not essential to gain a geographically representative sample. The researcher attempted to include students from as many of the targeted alternate programs as possible.

Diagnoses. Students were not included or excluded based on special education category or mental health diagnosis. This follows the position that educational, emotional, and behavioural difficulties should be understood and described as the student sees them, and not as categorized by school, clinical, or community professionals.

Consent and assent. Students and their parents gave permission to participate in the two activities, to have the data collection session be audio recorded, and to allow an external service to do the transcriptions. Both text and visual sources of data were needed to support the themes and patterns of meaning generated by the researcher; the rigour of those interpretations would not have been adequately validated without verification from the rich text offered from audio recordings. Therefore, if a participant had objected to either the audio recording or external transcription procedures he or she would have been excluded from the study, but no such objection occurred. The verbatim transcriptions by an external service that included non-verbal expressions and observations, verified by the primary researcher, ensured the accuracy of the transcriptions (Merrick, 1999).

Settings

The settings of the study, in particular the target school district and the alternate programs, are described below to provide context.

Target school district. The target school district was a large Canadian school district, which has a diverse population across both ethnicity and socioeconomic background. The primary researcher selected this district because of its size, her professional connections, and because of its realtively large number of alternate programs.

The target school district had a population of close to 70,000 in 2012. The district is divided into a several areas with major socioeconomic differences, and 50% of its students came from a home in which English was not the first language. More than 4,300 students (6.5%) came from families using income assistance or special care for their children, ranging from 0% to 30%, depending on the school. As of 2012, the district enrolled 6,821 students with special educational needs.

Target alternate program. All participants were full-time eighth grade students enrolled in a remediation-focused alternate program in the target school district. The alternate programs were located on traditional secondary schools sites, and provided academic support to students who had not been successful in regular classroom settings. Students were referred through school-based teams based on their emotional, behavioural, and academic struggles.

Student needs included challenges with meeting the academic, emotional, and behavioral demands of traditional classes which, in turn, impacted focus, learning, relationships, and well-being; these deficits were identified by teachers and administrators, and supported by counselling and other support staff. The aim of the target alternate program was to address students' needs through systematically designed and monitored curriculum and educational services that would not be offered in a typical educational program. The intended duration of the program ranged from one semester to three years. However, all students must leave the program at 16 or upon completion of grade 10, after which they were expected to transition to mianstream educational

programs. As of the beginning of the 2013/14 school year, there were five such programs in the target school district servicing approximately 60 students.

The programs offered an adapted curriculum, reduced or flexible schedules, and self-paced coursework, while also allowing students to participate in some regular classes. Each program was staffed by one teacher, some with support from a youth care worker, who was responsible for teaching all subjects and grade levels; most programs offered all core academic courses for grades 8 to 10. Students had access to the school staff and to services at the traditional secondary school (eg. administrators, counsellors, career and employment guidance, and extra-curricular activities). Occasionally, students were removed entirely from regular classes and offered flexible, individual or small-group instruction in the alternate program.

All data collection occurred on the site in an available office space to minimize disruptions and distractions, and to ease transportation for students who might have already been struggling with attending appointments and daily functioning. Students were told that if they preferred an alternate location, accommodations would be made to meet elsewhere, but no student requested this. The researcher worked with teachers to book meeting locations that ensured that were fairly private and ammenable to audio recording.

Sample. Ten students agreed to participate, six of whom were retained for this study. Participants included two boys and four girls, aged 13 and 14, who were enrolled in grade 8; two students were repeating the grade. Two students were living with two parent-figures, whereas three were living with only their mother, and one was living with grandparents. All participants described living in comfortable homes in secure neighbourhoods, though two also mentioned inadequate resources for food and clothing. Two students self-identified as minorities, two as Caucasian, and two did not include this in their descriptions, though parent reports to the school described them as Caucasian. Participants' profiles are further described in the next chapter.

Data Collection

This section reviews the data collection procedures, including an overview of the recruitment process and presentation and data collection sessions.

Recruitment. Administrators from each of the 5 schools were contacted by email (See Appendix A) to inform them about the study. Of the 5 administrators contacted, one indicated that the target program was undergoing significant changes and did not want to participate at that time, and a second contacted the teacher and reported that he did not wish to participate. The remaining three administrators granted permission to contact teachers.

Teachers were then contacted by email (See Appendix B) and asked for permission to make a short, recruitment presentation (See Appendix C). In one program, the teacher allowed the principal investigator to come to the class for a full day, and making presentations to each group. This was done on two occasions, and consent forms (See Appendix D) were left for the two absent students. In another program, the teacher arranged to have all of the students attend the first period for the presentation; a consent form was left for one student. In the final program, the teacher selected a period to present the study on four separate occasions, targeting the most attended period; only the seven students in attendance received the forms.

The recruitment presentations took place in the classroom of each program. One was located in a portable classroom, whereas the other two were located in small rooms in the larger school. Teachers and youth care workers were present but not involved in the presentation; students were told that the choice to participate was theirs, and staff were asked to neither discourage nor encourage students to volunteer.

During the presentation, students were given a description of the study, including an overview of the mapping activity, and the four interview questions; the primary researcher stressed that there were no right answers and that everyone was welcome to participate. Because

participants were asked personal questions that were recorded, it was important that they be aware of the specific questions asked to make a truly informed decision (Smith et al., 2009). The demands of time were reiterated and the students' availability taken into consideration as well. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions which generally concerned what the mapping activity might look like. The principal investigator emphasized that there was no prescribed method for completing the activity, and then engaged the students in brainstorming examples and offering encouragement for all responses.

At the end of the presentations, consent/assent and demographic (See Appendix E) forms and envelopes were provided. This was to avoid placing pressure on students to volunteer immediately, and to allow them time to review the details of the study. Participants were asked to return the completed forms to their teacher in the sealed envelope. The principal investigator made arrangements by e-mail to collect the forms and schedule appointments with the consenting participants. In total, 27 of 35 enrolled students were directly invited to participate in the study. Twelve sets of forms were returned; two students declined, and the six grade 8 students were selected for this study.

Site visits. Prior to the first data collection sessions, the primary researcher made several visits to each site. This allowed students to meet her informally and ask before data collection started to help establish trust and rapport. This is a key component of qualitative research to help alleviate power imbalances and establish trust (Creswell, 2013), and to acknowledge and respect participants as experts who were generously offering their time and expertise.

Data collection sessions. Each participant attended two or three sessions that lasted 45 to 90 minutes each, depending on the participants' verbal expressivity and schedule. In the first session, participants completed a map of their school journey (See Appendix F) representing

their past and present educational experiences. In subsequent sessions, the participants answered open-ended questions about schooling and student life (See Appendix G).

Each session began with light snacks, brief re-introductions, and a review of the purpose of the study, recording procedures, and informed consent/assent. Individuals were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question at any time and could leave without penalty in terms of receiving compensation for their time. After the introductions, the school journey map was described and completed. Specifically, participants were asked to draw a representation of the school path they had taken including the target alternate school program. They were encouraged to use the materials provided—pens, felts, pencil-crayons, glitter pens, stickers, post-it notes, rulers, shape tracers, number tracers—to highlight all the key places, events, people, ideas, or feelings that were most important to them. The researcher did give ideas or suggestions, but did assist with physical tasks, such as erasing pencil lines, tracing images, or pasting stickers when requested. Sessions were recorded as participants described their maps and answered clarifying questions. This took approximately 40-75 minutes.

The primary researcher then conducted the semi-structured interviews. Each participant answered four open-ended questions, as well as more general introductory and summary questions. Sessions ended with summary questions, a general inquiry about any further comments the participant might have had (Patton, 2002), and a reminder about confidentiality. At the end of the each session, participants were given a list of free local support services and resources, and encouraged to seek assistance if experiencing any distress. The primary researcher remained after each session to address any issues, but no participant reported any concerns or questions pertaining to the study.

Data Analysis

This study followed an organized approach to verify the credibility of the assertions (Byrne, 2001; Creswell, 2013). Data were analyzed and coded for patterns of meaning and themes, and then presented to others. A second-level of interpretation was also developed to account for evolving themes that emerged during data analysis (Hatch, 2002). This reflective and interpretive approach assisted the researcher in identifying experiences, values, and biases (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) that could have affected the validity of the findings.

Overview of qualitative data analysis. Generally speaking, thematic analysis is a fundamental and flexible method of analyzing qualitative data and offer guidelines to answering research questions through deliberate and thoughtful thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher first familiarizes herself with the data the interviews have been transcribed. This includes reading and re-reading the text to check the accuracy of the transcription and to generate initial ideas. Interesting and salient features of the data gained from a systematic review of the data set in its entirety lead to initial codes and identifying specific data points that are relevant to each code. The codes are grouped into themes and, again, data relevant to each theme are collected. These themes are reviewed to see if they work with the initial coded extracts and data set as a whole and then mapped.

Data analysis in IPA. Analysis in IPA studies has the same focus as other qualitative research as noted above, but pays particular attention to language in an iterative and inductive process that draws meaning from particular experiential materials (Smith et al., 2009). IPA involves line-by-line analysis of text to identify the relationship among emerging converging and diverging themes in the context of the participant's world and the researcher's psychological knowledge. Although IPA is free and multi-directional, there are stages suggested by Smith et al. (2009) that guided this study. Prescribed steps include multiple readings, initial noting,

developing emergent themes, connecting emerging themes, and looking for patterns across cases, which are described below as they pertain to each of the methods used.

Analytic process for the current study. This study involved multiple participants and methods of data collection, so it is important to understand the analysis and integration of data, the contribution of the multiple data sets, and the management of researcher subjectivity.

Visual data/mapping. The visual method used in this study offered participants multiple means of expressing their perspective, but required thoughtful consideration in the analysis process. IPA primarily focuses on text as the means through which participants describe their experiences, concerns, and understandings. However, IPA involves a set of common processes (Smith et al., 2009) that was applied to the analysis of visual data. More specifically, IPA is concerned with the content, specific language, and underlying meaning of words, but these three aspects could also be explored in visual accounts.

The primary researcher first analyzed the school journey maps for content—what people, places, events, or feelings were depicted in the drawings. Second, rather than exploring linguistic cues—though this was part of the process as words were included—she explored the maps for subtleties in visual cues. This included relative size, colour, shading, positioning, and detail. Third, the primary resarcher examined the maps for their underlying meaning through the identification and interpretation of symbols (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Analyses were supported through the audio recordings, which were reviewed to highlight participant explanations of the visual content, cues, and underlying meaning. The primary resarcher noted these explanations and used them to refine and verify the analysis of the images.

The primary researcher examined specific digital images of the maps; this was similar to the procedure in the initial noting of textual data. Her conceptions were described and labelled, and evolved into emerging themes for each participant; she then grouped emerging themes

according to broader inductive categories to yield super-ordinate themes for each participant. This process triangulated between the visual mapping and interview methods to provide richness and elaboration that offered a different perspective and strengthened the arguments being made (Rossman & Wilson, 1985). This also contributed to the credibility of the interpretations and conclusions drawn by the researcher as a form of convergent validity (Duffy, 1987).

Textual data. To maintain the general focus of IPA, as outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the primary researcher analyzed transcripts of both the school journey map and semi-structured interview over several stages.

Reading and re-reading. For the first step in data analysis, the primary researcher listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts. This verififed the accuracy of the transcription, and gave a complete picture of the account by imagining the participant's voice (Smith et al., 2009). The primary resarcher then closwly read the transcripts while maintaining a notebook recording initial perceptions and recollections. Again, these notes were part of the research audit trail that contributed to the dependability of the process and, thus, the interpretations and conclusions of the study (Merrick, 1999). Through repeated readings, the primary researcher was acitively engaged with the text which helped her conceptualize the interview and better understand the underlying narrative (Smith et al., 2009).

Initial noting. Smith et al. (2009) describes this step as a relatively free textual analysis. The primary reseracher reviewd transcripts of the map activity and interview for semantic content, and made notes to identify the key relationships, processes, places, events, values, and principles and their meaning to the participant. The primary researcher focussed on the language used by the participants and the context of their stories, making comments on three levels of analysis—descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. The primary investigator noted the content of the interviews, participant's specific language use when describing experiences, and participant's

conceptual understanding of those experiences. The researcher first read transcripts to highlight the most salient ideas while also noting initial questions her knowledge to posit initial interpretations; this represented the descriptive and conceptual components of analysis. She then read transcripts to note language use—pronoun use, paralanguage, repetition, and fluency—and to highlight linguistic components of the text. Hard copies of the transcripts were formatted to leave a wide right-margin to record these initial notes.

Developing emergent themes. This step focused on maintaining the level of data complexity while reducing its volume. After multiple readings of the transcripts which generated the initial notes, the primary researcher analyzed the text for salient emerging themes for each participant. She reviewed initial notes to identify emergent themes through exploration of sections of the transcript while considering the overall understanding of the interview; these themes were described using short phrases that were particular, descriptive, and interpretative and reflected an understanding of the participant's experiential accounts (Smith et al., 2009). The primary researcher used a wide left-margin to record these emerging themes so that the original text, initial notes, and emerging themes could be easily reviewed; emerging themes were transferred onto individual index cards to further facilitate coding.

Connecting emerging themes. The emerging themes were noted in the order they appeared, and in this stage of analysis these emerging themes were collected and grouped (Smith et al., 2009) using the index cards; themes were examined individually and then clustered together based on similar understandings. Themes ther were deemed cursory were put aside. This resulted in the creation of super-ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009) that were renamed to reflect a shared pattern of meaning of the underlying emerging themes from the previous stage of analysis. The super-ordinate themes reflected grouped and subsumed emergent themes, as well

as oppositional relationships and specific themes related to particular events and experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

The final step in this process was to combine the super-ordinate themes from the visual and text data, subsuming and eliminating until the broader inductive super-ordinate themes were named and defined for the individual participant. The primary researcher repeated the steps described above to generate eight to eleven super-ordinate themes for each participant.

Finding patterns across cases. The purpose of this step was to use themes identified in individual cases to make more theoretical connections across cases. The primary researcher examined super-ordinate themes for patterns of meanings across participants; the clustered super-ordinate themes from multiple participants became the potential primary themes representing their overall lived school experiences. Simiar to the previous steps, the principal resarcher explored these potential themes for patterns of meaning and salience and subsumed or eliminated as necessary. Broader categories of themes were named and defined, becoming the primary themes for the data set as a whole, while more nuanced categories of primary themes became its subthemes. The final result of this iterative process was the four primary themes and eleven subthemes that emerged from examination of the text and visual data as a whole. It is important to note that the frequency of a theme does not in and of itself impart significance—rather it is the salience of the expression to the participant's experience, and the insight that it provides to the phenomenon being explored (Smith et al., 2009).

Field notes and observations. Non-verbal communication, recorded in field notes after each site visit and data collection session, was also an important part of the analysis. Recorded proxemic, chronemic, kinesic, and paralinguistic information (Hill, 2009; Meier & Davis, 2011) was intrinsic to the participants' experiences and included to support the visual and textual data

(Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). These observations were included in the transcriptions and, therefore, incorporated into the conceptualization of the primary themes and subthemes.

Other information gathered through this method of data collection was used to provide context, clarification, and support for the themes and patterns of meaning that emerged from analysis of the visual school journey map activity and the textual semi-structured interview. Notes and observations were not analyzed seaprately so as to adhere to participant understandings and explanations of their experiences. Again, this triangulation of methods added detail and richness to the interpretations and written products (Rossman & Wilson, 1985).

Acknowledging the researcher's subjective stance. It is important to be aware of and acknowledge how the researcher's past experiences, culture and values may have impacted the interpretation of data. Notes of the research process were maintained to highlight potential emerging themes, and record considerations, appraisals, and struggles throughout. Once themes and patterns of meaning were gathered from the other three data collection methods, the primary researcher reviewed her reflexive journal to see what initial impressions supported these findings and which ones may have been impacted by researcher bias. As is typical of such qualitative research, these writings were considered in the analysis and final written product to explicate researcher influences on the process and, thus, the interpretation of data.

Data Coding

Coding qualitative data was the next step in analysis. This involved segmenting data, in this case the transcripts and visual data, into meaningful units which were then labelled with short descriptive phrases or category names (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2010). All data were segmented in a series of steps—preliminary coding, within-case coding, and final coding.

Preliminary coding. After multiple readings of the transcripts for descriptive, conceptual, and linguistic components, emerging themes were identified, beginning the process

of data coding. Again, the initial notes helped identify emergent themes which were coded in the left margin of the transcript. Because this practice included both the original voices of the participants and beginning interpretations, the segments of meaning in the original text were coded by recording emerging themes directly beside the line-by-line transcriptions (Smith et al., 2009). Similarly, digital images of the salient aspects of the maps were labelled with relevant emerging themes. All emerging themes were written onto index cards in the order they appeared, but duplicates were discarded.

Within-case coding. With smaller samples in IPA, the next step in data coding maintains focus on individual cases (Smith et al., 2009). The index cards with the emerging themes were grouped to include converging and diverging ideas, and form super-ordinate themes that were converted into nodes for each participant. The super-ordinate themes were written on index cards that included a refined definition of the theme. These steps were repeated for the six participants, yielding eight to eleven super-ordinate themes for each.

Final coding. This stage included coding themes across cases to reflect the shared experiences and meaning for the participants as a group. The index cards with super-ordinate themes were sorted and grouped according to diverging and converging meaning, similar to the process for the emerging themes. These clustered themes became the primary themes for the data set as a whole, but it must have been salient, not merely present, for at least four participants (Smith et al., 2009).

With the final primary themes and subthemes named and defined, the final coding step began. The original text and visual data were re-examined and coded for the primary themes and subthemes. The primary researcher created a spreadsheet that included all meaningful units of text for each subtheme by participant; numbers and descriptions of images were also included.

At this time, written field notes and participant observations were coded in the margins according to these primary themes; a separate spreadsheet included verbatim excerpts from the notes. Field notes and participant observations were not coded for emerging and super-ordinate themes to remain true to the participants' accounts and limit researcher bias in the analytic process. Again, this served to bolster the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Inter-rater agreement on coding. Throughout data analysis, the primary researcher collaborated with members of the research team to corroborate and explicate primary themes and subthemes. Two members of the team acted as judge and adjudicator. The judge, in this case the primary researcher's supervisor, examined the definitions of all themes, as well as the coded data points identified to support them. Discussion to determine the accuracy and relevance of each theme and data point ensued; if disagreement arose, the adjudicator was consulted. Themes and data points were revised as needed to reflect consensus among the primary researcher, judge, and adjudicator, verifying the accuracy, meaning, and importance of interpretations and conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

Validating the Current Study

Several criteria to assess the rigor of a qualitative naturalistic study, including truth value, applicability, consistency, neutrality (Guba, 1981), and catalytic validity (Merrick, 1999), were used to establish the trustworthiness and credibility of this study.

Truth value. Phenomenological research aims to capture what it is like to have a certain experience, not generalize to theories or models (Creswell, 2013; Field & Morse, 1985). Validation provides confidence that the findings are accurate and meaningful and that the purpose of phenomenological research is honoured. Member-checking is often used in qualitative research, but because experiences and meanings are bounded by time and context, returning later for verification is purposeless and opposes the underlying notion of multiple

truths in phenomenology (Taylor, 1995). Furthermore, the power imbalance between student participants and the primary researcher who was an educator could have contributed to participants' emphasis of aspects of their accounts to gain approval or support the researcher (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). Instead, several other steps were taken to ensure truth value.

Triangulation of methods and investigators increased the truth validity of the study. This facilitated different means of expression, as well as elaborated upon participants' detailed accounts while minimizing potential researcher bias. Similarly, the primary researcher's assumptions and biases were openly acknowledged in a reflexive journal and helped identify influences these had on the interpretations and conclusions. The primary researcher used peer debriefing throughout the study to ensure that participants' perspectives, rather than her conceptions, were reflected in the interpretations and highlighted in the final written product. Finally, original visual and text data was used substantially throughout the explication of the themes and patterns of meanings to support the interpretations of the researcher. These considerations helped ensure that the biases of the researcher did not alter the meanings intended by the participants, and that interpretations resonate with as many participants as possible.

Applicability. This refers to the extent that the results might be applied to other contexts, settings, or groups (Krefting, 1991). Applicability can be viewed as transferability, whereby the findings of one study are applied to other contexts based on the fit between the two contexts (Guba, 1981). For this study, this refers to whether the findings could be applied to other programs in the target school district, and to similar diverse, urban schools districts and programs. The researcher provided sufficient descriptive data to allow for comparisons; transferability becomes the responsibility of readers wanting to apply the findings to another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The primary researcher intended the study to give voices to key stakeholders—the

students—and its findings to be applied to inform placement decisions, intake procedures, classroom procedures and practices, educational resources and programs, and case management protocols in the target school district, supporting the applicability of this study.

Consistency. Thick and rich descriptions of participants' experiences provided a detailed account of their school lives. Consistency occurs when those accounts would have been obtained by another researcher, though this is less relevant under a supposition of multiple realities (Krefting, 1991). The primary researcher focused on participant accounts and ascribed differences to identified sources rather than attempting to control variability (Guba, 1981). This required the researcher to observe and account for changes in participants' lives, fatigue, the bounds of atypical experiences, as well as her influence. Triangulation, participant-led methods, and adherance to open-ended protocols contributed to consistency because participants explored pertinent topics, events, or changes in their lives without coercion from the reseracher. Field notes and participant observation further established consistency by providing observations outside of the data collection process that identified potential changes in the participants' lives.

Haggman-Laitila (1999) suggested that a researcher can address her biases by identifying and describing her views throughout the research process, and avoid monologuing or asking leading questions. The primary researcher asked four broad questions, allowed ample time for responses, accommodated silences, and used probing questions to obtain detailed accounts of participant experiences; clarifying questions were also asked to confirm initial understandings and interpretations. Furthermore, participants made corrections or additions to their responses as needed during summary questions. These considerations guided the data collection and analytic process, and the primary researcher tracked and reflected upon consistency through audio recordings and relfexive journals.

Neutrality. The researcher attempted to put aside her biases, motivations, interests, and perspectives, to work with individuals to verbalize their experiences in as much detail as possible (Creswell, 2014). She endeavored to limit the biases, motivations, and perspectives of the researcher (Guba, 1981), and was sensitive to the use of lengthy and leading comments, directive questions, and non-neutral body language not only during the data collection sessions, but also during site visits. The researcher also reviewed the recruitment and interview process through her field notes and reflective journal to check for these behaviours; throughout the data analysis process the researcher engaged in discussions with members of the research team to identify and address potential assumptions and biases.

Catalytic validity. A research project is deemed to have catalytic validity when a) the participants are encouraged to act on their changed understanding that came from their participation in the research study, or b) the results of the study act as a catalyst for action (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). More specifically, catalytic validity is achieved when participants are invigorated and redirected by their experience with the research process (Merrick, 1999), which then inspires change. Several of the participants mentioned that they were excited to talk about their experiences and be honest about what school had been like for them; they also described the research experience as enjoyable and interesting.

The primary researcher noted participants' interest and enthusiasm in their diligence in completing the map and their detailed descriptions of their experiences. The primary researcher observed the participants struggling to get to class on time, to remember their schedule, and to sustain attention on academic tasks. However, these students showed effort and focus in remaining engaged through lengthy sessions, and in arriving on time for every session without fail. Ariel (all participants are referred to by pseudonyms they chose) commented about her school map, "I want to make it straight up. And I'll just put like all my hard work into

this…Like, I drew this all…And I came up with most of the ideas." The other participants echoed similar sentiments, and expressed pride in their drawings and efforts.

Two of the participants specifically spoke about how participating in the study was allowed them to be heard and understood. Damien thought that participating in the study might help him "throughout the school year," while Cole wanted to participate because it was "fun and nice to talk to someone." Damien further commented "to be honest, half of the time you're actually helping me express what I'm trying to say and whatnot." To Aurora, being heard was extremely important because "there is a lot of things that kids do go through, and you know, kids do have a voice… we are, you know younger than adults, but we also do have a heart. We do have feelings." She went on to explain how teachers should remember this and how talking to the primary researcher was a unique and positive experience; similar comments were made by Damien and Ariel.

The participants were also hopeful about the potential for their perspectives to impact schools. Four participants asked several questions about who would read the results and what the research team members thought about what they had shared; they also commented to the program staff how much teachers would learn from the study. Two participants asked specifically whether teachers and principals would see their work and know what their school lives entailed. Ariel was clearly proud of her work, emphasizing its importance: "I just, I want people to know that this means something. They should read it." Three participants did not want their responses to be anonymous, and but wanted school personnel to speak with them about their experiences and the findings of the study. Participants' attention, efforts, and responses to their experience in the study all contribute to its catalytic validity, which bridges the systems involved in development by linking individual voices to the group or policy level.

Summary

This study aimed to understand students' lived experiences of schooling, including their journey from kindergarten to their current placement in an alternate program, and their perspectives on the factors influencing their educational success and well-being. Based on these parameters, an exploratory, inductive, and emerging qualitative research design was the most appropriate method. Specifically, IPA was used to analyze data obtained through school journey maps and semi-structured interviews, and supported through researcher observations.

Chapter 4: Results

Overview

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived school experiences of students who were in alternate school programs due to social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. The central phenomenon to be investigated in this study was the school journey of eighth grade students who had transitioned to an alternate program. The primary purpose of this study was to learn how students in alternate programs describe their school journey.

Demographic Profiles

Following a phenomenological approach, this study focused on gaining the students' perspectives of their experiences. The primary researcher also attempted to gain the students' perspectives of who they were in the context of their lives using open-ended self-report questions rather than standard structured demographic questionnaires. Participants included eighth grade students enrolled full-time in an alternate program who were asked several general questions about themselves as people and as students, as well as information about their personal lives (See Appendix E). Their responses, coupled with the primary researcher's observations and field notes, are summarized below; all participants selected their pseudonym.

Ariel. In several school visits, Ariel always showed herself to be forthcoming and extremely direct; she often shared details of her time outside of school and personal relationships. She described herself as "outgoing, loud, and straight up" initially, progressing to aloof if she "doesn't like them" and then to mean. She was repeating grade 8, though she had just started at the target alternate program in the middle of the semester. She described herself as a "good student when [she has] friends," but when she did not have friends she "skipped a lot and [was] always late." Ariel perceived some of her previous teachers as being "mean or rude" which resulted in her making "bad decisions" and being "rude" because "respect is earned." She

reported that she liked English, Science, and "sometimes Math" especially when she "[knows] how to do it." Outside of school she reported that she liked to smoke marijuana because it "helps [her] cope better and helps [her] eat." She said that she split her time between her primary home where she lived with her sister and brother, and her dad's home where she also had a half-brother. She spoke positively about her family, particularly her mom, and mentioned several other extended-family members that were important to her.

Aurora. During site visits Aurora was full of energy and curiosity. She described herself as "outspoken" and "social" which was supported by the thoughtful and friendly questions she asked about the primary researcher's project and experience as a graduate student. She said, however, that she was a student who "gets in trouble a lot because of texting or talking in class" but "still gets [her] work done." She further commented that teachers see her as "a girl who is bright but needs some help." Aurora did not mention any school subjects or activities that she enjoyed, only the social aspects of her school day. Outside of school she reported that she liked to "dance, sing, cheer, text, tweet, talk, and hang with friends." She said that she lived in a multi-family home with a "really nice backyard" in a "nice neighbourhood with lots of kids." She reported that she lived with her mom and older sister, whom she spoke about very affectionately, and also had another older sister and two older brothers.

Cole. As a student who described himself as liking "to do fun things" and "talk a lot," he appeared quiet in class, spoke softly, and rarely made eye contact with the staff. He reported that he was a grade 8 student who was "polite" and "paid attention and listened." He was also confident that teachers and principals would also describe him as such, as well as someone who "asked questions to make sure [he] knew what he was doing." Cole said that he enjoyed Math and thought that schoolwork was "not hard" and could be "fun and interesting." Family was

very important to Cole, who reported that he lived with his Dad, older sister, and two younger brothers in a housing complex that was situated in a quiet neighbourhood.

Damien. Although Damien described himself as very private, he was willing to share that he was a "philosopher" who was "random and creative." He was not sure how school staff might describe him, but said that as a student he "tried" but was absent "lots of the time." He reported that he liked grade 8, specifically physical education and technology classes, and "loved to think deeply about what's going on…in society and the community" when he was not in school. He stated that he lived in a house with his mom, step-dad, grandma and four siblings—three younger brothers and one younger sister. He was verbally expressive and was almost always smiling, and looked to engage adults in conversations about videos games.

Logan. This participant described herself as being unique and "bubbly" with many friends. She was repeating grade 8, but was taking a grade 9 elective, which she said she enjoyed. She reported that she lived in a house with her mom and step-dad, and had older brothers, one of whom she spoke of fondly and nostalgically; the other she spoke of as being a bully and "really bad." She liked to experiment with her hair and make-up and also liked to decorate her clothes and shoes using permanent markers and coloured duct tape. She said that she "used to be a good student" but was struggling in most of her classes. She also described herself as very athletic, and was also "into acting and modeling."

Payton. For Payton, describing herself was a difficult task. She commented that it was "hard to go outside [her] body and look at [herself]," but did say that she "cared about school but sometimes just wanted to go home and sleep." She was only present for one of the five school visits, but was on time for each of her appointments for this study. She presented as a polite and bright young girl with a sense of humour; she was not shy, but did not offer personal details nor engage in conversation outside of the data collection tasks. She was a grade 8 student, but

started her school year in a regular program before being referred to the alternate program. In school she reported that she liked to read, and outside of school she liked to sleep. She said that she lived in a big house and had a "nice, big, pink room." She was living with her grandparents and younger brother, but had left their home to return to living with her mother. She also mentioned that she had an older sister and another younger brother, and was close to her father.

Summary. There were some commonalities among the participants' descriptions of themselves. Most viewed themselves positively, including their capabilities as students, and reported having decent relationships with their parents or guardians, and other family members. Though many commented briefly on difficulties with in school concentration or attendance, all participants viewed any academic struggles as temporary and not reflective of their abilities.

Primary Themes

A further aim of the study was to identify prominent themes and patterns of meaning about school and schooling, and about emotional and behavioural development and well-being based on the students' descriptions of their experiences. These questions were explored using an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the visual data collected from participants' self-created school journey maps and the text from individual interviews.

As described in the methods section, themes were identified for individual cases and then connections were made across cases to identify shared concepts and generate broad, or super-ordinate themes. These super-ordinate themes were then refined by through elimination and combination, and organized according to scope and salience; a master list of primary themes and subthemes (Table 1) was created to demonstrate how themes from individual participants were nested within the theoretical themes across participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 1

Presence of Primary and Subthemes by Participant

Themes	Ariel	Aurora	Cole	Damien	Logan	Payton
Developing and defending "self"	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Gender and sexual identity	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	no
Autonomy and self-realization	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Group membership	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Schooling as a social process	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Bullying	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Enemies and allies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Friend conflicts	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Schooling as tumultuous	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
School as disruptive	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
Responding to school ecology	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Coping with stress	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Activities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Functional supports	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Poor coping strategies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Though the frequency of a particular theme in a participant's narrative was considered and is depicted in Figure 1, it was the insight that the theme provided to the participant's experience, rather than the number of quotes, that shaped the final iteration of the analytic process. Four primary themes, each with two or three subthemes, were identified in capturing the school experiences of students from the alternate program.

Figure 1. Frequency of Quotes by Participant for each Primary Theme

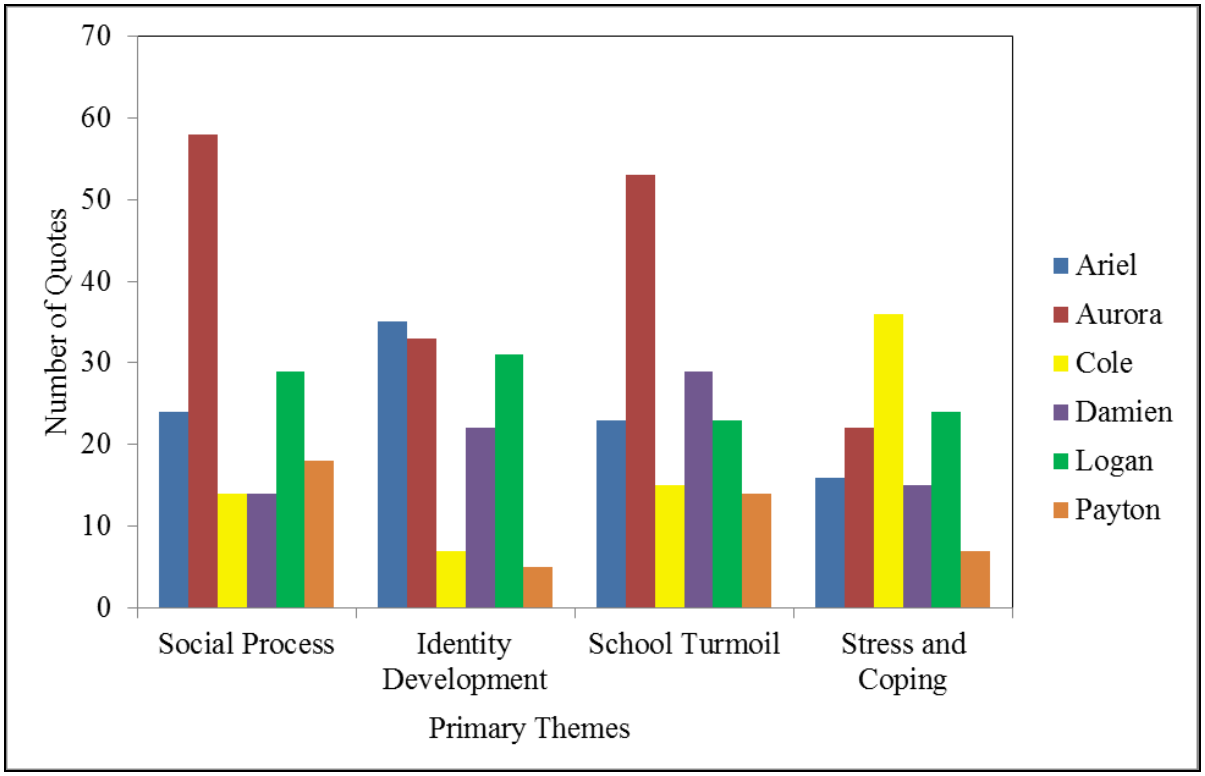

Figure 1. The number of meaningful data points found is indicated for each participant by the four primary themes. The relative number of quotes for each participant, rather than across participants, is important because interview lengths differed for the six participants.

Struggling to develop and defend their sense of self. Given that the transition from childhood to adolescence begins while students are in school, it is not surprising that identity development was a prominent theme in the school experiences of these participants. As they approached adolescence and transitioned to secondary school, participants explored who they were and who they would like to be, all while trying to live as authentically as possible. They emphasized the importance of freedom from expectations and judgments, and the right to express any attitude, disposition, or belief they desired. This included participants' conceptions of self as gendered and sexual beings independent from the expectations of their peers, but still rooted in social, emotional, and behavioural norms of society. Making connections to a chosen social

group provided participants with a sense of belonging, as well as acceptance and status. However, conflict arose as their sense of self was challenged by others or when they experienced tension between who they were or would like to be and who they felt they needed to be.

Gender and sexual identity. Gender identity was important among the participants, particularly the girls. For many of them, gender roles felt entrapment because of the expectations placed on them as females differed from what they wanted for themselves. Female participants explained that, according to the messages they received from friends, boyfriends and family, girls were supposed to be pretty, weak, and sexually conservative. However, these participants saw themselves as needing to be strong, independent, and desirable, which conflicted with the messages they received from both peers and adults.

The messages about the ideals of femininity seemed to begin with physical appearance. In elementary school, this was very much tied to the onset of puberty as described by Ariel:

> Everyone made fun of me. And in grade six, I was like anorexic. And I had like no boobs, nothing. I was so small. It was so gross. I looked so sick. And then there was like a bunch of girls that used to make fun of me because I had no boobs, the girls in grade seven and stuff. It was pretty insane.

As participants progressed through school, the focus and ensuing judgments based on appearance intensified and started to include comments on sexuality and sexual behaviours. Ariel noted this evolution:

> In elementary school, [bullying] was more like…oh, you're a loser or cooties or…[In high school] if you're sexually active and people know, good luck. They like… They like freak out. Like, it's ridiculous. Like, as if your sex life is anyone's business between only you and the person you're doing it with. Like, chill. It's none of your business.

Ariel also observed that in high school "all pretty girls get judged. It's actually insane. And so do ugly people. It's weird. The pretty people and ugly people get judged…Everybody gets judged. Girls are jealous. Guys are jealous." Logan, too, suffered under the judgments of others about her appearance. She commented:

> I've been bullied so much because of my hair and my appearance…I like keeping my hair short. I don't like the way I look, per se. But I don't like my appearance. But I like who I'm becoming as a person.

It is clear that not only is appearance important and subject to bullying, but also connected to expressions of self-concept and identity development. Aurora spoke frequently about her appearance and spent many of her school breaks fixing her hair, nails, and make-up, as did Ariel. She could be "cheered up" simply by a classmate telling her she "was beautiful" and both revels in and is embarrassed by such attention:

> And I had abs for a while, and it was awkward because I'd go swimming with the guys for field trips and stuff, and [Name] would be like, you have abs. And then he'd be like, that's hot. I'm like, oh my god. I'm like really?

Throughout their reflections, participants described rejection of the focus on appearance, but at the same time had internalized its importance, as seen in Ariel's remarks:

> Like, I hate on myself in person because I'm ugly. But pictures I post on Facebook, I obviously like that picture. I'm going to post it, right? But like, I don't know. I just don't like it when girls hate on their self it they don't need to.

These perceptions of femininity were also connected to their sexual identity. For Ariel, this included her manner of dress:

> Like the way I dress…they think that's what a slut is. That's not what a slut is. Like, maybe I dress in a way that…showing off, you know, like not too much. But I still had

> something showing. Too bad. You know show it while you got it. Show it while you're young. Right? Like, it may look bad. But I'm not going to look like that when I'm old enough to show it, you know.

Logan's sexual identity was also connected to her appearance by others, "Nobody really knew the reason why I cut my hair. And so they just put it as, oh, she's a dyke. She's a lesbian. She's this. She's that." To counter these judgments, Logan pays particular attention to her looks:

> I started wearing a little bit of make up in grade seven. And then… Now, I just do full blown… I do make up now. And…It's just… It saves a lot of issues with getting judged… It's not that I try to look pretty for everybody else. But I try to look pretty for myself because I don't believe that I'm pretty or beautiful, or anything like that. I don't really believe that at all. And so, now I'm just trying to change it a little bit and see if I can at least be like, okay, that's what they're going to get today. That's how I'm going to look. If they don't like it, whatever kind of thing because I'd spend half an hour or an hour on my make-up and just that alone.

As they emerged into adolescence, participants wanted more intimate relationships with partners and explored sexual behaviours that aligned with their gendered view of being an adult. However, when participants acted on these sexual desires, they were often ridiculed, judged, and bullied for doing so. For example it was common that the girls mentioned being virgins, but being called whores and sluts. Payton was called a "pussy" and "slut" by a girl who bullied her and opened her locker and "wrote slut all over it." Aurora was similarly tormented after "a guy told everybody" about one encounter they had, saying that she "got bullied from that, getting called a slut and whore and stuff." She exclaimed that had she attended another school she "would have had people calling me a bitch straight up to my face. I would have people calling

me a slut, a skank, a whore. For no reason, I did nothing to them. They'd just call me it because I dated [Name] and he knows a lot of people."

These assaults on sexual identity extended beyond verbalizations to statements made on social media to written on school property. Aurora spoke of her experiences with this:

> I had kids saying that...telling other kids that I wasn't a virgin and stuff...Yeah. And saying that I have sex with people for two dollars. I'm like yeah, because...At school, on Facebook. They still say it. I don't know. I now just ignore it.

For Ariel, her persecution included both social media and vandalism that deeply impacted her school life:

> High school was really bad. High school, all the stalls in every bathroom all…in every single bathroom in the whole school, in every stall, everywhere, it was like, oh Ariel is a ho. Ariel is this. They wrote it. And they took pictures of it and put it on the Internet. Like, ha ha, yeah. And they'd be like straight.

The persistence of these pains is clearly explained by Ariel, "I just see it and just look at it and just – I don't know – feel like shit…[but] there's nothing I can do. What am I going to do, go up to them and get them to delete it for me?"

In a different way, the conflict between sexual expectations and self-expression was also true for Damien. He, too, was trapped by his stage of sexual identity, because he was not interested in sexual behaviours and intimate relationships, and felt like an outsider among his peers. He spoke of one particularly troubling interaction, "Well, once this girl named [Name] was like completely obsessed with me. She just wouldn't leave me the hell alone. Ahhhh! It drove me so nuts..." He then tried to escape this unwanted attention by playing a gross prank on her but "like a week or two later she bugged [him] during recess and lunch. [He] tried to run away from her but she always found [him]. Ahhhh!" Damien was, in fact, irritated by what he

saw as his peers' obsession with sex; he found it distasteful and immature that his peers constantly tried to draw him in about conversations and jokes about sex. He commented:

> Like, I'm just not too fond of elementary school. They always take....like especially the younger ones, take everything dirty... Like, it's not cool. Like, nowadays they're always talking about you know what, like seriously guys. Like, seriously? That is just not appropriate.

He attributed this to his struggles to connect to others, saying that it "made it kind of difficult to communicate with anyone."

For Logan, developing her sexual identity was particularly problematic. This was because she viewed her gender identity as conflictual to the roles expected for women, and also because she identified as bisexual, which complicated her relationships with same-sex friends. She was not supposed to have short hair, wrestle, skateboard, or play football, nor was she supposed to show platonic affection towards her female friends:

> Most of my friends, if they ask about my sexuality I'll just straight up tell them. [My friend and I] we were really close, like close best friends. And so we were hugging a lot…[sometimes] we'd just be like skipping down the hallway holding hands, like whatever. It had nothing to do with my sexuality. She's straight. It had nothing to do with her sexuality…And she asked me if I was bi or anything. And I said… It was like the beginning of grade eight. So I was, I don't like think about my sexuality at all. So I was like, nope. I'm straight. I'm all good…And so I've thought about it a lot…And I came out as bi-sexual…And so she got really mad at me and was just like, you lied to me. I'm like, what do you mean I lied to you? And she just walked away…

Dating and intimate relationships were also complicated for Aurora and Ariel. Aurora spoke at length about boyfriends and the complications that come when the relationships end,

mentioning "there's another kid named [Name] who I dated, who hates my guts because I broke up with him." She also talks about not dating "in kindergarten, or grade one…", as if this were a normal part of school relationships, and that one of her most significant school memories was "her first kiss." Her most recent break up impacted her emotionally and academically:

> He broke up with me. And I still have feelings for him, and it's sort of been like, it's only been like three to four months...But now he's dating one of my friends. And I'm like, I want to murder you, but I'm not going to because I still like you…at the beginning of the year I wasn't doing so well…Because at the beginning of the year I was going through a really bad break up with my ex...I still don't go to English class right now though. Because he's in there.

Ariel also experienced conflicts around sexual behaviours and relationships. She described a disturbing trend among her classmates:

> In [school], we only had guys in our class if you were doing like a big group thing. Other than that, it was just girls. And there was a reason why. Because there used to be guys and girls [together], but then [things] got really sexual… They'll be like how much Junies. Junie is like grade eight, grade nine, grade ten…[it's a competition about] how much you can like have sex with them or how much different girls you can get in their pants. And it's like a good thing with the guys.

She goes on to explain that she wants "a guy who will like see the real [Ariel] and like it, [rather] than like want me for like their little sex toy or their little games." But still, she struggled to meet the demands of her relationships:

> I don't need a guy. I have a boyfriend, but I don't need him. Like, if he wants to leave me, I'd be for…I'd be perfectly fine. Like, I like him. And obviously, I'd be upset. But I don't need him. If he's gone, honestly I could accomplish a lot. I wouldn't have to

> worry about having to see him. I could be worrying about going to school or going to the library or going to the gym, not having to worry about that, right? And I'm single, right. So I can also talk to other guys I like and figure out everything, right. That's a lot easier.

In different ways, the participants wanted to assert their gendered identities and express their sexuality as they preferred, but felt stymied by the expectations of their peers and by sociocultural pressures. These tensions between the gender identities that they would like to assume and the expectations of friends, family, and society are apparent in their portrayal of bullying, conflicts with friends, self-perceptions, and intimate relationships.

Longing for autonomy and self-realization. The idea of wanting autonomy is not novel in the consideration of adolescent development, and is actually an expected and important aspect of this period (Erikson, 1968). In conjunction with their desire for independence, these students also wanted others to acknowledge and accept their self-perceptions.

Several participants were frustrated by the discrepancy between how they viewed themselves and how they were being treated; this included their views of their peers as being very different, even inferior, to them. For example, both Aurora and Ariel felt that their lives had been quite difficult and that they were forced to grow up quickly. As such, they felt that despite their young age they had earned the right to be seen and treated as older, and went as far as to look down on their same-age peers. Ariel said, "I feel like I have a lot of important things in my life that happened. Like, kids don't even understand how much I've been through." In several instances Ariel and Aurora referred to their peers as "kids," "little," "immature," or "young." Ariel explained:

> I like older people, not younger people. I feel like I like belong better with older people. They understand me more. And I can say things without them thinking weird. Why are

> you talking about that? Or like, not anything too bad. But like, I don't know... I'm ashamed of my age…I've been ashamed of my age ever since like grade six.

Aurora concurred:

> I guess, to be honest, I've been through a lot. And I guess it's kind of made me feel like I had to grow up a little bit faster than most kids. And I...Just me, kind of, you know, acting more not my age, like older than I am…

Not only were they very focused on trying to appear and act older than they were, they viewed students their own age as weak and inferior. Aurora also struggled to relate to her classmates:

> It's just they always act like...I don't know, they just have a way of acting so little kiddish, like little toddlers acting like they're... Like they're thirteen and they'll act like they're four years old. Always getting themselves into drama, you know, and dealing with it in the most stupidest way.

Ariel had similar sentiments and argued, "I don't like people a year younger than me… Like, I know so much grade 8's that just act like grade 8." Even though she, too, is in eighth grade, it is distasteful to act her age and she views her peers who do as unworthy.

For Aurora and Ariel, their age was not just a source of disconnect between them and their peers, but they saw being older as a means to escape their situations and gain power and control. Ariel said, "I should be nineteen. That sounds way better…and you can do way more things." She lamented not her lack of freedom, but her lack of independence because she was allowed to make her own choices, but still relied on others for support. She explained:

> I can't do anything. Like, I have like no freedom. Well, I have a lot of freedom actually. But, I could be doing much more if I was older…Like, having a better job. I don't know. Living on my own, making my own money, being proud of myself, [and] not having to live off my mom's income.

Damien also had a perception of himself that set him apart from his classmates. Damien described himself as a "deep thinker" and "philosopher" and took pride in his intellectual abilities. He explained that he "wasn't too fond of many people in elementary school. Most of them to [him] seemed rather dumb." This division continued into high school as he argued that "studies have proven that teenagers tend to be the most reckless and/or dumb altogether for that moment in that stage." With this view of himself, it is no wonder that he was "really pissed off" when he was prevented from doing grade-equivalent work. Aurora was similarly irritated by her teacher's spurious perceptions of her:

> I get told all the time, my teacher's like Aurora, you talk too much. I'm like, well, all my work's done, so don't tell me I can't talk. Actually, when I handed in my science today she—She was just like, good job, you got it done. I'm like, yeah. I'm like don't tell me I don't work, as I walked away…

The endeavor to reconcile their self-image with the perceptions of others was not the only instance of such a conflict. Indeed, participants also expressed their difficulties to achieve their ideals because of self-doubt. Cole, for instance, saw himself as a leader and very much felt he fulfilled in this role, but doubted his abilities to achieve this status. He argued, "I'm not really good at talking with some people. And I'm not like not [pause] I'm not like [pause] I don't know, like sometimes it's hard for me to do things. Like...I'm saying the wrong words right now." Yet he was able to express himself during the interviews and offer clear explanations of his school experiences. He also described how he was able to communicate well and assist his peers: "Well, whenever like, I like to help other people too. Like say if someone needs help, I like to help them if I know what to do." Cole mentioned having "fun helping other people" during sports events and academic activities, particularly math.

Logan, too, looked for self-determination. For her, this was partially through separation from her friends so as to take control of how she presented herself through her actions and her words without the judgment and interference of her peers. She described this barrier to authentic self-expression:

> I felt like I wasn't myself. I felt like I was being a fake. And I didn't like that. And so I was like, okay, maybe you just need to try harder. And so I tried harder. And for a while, I was kind of happy…And I'm just like, if you're not happy today, pretend to be happy just so people don't like bombard you and just be like, what's wrong? What's wrong? What's wrong? And then when I tried to tell people I don't want to talk about it, they would always force me to talk about it…So it's just like pretend to be happy.

The participants also wanted to be seen as confident individuals without judgment or intrusion from others. Ariel exclaimed,

> Like, who is he to not want me because of my choices? That's my life. That's who I am. Deal with it. You know like it. Too bad. Right? But then I started getting confidence in myself. I was like being like, you know what? I know I'm pretty. Who cares? You know I have my scars. Who cares, you know? Deal with it.

Damien spoke about this in terms of earning respect:

> Well, there is an equal number of people who disrespect me as there is people who respect me. Like I'm okay with people who can at least accept that I am who I am. But [there are] people who just won't even bother to even consider accepting who I am.

He goes on to explain the importance of individuality in schools:

> Well, the fact that they actually promote originality. Like promoting being who you are and whatnot, and being spiritually awake. It just feels kind of cool that they let you be

> who you are and they will…And I like that. It allows me to…like every now and then I can like demonstrate my philosophy and whatnot.

Logan was also trying to assert herself and was desperately trying to escape from the schools she saw as interfering. She spoke about being watched by school staff and having to report to teachers and counsellors about what she was feeling, where she was going, and what she was planning to do. She described her experience beginning high school:

> It's just grade eight, it was just the instant pressure that you feel right when you get into the door of your first day. And everyone is staring at you because you're a freshman. You're a new kid. And so everyone wants to get to know you. And it's just like…but it's like, what if I don't… What if I'm not what they think I would be like? It's like, then they'll think [this] about me.

To her she wanted to completely escape this and take control of her life saying, "I don't really care if I died, honestly. It's just a life. Like, it's mine…So I'm just like, whatever. It's my life and I don't really care about it…" To Logan, her suicide pact was the ultimate expression of wanting to take control of her life after the unrelenting pressures to conform and gain acceptance through an inauthentic life.

Interestingly, all participants viewed school as the means to gain the very independence and self-determination they desired. Aurora explained the importance of school:

> It means I can actually, you know, get a good job and support a family, and you know, have a family of my own one day. And that actually means a lot…So anyways, like I was saying, to get a good education. You know, it means that I could, you know, actually have a life one day...You know, get money so I can do things and have a family, and raise them so they're not like having to deal with the crap I went through.

Cole mentioned that school teaches skills "where it helps you cope with things in life" and Payton whole-heartedly agreed:

> Yeah. Like just…But a bad life is like you didn't go to school. You don't even have a job. Or you don't know how to do anything, like I just said. Yeah, that's not a good life… what if you have bills and you have to add them up, and you don't even have a job because you didn't go to school…And what happens later on in life when your parents die and you're on your own and you don't know how to do anything because you didn't go to school?

Although schools were clearly seen as contributing to the barriers to confidence and healthy self-perceptions, they were also seen as a means to achieving goals and a "better life" (Payton).

Striving for independence and self-realization was central to the development of these students, but also resulted in tensions with their teachers, peers, and even within themselves. They wanted freedom and unconditional acceptance of who they were becoming, yet felt pressure to conform to avoid judgment and conflict. Schools were seen as being both the means to achieve goals and autonomy, and the confining social environment that demanded conformity and unquestioned compliance—an obvious source of confusion and pressure for these students.

Importance of group membership. In different ways, all of the participants sought to belong through connecting to others who were similar to them or who could help them improve their status. This was not the same as the support gained from allies, which was more of the sense that someone was "on their side," whereas group membership was finding a sense of belonging, and of "fitting somewhere." Group membership offered identity and kinship to the students whether it was based on cultural or social groups.

Aurora, Payton, and Ariel mentioned instances where their cultural identity was challenged. These participants described experiencing racial slurs and competition based on

their race/ethnicity. Aurora spoke of "hating" another student because of a "competition type of thing" because they "were the only White kids in the school." She explained that they later become friends because of their shared identities. Ariel did not speak of competition, but mentioned several instances when she was insulted based on her SES and race. She was constantly dismissed for being a "poor kid" or a cultural minority because her schools were predominantly comprised of Asian students. When this occurred she would feel the urge to defend herself and her group:

> Standing up for myself? I don't know. I just don't like girls say stuff about me. Like, I do. It just depends on what they say. This guy called me a White trash at school and I punched him in the face. Call me White trash, I'll punch you in the face.

Ariel later argued that these comments were also not appropriate because she was actually "part Native." Payton echoed similar disdain for being categorized inaccurately as "White" because she was "barely White." Payton described experiences with racial slurs already mentioned above, and other racial tensions in school:

> "There was racist teachers. There was racist children. Because lot of them were like Punjabi and stuff. Right. So they're really racist...They're just racist. You're White, so you're.... and I am [better]. You're different."

She spoke proudly of being Filipino and how that has impacted her beliefs about school, namely its importance in securing a good future.

For Ariel, finding a social group involved aligning herself with older students, increasing her drug use, and making sure to avoid certain groups like "dorks," "Asians," and "pooks." She knew exactly which groups had little social collateral and if she could not align with socially powerful groups she avoided groups that were seen as social targets. When she was forced into such groups, she was unhappy:

> I always wanted to be with like the popular group of friends, right? But I didn't. I hung out with these like…in high school, I guess they'd be called like nerds or dorks or whatever. But I used to hang out with like the nerds in elementary school. Oh, my God. It's so embarrassing."

She argued that, based on appearance, finding a group to join was simpler in elementary school than in secondary school because "if you looked better, you had like a more popular group of friends."

Group membership and a sense of belonging were so important that even though she clearly understood and expressed that her current school was "better" than her last, she longed to return to it:

> This school is better than my other school. Like, I know it is. It's just I don't feel like I fit in here… Because I don't fit in. Everyone else here thinks it's dope to… Everyone here can afford so much. I can't even do half of the things they can do. And just the way they dress, like so much nice clothes. Not me."

She even resisted her placement in the alternate program, which she identified as a "good" and "safe" place for this reason: "I feel like I don't want even belong in this room, because like the kids some of them are slow, pretty slow…there's kids that have like such big issues in here. And I don't have issues like that." The support she received was recognized and appreciated, but it did not compensate for the sense of difference she felt in being placed in the program, which highlighted her need for belonging.

For Cole, Aurora, and Logan, group membership was established through having many friends, and that these friends in some way had a shared identity that each participant adopted at least in part. Cole used the joining of certain groups, usually through sporting activities, to find friends. In many ways, belonging to a team was the only way Cole had to establish relationships

and identity because he "knew who [he'd] be with" at each point of the day. Because of this, he "felt really good" and started to see himself as a leader amongst teammates and his peers in the classroom. Aurora found this connection through participation in creative arts and had friends who were in drama and arts programs and who competed with her in multiple school talent contests. She mentioned numerous friends who she gained and kept over years, citing finding a "good group of friends" at each school she attended as her main focus. She was weary of being alone and feeling like an outsider, shunning other social groups:

> I guess like the look of [that school] just gave me a weird feeling about like how the students would act. Because I mean, it looks like a total school that, you know, all the preppy little bastards would go to."

Logan, on the other hand, sought membership with students who were known for being emotionally and socially different:

> And last year, it was just like basically just me and her walking around. We weren't really have like a huge pack of people. When now, I do have a huge pack of people who just hang out under the stairs…People say that I am popular because like I have a ton of friends. And I'm a really… Apparently, I'm a really likeable person."

She explains how important it is to find a social group as a means to develop and strengthen her sense of self:

> I've been hanging out with a group of friends the past year. And it's just like, they've actually shown me who I can really be and how much of an influence I can have on the world…They've helped me through a lot of my problems…and just like discovering who I really am because they accept me for who I am. And also become who I am today, which is I don't care what other people say about me...And so they've helped me a lot with my issues because they're so welcoming."

Ariel agreed that it is crucially important to find a group to belong to, going as far as to "go with what everyone else is doing…to not get made fun of and to like fit in." Damien wanted to belong to a group, but was never able to find one in elementary school. He excitedly remembered one friend—the only friend he had "ever really visited"—and his delight at engaging with his classmates that he had "actually bothered to meet, [who] actually had some form of intelligence." In elementary school, he lacked these peers and felt "like no one understood [him]," recognizing that now he is fortunate because "it feels awesome that there are other people who can think like [him]."

Finding a group to belong to was an important part of identity building for these students, and that sense of belonging was something they could recognize as being inherent to certain classes, programs, and schools. Logan described this feeling in one school: Students, even if they weren't your friends…they still knew who you are, and they would accept you. Yeah. It was kind of one of those schools. It was just like no one gets left out." This highlights the sense of belonging that group membership afforded these students. Through acceptance and shared experiences, participants found social connections and security in their chosen groups.

Schooling as an increasingly complex social process. When an individual spends a considerable amount of time in an environment where multiple systems and people interact, there is clearly a need for established interpersonal skills and a sense of resourcefulness. This was true for these students as they progressed through their school journey. From kindergarten to secondary school, the social, emotional, and behavioural norms changed and became increasingly demanding, intricate, and nuanced. Participants often struggled to understand these changes and to find the supportive relationships they needed to succeed; schooling was a non-linear and complex journey with unstable and confusing relationships. These students worked to differentiate between positive and negative connections and establish rapport with school staff

only to have those relationships end abruptly. Furthermore, the rules for establishing these relationships changed as settings changed—new classes, teachers, principals, and schools—and even their friendships were insecure. As participants became older, their need for support increased, but navigating the intricate social system of schools also became trickier. This is evident in their experiences of trying to determine who could best aid them in escaping the unrelenting stress of being bullied, and the confusion and sense of betrayal and loss when their friends did not support them or, worse, became bullies themselves.

Being trapped in the cycle of bullying. For many of the participants, bullying had a significant impact on their school life. The problem was not only the escalation of the severity and type of bullying across their school journeys, but of the cyclical nature of the process whereby it was difficult to determine who was the 'victim' and who was the 'bully.'

In terms of escalation, this occurred both over the school journey and within specific relationships. In early elementary school, bullying was simple and relatively inconsequential, mostly involving name calling that did not go beyond the school grounds. Payton aptly described this as "kid drama" which was "Oh, you took my toy! You're not my friend anymore. [Speaking in mimicking voice] You didn't hang out with me at lunch so you're not my friend anymore." Arial, Aurora, and Logan offered similar sentiments that in elementary school the bullying was minor both in how often it occurred and its nature. Payton also commented that the bullying did not impact her as much because "we still got support by the principal and our teachers and stuff." However, as participants got older, bullying became far more complicated, severe, and enduring. Ariel, Logan, and Payton remembered the specific point when the bullying seemed to worsen, as Ariel explained, "grade three is when everything started getting…mean." Cole also had this experience: "Like, I used to know like people who were like mean people and

they'd just do things, like just rude…Somebody coming up to you and just saying something mean to you for like no reason."

What began as name-calling or taunts that could be attributed to a specific event then escalated into unprovoked attacks that were pervasive and more enduring. Ariel commented about her experience prior to entering the alternate program: "High school was really bad. High school, all the stalls in every bathroom all…in every single bathroom in the whole school, in every stall, everywhere, it was like, oh Ariel is a ho. Ariel is this." Aurora had the same experience before entering the alternate program: "This school was the worst school because of the fact when I moved there my bullying got worse, to the point I was going through a lot of depression. I'm now on antidepressants because of it." And as participants became older and social media became more prevalent in their lives, so did its role in their experiences of bullying. This was particularly true for Ariel and Aurora:

> There was an Instagram page made about me… But I got put on that, a pooks page [on Facebook] and then an Instagram thing. And they like had a picture of me. And they were like going on about like how I'm a slut and everything. (Ariel)

Aurora added, "And then it was all over Facebook, all over everything. And I'm just like… Oh, that hurt…I'm like, you know, I have a life on there. I have people to talk to I haven't talked to in years."

The use of social media highlighted the unrelenting stress of bullying. Ariel, Aurora, and Logan all commented how they felt persecuted even at home, and also isolated from their friends because they had to avoid social media or be faced with the onslaught of written aggressions. Even more of a struggle was their resignation that those hurtful comments would remain on the internet and there was very little they felt they could do to have those comments and pages removed.

It was clear that to the participants the bullying was an expected part of their daily lives as they progressed through school. Damien described one bully that "just wouldn't leave [him] alone. It actually wasn't until grade seven that he finally left [him] alone." Similarly, Ariel commented that at "all the other schools I went to I got bullied at" and Aurora had "been bullied up until this year." Matters were made worse because while previous bullying issues could be resolved with the help of teachers and administrators early in their school lives, as participants became older they felt these avenues of support were no longer options. They felt that turning to someone for help showed weakness or was futile; teachers and administrators were repeatedly described as indifferent or powerless. Aurora, proud to show her strength by confronting bullies, stated that

> most little kids if they see somebody getting bullied, they'll just go... first thing they'll do is go and get a teacher. I'll step in the middle of it and be like stop. And then, I don't know, I'll continuously help people when they need to be helped.

She also commented on how little support she felt even when she did ask for help from teachers:

> I had had...I had some pretty screwed up memories in the next school…I don't know, they'd follow me home. They'd like...I don't know. As I was walking home they'd call me names, they'd push me into ditches and…I was coming home with bruises, because of kids....Yep. And I'd ask the teachers for help...Yeah, they talked to the students, but they didn't actually do anything. [Pause]...They'd be like, okay, we'll talk to them. They talked to them, and nothing changed. The kids would have to apologize, and it would not help.

Payton had similar struggles where "teachers were mean. The students were rude. Like if you were getting bullied or something, they don't do anything about it. At that school I was

bullied." Participants felt the same lack of support from principals, as exemplified in Aurora's comment, "Me trying to ask for help, and they just kind of throw it back in my face...I asked for help with bullying one day...I told the principal. He didn't do shit. Kind of just left it...Yeah, he just left it."

The participants did not present these stories as bad experiences with particular teachers and principals in particular schools, rather they felt abandoned by the school system as a whole. Payton felt the system's anti-bullying efforts were meaningless, "Oh, and they have these non-bullying days with the pink shirt and stuff. They shouldn't even have that at that school, honestly." Aurora echoed these frustrations:

> And you know all those commercials that say anti-bullying free, zero tolerance for bullying and stuff [Pause]. Apparently, according to the school board, even said to our faces, those commercials aren't real. It's not a hundred percent bullying free, tolerance thing. I'm like, so you waste all that money making commercials for lies.

The escalation of bullying not only occurred across school journeys, but also within given interactions. This included the progression from name-calling and social exclusion to relational aggression, and, eventually, physical aggression and violence. For Cole this was "like getting into like an argument with somebody, and like it goes to physical…Somebody was arguing about me… I was just, I was trying to tell them about like the thing and then they got mad and they hit me...I hit them back, and then the teacher like stopped us." And, as Logan explained, this was a progression that happened over time, but could escalate quickly:

> I had a really, really bad temper. And this guy names [Name] that was very mean to me, and I didn't like him. He didn't like me. And so like, he told… He like said that I [punched him in the eye]. But I didn't. And then he like… So he kept on pushing me. And so I just punched him and I knocked him out. [Pause] Not that great.

Payton tried to avoid altercations, and thought "I'm not fighting, I'm not fighting. And they called me a pussy and stuff, and like whatever. And I started to leave and then she called me a slut and stuff." However, she eventually felt no other option but to fight to protect herself:

> I went to the principal once, Mr. [Name], because I had been threatened by her again and she pushed me. And then I said that I'm too scared to go out, like to walk to class to class because she was obviously going to threaten me over and over again…it wasn't just slapping me, but her hitting me and she kept hitting me, so I had to use self-defense and I got her off me.

Ariel, too, viewed her fights as self-defense and described one incident, "I fought yesterday because she punched me first. So obviously, I'm going to defend myself." Aurora, on the other hand, described this escalation to physical aggression as being pushed past her threshold of restraint:

> I was so done with the bullying to the point where I was just like, the next person who bullies me I'm going to punch in the face. And what do you know, he called me a bitch, I punched him in the face and broke his nose.

In the absence of support from teachers, principals, and school districts, the participants felt the need to protect not only themselves but also others they viewed as vulnerable. Aurora's example above of intervening herself rather than asking for help clearly depicts this protective nature, as does Ariel's example of when she defied a bully who was attacking a younger, smaller boy:

> Something just came to me. And I was like, what? And then I seen this girl, [Name]. And she wanted to fight him. And she was trying to punch him, or something, just… They were beefing it. And I just went up to her. And I pushed her. And I was like, look at the size of him. Leave him alone, right. And I just pushed her out of the way. And I

> was like, don't even try hitting him. If you want to hit him, hit me. I was like, pick on people your own size, right? …Everyone took her. Everyone just took her. Like, everyone dealt with it. Except me. I wouldn't take it, no. Screw that. Who are you? Like, no. Not happening. And I just pushed her out of the way. And I got in trouble and everything for helping him.

The insults and taunts both in person and on-line progressed, and the participants, who were victims of these assaults, retaliated with the only means they felt they had to defend themselves and others which was physical aggression. Schools intervened at the peak of this cycle when the bullying had escalated to physical aggression, not realizing that the participants who were now labelled as the bullies were reacting to the unrelenting and pervasive name-calling, relational aggression, and intimidation that had occurred over weeks and months.

Further complicating this process was the gain in social status and, thus, protection from further bullying, that resorting to physical aggression provided the participants. Payton recounted with pride how "winning" the fight after so many threats and lesser physical altercations, though not her intention, had helped her socially. Ariel was praised after one fight by a former rival,

> And then she just gave me props. I was like, okay. And I was like making fun of the girl that punched me, because all she did was hold my hair after she punched me. So I was just like making fun of her.

Ariel's experiences best demonstrate the cycle of bullying and the reinforcing nature of engaging in physical aggression. She clearly understood the cyclical process she was caught in:

> I used to make fun of a lot of people, actually, to be honest. I used to be mean to a lot of people. Until...I don't know, I just realized how like stupid it was. But kids were always mean to me. Right. So maybe I thought it was okay. But I just didn't take it. And I

> [unintelligible] her this time, because I don't know. We were young. And I like beat her up…because she was so mean to me.

And yet she could not ignore the power of using fighting as a skill to show her dominance:

> It's pretty funny, like why are you just pulling my hair? When I'm fighting someone, I want them to do other stuff. I want them to hurt me. If you're going to fight me, make it hurt. Don't just pull my hair…you know?

This cycle of bullying, in the eyes of participants, went unrecognized by school personnel who failed to help before the bullying escalated, as Payton so clearly explained:

> And I ended up having to move schools. She didn't have to move schools. I got suspended for like half the month. And I had to go home and stay home, and she got to go to school and have freedom yet she's the bully.

Despite the bravado of their tales, their claims of being fearless, and the apparent satisfaction gained from "winning" those fights, the participants plainly described the overwhelming stress of being trapped in the cycle of bullying. For Aurora it impacted her "focusing in class" and she "ended up going through so much depression [she] ended up cutting [herself]." Logan, too described feeling a depression that "still travels out into like [her] life now." Payton stopped going to school other than for one or two classes a day because she "was threatened" and was "too scared to go out, like to walk to class to class," recognizing bullying as the reason she "couldn't go to do [her] work and be a happy student." It seems bullying was a primary barrier to participants' learning and school success as assessed by Ariel, "like honestly, I'd be such a good student if kids just learned to shut up…if they learned that there's more to life than picking on people."

Identifying enemies and finding allies. In maneuvering any social system, it is important to determine who might be a support and who might be a barrier to gaining resources,

assistance, or understanding. This was true for the participants and their experiences with the complex social dynamics of schools. Given the distress participants were feeling due to bullying, deciphering who to turn to for help and support and who to avoid because they might make things worse was paramount. Unfortunately, there were no clear strategies for how to accomplish this, and any schema that was established did not apply to new settings as participants changed grades, schools, and circumstances.

In elementary school, the task of assembling allies and building defenses against enemies was relatively straightforward not only because the social interactions were simple but also because the sheer number of people to navigate was far fewer than in secondary school. Enemies were very clear—people who were mean, overly strict, and untrustworthy. For Damien, this delineation was very evident. When asked about his early school experiences at home, he said:

> Because in all honesty, I mean no offense by this, but only people who like would...Only people I would trust my life with. And even some people I would trust my life with would get to... I would tell that to.

According to Damien, teachers were simply not to be trusted because they could be "fraudulent" and "suspicious;" other teachers were not reliable because "they're always in some lounge somewhere doing something" or were "miserable…and just never lightened up" and so strict that school was "like freaking boot camp." Ariel had similar thoughts about teachers, and commented that "there was people who said they were supporting, but I didn't want to talk to them. I didn't trust them."

Allies, in contrast, were people who were interested and accepting, seeing beyond bad behaviour and treating student with kindness and respect no matter the circumstances. Several participants found allies in their teachers. Logan commented: "And there was this one teacher I

had in grade four…And we always called her 'the Wicked [Name].' But she was the awesomest teacher ever. Yeah, she was like my best friend."

For Ariel, having allies was obviously very meaningful to her, and her face lit up and a big smile spread across her face when she described one principal:

> She was like the best principal ever. I was always in her room. I know it sounds bad, but I was always in there to see her. I'd be bad on purpose just so I could go in there and see her. She was just so nice… Every time I'd get in trouble, she wouldn't make a big deal of it. She'd be like, oh, it's fine. Don't worry. Come work with me.

Logan and Ariel both stressed that their loyalty and affection for their allies also stemmed from an acceptance of their families and an extension of support beyond regular duties. Logan commented:

> We talked about my problems. She would help me with my homework a lot, even if I was in like… Well, I wasn't even in her class anymore. She still helped me a lot...Yeah. She got along with my mom too. And we'd bring my dog just so Ms. [Name] could see her.

Aurora, too, had support from a teacher that "wasn't hers…[but] helped her a lot [and] was honestly [her] favourite teacher there." As described above, Ariel would purposely "be bad" to be able to spend time with her principal, and she would also leave high school to return to elementary school to see another teacher:

> She was so nice to my friends. Like, she didn't ever tell on us… [and] she was always like nice, like with me and my family. And she always gave us advice. And she was always… Like, my Mom was always able to just cry and talk to her. And she'd always just listen.

Cole, like Damien, struggled to trust staff and to confide in anyone. He described a special relationship with one teacher that took a long time to establish:

> And yeah, he's...I don't know, I didn't really talk to him in like grade three, because I was only there for like…Yeah, I was there for like the year, but I don't know, I didn't really talk to too many teachers in grade three. So I don't know...I'm just not good at talking at adults sometimes…[but then] [Name] became a really easy person to talk to.

Thus finding allies in elementary school was the process of finding someone accepting, and forging a relationship that had meaning beyond helping with schoolwork or being empathetic. These allies were friends, confidantes, and kind supporters, who were all sorely missed when they were gone. Aurora "loved [her] kindergarten teacher. [Her] grade four teacher was awesome. Her name was Ms. [Name], [she] miss[ed] her." Similarly, Logan struggled when she had "to change principals when [she] got really close to [her] old one. And just like a new teacher came. And she wasn't very pleasant. So we didn't learn at all." Some losses were more traumatic; both Ariel and Aurora spoke about their "favorite" school ally being "murdered" and missing each of them terribly. Given the importance of allies and the effort it took to form those relationships, losing them, for whatever reason, was a difficult experience as was trying to replace them.

In high school, the identification of who was an ally and who was an enemy became more unclear. The criteria from before was the same, but with the added distinction of wanting to be heard and validated. The transition to high school, and subsequent loss of previous allies, was another strain, as was having to contend with so many more people and demands. Participants felt like they had less support and that schools, in general, had fewer resources and less time to deal with them as individuals, as supported by Damien's comments about teachers

always being in "lounges somewhere" and Aurora's feeling that secondary school teachers have more demands and less time to help students.

When these students did ask for help, they felt they were being ignored, or worse, blamed for the problem. When Aurora went to a teacher about being bullied she was told "that it wasn't all about [her]," which was clearly frustrating as she later exclaimed, "Freaking...And when a kid cries out for help, help the damn kid." Payton also talked to teachers about being bullied because she "didn't feel safe at all. And [she] told the teachers that [she didn't] feel safe. And they said 'Well, there's nothing I could do about it.'" Eventually, these students learned not to trust anyone. Payton argued that "principals would not do anything about it so…what's the point" of asking for help if "they don't help you or anything." She sighed as she said, "the principal blamed it on me. They said, well, that's not her problem. [Pause] He didn't do anything. He took [Name's] side…And then I felt like nobody was on my side." Logan simply stopped asking for help:

> I just stopped talking to people about my problems. And I didn't really open up to anybody. And I stopped trusting people because everyone was letting me down. And I got kind of upset about that… It just felt like I was trapped because I couldn't really trust anybody.

Aurora felt that she "wasn't even heard" and struggled with no support for a year:

> I don't know, I honestly didn't deal with it that well. That was the year that all I would do is sit in my room and cry. I wouldn't even talk to my mother about it...No, because nobody helped me at [that] school, I figured nobody was going to help me here.

She most aptly describes participants' wanting to be understood, respected, and validated:

> There is a lot of things that kids do go through, and you know, kids do have a voice. If they ask for help, give it to them. Don't just, you know, say you are and then walk away.

> Don't walk away from bad situations that kids need help in. You know, it's...School, is, yeah, it's school. You know, we are kids, we are, you know younger than adults, but we also do have a heart. We do have feelings.

In high school, the level of social struggles increased, as seen in participants' stories of bullying and in the loss of previous allies. Participants struggled without allies and, eventually, learned that few adults in schools would help them in any meaningful way; they opted to withdraw or find other means to help them traverse the complex social aspects of schools and schooling.

Navigating the tensions and contradictions in friendships. In any enduring social setting, it is expected and desirable to form friendships. For students, particularly adolescents, friendships can both foster and support positive school experiences. Indeed, related to the previous theme, friends can also be allies. The distinction here is in the instability and fickle nature of the friendships experienced by these participants. Unlike the enemies and allies described above who offered some stability in maintaining their assigned role, friends were not constant in the participants' lives. As they reached adolescence and entered high school, relationships became more complex. Conflicts, judgments, and struggles to set healthy boundaries all contributed to participants being confused and hurt by their friends.

Ariel was very aware of the change in friendships from elementary to secondary school, and mentioned that "high school, it's way different…like, your friends would just stop talking to you" for any perceived slight or shortcoming. Logan had similar experiences worrying about her friends' opinions and before mentioning any concerns she thought, "Well, I don't want people to know that I'm actually really upset inside because then that might change their opinion. And so, I just dropped it." For Payton, these snubs were largely a game and explained, "Somebody just looks for drama. That is what my ex best friend did. She just looked for drama." In this case

the "drama" was enough to end the friendship altogether. These comments hint at the underlying uncertainty felt by these participants, and also the irony of being judged by friends, as explained by Logan:

> Like, you'd be doing something, like skateboarding. And they'll be like, oh, that's not very cool. Like, you shouldn't be skateboarding because you're a girl. And then, so they'll be judging you on that saying that because you're a girl, you shouldn't be skateboarding. And yet, they tell you to be yourself all the time.

Logan also worried about the impact of sharing her struggles among friends:

> With me, it's just like I tell somebody my problems. And it's just like, oh, but then they have to live with knowing my problems. And that might put them in a depression. And so I just don't tell anybody my problems anymore… Like, as much as they all help you and they all tell you their problems and you tell them yours and they're so supportive…But at the same time, everything can also put you into depression. And it can also be a lot of stuff, just like stress wise.

Ariel, in contrast, did not worry about these issues, but recognized these that contradictions were a part of "fake" friendships and asserted that she would forego popularity for being true to herself:

> [Popular kids] are going to grow up with a bunch of fake friends while the real people have their real friends. And that's way better, to have a bunch of real friends or one real friend other than a bunch of fake friends… I'd rather be known as like real, like being myself and be hated for being myself than be liked for being someone I'm not.

Despite her efforts to "be real" and appear strong, Ariel's trying friendships did impact her in inescapable and substantial ways, as depicted in her description of her anxiety:

> And I got in a fight with this friend of mine earlier in the day. And we were just like not talking…and all this stuff. And then, everything was just going around the school. And I just was like so not ready to be at school. I just had this weird thing happen. Like, I was… My body was all stiff. And my arms were like this. Like, I couldn't move. And they were all like purple. And I was shaking. My body was tingling.

Aurora also described the unavoidable weight of

> having to deal with arguments from [her] friends the next day, and going home and realizing that it's not over, because you know, you have Facebook… you know, the doors not always shut. You always have some way of dealing with things when you're at home. Just because of the Internet, you have ways of having to talk to those people. So when I'm in a fight with my friend, I just don't go on Facebook, don't talk to her at school.

There were several instances of relatively minor judgments that escalated into significant conflicts and bullying. Payton described her experience with a friend-turned-bully: "My ex-best friend who claimed she was my best friend, she said that I got somebody sick but I didn't. And then she started saying that I'm going to beat you up and all of this other stuff." Logan, too, experienced a drastic change in a friendship:

> But me and my best friend started arguing…a lot. And then just a bunch [Pause] And then I got into a giant fight in the back of math class with my best friend. And it wasn't just a speech fight [Sigh].

Both Aurora and Logan tried to resolve conflicts with friends in the hopes of maintaining the relationship that was once so important and meaningful to them. Logan asked her friend, "'Why aren't you talking to me? What did [Pause] Did I do something wrong? Or do you just

not like something about me?' And she just didn't talk to me. She just walked away." Aurora also described a particularly complicated friendship that was dissolving:

> I'll message him on Facebook saying, you've been my best friend for how long, you can't just throw friendship away like that. Like we've been friends since kindergarten. Like, you're like a brother to me… And now he's best friends with my best friend. He's stealing my best friend away from me. And he has never even met her. They talk over Facebook and call each other.

Aurora's experience not only represents the dissolution of one friendship but the lack of loyalty in another. As much as having friends who were judgmental or antagonistic and hurtful was problematic, it was the betrayal that participants felt that seemed to resonate the most with them, and highlighted their distress and anguish over the disingenuous friendships. After one betrayal, Logan described her lack of trust:

> And it's just… It wasn't necessarily her backstabbing me. But she just made me see that anybody can turn on me at any moment. And it doesn't matter if they're a best friend, or just anybody. And so that kind of made me see things, like actually how they are instead of how they're explained to be.

Aurora was also betrayed by a friend, and described how angry she was:

> And then there's this girl who I went to school with who...I was good friends with her for a while. And she completely back stabbed me. She told everybody all my secrets after she was done just like...After a year of being my friend she just [Sigh]... I was livid with her. I'm like, oh my god, I never want to see your face again. I'm like, you ever show up near my house, you ever show up in my class again, I will punch you!

For Damien, the betrayal he felt from a group of students was incredibly salient. He talked little of friends and had only ever visited one person's house while he was in elementary

school. He spoke uncharacteristically quietly and stammered through the story of this person stealing his prized creation: "I thought they were my friends until one day they committed theft [Pause] And from that day forth I never mentioned their names again. Hence, I've forgotten all of them. Except [Name]'s, because she was the one who kept it." As described previously, Damien was fiercely private and rarely trusted others, judging from his demeanor and the eventual revelation of this event, which he described as his biggest secret, it was clear that this duplicitous friendship impacted him and his relationships with peers at school.

The most dominant experience of a stressful friendship was shared by Logan. She looked down as she explained, "I don't really tell many people, because I'm not very proud of it. Me and my best friend made a pact that we were going to commit suicide together." She went on to describe how she found this friend at school, pale and shaking after taking numerous prescription medications. Logan was clearly upset as she went on to explain: "I didn't want to lose her. Like, she's my best friend. And I would never think about hurting her. And I would never think about her hurting herself, because I cared so much about her." Although her friend was well enough to return to school weeks later, feelings of guilt and sadness were still strong as Logan talked about the experience and how it has impacted her at school. Sadly, this was the second time Logan had found a friend at school who had attempted suicide. Though she is still friends with both girls, Logan did comment about how much these experiences affected her own well-being, relationships with other friends, and success in school.

From these accounts, it is clear that participants' friendships were potentially conflictual, tense, fleeting, and without adequate boundaries. These students would have friends one day, and whether due to competition or misunderstandings, lose the same friend the next day. In fact, those friends sometimes became people to avoid because they were invalidating and disloyal.

Participants felt trapped between wanting acceptance, friendship, and support and wanting to avoid the stress and confusion of the conflict.

Schooling as tumultuous. The participants described the process and path of their schooling as disordered and inconsistent. Not only were their recollections fragmented, but those memories that were clear also expressed struggles with upheavals caused by multiple school and staff changes. The reasons for untimely school transitions and staff turnover were many—death, family instability, parent decisions, school policy—and compounded the strain of negotiating the natural changes in schools that are experienced by all students. For these students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, the lack of structure and stability was problematic at best. Furthermore, when students did manage to anchor themselves in a particular school, they were resistant to its climate which they perceived to be competitive and rife with inflexible policies and practices. Students may have been temporarily buoyed by their encounters with dynamic, kind, and responsive school staff, but they returned to feeling caught in the turbulence of schools when those connections were lost through natural or forced changes.

Disruptive school experience. Schooling, for many people, is a continuous path that can be used retrospectively to anchor memories, experiences, and, in many ways, entire childhoods. From kindergarten to graduation, schools are where children spend the most time outside of their homes and they can provide stimulation, constancy, and support, as well as an education. These participants, however, described their school journey as forgettable, disjointed, and unpredictable.

First, most of the participants had very few memories of early elementary school, despite the fact that they had only just transitioned to high school. Payton, Aurora and Cole could not remember the names of their schools or many details of their experiences there. Aurora said, “I honestly don’t know how many schools I’ve been to...I'm just like, too many…I just don’t

remember." Similarly, when asked about a particular school Cole responded, "Yeah. I don't know, I don't know what else with that school. I can't really remember too much." Cole later tried to trace his school path:

> I think I was there for grade one. And then in grade two I went [Pause] So [Pause] no [Pause] I went to [School] for kindergarten and grade two. And then maybe I went to [School] for grade one...And then in grade three I went to [School]...I don't know [Sigh].

The only memory Payton had prior to grade three was a racial slur aimed at her that was written across the school wall. She explained, "Lots of people hated me. I don't know why. And then my mom just had enough and she took me out of that school." Until grade three, school was largely forgettable. And as much as this seems like an absence of negative experiences, this does not compensate for spending three years, six hours a day, in a social system that had left no lasting impression.

From grade three onward, participants' memories became stronger, but, in general, they were negative and reflected struggles with numerous school transitions. Aurora commented,

> Yeah, but actually my grade five [Pause] or after grade six, I kind of [Pause] I don't know, my schools kind of swapped a lot… That [one] I stayed in for a while [Pause] when I had to go stay with my grandparents, and that's what school I went to when I lived with them.

Her home life was very unstable which directly impacted her schooling through many moves and school changes.

Ariel's experience was similar:

> I was always at [School] because my mom worked. So we always had to move. And I always went to different schools. But I always ended up coming back to [School]. And the only reason I stopped and having to come back and forth because there was [Pause].

> It was like you can't just keep coming back and forth, right? Like, I was always coming back and forth.

These school transitions created a fragmented and nebulous early school experience for all the participants except Damien, who was home-schooled until grade three. With each transition came new teachers, principals, classmates, environments and rules—and participants scrambled to adjust. Aurora and Payton both had difficulty with the disruption to their learning. Aurora said, "Sometimes I feel like I had to freaking redo a bunch of classes that I shouldn't have had to do, or grades that I shouldn't have to do… everybody was so immature. I felt like I was going back in time." Payton transferred mid-semester and felt

> really far behind...And I came to this school really late [Pause] So I was really behind. But I catched up on science a little bit and I'm retaking my test. I'm doing my work sheet, so just to get my grades up.

Logan mentioned that she attended one school for only three weeks "which was fun" but "pointless" because she was now three weeks further behind for her new school. For students who were already having difficulty with the academic and social demands of schooling, multiple transitions, which were also often untimely, only increased the strain on these students.

It was not only the academic changes that proved difficult for the participants, but also the social changes that came with a new school. Most of the participants lost connections with friends and staff who were meaningful anchors and supports. Ariel spoke about one school, "[here] no one wants to be my friend… I knew everyone at [my other school], right. So I would always have friends because I went to elementary school with people." Cole described a similar experience of starting high school with no friends, "Yeah, and then, plus, I went to this school only with like one person from my old school. Everybody else went to a different high school." Logan, too, described her pains in finding friends after changing schools:

> And then we moved. And then I was really sad about that because I wasn't allowed to go the high school that all my other friends were going to [Pause] I went into the new school in grade six. But I still didn't really make friends for a year.

For Cole, the social aspects of school were particularly stressful and taxing. He found talking to adults and making connections with his peers very difficult, yet he preferred to be around people. His most detailed memory of any school was his transferring to a new school mid-semester and arriving midway through a class:

> First day I was [Pause] I was kind of like, and I didn't know what to do [Pause] I guess I was nervous [Pause] I didn't know anybody or anything. And like...Yeah. And like when I went there, it was like [Pause] By the time I like got to the school it was probably like twenty minutes to recess, something like that [Pause] the teacher said like, 'Oh hi, Cole.' And like everybody said like, 'Oh hi, Cole,' because like, yeah. And like, it was a little bit before recess and somebody's like, 'Does anybody want to have Cole come play with them or something?' And then a few boys were like, 'Oh, we're going to be playing with a football outside.' And she's like, 'Do you want to go play with a few people outside?' And I'm like, 'Okay'. And so we went outside and we played. And I still know basically all those people in that same class.

During the interview sessions and all participant observations, Cole spoke very little and then only when spoken to, his typical response often being "I don't know." He could not remember the names of his schools or teachers yet his telling of the first day in that class was vibrant. He stumbled over his words, pausing several times, but his relief was well-depicted as he expressed appreciation for the social graces of his teachers and classmates in a lengthy and detailed account of one brief moment in his school journey. And those social graces that were demonstrated in a

small gesture gave him lasting friendships and stability in his school life, easing the disruption of his school changes.

Disruptions in schools were not only due to untimely moves but also due to other unavoidable upsets such as the transition to high school, and the loss of teachers and principals due to job changes, retirements, and deaths. Aurora and Ariel lost close relationships with teachers who were murdered, and Ariel also lost one with a teacher who "won the lottery and quit her job." Position changes are not uncommon or avoidable, but they do impact students. Both Damien and Cole described having a different Social Development teacher each year, and Damien further commented:

> Well, first off, half the time most teachers have to have…a lot of the teachers are either volunteers or substitutes. Like, I've been noticing that in [School]. And to be honest, I actually think they may be struggling financially with stuff, or whatnot.

For Damien, more stability among staff would "be rather useful, and reliable too. Organized and on time would equal a reliable staff," showing that the instability among teachers and other staff members did not go unnoticed.

Logan's description of losing friends mirrors her feelings about losing connections with school staff:

> She was like my best friend…And then I had to move, and she was crying. It really sucked. And I was like, I'll come visit before you retire…And so I never got a chance to go back there… And then there was Ms. [Name]…And she was really upset when I had to go too, because I had really strong bonds with all the teachers…Yeah, so I kind of lost touch with her.

For Logan, who "was mainly in the office" during her school days, the kindness and respect she was shown by these teachers was always appreciated, regardless of her behaviour.

The disarray of participants' school journeys was exacerbated by absences due to suspensions, stress, and/or avoidance. All of the participants except Damien had been suspended at some point as a consequence for their misbehaviour, usually for fighting. Cole was sent home for "getting mad" and hitting someone who struck him first, though this suspension only lasted one day. Logan described being frustrated during a longer suspension,

> I wasn't allowed to go to school for a week. And my friend [Name], that lived like a street away from me…she just gave me my homework every day. Half the time, I'd be like…I really didn't want to get behind in my homework. So I'd be on the computer, researching what we were doing…and stuff. Or I'd be just sitting there.

She noted a pattern when school was discouraging of "not really acting the same. I get [Pause] I give attitude to teachers. And then I get sent to the office. And then I get suspended. And I end up skipping. And it's not that great." Ariel, too, was suspended several times and was also often late or absent from class:

> Like what school is like, like with bullying and drugs and how your family life can affect you. Because [it] affected me so bad in school…Especially at [School]. Like, you look at my classes and how much times I've been late or I've come to school, it's crazy how much.

She clearly remembered one specific semester where she missed 132 classes, amounting to at about a third of her classes. Both Logan and Ariel understood that their absences made school life more difficult, but were not aware of other means to ease their stress.

Indeed, for most of these students, the culmination of this disruptive experience included being expelled from school, leading directly to their placement in an alternate program. As described above, Payton was suspended for "half the month" after a physical altercation and eventually expelled and forced to transfer schools. Aurora, too, was expelled after being so

disheartened by on-going bullying that she "punch[ed] the next person who bullied her." The problem with these expulsions was that not only did students feel the injustice of being expelled for "self-defense" after their pleas for support were ignored, but they were also excluded from any opportunities to learn. Payton and Aurora waited weeks before finally being placed in a new school while Ariel's wait was much longer:

> And they just kicked me out and told me I wasn't going to go back. Like, my stuff is still there [Pause] Yeah. They liked kicked me out. They wanted me to leave. They've always wanted [Sigh] They were going to just let me stay there until a [alternate program] was able to take me. And there wasn't an [alternate program] for a bit. And then I just got kicked out of school [Pause] I don't know. No one helped me. I did nothing for two months. It was pretty dull. Kind of fun, getting to sleep in and stuff…not having to be at school. But then I missed it.

In these participants' school journeys, academics and focusing were already a challenge without lengthy gaps in instruction due to absences, suspensions, and expulsions. This is not to say that students were rejecting schools, in fact five of them mentioned a particular school as a safe haven or a "home" school; this was the anchor and shelter of their school journey that was necessary because the rest of their school journey and experience was so tumultuous, in part due to the disciplinary practices of schools.

Responding to the ecology of schools. It may seem that students with social, emotional, and behavioural issues simply lose interest in schoolings. However, this does not seem to be the case for these participants. Their seeming lack of compliance, task completion, and attendance was not a matter of disengagement, but rather a response to the basic ecology of schools. Students were processing how they were positioned within the microsystems of schools, including interactions, practices, and processes. Students, then, were dynamic parts of a

complex, diverse, and competitive system that formed the primary environment in which they learned and developed. Their processing of their position within this ecology, however, sometimes resulted in behaviours that questioned and resisted the very nature of schools.

For example, with regard to resisting schools, several participants' mentioned schools that schools as whole should not even exist. Aurora exclaimed about one school

> I really don't care, because this school sucks. [Pointing to one school on her map] I hate this school with a passion…I didn't like that school...I didn't want to be there. [Pause] I absolutely hated that school. [Chuckles] It is a shit school, I can tell you that much.

Payton described similar sentiments:

> That school shouldn't even be a school. It should be a private school, the way they treat children there… I hate this school, honestly. It shouldn't even be a school…They should knock it down… I mean, if that was the last school on earth I wouldn't...and I care about my grades. A lot of stuff, I wouldn't even go to that school if it was the last school on earth.

The rejection of these schools seemed to be based on a feeling or impression the student had built in part from the appearance or reputation of the school. Arial asserted about one school, "I never wanted to go to that school. Even in elementary school I knew that was a bad school." Ariel rejected another of her schools because it looked like a "classy" school rather than a "creative school [where] kids had fun…because they had paintings on the wall outside…not just gray and blue and green." Similarly, Aurora talked about her reaction to seeing her school for the first time:

> [Mom] takes me to go sign me in to the school. I look at the school. And as soon as we get on the grounds I'm like, this looks like a private school...I'm like, I don't want to go here...I don't know, because I guess like the look of it just gave me a weird feeling about

> like how the students would act. Because I mean, it looks like a total school that, you know, all the preppy little bastards would go to...Well, and they did. They acted exactly how I thought they would.

Her first impression of another school was no more positive:

> I'd go to the front of the school, and I felt like I was in a dungeon. Bars on the windows. I'd be like, I don't like this window. Because our classroom windows were just plain, you know...Had bars on them. I'm like, well then. I'm like, that's not weird at all. I don't like this school. I never will like that school, ever.

Those initial perceptions and feelings about certain schools were powerful and enduring, and shaped the participants' interactions within these imposing environments.

Students not only opposed the physical spaces but also the stifling nature of schools and traditional models of education. In another manner of resistance, participants refused to attend or follow the rules because they felt like they were not being honoured and respected; they simply did not agree with the methods of teaching and discipline in those schools. Aurora, Ariel, and Payton would skip the classes with rules or teaching practices they did not agree with or teachers who they did not like. Damien's greatest aggravation was with the content and pace of his classwork:

> Yeah. Work-wise they actually kind of held me back to grade three and whatnot, and that really pissed me off. Heck, we even got into ridiculously long debates over that [Deep sigh] Like I was stuck having to do grade one, two, three work when I was having to do grade freaking seven!

He was astutely aware of other instances where students, rather than being held back, were given adaptations and more time. He commented that he strained "to go at the pace of everyone else…[which] was kind of annoying" and was very proud about his accomplishments now:

"Well, it's been pretty cool. I'm finally able to do math and such that is equal to my grade now. Finally, after all of those years I was held back."

Several others also had difficulty with the pace of instruction, especially when they transitioned to secondary school where, according to Ariel, teachers did not help as much "because they're worrying about a bunch of other stuff." She explained the difference:

> [In high school] the teachers just didn't teach me properly. And I didn't like going there because I didn't understand it and because the teachers suck at teaching…The elementary teachers, they like take it slow and make sure you understand it. The teachers don't even explain it to you in high school. They just tell you what you're doing, and that's it. Like I remember, in elementary school, they would sit there and explain it to me until I understood it. Them, they don't. And I ask for help so much times. I embarrass myself in front of the whole class just to figure out what I need help with and stuff.

This difference definitely impacted Ariel's learning and achievement: "Learning was easier in elementary school than it was for me in high school. High school was way harder for me to learn things. That's why I failed like three classes. [In] elementary, I never failed anything." Aurora offered a specific example to demonstrate the arduous demands of secondary school:

> Like it doesn't help like, for instance, my science teacher, she just gave us a math booklet that we had to finish in two days. Like it has like, ten pages on it. We had to finish it in two days, then we had to mark it. And then we had, the next day, we had...Or, yesterday we had a review package that we had to finish that day. And then today we have our test. That's not enough time for some kids to, you know, actually pick up the learning and soak it into their brains.

Coupling these demands with the difficulties in focusing expressed by Logan, Aurora, Ariel, and Cole, achieving academic success is, no doubt, extremely challenging.

For Aurora the fast pace of instruction was even more daunting given the instructional strategies and styles of teachers who were "assholes" and "sucked" because "all they do is basically give you a freaking handout, and tell you to read it and learn… And I'd ask for help and they'd be like, 'Okay, I'll be there in a minute' and never show up." She also wanted more differentiated instruction rather than just

> Talking, and talking, and talking [without doing] anything on the board or anything to show visual learning… they're just like, one voice. They don't like form actions or anything. They don't move their hands. They just stand there and go, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

It did not help that the curriculum was meaningless and repetitive to her:

> It's getting boring. Like, I honestly feel like with science and stuff that I'm just learning the same crap over, and over, and over again...Like the body system. I feel like, okay, I learned that in grade six, seven, eight. I don't know, I'll probably learn more in nine, ten, and eleven. [Pause] It's just like, when am I going to need to know about the body system? Like I'm not planning on becoming a nurse.

Cole stressed the importance of "good" teaching and receiving extra help in secondary school, but his experiences were mostly positive. Cole offered a description of his Math teacher as an example of a memorable teacher:

> Whenever like she sees if I'm not sure if I'm... when I am like scrambling around trying to figure out what to do, she'll like come and ask if I'm like doing okay…and she'll like explain it all in a very easy way that you can understand it.

Aurora also described a teacher that "stood out" as positive. Her French teacher "actually taught us stuff. Taught us tricks how to remember things...For instance with the alphabet in French, she made a song out of it. And she made it like the Flintstone theme." Participants also commented

on the importance of story-telling in teachers. For Cole, this was the key trait in his favorite teacher because "he has a lot of stories, and like when he talks he has very interesting stories." Damien commented about one teacher,

> He also puts a lot of personality into what he does and whatnot. I like that. Like he's teaching from the heart...Well, he often makes an analogy of the current subject by comparing it to something he has experienced before in his life. [Pause] Now that I think back on it, he also doesn't rely as much on the book either.

Aurora supported the need for personality and creativity in teaching, and explained:

> Like my English teacher, he's good at talking and teaching the class. Because he actually, like, he'll like raise his voice to try to get their attention. And he'll be like all dramatic about it. And it's just like, okay, I see how it is… Because he just...I don't know, he's funny. He makes class, you know, into a way that learning can be like joking around. But, you know, you're actually getting it into your head.

For these participants, the teaching style and efforts to support student learning could counter the demanding and difficult curriculum of secondary school.

These students also questioned the climate of competition and pressure to perform in secondary schools. For some, it was a general feeling that they had to be unflawed, as Payton explained, "It's more like, you have to be good and you have to be perfect to be at school." Ariel agreed, "Like, kids are always pressured to be like perfect, you know. And that's why a lot of kids are like sad these days, because they're always pressured to be like perfect." Logan best described this experience:

> It's just like the pressure of all the homework, or the pressure of all. [Pause] Like, you want to be [Pause] You want to impress your mom. You want to impress you dad. You want to impress the teacher, so you try to do good. But as you're trying to do good,

> you're kind of not really doing that great because it's just like you're worrying about impressing people. But at the same time, you're kind of failing at it. And it's just getting really difficult.

Damien attributed his behaviour to this pressure, and said that he "got overwhelmed rather easily...[and] possibly [his] immaturity back then was [him] lashing out because of such...Resulting in [his] lashing out in forms of immaturity and mischievous actions."

The pressures to perform were compounded by the sternness of teachers and the importance placed on achieving certain grades. Damien commented about one teacher: "Well, first off he's ridiculously strict. Like geez, it's like being in a freaking boot camp. Heck I'd rather be there than freaking have him around...Well, all I can say is that he's ridiculously strict." Payton agreed and forced herself to "rush to class even if [she had] miserable days because the teachers were really strict." Damien preferred teachers who he viewed as being "rather encouraging [and] stand[ing] by their rules yet still encourage[ing] people. Like instead of just going with the one thing they're able to be flexible and whatnot." Several rules were described as harsh because they were enforced outside of class time or by teachers unknown to the students, as Aurora described:

> Some of the rules, some of the teachers, you know, they can piss you off... For instance, there's a teacher at our school, he's not even one of my teachers. And if I get caught, you know slipping a word up in the hallway, he'll be like, ten or fifteen, which is ten push-ups, or fifteen minutes after school. And I'm like, you're not even my teacher, so shut the hell up. And it's lunchtime, or after school, you're not the boss of me.

The overwhelming pressure to achieve was also described by most of the participants. For Cole it was being overcome with large projects because "it's hard for [him] to think about

something and then do it…because [he has] so much things [he] has to think about and [he'll] forget stuff easily." Logan offered the following example of feeling pressured:

> Because everyone in high school is like, oh, what did you get on the test? Oh, what did you get? I got an A plus. What did you get? You're sitting there with a C. And then you're just like, oh, I got a B. Or hi, I got an A too…And it's just like because of everything else that's pressuring you, you're forgetting about the important things. And you end up getting a lower grade because you're worrying about other stuff.

Aurora had similar thoughts:

> Having to study so much for those little tests that have so much of your mark, help you pass, it's stressful. Because I mean, you know, you want to get a good grade. You want to pass school. You don't want to have to repeat a grade. So you're just having to focus and focus, and focus, and focus. And you have other things on your mind [Sigh] like trying to focus so hard on that test, and then you know, it comes and you get it back. And you're so like edgy about your grade, and you're just…Yeah, it's just like, I'm scared to look at my grade. Uh oh, what did I get, what did I get?

With the numerous learning objectives in schools, including those involving citizenship, interpersonal skills, life skills, and socioemotional awareness, it seems that achievement in core academics is still the task that is given the most weight and focus in secondary school, even in alternate programs.

Repeatedly, these participants stressed their motivation to do well in school and understanding of the relationship between school and future success, but they also stressed the need for time to decompress and escape from the unremitting academic burdens of school. Unfortunately, most participants argued that this was exactly what was lacking in their school experiences. For Ariel, this was simply a lack of space. She argued "like, there's isn't no

[Pause] not much anywhere to go. It's either on the first floor or on the second floor. Like, there really isn't anywhere you can go and chill in the school." Damien suggested that although there is "more freedom [and] they allow you to walk in the halls and whatnot," he is frustrated that his primary means of relaxing is constricted. He complained:

> One thing I just cannot get over in this school is they banned gaming. They banned gaming of basically all forms in this school. And in the library...And the computer labs are never open, which is not cool. Like seriously guys, why? Lunch is about eating. It doesn't take an hour for someone to eat their damn lunch.

Even in elementary school his relaxation was thwarted because only "kids of certain grades could go on [the swings] on certain days." For Cole, playing sports at lunch was an important way to socialize and "get out aggression" while Aurora and Logan used creative arts like drawing, playing music, and singing, to escape from the stress of school. Still, this was not quite enough for Aurora: "God, I so miss recess. I miss having twice a day where you could just go outside and not worry about school. Now it's just once a day, and now it's like, oh."

During observations and data collection, all participants demonstrated good task endurance, work effort, and desire to do well at the job at hand. They all talked about wanting to graduate, having a future, wanting to get good grades, and gaining a sense of purpose through school. What was clear, however, was that they simply felt that school was not set up to help them achieve these goals. Furthermore, due to a fast-paced curriculum and school "getting harder and harder," the mounting pressure to be "perfect" and achieve eventually exceeded participants' ability to cope, and they struggled to find activities and enough time to unwind.

Exploring ways to cope with stress. Participants' accounts of the stress that they experienced throughout their school lives were pervasive and poignant. The stress that they felt impacted how they interacted with and responded to their environment. And when these stresses

seemed to exceed their abilities to cope they tried various strategies to alleviate their ensuing negative emotions. It is not surprising, then, that a significant theme in the lives of the participants was their exploration of ways to cope with stress—both positive and negative. These students described activities in and out of class, whether they were related to academics or not, as useful in proactively addressing the strain and pressure of school. Moreover, in an effort to solve problems, these participants sought advice and support from people who would help trouble-shoot or boost their mood. When the supports simply were not enough to ease the feelings of worry, fear, sadness, and hopelessness, these students used self-harm, illicit substances, and avoidance to cope as best they could, but these strategies often lead to more stress and negative impacts on their well-being.

Using activities to decompress. Participants described various activities that they enjoyed engaging in to cultivate enjoyment and stress-relief. They spoke of field trips, projects, extra-curricular activities, and creative arts as being important ways of dealing with their stress.

As mentioned previously, many of the students could not remember any details of their early school experiences; however, field trips were an exception. Cole, who struggled the most to recall his early school life, described in detail one field trip to a petting zoo and pumpkin farm. As he discussed his interactions with a baby goat, and the pumpkin that he chose to take home, he smiled and his speech quickened and become more animated. He also recalled another memorable field trip:

> One field trip we went to an island, like camping basically. And we went for a hike, like the first day. And that was a really fun hike, because like the whole year, the field trips we'd do hikes. And then around the end of the year we did like a really big hike, and that was really fun.

Ariel, too recalled a field trip that she "was so excited for…[but she] didn't get to go…because [she] was bad. [She] messed it up [her]self." She commented that students could earn stars if they "did something good so they could earn like a trip somewhere." For Ariel, the field trips were seen as rewards and privileges that needed to be earned, and she was disappointed when they were lost.

Other school events were also very important to participants. Aurora participated in numerous school events, including talent shows. Though she described the anxiety of performing, her pride in her achievement was evident:

> We like finished the song...I looked at her, I'm like, bleh. And I ended up winning. It was so awkward. I'm like, okay, I say, okay...And I got first place with my friend. And I'm like, because me and my friend are in the same class, so the principal called our names on the announcements to come get our prize. It was a little ribbon and then we got to pick from a DS, an iPod, and…I still have it today.

Cole remembered sports day and how he felt "good about that" because he was chosen as a team leader, making school full of "excitement…because like there's always something to do." Damien also commented that the business of school helps with stress because "being bored all the time makes [him] feel kind of sad." More importantly, Damien gained a sense of pride and accomplishment from his grade seven graduation, which he described as "actually great." For Damien, this was one of the only detailed positive events he recounted.

Several participants talked about using art as a means of relaxing and coping with stress. Aurora delighted in "drawing, painting...and some sculpting with like clay and stuff," giving her creations to family members as gifts. Logan commented that when she was stressed, she "just needed time to [herself]… And that's when [she] started drawing. And [she] taught [her]self how to draw and just… It just kind of took [her] mind off a bunch of stress…it would just take

[her] mind completely off things." Ariel, too, liked to draw, and particularly appreciated when these activities were incorporated into schoolwork: "I like doing projects…Like drawing and having to figure everything out and stuff.…I like the creating part more than the planning part." To her, artwork even shapes her opinion of schools themselves, seen in her unfavorable view of a school's renovations:

> Now, it just looks like a classy school. It doesn't look like a creative school. [Pause] Like, it just looks like a normal school. Like before, our school didn't look as like… It kind of just looked like [Pause] creative. Like, it looked like kids had fun there…because they had like paintings on the wall outside and [Pause] I don't know. Now, it's just like gray and blue and green [Exhales] gray and green.

Students also emphasized the need for physical activity for pleasure and stress-relief. Damien's joy came from the simply pleasure of playing on swings, while for Logan, it was playing the drums for the school band and competing in numerous school sports:

> I was super-athletic. I was on the high jump team for track and field. And I got really good at that…I [also] won first place in one of my cross country things. And there was 250 kids running. And I won first place out of all of them…I was on every single sport on the track and field team in [School]. And I was really athletic, because that's the way I got my steam out.

She now uses wrestling, skateboarding, and physical stunts—similar to parkour— to vent energy. For Cole, sports have a similar function: "Well, you know how to like accept whether you win or lose and if you're not good with that. That way you can be less aggressive."

All of these creative art and physical activities were specifically identified as ways to escape the stress of school, and their importance was clear. Students also talked about the importance of being given time to engage in unstructured activities of their choice, and saw

recess and lunch time as extremely important in terms of allowing them a break from school. They also talked about the importance of available activities, safety, and security, which they thought were paramount to have available during this time. Damien exemplified this need in his comments about playing video games at lunch: "Like the lunchtime's about relaxing and getting in like...yeah, so you don't feel overwhelmed when you go back to class."

Aurora had similar feelings about the need for recess:

> Because, I don't know, it just gave you, you know, more time to hang out with your friends. And you didn't have to worry about getting your work done at that moment. You could just go outside and play and do whatever…It'd get a lot of stress off these high school students and make them less grouchy.

Whether the activities were planned, structured or purely for leisure, time to relax was crucial to these students. As Damien explained:

> A critical [school] event was my struggling. [Pause]It was rather [Pause] It actually held me back mentally a bit too...And it made me feel kind of trapped for a period of time, which is why I'm glad there is so much freedom during lunch time… [At] my previous school [there] was lack of freedom. I couldn't really do anything, with the exception of playing games every now and then as a break. But, that was pretty much it. And that was only because I got so stressed out very easily back then.

For students who struggle with social, emotional, and behavioural demands of school above and beyond academic demands, reprieves from the intensity of school are paramount. Both structured and unstructured activities provided opportunities to retreat from stress and to manage feelings of being overwhelmed.

Seeking functional supports. The importance of relationships is clearly demonstrated in previous themes; participants included identifying enemies and finding allies and the crucial

nature of friendships, no matter how confusing, as part of the social process of school. Relationships also acted as buffers to stress in the form of functional support, which differs from previously described themes. Specifically, enemies and allies have fixed roles, and based on their experiences, participants categorized people as one or the other, and then acted accordingly. Whereas an ally or friend was a person with whom the participant forged a meaningful and mutual relationship, functional supports were different in that they were actively sought out as a means to cope with stress and emotions rather than to gain companionship and camaraderie.

Several participants sought assistance and support from adults in their schools. This, again, was not an alliance, but a use of various people to help manage their stress. Ariel said, "a counselor, a child care worker, that always like helped me and always like cope and everything. And yeah, she just like helped me. She was really good." Cole mentioned several adults who served this purpose. There was one counselor who, although he could not remember her name or much about her, helped him often:

> It was a woman. She was like...She was really nice, like she was really nice. And I don't know, sometimes when I would get in trouble, like she would talk to me, and like she made me feel like I wasn't always in trouble.

She was empathetic and available, like another teacher Cole often turned to:

> He was a teacher…And I would go there in the mornings for breakfast club...Sometimes like I was in class, sometimes like I would... Because he was a counselor…and sometimes I would be able to like see him if I'd get a field ticket… Anyways, so like, you know, I'd get mad. And whenever I was like getting mad, he would always like talk to me about stuff and like that. So eventually like by like grade four he was a real easy person to talk to.

Cole also mentioned two principals and other teachers who were "nice" and "became really easy to talk to" when he was "getting mad or frustrated" because "they all like...they listen a lot, and that's good." He appreciated having "like people you can actually talk to. So you're not, you're always like, just stressed or anything…Maybe if like you talk to like a counselor and you have low self-esteem, and they talk to you about self-esteem. Or confidence."

These social supports also came from support staff and even from secretaries and custodians. Logan described one relationship:

> The janitor…just like boosts up your mood. If you're upset, he'll be like [Pause] He just like pulls you aside and he like talks to you about your problems and everything, and tells you how to do things. And just like what you could do to fix that.

The participants also mentioned friends as functional supports. In this role they acted as advisors and defenses against bullying. Aurora talks about her having her anxiety get "worse and worse and worse," lamenting that during that time she "had no friends." Talking about her experience at one school, her need for support through friendships was clear:

> They acted exactly how I thought they would…I don't know, they had...Just the bullying, I guess. They'd act like they were some rich kids with all this money and could do whatever the hell they pleased…then I met my really good friend [Name] there, which I guess that was a good thing. There was only two people that I met here.

She explained that friends help

> You know, if you're feeling down they could like make you laugh or something… [For example], I was having a bad day…And then my friend comes up to me and he's like, don't be such a mopey little butt head. He's just like, you're beautiful, so put a smile on your face.

For Cole, friends helped him with "common sense. Like to make sure like, you know, whether this is good or bad..." and for Damien "Yeah, (friends) relieve a lot of my stress. Yeah, like I can talk to them and whatnot." Logan mentioned how her friend helped specifically with her mood, "My friend [has] helped me through a lot. I'm not as depressed anymore… she just boosts up my mood. She just… When I'm around her, I don't really worry…" Indeed, the group of friends students kept could provide protection against or prevent bullying, according to Ariel, who would preferentially socialize with particular friends and groups just for this reason.

These relationships provided support while contending with the stresses of school. When talking about supports she had in school, Aurora answered, "It's mostly just, you know, having good relationships with people, like teachers included…I realized I haven't been getting bullied as much."

Talking to adults and peers was mentioned as a way to calm down, problem solve, and go through a healthy decision making process. Social relationships with peers were also preventative in terms of buffering the participant against bullying and therefore reducing stress from social conflicts. Essentially, the participants found safety in numbers.

Recognizing poor coping skills. There are different ways to cope in situations of extreme stress. Although using positive activities and seeking functional social supports were largely positive methods of handling stress, the majority of the participants' coping mechanisms would be considered maladaptive, and the participants themselves recognized their struggles. Logan commented that she "wasn't able to handle much stress, at all. And it would just… It made [her] school life way harder than it should have been." Ariel agreed:

> [School is] just stressful. I always like have to breathe and just relax, because I know that I can't punch everyone in the face that makes me mad, so…or annoys me or gives me a wrong look. So I've got to just deal with it.

As mentioned previously, Damien, too, was easily overwhelmed and said it resulted in his "lashing out in forms of immaturity and mischievous actions." Damien further noted that "the reason why that's the case was cause I wasn't taught...most of the time the reason would be because I wasn't taught to handle the...certain situations." Coping skills, then, were something in which he needed direct instruction, and that Cole felt he had gained: "I was there because I had anger management... So I'll get mad easily sometimes [but school was] where it helps you cope with things in life…Now I don't get mad too easily anymore."

Participants also tried to minimize their struggles, downplaying the impact they had on their school lives. In speaking about feeling misunderstood and having her own experiences undervalued, Ariel said:

> My attitude, I've been like through so much I've been just starting to not really care anymore. Like, I don't care if people don't like me anymore. I used to like cry. And I used to get so upset about it. But I'm so just used to it, I don't even care.

Aurora spoke about one of her close friends committing suicide and "knowing that she'd be so disappointed in me…but whatever…life's a bitch." It is clear that the tensions of school were negatively impacting the participants, but in the absence of adequate supports and strategies for coping they simply tried to "pretend everything was fine," as Logan explained.

Substance use was seen as a way not only to handle stress but to gain acceptance of peers or people with social status. All the female students spoke of their use of alcohol to relax or gain acceptance, "Well, I blaze. I blaze every day. Not like that, like MDMA. I don't do it every weekend. Like, some weekends. [Pause] But…I don't plan on doing it a lot." She continued to explain, "What's the point of being clean if you're just going to get stressed out and do it again? Like, I wouldn't even try being clean." Logan described using drinking as a coping strategy quite vividly:

> A bunch of reality hit me, I guess. And it's just like, basically things aren't going that great. And then it's just like, your life is going to be shitty. [Pause] And it's just voices in my head putting me down… And I just kind of solved it with drinking…and self-harm. And yeah, it's just [Sigh] not that great of a time...It just takes my mind off things. Like, I don't want to think about it.

Logan's description of engaging in non-suicidal self-harm was similar to the experiences of each of the female students. Ariel commented that she "cut herself" because she lacked "confidence" whereas Aurora explained she cut herself when she was feeling overwhelmed and lost:

> [Sighs] That school was just [Pause] This year my bullying got even worse than [School] And I ended up going through so much depression I ended up cutting myself. [Sigh] It was more so just I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to go to or anything. I had enough of everything…The first time I ever cut because of getting so [Pause] So many negative things in my head from bullies, and you know, not being very positive about myself. That's something that [Pause] you know, it scars you for life, so [Exhales deeply] Like your arms will never be the same.

For Logan, this strategy for coping simply lead to more stress because "it's just worriness and pressure, because it's like if I did cut the night before, it would be like, oh, I have to wear a [long] sweater."

Most participants also attempted to use avoidance coping to deal with stress. This included social withdrawal, skipping classes, or simply not attending school. Ariel said that because of "what school is like, like with bullying and drugs and how your family life can affect you…That's why I never went to school…I was always away. I missed like 132 classes in one semester." Aurora coped with her anxiety by avoiding school, saying "I had a really bad anxiety

attack... I went home and didn't go to school the next day. I kind of just didn't do anything for a while." Also Aurora was not attending certain classes, "I still don't go to English right now though. Because [my ex is] in there. I'm scared that if I go in there I'll just bawl my eyes out, and I don't want him to see that." Payton used a similar strategy to deal with school stress:

> And then when the drama started coming in, and the bullying started coming in, I kind of like skipped school and just stayed home. I'd go to some classes and then go home [Pause]. Usually I went to just the two morning ones. And then went home at lunch or something. And then the rest of October, I think I didn't go to school much because I was threatened.

Logan went to school, but simply withdrew from others and would be "acting all happy when, deep down inside, [she] was crying…and so [she] just [didn't] tell anybody [her] problems anymore."

Ultimately, students' stress did not improve and this impacted their well-being. Cole, Damien, Ariel, and Aurora all spoke about having anxiety, with the two girls explicitly described the physical symptoms and "attacks" they experienced at school. Logan, too experienced such anxiety:

> I have anxiety issues where like if something is stressing me out or if something is like paranoiding me, I'll get like a giant, harsh pain right in the middle of my chest. Just like, I'd end up [Pause] I've been [Pause] It's been so bad, I ended up crying because of it...Because I'm trying to impress everybody. And because the stress of school would give me anxiety. And then that would be hard for me to work because of it.

Payton, Logan, and Aurora also gave detailed accounts of their struggles with depression. Aurora said that because of bullying she went "through a lot of depression. [She's] now on antidepressants because of it." Payton said,

> I also have depression. So usually I'll be like, not wanting to go to school but that wouldn't be because of the school [Sigh] it's just like one day I'd be like so like tired and stuff. And the next day I'll be like up and I'm like, yay school! Yeah.

For Logan, her depression was more ubiquitous and integrated into her friendships:

> Like today, we were kind of like depression buddies, I guess [Pause] we were kind of just like 'fuck up' buddies, because we're both screwed up. And like, we always mess up with some stuff. And it's just like, yeah, we always like [Pause] We're always sad together.

Her depression progressed even further as she described the shame and guilt she felt for having a suicide pact with another friend. She reiterated that her life was meaningless and worthless and that "she just didn't care." As much as students spoke of managing their struggles, it was clear that poor coping skills and the stress of school contributed to their significant mental health concerns—enough to warrant intervention from professionals outside of the school.

From elementary school to their current placements in school, the participants searched for ways to cope with the strains and pressures of school life. Some of their methods were positive, prosocial, and effective, such as using people as functional supports, and using activities or creative mechanisms as coping mechanisms. Others had negative consequences such as skipping class, thus increasing gaps in their learning from absences, having high levels of stress from reactions to self-harm and substance use, and using social withdrawal to avoid feelings of hopelessness and separation. Indeed, all of the participants spoke of how stress affected their well-being, describing experiences with anxiety or depression that they attributed to the impact of schooling. In general, participants argued that more understanding of the true difficulties of their lives, and direct teaching of coping skills would alleviate much of their worries and tensions.

Integration of Themes

The previous sections offered a narrative of participants' lived experiences that spans their school lives as they related to major themes. For ease of presentation, these themes were separated and interrogated individually. This should not be taken to mean that these important experiences were somehow removed from other experiences or positioned outside the systems and environments with which the student interacted. The images drawn by the participants encapsulate relationships among the themes induced from their experiences and are used to support the analysis of the relationships among the primary themes and subthemes, respectively.

Figure 2: Intersection of School Turmoil, Social Processes, and Identity Development

Figure 2. Payton's depiction of a negative school climate that contributed to her experiences with bullying. The injustice and lack of support is clearly demonstrated by her comments, and the crossing out of the entire school.

Linking primary themes. The major themes that emerged from the participants' descriptions of their school lives are connected and highlight the complex nature of schooling and of the emotional and behavioural struggles of students in alternate programs. In examining Payton's drawing of her least favourite school in Figure 2, she clearly shows how her experiences with bullying, feelings of isolation, and rejection of her school as a whole were connected—all of which contributed to her distrust of school staff, peers, and ultimately contributed to her school avoidance and depressive symptoms.

Similarly, Figure 3 represents Logan's struggles in one period of her schooling. As she tried to establish and maintain the friendships that were clearly very important to her, she felt the need to "pretend" to be someone other than who she was and who she was hoping to become. The stress of these pressures and the discomfort of being inauthentic were overwhelming and she used self-harm to try and counter these negative emotions. In the end, the desire for acceptance, the guilt for being false, and the shame related to her self-harm behaviours created a cycle that she attributes to her insomnia, poor school performance, and feelings of hopelessness. Again, this image captures the relationship among three of the major themes and highlights that the experiences and, thus, the needs of these participants are significant and complex.

Figure 3: Intersection of Identity Development, Social Processes, and Coping with Stress

Figure 3. Logan's depiction of the effects of inter- and intra-personal stress. She shows insomnia, drug use, false appearances, depression, and self-harm as related to her struggles.

These detailed analyses of participants' experiences highlight the complexity of their school lives. Taking a broader perspective across participants' lives shows similar connections among the major themes. For example, the tumultuous school journeys—during which participants experienced disruption, injustice, loss, and isolation—were full of stressful events and interactions with which the students had to cope. Whether they sought supports or employed poor coping strategies, these students explored ways to cope with disruptions, unfair expectations, and unwelcoming environments. These changes were often out of the control of the participants or they had little say in the decisions being made about their schooling, which resulted in a loss of liberties and established social groups that gave them a sense of self. Each new environment then had to be carefully evaluated by the student to identify who might be an ally or a stable and accepting friend to help navigate this unfamiliar and complex social system.

Figure 4: Connecting the Primary Themes of the Experiences of Alternate Students

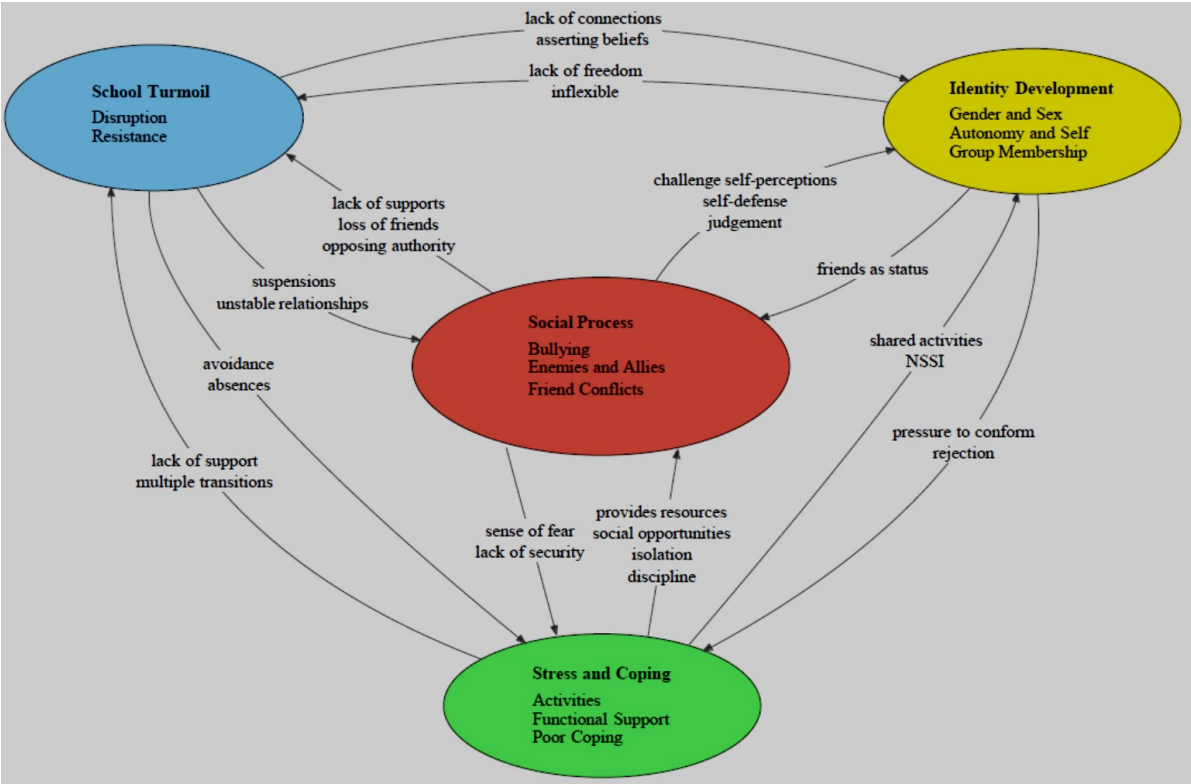

Figure 4. Model of the bi-directional associations among the four primary themes that emerged from participants' accounts. The most salient theme *Schooling as a Complex Social Process* is placed in the center.

In examining the theme of schooling as tumultuous, it is clear that the experiences with turmoil were stressful and impacted the participants' identity development and social interactions which links all four primary themes. This is only one example of the numerous connections that can be made among each of the primary themes in the capturing of the essence of the lived school experiences of these participants. Figure 4 shows a simple summary of the interconnectedness of the four primary themes across participants, with the complex social processes of school being the most salient and central experience for these participants.

Linking subthemes. Just as connections can be made among the four primary themes, there are numerous striking associations among the 11 subthemes. Snapshots of Aurora and Ariel's school journey maps provide a vibrant expression of the connections among themes in their school experiences.

Figure 5: School Disruption and Resistance as a Result of the Cycle of Bullying

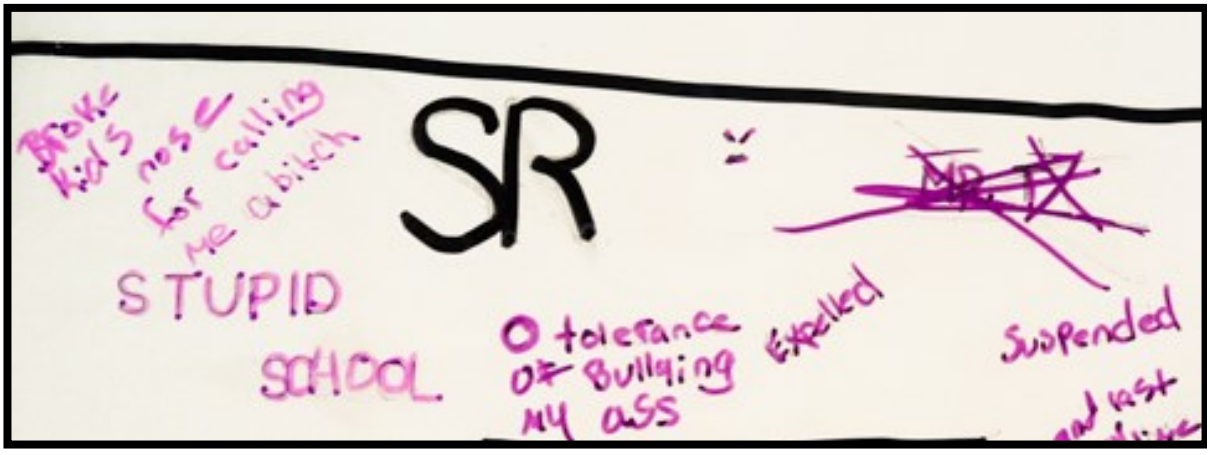

Figure 5. Aurora's portrayal of her experiences in one school. Her perspective of discipline policies and position as a bully-victim are clearly shown, and resulted in school exclusion.

Figure 5 portrays the events that led to Aurora's placement in the alternate program. On first sight of the school she "hated it" and felt like she could not possibly fit in. The bullying began immediately and with the exception of her French teacher, she had no friends, allies, or

functional supports to protect her from the constant insults and threats; she went to administrators and counselors who either told her there was little they could do or blamed her for the conflicts. It was only when she became physically aggressive that the school intervened in this cycle of bullying, but only Aurora was disciplined through suspensions and expulsion.

Figure 5 encapsulates how Aurora tried to find allies and functional supports to help her address the bullying and cope with stress, but felt ignored, invalidated, and alone when her needs went unmet. There was no sense of belonging nor membership, and she tried avoiding conflict through skipping school and smoking, but reached a point where she needed to defend her sense of self, literally calling it "self-defense", by the most effective means she knew—physical aggression. To Aurora, the "zero-tolerance" policy against bullying only applied when she "was the bully".

Similarly, Figure 6 is Ariel's depiction of her experience in high school. She, too, felt trapped in the cycle of bullying, and her "fighting" back eventually led to her expulsion from school and placement in the alternate program. It is clear that her identity in terms of gender and sexuality is important to her. However, she was also the subject of the verbal aggressions from other students, including those who used to be her friends. She wants to dress alluringly, but is then bullied for this. She uses drugs and alcohol to relax from the constant stress bullying that follows her everywhere, including into the bathrooms and her home via the Internet. Even though the surveillance cameras in her school helped identify the students who vandalized the bathroom, the permanence of those "tapes" and those "pages on the internet" still impact her because she "can never get rid of them." Again, as with Aurora's example, there is a noticeable connection among several subthemes in Ariel's picture. She lacked functional supports and allies to help her with the bullying that came from an "ex-friend". The assaults were pervasive and lasting, and specifically commented on her sexuality as a young woman. When her

maladaptive coping strategies failed to provide relief, she became physically aggressive resulting in an expulsion that disrupted her schooling for two months as she waited for a position in an alternate program to become available.

Figure 6: Coping with Bullying, Gender Identity, and Conflictual Friendships

Figure 6. Ariel's summative drawing of her secondary school experiences, which were focused around her gender and sexuality. Stress from being bullied by former friends resulted in substance use.

In probing the detailed accounts of participants' school journeys, there are a myriad of connections among the subthemes. Looking across participants, similar patterns of interactions among the primary themes, much like those depicted in Figure 4, can be discerned. Placing one subtheme at the center of their experience and examining the links between it and a number of other subthemes allows for a thicker and richer portrayal of those experiences.

Figure 7: Bullying as the Nexus of the Journey of Students Placed in Alternate Programs

Figure 7. This is a model of the bi-directional associations among the 11 subthemes that emerged from participants' accounts. Bullying is placed in the center as the most salient factor in their schooling.

Indeed, this perspective allows for a better understanding of the students' experiences in the midst of multiple systems and multifaceted interactions that shaped their daily lives and experience with schooling. Each subtheme could be used as the nexus of these participants' experiences, and then explored for the multiple relationships among the themes. To illustrate this, Figure 7 shows the most salient subtheme across participants' narratives of being trapped in the cycle of bullying as the center of their school lives, and the many ways in which bullying impacted and was impacted by other facets of their experiences.

Summary

The iterative process of analyzing visual and text data yielded a rich and detailed account of the lived experiences of students from their entry into school, through to their transition to secondary school and placement in an alternate program. The four major themes—school as a complex social process, developing and defending their identity, schooling as tumultuous, and exploring ways to cope with stress—described the experience of these young students. The 11 further subthemes give a more colorful and abundant description of the intricacies, complexities, and nuances that comprise participants' school journeys, including positive and negative experiences. What is most noteworthy is that just as the individual—his thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours—cannot be understood in isolation from the other individuals, communities, environments, and systems with which he interacts, the themes cannot be separated from the essence of the totality of these students' experiences. They, too, impact and are impacted by the other themes that emerged, and should be recognized as a part of a complex web of interactions among the systems in which these students develop. The following chapter will situate the four primary themes in the literature and discuss the implications of this study and future directions for educating students with EBD.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Given the inductive nature of IPA, results often include themes and areas of study that were not anticipated and, thus, not included in the introduction and literature review (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As such, the purpose of this section is to frame the salient themes several topics that emerged during the analysis within the wider context of research literature.

Overview

The results of this study detailed several processes in the lived school experiences of eighth grade students in an alternate program. These students described schooling as a stressful and disorderly social process that shaped their identities, required a significant amount of energy, and demanded their full complement of coping strategies. Factors that gain significance in early adolescence, such as social relationships outside of the family (Feldman, 2008; Steinberg, 2008) and identity development (Erikson, 1968), were particularly valuable for understanding the experiences that led to their removal from traditional programs and subsequent enrolment in an alternate program. They stressed that these factors played integral roles in their academic and social difficulties, adoption of poor coping strategies, and lack of school success in more traditional settings. These results highlight that students with EBD may be better able to negotiate their schooling if their subjective experiences of their trajectories, environments, and schools were used to inform policies, practices, and educational reform. A broader ecological perspective of EBD would strengthen individual socioemotional skills and address problems in the school environment that contribute to student difficulties.

The following chapter reviews the four primary themes that emerged from the participants' accounts of their lived school experiences. Each theme is presented with an overview of its definition and of the main characteristics of its subthemes, and is then discussed in the context of current research, as is consistent with IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009).

This format allows each theme to be situated within relevant literature, and facilitates a better understanding of the dialogue between the findings and existing research. However, participants' narratives of schooling were not so simple and neat. The participants' experiences are not distinct memories but memories within complex contexts; events that altered their paths did not occur in isolation. The chapter will, therefore, conclude with an integrated view of the findings from an ecological systems perspective, followed by the strengths, original contributions, and limitations of the study, and future directions.

Struggling to Develop and Defend their Sense of Self

To review, participants were immersed in the process of exploring their personal identities, and were also attempting to be true to their developing identities in a context of judgments and pressures from school staff and from their peers. This theme included a tension between living authentically and autonomously and gaining acceptance and support from social groups. Though students described their whole school journeys, they were using the viewpoint of adolescence to describe their path toward developing and committing to an authentic identity.

Overview of identity development in youth. Theorists have posited that adolescence is marked by an exploration of and a commitment to identity, which is defined as an adolescent's set of goals, values, beliefs, sense of belonging, group memberships, and social roles (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). These participants were young adolescents, and, consistent with the literature their concerns related to identity were a salient component of their school lives.

Erikson (1980) explained identity as the development of a persistent sense of self, which includes an essential nature that is shared with others. He argued that identity is developed through attachment and adherence to principles that provide a stable basis for an individual's actions; these ideals are then adapted as needed to maintain a consistent foundation to explain individual choices and behaviours (Erikson, 1968).

Adolescence is characterized by a crisis between identity formation and confusion, and the successful resolution of this crisis is said to provide a solid foundation for adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Marcia (1966) complemented Erikson's ideas by recognizing exploration and commitment as two distinct processes that are crucial for adolescent development. Exploration includes the consideration of alternatives across domains of identity, while commitment includes establishing choices in those domains. With this understanding of identity development, forming a persistent sense of self clearly involves important psychological processes that become more integrated across adolescence (S. J. Schwartz, Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Meeus, 2012).

In this study, several important aspects of identity development emerged as integral parts of participants' school experiences, including autonomy and a sense of belonging, which are associated with the broader construct of self-determination. More specifically, self-determination includes the three basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which were salient aspects of these participants' school experiences. As such, self-determination theory offers a suitable framework for understanding how the participants developed and defended their sense of self.

Self-determination, identity, and educational success. The underlying psychological processes of self-determination have been found to be essential to positive development and school success (Bassi & Fave, 2012). For example, students who felt support for their autonomy, especially from their teachers, showed better self-regulation and had better achievement than those who did not (Guay, Ratelle, Larose, Vallerand, & Vitaro, 2013). A sense of belonging or relatedness had similar positive associations with academic outcomes (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Mallett et al., 2011). In fact, social status was positively associated with GPA (Destin, Richman, Varner, & Mandara, 2012), and students with fewer close friendships were more likely to drop out

(Carbonaro & Workman, 2013). This may be related to status gained through friendships in hierarchical systems such as schools because underrepresentation of one's group enforces the notion that one does not belong (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

This research is particularly relevant for this study because students with EBD report low levels of self-determination (Carter, Glaeser, Lane, & Pierson, 2006). Specifically, students with EBD assigned a relatively low importance to academics (Wei & Marder, 2012) and reported lower levels of academic competence (Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001), which may have also contributed to a perceived lack of relatedness. This may be confounded by that fact that students with EBD have been excluded from important aspects of their schooling such as educational planning (Test et al., 2004) or evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions aimed to serve them (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001).

Factors of identity development besides self-determination have implications for educational outcomes, including style and compatibility. For example, a diffuse/avoidant identity style has been found to have a negative impact on academic achievement, as has inconsistent self-perceptions about academic capabilities (Hejazi, Shahraray, Farsinejad, & Asgary, 2009). Furthermore, discrepancies in adolescents' views of their idealized self and actualized self also contributed to poor grades (Ferguson, Hafen, & Laursen, 2010). From this research, it is clear that self-determination, positive identity style, and a well-integrated sense of self can contribute to healthy development and school success and are particularly important for students with EBD.

Self-determination, identity, and well-being. There is research that shows that the development of a coherent self-system is important for psychological well-being. For example, strong identity development and self-determination have been positively associated with psychological functioning, well-being, and high levels of adjustment (Marttinen & Salmela-Aro,

2012; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012). It appears that although the exploration of identity is effortful, adolescents who are highly committed to their identity have stable and positive social profiles with low levels of neuroticism (Meeus, 2011). On the other hand, low and discrepant identity development has been associated with a number of factors related to well-being, including low self-esteem, anxious and depressive symptoms, and fewer intimate and satisfying relationships (Baumeister, 1995; Ferguson et al., 2010; Meeus, 1996). Although resolution of adolescent identity conflicts promotes positive development in adulthood, the process clearly has significant implications across adolescence as well.

Relatedness, as part of self-determination, also has significant implications for student well-being. For example, social identification and acceptance has been shown to positively influence adjustment and self-esteem (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009) and well-being (Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009). Social identification, the complex psychosocial process of identifying one's social group and finding acceptance, is also impacted by gender identity development. For example, self-perceived cross-gender typing, particularly in friendships, contributed to distress and poor well-being (Menon, Schellhorn, & Lowe, 2013). It is important to note that the relationship between identity development and psychological well-being is complex and may be transactional (Crocetti, Klimstra, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009; S. J. Schwartz et al., 2012; Wiley & Berman, 2013). A sense of belonging was important to well-being which, in turn, impacted school performance. This association may be even more critical for students with EBD whose social confidence and self-image tend to be significantly lower in comparison to those of their peers with different special educational needs (Wei & Marder, 2012). This highlights the importance of students' emotional and behavioural difficulties as warranting specific attention, and of the participants' subjective experiences.

Situating this study in the self-determination and identity development research. The results of this study were largely consistent with the literature. Participants reported that when their autonomy was supported they were less overwhelmed by and more engaged in school (Guay et al., 2013). This was also true when they had particular staff members and social groups with whom they felt comfortable and accepted. However, when students' identity development was not supported or was discrepant in some way, they tended to become avoidant, which negatively impacted their schooling (Ferguson et al., 2010; Hejazi et al., 2009). Specifically, participants withdrew from activities, classes, and, eventually, school, when their identities as independent, capable, and honest students were not supported. This impacted their academic outcomes due to missed class time and their social outcomes due to having less satisfying social relationships (Ferguson et al., 2010). Participants stressed that a sense of belonging was particularly important in times of difficulty and transition (Fenzel, 1989), and that it shaped those experiences as positive or negative. In summary, the results of this study were consistent with extant literature as participants struggled when their identity and self-determination were not supported, which contributed to their poor educational and psychosocial outcomes.

The results of this study also differ from the published research with respect to the process of and contributing factors related to participants' identity development. Participants stressed that school was a central means to gain the independence that they desired and that they had specific academic goals. They were also engaged in school and had a positive sense of academic competence (Wei & Marder, 2012; Wiest et al., 2001). For example, although they experienced drops in grades, especially during school changes and other transitions, they reported interest in achieving school success and belief in the importance of schooling. Their withdrawal from school was a response to conflict not to a lack of engagement. Thus, when their self-conceptions of their intelligence, work ethic, gender, sexual behaviours—were not supported

by school personnel, they displayed negative affects and behaviours in an attempt to resist the negative judgments. This was when participants reported "self-defense" behaviours. Some participants lashed out when their views of themselves were actively challenged by friends, peers, teachers and principals, while others internalized this discrepancy in the form of self-doubt and by presenting an inauthentic self. The results of this study suggest that these students from an alternate program wanted to do well, that they felt capable, and that they valued school as a means to a good future, but that they adopted avoidant and defensive styles in response to inter- and intrapersonal conflicts and tensions.

Schooling as an Increasingly Complex Social Process

The participants described schools as complex social systems in which they had to establish effective interpersonal skills and functional supports to be successful. As detailed in the previous chapter, participants explained how the social aspects of schooling became more complicated, unstable, and demanding as they progressed through elementary school to secondary school. With every change of school, staff, classroom, and peer group, they struggled to understand the new social norms and to find adequate resources and meaningful friendships. Participants' experience with bullying was a crucial element in this process. They experienced constant threats to their senses of safety and worth, which took a toll on their education and well-being. In response, many adopted a number of poor coping strategies that included becoming bullies themselves. Indeed, participants attributed most of their social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, as well as their placement in an alternate program, to bullying.

Overview of interpersonal relationships and conflicts among students. Schools are complex social systems that require healthy socioemotional and interpersonal skills, but also offer social supports and friendships. For adolescents, peer relations are of particular importance, as they provide companionship, kinship, support, and protection (Agnew, 2003;

Buehler, 2006). In contrast to these positive aspects of peer relations, the most salient aspect of the participants' school journeys was their strenuous and unremitting experience of bullying. The participants actively sought allies to help them deal with the bullying, but found few worthy resources; their enemies were those who exacerbated the situation by failing to protect them or validate their experiences. For these participants, friends were also unreliable supports or, worse, were among those who bullied them. With so many intricate conflicts, a primary issue for these participants was how and where to position themselves in the complicated network of direct and indirect aggressions within the system of the school.

Overview of bullying. Bullying is aggression toward another individual when there is a difference in power and, and it can be divided into two broad categories—direct or indirect. Further delineation among types of bullying include verbal, physical, and relational aggression (Olweus, 2001), and cyberbullying (Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012). Bullying has gained significance in media and research, with prevalence rates varying from 15% (Olweus, 1993) to 41% (Bradshaw et al., 2007) in schools. This may be due to varied definitions of bullying behaviour and to differences among student and adult perceptions, with teachers underestimating the prevalence of bullying (Demaray, Malecki, Secord, & Lyell, 2013). Both the high prevalence rates and misconceptions of adults are concerning as bullying significantly impacts the lives of students.

Multi-level perspective of bullying. Bullying is a complex interaction of individual, social, and systemic influences. In terms of individual factors, it seems that aggression declines with age, and that girls are more likely to use indirect aggression while boys use physical aggression (Tsorbatzoudis, Travlos, & Rodafinos, 2013). Also, victimization increases for students with friends in high-risk groups (Pokhrel, Sussman, Black, & Sun, 2010), and with friends who are also victims, even when controlling for gender, ethnicity, and base line

aggression (Sentse, Dijkstra, Salmivalli, & Cillessen, 2013). Individual factors, social relationships, and the dynamics among them are all important to preventing and intervening in the cycle of bullying.

Broader systemic factors also need to be considered in understanding bullying and its impact on educational and socioemotional outcomes. Aggression increases with fewer classroom anti-bullying behaviours (Nocentini, Menesini, & Salmivalli, 2013), negative school climate (Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, Chatzilambou, & Giannakopoulou, 2012), and more internalized notions of gender and social roles (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Furthermore, physical aggression may actually be normative in certain social groups and used to gain popularity, respect, or status (Nocentini et al., 2013; Pokhrel et al., 2010), through a strategic selection of victims (Veenstra, Verlinden, Huitsing, Verhulst, & Tiemeier, 2013). A qualitative study by Crowther, Goodson, McGuire, and Dickson (2013) echoed these ideas. Participants stated that by living in a hostile climate and expecting victimization, they slowly constructed an aggressive identity to gain acceptance and respect; through this process they became fighters, which was both normative and advantageous. Clearly, focusing on individual factors of bullies and victims is too simplistic to address the nuances in such aggression. Social relationships, classroom and school factors, and societal norms also impact the cycle of bullying, and reflect the complexity of this problem. A broader ecological systems perspective of school bullying would better support students in their academic, behavioural, and emotional development.

Academic implications of bullying. Bullying has significant consequences for academic performance. More specifically, bullying and feeling threatened or unsafe has been found to impact students' learning, grades, and achievement (Hammig & Jozkowski, 2013; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Osler, 2006; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2011), and to predict dropout (Alika, 2012), which is the ultimate academic consequence of the cycle of bullying. It is also

interesting and noteworthy that these consequences may extend to the school as a whole. For instance, teasing and bullying were related to test performance on mandated achievement tests, even when controlling for demographic factors, personal victimization, and school size (Lacey & Cornell, 2013). Given the pressure of schools to meet mandated achievement standards, policies and practices regarding aggression in school should extend beyond interventions aimed at the individual level (Chaux, Molano, & Podlesky, 2009). Creating safe learning environments would help support well-being and academic performance for individuals and for schools.

Psychosocial implications of bullying. Aside from its associations with academic outcomes, bullying also impacts the socioemotional development and well-being of those involved. Victimization is linked to chronic worrying, poor sleep, distress, internalizing and externalizing difficulties, and lowered self-esteem and well-being (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Espinoza, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2013; Green, Dunn, Johnson, & Molnar, 2011; Idsoe, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2012; Nansel et al., 2001; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). Specifically, Zwierzynska, Wolke, and Lereya (2013) found that victimization increased the risk of severe and persistent depression and emotional problems. In terms of the impact of bullying on social relationships and functioning, victims were reported to feel more lonely or isolated (Buhs, 2005; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Veenstra et al., 2005), more socially anxious, and to experience more social-behavioural problems (Erath, Tu, & El-Sheikh, 2012) than other students. In some cases, students who were withdrawn have described a direct link between the different forms of bullying and school and self-exclusion. Specifically, participants felt that schools did not provide support for victims (Beran, 2009), and that adults only reacted to physical bullying even though psychological and verbal bullying had a greater negative impact (Osler, 2006). Given the importance of a sense of belonging ascribed to

identity development from the previous theme, the poor social consequences for students experiencing bullying impact positive development as well as well-being.

Research into the multi-faceted and intricate nature of school bullying is necessary, but it often focuses on bullies and victims as distinct groups even though the roles in the cycle of bullying seem to overlap. A bully-victim is aggressive towards others and is also verbally, physically, or psychologically victimized (Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). Bully-victims have many of the problems and poor outcomes of bullies and victims, though they may actually be at higher risk for poor adjustment (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012; Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004; Veenstra et al., 2005). For instance, bully-victims may use more direct forms of aggression (Yang & Salmivalli, 2013) than pure bullies, and have poorer self-regulation skills and more impulsive behaviours (D. Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001) than pure victims. It may be that bully-victims are not part of a distinct group, but that they are individuals who are engulfed in cycles of aggression and who move between bully and victim groups depending on the social and environmental contexts. The process of bullying may depend on classroom and school factors as well as on individual factors, and may be both psychologically damaging and socially advantageous to bully-victims. This is clearly a complex and multi-systemic concern that requires more holistic perspectives to properly research and address bullying in schools.

Situating this study within research on bullying. Of the participants' descriptions of schooling, their experience with bullying was prominent and pervasive across domains of functioning, paralleling the educational and psychosocial consequences in the above literature. Participants described the progression of bullying that began with relatively tolerable verbal aggressions in early elementary school, and evolved into more hurtful verbal aggressions, cyberbullying, and, eventually, physical aggression. Participants' attributed the persistent assault

to their sense of acceptance and personal safety as the most significant reason for their difficulties in school.

For these students, bullying impacted their academic performance because it affected their ability to concentrate, and it prompted them to be in a state of constant worry. It created a ripple effect starting with the avoidance of certain classes or of school entirely, which then had negative consequences for their well-being and mental health. These descriptions are consistent with the literature described. For example, participants reported symptoms of depression and anxiety, and several of them received treatment, including medication, for mood and anxiety disorders (Zwierzynska et al., 2013). They also described feeling stressed and overwhelmed by threats and feeling a distinct lack of meaningful support from school personnel, who were said to respond only to physical aggressions (Beran, 2009) and who saw the participants as bullies rather than bully-victims. Participants were forced to physically defend themselves because schools failed to adequately address bullying. Moreover, they experienced the elevated social status of "fighter" which mostly reinforced their aggressive behaviours and became normalized in their school contexts (Nocentini et al., 2013; Pokhrel et al., 2010). Their most essential understanding of their experiences was that it was bullying and the dearth of understanding about its process and impact—not their academic, emotional, or behavioural difficulties—that led to their placement in an alternate program.

The findings of this study countered the suggestion that girls experience and adopt bullying differently than boys. For example, physical aggression has been demonstrated as more prevalent, normative, and socially advantageous for boys; girls, on the other hand, are viewed as adopting more verbal and relational forms of bullying (Alika, 2012; Tsorbatzoudis et al., 2013; Yang & Salmivalli, 2013). In this study, however, physical aggression was normative and advantageous for the girls, and gained them similar social status to boys. Another difference was

that most of the participants, including all four girls, described being bully-victims. However, in the literature, bully-victims have been found to be only 1.6% of students involved and were more prevalent among boys (Olweus, 2003). This study aimed to understand the experiences of particular students in particular contexts, and this contradiction supports further explorations of environmental and systemic factors that better reflect the nuances of physical aggression and of bully-victims.

Another interesting finding of this study was the role of friendships in the social process of bullying. Friendships have been associated with increased social support that provide some protection against bullying (Beran & Lupart, 2009; Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2003; Rothon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011), but these participants described friends who bullied them, and some who even became their primary bully. This created confusion and a sense of betrayal which impacted interpersonal relationships and social functioning because participants became distrustful and guarded, even with their friends. Though there is a common perception of friends as protection against conflicts, this study supports emerging research (Daniels, Quigley, Menard, & Spence, 2010; Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008) that encourages examinations of multi-level factors associated with aggressive dynamics in friendships.

Schooling as Tumultuous

As described in the previous chapter, participants' school paths were fragmented in their memories and in their lived experiences. Early school involvements were vague recollections and what stood out most were participants' negative experiences and a sense of loss in relation to friends, teachers, leisure activities, and functional supports. As they progressed through school, the demands, policies, and climates became more inflexible, and these participants actively resisted these constraining environments.

Overview of the contexts and pathways of schooling. Schooling, in this context, is the process of learning that occurs in educational settings from kindergarten until graduation or school leaving. For many students, this involves constancy during childhood and adolescence through a solid and familiar presence. For students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, however, this process may be highly complex and disappointing. In terms of the nature of schools themselves and the policies and practices instituted at different levels of the educational system, students' educational, emotional, and behavioural needs may not be adequately met.

Problems with the school context. School climate refers to the safety, discipline, fairness, warmth, and support of the social and physical environment of schools (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011) and is important given the increasing diversity of schools (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008). As the two previous themes suggested, a sense of belonging and safety was important for positive school experiences. Indeed, school climate has been associated with several educational factors including academic achievement, motivation, and performance (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Felner, Aber, Primavera, & Cauce, 1985; Griffith, 1999; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Stewart, 2007), and sense of school belonging (Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005). School climate has also been associated with psychosocial factors such as well-being and adjustment (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Roeser & Eccles, 1998), and prosocial behavior (Coker & Borders, 2001; Rumberger, 1987). Loukas and Murphy (2007) posited that school friction contributed to internalizing and externalizing problems by decreasing quality interpersonal relationships, increasing peer rejection, and interfering with feelings of school connectedness. In sum, students' learning and experiences are shaped through their perceptions of their environment (Bandura, 2001), and students need positive school settings that provide the physical, emotional, and intellectual safety required to learn and succeed.

Simply monitoring students does not effectively create a positive school climate (Bear, 2012), nor does it consider the impact of such practices on students (Kohn, 2004). Often, student voices have not been heard despite students being "able to make a valid and essential contribution to understanding of processes and systems of discipline in school" (McCluskey, 2014, p. 94). Excluding students from such discussions has led to confusion and frustration that stems from a lack of control (Pirrie, 2009). For example, students reported that adults do not care about, listen to, support, nor respect students (Cornell & Gregory, 2008). Furthermore, when rules were deemed unfair or unclear more behavioural problems related to school order, safety, and discipline occurred (Fan et al., 2011). Kohn (2004) eloquently argued that "we should ask not have we done enough to stamp out this behavior but how can we transform schools into places that meet students' needs so that students don't lash out in fury" (p 38). When taking a reflective and holistic perspective of EBD, students' behaviours are viewed in context, as this is what determines which behaviours are valid reactions to the unjust, vague, and inflexible policies and practices they encounter in their school lives. The interactions between individuals and their environments, and between the systemic and sociocultural school factors contributing to and maintaining behaviours should be considered in exploring the experiences of students with EBD.

Discontinuous school services. For students with individualized educational needs, schooling can be marked with numerous shifts and breaks. Whether this involved multiple in class and outside settings (Gregory & Cornell, 2009), working with several different adults (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), or experiencing a number of school and program transfers, students may not have the stability needed to create a sense of community. This is especially problematic for students with EBD who work best with consistent expectations and supports (Kauffman, 2001), and who may withdraw when schooling becomes too difficult. In fact, when

students fail to find appropriate support they withdrew from learning (Osler, 2006). This self-exclusion may not be a purely individual factor related to student maladjustment, but a reaction to schools as entities that disregard rather than recognize "the mundane tyrannies of everyday exclusion—the student who is 'crying, worrying, refusing to do her schoolwork'" (Osler, 2006, p. 578). To promote positive development among students with EBD, schools need to provide stability and positive structure rather than varied and disjointed services.

Disciplinary practices also contributed to school exclusion, particularly when interim services were not provided. Discipline policies have been under scrutiny recently (Skiba & Peterson, 2000), which heightens concern among educators and parents (Kohn, 2004). For example, in Alberta concern over school violence led to increases in principals' disciplinary authority in 1994, and to the establishment of the Safe and Caring Schools Initiative in 1996. These policies aimed to reduce school violence using a cooperative, integrated approach that supported immediate suspensions or expulsions (Calhoun & Daniels, 2008). These abrupt school exclusions were initially intended for weapons-related behaviours (Skiba, 2002; Skiba & Knesting, 2001) that threatened student safety. However, these zero-tolerance policies have been controversial in their overuse (Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena, Baum, & Snyder, 2006; Fenning et al., 2012), and have resulted in school exclusion, often for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bear, 2012; Carroll, 2008). Such practices have been publicized as ensuring safety, but they do so at the expense of students' educational rights.

Although school exclusions were intended to deter behaviours that threaten students' safety, such as drug and weapons-related offenses, other factors are also associated with suspensions. For example, gender, rebelliousness, and academic failure were associated with being suspended, as were school level factors such as low commitment and SES (Hemphill, Plenty, Herrenkohl, Toumbourou, & Catalano, 2014; Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010). It

appears that the intended use of these policies has been obfuscated, and used inflexibly and excessively without considering broader systemic factors contributing to students' behaviours.

Using school exclusions as the primary means for managing student behaviour is problematic for several reasons. Exclusion has been imposed with little flexibility, reinforced the very behaviours that were unwanted, and failed to teach more desirable behaviours or to recognize factors that underlie the behaviour (Black, 2004; Hemphill et al., 2014; Kohn, 2004; Osler, 2006; Skiba, 2002). Furthermore, suspensions have led to lengthy absences with the onus on the family to find accommodations (Carroll, 2008; Pirrie, 2009; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). However, schools are mandated to provide education during lengthy suspensions and expulsions; more specifically, students must receive services after 10 days of exclusion and cannot be expelled due to actions resulting from behavioural disorders (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Sadly, as highlighted by research and by the participants' experiences, students with EBD rarely experience such targeted and supportive services. A multi-level perspective of student behaviours offers a more functional approach that could help to inform disciplinary practices and to avoid unnecessary exclusions while teaching students more positive behaviours and interpersonal skills.

Situating this study within research on school context and discipline. The research on disrupted school pathways were echoed in the findings of this study. The participants described having disjointed school journeys that started in primary school, and needing multiple supports (Pirrie, 2009) for issues in academic, social, emotional, and behavioural areas. Each time their class setting, teacher, or school environment changed, these students experienced stress and instability that impacted their schooling. Participants' educational performance was negatively impacted due to a mismatch between student needs and teaching strategies. This seemed to result in participants experiencing schooling as meaningless, and disengaging as they

struggled to meet the expectations of multiple educators across multiple settings in an environment that was not supportive of their needs. With every change, they needed to find new functional supports and social groups. Consistent with the literature, participants emphasized that the key to adjusting to these changes was a supportive and consistent peer group (Pirrie, 2009). Schools focus on providing individualized educational programs, but should focus on providing consistent services, functional supports, and social activities for students with EBD.

Bullying, again, was paramount in the discussion of the discontinuity of schooling for these participants. When their struggles with bullying exceeded their supports, their negative coping strategies led to self- and school-imposed exclusions. Students had worries and responsibilities outside of school, peers who were tormenting or excluding them, and a series of discounting practices by peers and schools that exacerbated their emotional and behavioural difficulties—all consistent with extant research (Osler, 2006). These participants avoided classes, peers, teachers, and school as a means of avoiding the daily insecurity and intimidation they were experiencing. Eventually, they became physically aggressive and were expelled, but, similar to the findings from this literature, their intentions reasons for their behaviour were not considered (Gregory & Cornell, 2009) in determining appropriate consequences. To these participants, this was disrespectful, unfair, and disregarded the interactions among the influences and systems that contributed to their behaviour.

Participants' aggressions did not involve weapons, and students were deemed safe enough to return to a mainstream school setting, and yet they were expelled with no services during their lengthy absences (Pirrie, 2009; Pirrie, Macleod, Cullen, & McCluskey, 2011). This undermined their rights to services and compounded these students' struggles. When they returned to school, they had to adjust to a new environment and to make up for missed instructional time, all with little support. There were classroom and school level factors that

were not considered when evaluating their educational placements, which led students to feel voiceless and disrespected. The participants had very few opportunities to have input into the decisions that were impacting their education and well-being. Consistent with the research, these students were excluded from the disciplinary and educational decisions that impacted them, and the reasons underlying their behaviours were omitted from the process.

Exploring Ways to Cope with Stress

To summarize the findings, school life was very stressful for these participants. Though some of their worry stemmed from the demands and pace of school, the majority was due to conflicts, and in particular, to bullying. The participants tried to cope by focusing on creative and physical activities or by seeking functional supports, but these positive strategies were often not enough to alleviate their stress. Their poor coping strategies—substance use, aggression, self-harm, and avoidance—had a destructive effect on their schooling and their well-being.

Overview of stress and coping in adolescents. As described previously, adolescence is a time of identity crises and increased stress due to changes in biological, cognitive, and socioemotional processes (Santrock, 2013). It is a period that includes pubertal and school changes as well as changes in social relationships, and it has also been associated with the onset of mental health issues (Sawyer et al., 2012). In fact, as adolescents age they may become more sensitive to stressors. In one study, the relationship between stress and depression strengthened regardless of the number and magnitude of stressors (Morris, Ciesla, & Garber, 2010). Chronic sadness and elevated mental health risk have been associated with fighting, threats, and substance use (Dowdy, Furlong, & Sharkey, 2013), which impact mood and psychosocial functions. This situation may be exacerbated for students in alternate programs who reported lower levels of positive coping strategies than other students (Wiest et al., 2001). For adolescents, stress can be prominent in their schooling and contribute to their EBD.

Stress and achievement. There has been much research examining relationships among stress and educational outcomes. Arsenio and Loria (2014), for example, found that there were significant relationships among academic stress, academic affect and coping, and GPA, even when considering overall moods. Similarly, psychological distress, including poor self-esteem and emotional difficulties, negatively impacted achievement and educational aspirations (Rothon, Arephin, Klineberg, Cattell, & Stansfeld, 2011). This is problematic because educational aspirations are linked to actual achievement, even when controlling for prior achievement. For example, in one study academic expectations were positively related to academic performance, and there was a negative relationship between school-related stress and academic performance (Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2005). Though this may seem intuitive that stress would impact academic goals and performance, it is nonetheless a relationship that should be examined in efforts to improve education and well-being among students who are struggling.

Unfortunately, the coping strategies used by students to alleviate stress are often immature and ineffective or, worse, harmful. Students who were overwhelmed in school used avoidance and denial to cope with academic stress (Arsenio & Loria, 2014). This is not an effective means for self-regulation, as the relationships between regulation of emotion and achievement is mediated by problem-focused coping and has the opposite relationship with avoidant coping (MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011). Skipping school (Dowdy et al., 2013), delinquency (McLeod, Uemura, & Rohrman, 2012), and substance use (Grunbaum, Tortolero, Weller, & Gingiss, 2000) were also strongly associated with achievement. Furthermore, those students with two or more emotional or behavioural problems earned lower GPA's and level of education independent of aptitude (McLeod et al., 2012). Some research has also demonstrated a positive relationship between stress and achievement. For instance, more complex coping strategies were positively associated with academic outcomes (Hardie,

Critchley, & Morris, 2006). Similarly, a sense of school justice led to better grades and less distress even when controlling for achievement (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005). Given the benefits of positive stress management that is supported in the literature, active instruction in coping strategies should be considered for students with EBD to help improve negative affect, grades, and days absent (Horn, Possel, & Hautzinger, 2011).

Interpersonal and relationship stress. As much as stress impacted achievement and learning, it also impacted important social relationships. However, research on the role of friendships and peer support in mitigating stress and worry has been inconsistent. On the one hand, a meta-analysis showed that those who used active coping in response to controllable stressors had higher social competence and fewer externalizing problems (A. T. Clarke, 2006), while those who ruminated or had negative cognitive styles were at higher risk for social conflicts (Hamilton et al., 2013; McLaughlin & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). These findings suggest that negative coping and cognitive styles contribute to relationship difficulties. On the other hand, research has demonstrated that rumination does not predict any stress, even interpersonal stress (Hamilton et al., 2013), and that increased peer support does not predict future school success. This suggests that psychosocial variables may be outcomes rather than antecedents of achievement (MacKinnon, 2012). Overall, close relationships appear to be complex and can serve as both a risk and protective factor, depending on the context and nature of the relationship. This discerning perspective of close relationships was clearly depicted in participants' accounts.

Influence of school context on stress. School environments may also serve as protective factors against student stress, as described previously in the discussion of school climate. Indeed, schools with positive and supportive climates allow adolescents to cope with their dysregulated emotions and behaviours rather than taxing their limited coping skills (Loukas & Murphy, 2007). This suggests that positive school climates can mitigate the negative impact

of stress on educational and psychosocial outcomes. For example, school value systems and teacher perceptions of students have contributed to creating a positive climate for learning and for students' optimism and well-being (Ruus et al., 2007). School-related stress and high academic expectations, in contrast, negatively affect academic performance, and suggest that highly competitive and demanding environments contribute to stress (Kaplan et al., 2005). As much as stress has implications for the individual, prevention and intervention strategies must also target the school level to address poor coping in students. For students with EBD, this would alleviate the perception they are somehow deficient, and recognize interactions and systemic factors that contribute to and maintain their difficulties.

Situating this study within research on stress and coping. The findings of this study regarding stress and coping were consistent with existing research. Participants described school as their primary stressor, largely due to threats to their safety and to lack of support. For these participants, stress did indeed impact their academic achievement and their relationships, and it also served as a reflection of their school contexts. More specifically, academic stress resulted from a lack of time for meaningful learning and engagement, which led to conflictual relationships with teachers and a negative impact on their learning and performance (Kaplan et al., 2005). Whole schools were also identified as stressful and lacking in support—there were several descriptions among participant accounts that deemed particular schools as intolerable and unworthy; others, however, were seen as comforting and familiar (Loukas & Murphy, 2007). This suggests that school contexts impacted the stress of the participants and that there were broad systemic factors that were associated with student stress.

The most striking similarity between this study and existing research was the complex associations among social relationships and stress. Teachers and counsellors were seen as anchors in an instable and difficult social hierarchy (Guay et al., 2013), while at other times they

were seen as uncaring or powerless bystanders who contributed to student stress (Cornell & Gregory, 2008; Osler, 2006; Ruus et al., 2007). Similarly, principals were seen as fair and supportive confidants who respected students (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005), but they were also viewed as inflexible authoritarians who controlled student life completely and had little regard for students. In line with existing research, school climate, values, and teacher perceptions were associated with student stress.

Friendships were also described as increasingly salient in the school lives of the participants, though these relationships were also extremely intricate. Students sought peer groups that would be supportive of their perceptions, actions, beliefs, and desires, but then struggled when they did not receive the level of acceptance that they wanted (Menon et al., 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Furthermore, the conflicts in their friendships led to their feelings of stress, of being overwhelmed, and of betrayal (Daniels et al., 2010). When those friendships became aggressive, participants' stress increased and they were often unable to access enough personal and functional support to alleviate their distress. They lashed out, abused substances, avoided school, engaged in self-harm, or socially withdrew as a means to cope with their stress (Arsenio & Loria, 2014; Grunbaum et al., 2000). In sum, and consistent with the literature, the quality of friendships and victimization were associated among the experiences of these participants (Daniels et al., 2010), and, in some instances, particular friendships vacillated between buffer and stressor.

Summary: Connecting Themes within an Ecological Systems Perspective

The findings of this study can be viewed from an ecological systems perspective, with the salient factors for each system being borne from the thick, rich descriptions of the participants' experiences of schooling. In placing the seminal points of their accounts within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, students' experiences of schooling are clearly

situated within a highly complex set of systems that influenced their outcomes. Indeed, the essence of these participants' school experiences is complicated and interwoven among individual, classroom, school, district, and societal levels.

Figure 8: An Ecological Systems Perspective of Students' School Journeys

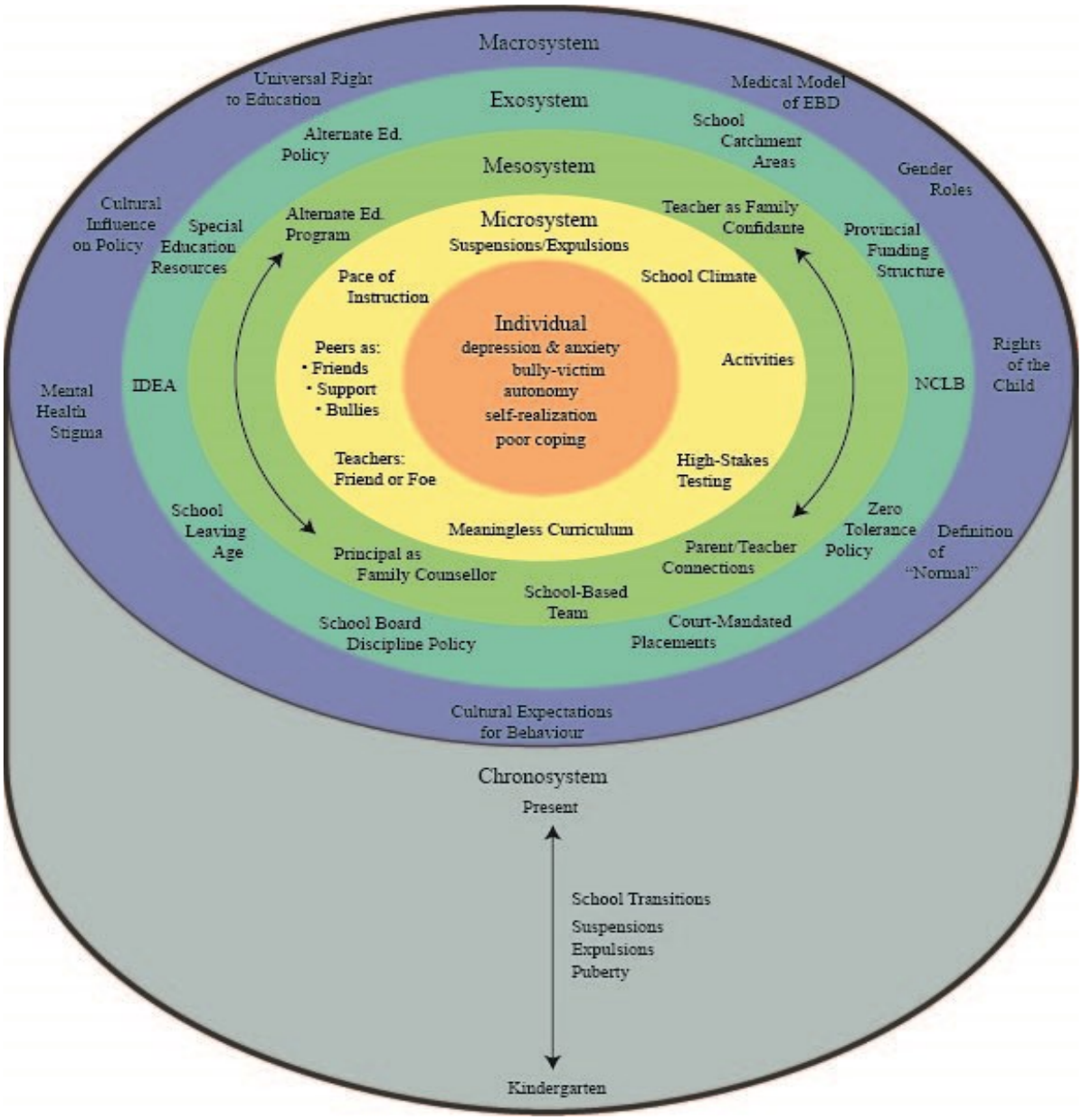

Figure 8. An multi-faceted and multi-system model of participants' most salient experiences and perspectives. This highlights implications and considerations across domains and structures for students in alternate programs.

The ecological systems perspective of these participants' experiences plainly demonstrates the need to focus beyond individual factors and narrow areas of research to include systemic factors and interdisciplinary work aimed at reforming educational practice and policy.

Strengths and Original Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. Most of the research pertaining to alternate programs has been quantitative, focusing on individual-level factors (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Denny et al., 2003; Vann et al., 2001) and on programmatic outcomes that define school success through graduation rates, grades, and attendance (Cox, 1999; Haughey, 2009). These studies often focus on the perceptions of teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and parents. However, students are key stakeholders in their education, and should have a meaningful role in the creation of school policies, practices, and structures that shape their lives (De La Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002). This study emphasized student perceptions, and employed numerous strategies to validate participants' rich descriptions and bring value to their insights into schooling and its impact on education and well-being.

There is a paucity of research on alternate education programs, particularly on remediation-focused alternate programs, since previous research has primarily focused on continuation or disciplinary programs (De La Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Morrissette, 2011). Furthermore, these studies mainly included students who chose alternate programs and who were older than 16, the mandatory age for schooling. The participants in this study were just beginning their secondary school experience, and were placed in the alternate program by school officials who were still required to provide services because of their age. Targeting this age of participants while they were in school also focused on a specific developmental period and important school transition rather than spanning a wide age range in a retrospective study (Morrissette, 2011). To the best of the primary researcher's knowledge, this is the only study

that examines the experiences of early adolescents while they are enrolled in a mainstream school-based alternate program. This helps to expound the experiences of students while they are in alternate programs and while there is an opportunity for programmatic changes, rather than focusing on students who have been removed from school or who have dropped out.

The method chosen to explore the experiences of students is a strength. For instance, the visual arts component complemented the interview and helped to triangulate the data and to improve trustworthiness and credibility. A creative arts project can also be engaging and encourages self-expression, helping to build rapport between the participant and the researcher (Prosser, 2011). The activity itself served as a prompt for the interview, which yielded thick and rich descriptions of schooling from the participants and allowed them to reflect on their responses. Furthermore, the school journey map promoted engagement because it allowed multiple means of expression of student experiences (Hall et al., 2012).

Previous studies have looked solely at the experience of being in an alternate program (De La Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Morrissette, 2011). This study asked about school trajectories and did not ask about comparisons between settings or experiences, but allowed participants to speak freely and draw comparisons as appropriate. This appears to be the only study in the literature that focused on participant sense-making of their school pathways, including kindergarten until their current placement in a secondary alternate program. Just as dropping out is not an event that occurs at a specific moment in time, but rather the conclusion of a process that includes gradual disengagement from schooling (Rumberger, 2011), placement in an alternate program is the result of years of struggles in traditional school settings. In taking a broader ecological perspective of student experiences, the temporal components must be considered. To inform policies and practices that positively impact development, interventions

should target the early stages of EBD, which requires examination of school trajectories, not simply of the point when difficulties are severe and students are excluded from school.

Finally, the study and results from students' accounts were framed by an ecological systems theory, which further strengthened this study. First, the study encompassed a multi-level perspective of EBD that embraced a community psychology perspective of student struggles, rather than placing the responsibility and meaning of those difficulties solely within the individual. Second, the open-ended and inductive nature of the study allowed for an exploration of school, societal, and cultural factors that contribute to school experiences and the context of student behaviours, rather than focusing on a priori factors determined by outside researchers. This yielded a complex and intricate depiction of the issues faced by students with EBD who are in an alternate program, which will offer implications for practice and for further research.

Limitations

In phenomenological studies, generalization is not the purpose (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994; Guba, 1981) and no such claims are being made. However, the nature of an interpretative analysis is subjective, and should be considered. Namely, the primary researcher's involvement in the target school district as a former alternate program teacher, and her background in mental health counselling may have influenced the process. Thus, the reader must take into account the subjective stance of the researcher, the description of the participants, and the context of the study to determine whether the findings are pertinent to their research and applications.

The demographic profiles of the participants sample warrant further discussion. There were more females than males included in this study, which differed from the larger sample of 10 students, and the program demographics of approximately two-thirds males. Though reflecting proportions of the population in the participants selected is not mandated in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 1995), it nonetheless impacts the findings of the analysis. Rapport with a

female researcher or the nature of the study requiring verbal and creative expressions of personal information may have influenced this. Similarly, participants were recruited from only two of five programs because of teacher and administrator decisions not to participate. The ways in which the unique perspectives of the students from other programs, based on their experiences in different school environments, would have contributed to the findings is unclear.

Finally, student motivation for participating may also have influenced the overall results of the study. Participants could have been influenced by their positive or negative school experiences, the opportunity to be heard by a teacher, the monetary compensation, the perceived potential for this research to make a difference in their schooling, or the missed class time. Also, conducting the visual activities and interviews on site could have restricted participants' willingness to disclose negative perceptions, particularly for their current placement.

Future Directions

Outcomes of this study suggest that EBD should be examined from a broader perspective, particularly when considering students' educational programming and placements. The emotional and behavioural struggles of students cannot be viewed strictly as problems within the individual that require intervention, but also as difficulties that are borne from and maintained by educational environments and complex systems of influence. Adopting this perspective has implications for practice, policy, and research.

Implications and recommendations for practice. There are a number of considerations for educators in working with students with EBD. The impetus to continue to offer academic remediation to students with EBD reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of their struggles and of their needs. The pressure on teachers to produce certain levels of achievement and to meet imposed educational standards creates a focus on traditional measures of achievement to the exclusion of other domains. However, improving non-academic areas can have a positive impact

on educational outcomes. Specifically, supporting adolescents' sense of self can positively impact academics (Wei & Marder, 2012). Similarly, addressing problems of exam-related, homework-related, and extra-curricular activity stress can promote better academic achievement (MacCann et al., 2011). In sum, actively teaching prosocial coping strategies would be beneficial for both education and well-being, and should not be viewed as a misuse of instructional time, but rather a different means to improve achievement.

Additionally, whether in curricular instruction or in psychoeducation about coping strategies, students' autonomy needs to be considered and promoted in teaching practices. Students in alternate programs may underachieve and have low perceived academic self-efficacy because of their lack of autonomy and not because of a lack of ability (Wiest et al., 2001). Students have a realistic idea of what is necessary to succeed in school (Wiest et al., 2001) and do not attribute luck or unknown causes to school failure (Roque, de Lemos, & Goncalves, 2014), but are simply not given appropriate types of support and choices to meet expectations. Again, this will require action and a focus on teacher education, and on educating support staff and administrators, rather than on a solely individual approach of educating students.

There are recommendations for practice that can be implemented with students and with teachers to help improve the school experiences, and, thus, the school success of students with EBD. First, strategies to aid coping and self-realization should be taught. This could include teaching self-determination skills to improve task engagement (Kelly & Shogren, 2014) and teaching students how to assess whether a chosen coping strategy will be effective (A. T. Clarke, 2006). This could be achieved through activities that also help to facilitate their identity development by allowing them to freely express views or beliefs to promote optimal health and well-being (Phoenix, 2001). In sum, teachers need to be trained in teaching self-determination and socioemotional learning and then these strategies and skills taught to students with and

without EBD. This would aid those students who are currently struggling and well as prevent struggles in others.

Schools must also take action to better assess true emotional and behavioural difficulties. With the problems in defining EBD and the over-reliance of medical models of these difficulties, the context of behaviours is often overlooked; yet the definition clearly states that the difficulties must reflect an inability and an inappropriate response to a situation. To do this, the context of the behaviour must be considered. Therefore, schools should consider using functional behaviour assessments (Skiba, 2002), and then offer teacher training and on-going professional development to increase support and reduce exclusion, which contributes to a safe, positive climate for learning (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Rubin, 2004). Focusing on improving teacher-student relationships, particularly in late elementary and early secondary schools, to promote a sense of belonging in school and connections to teachers may be an effective means of improving experiences and outcomes (Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, & Louis, 2013). Also, the significance of teacher-student relationships that convey respect and offer support with nonacademic problems (Gregory & Cornell, 2009) in adolescence must be emphasized in professional development and continuing educational opportunities. Again, this would include schools supporting and intervening in nonacademic issues as a primary means to improve students' experiences and, thus, their performance.

Implications and recommendations for policy. Educational reform should reflect the findings of research, and include the insights of the primary stakeholders, namely the students. Schools should take responsibility for creating a favourable learning environment and for supporting and maintaining positive school climates—with input from students with EBD. This would require schools to adopt a community psychology rather than traditional medical

perspective of EBD (Ruus et al., 2007), and to examine multi-level influences on emotional and behavioural functioning. Furthermore, in assessing the efficacy of implemented changes, policy-makers should understand that different aspects of student learning may change at different rates. For example, changes in the school environment can impact student well-being and learning, but not necessarily equally across all domains. Changes in engagement, for example, may occur quicker than changes in psychological well-being (Van Ryzin et al., 2009). Devising realistic timelines for implementing, evaluating, and revising policies is an important step toward improving the educational experiences for these students.

As many of the student struggles seemed to revolve around their feelings of safety and belonging, policies around disciplinary procedures and enforcement need to be a priority. A formal written policy that promotes a flexible, non-punitive, and equitable approach is needed (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Pirrie et al., 2011), and the debate about policies should include students (Osler, 2006), families, and communities members (Rubin, 2004; Skiba, 2008). Disciplinary measures should also consider student history, development, supports, and resiliency (Kajs, 2006), and should be enforced consistently through adequate student supervision (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). School exclusion should only occur for safety reasons, not for convenience or lack of adequate resources; formal services should be provided for students during absences, particularly for students who need structure and support. The aims of discipline should be to teach students more effective means for navigating stress and conflict and to help them succeed in school and in other environments, rather than simply to maintain order and conformity.

Implications and recommendations for research. Researchers must consider that unwanted behaviours may not reflect a problem with the students, but may actually reflect adaptive responses when they are unable to meet expectations (Pirrie, 2009). Furthermore, EBD

should not be assumed to be the cause of problems but part of complex relationships among domains of functioning. For example, EBD may be viewed as part of a reciprocal relationship between identity and psychological functioning and well-being (S. J. Schwartz et al., 2012; Wiley & Berman, 2013), where the educational impacts of identity development are considered and supported (Ferguson et al., 2010). In studying EBD, longitudinal research would help clarify causal factors; this should include environmental factors, as well as the adaptive benefits of problematic behaviours. Individual factors with respect to identity development, psychological functioning, mental health, and measurements of achievement that reflect school success, engagement, and meaning (Conner & Pope, 2013) need to be explored in students with EBD.

Access to education is a strong predictor of health, and so improving school experiences would have an expected significant impact on life course health (Deaton, 2002; Metzler, 2007). Viner et al. (2012) assert that "adolescence is a second sensitive developmental period in which puberty and rapid brain maturation lead to new sets of behaviours and capacities that trigger or enable transitions in family, peer, and educational domains, and in health behaviours. These transitions modify childhood trajectories towards health and wellbeing" (p. 1641). They also suggest that creating safe schools and positive peer supports are crucial to promoting healthy development and successful large-scale interventions that protect against health risk behaviours. Research into effective school-wide programs, particularly in secondary schools, and prevention strategies, rather than solely focussing on interventions when difficulties become significant, is needed.

Conclusion

Students with EBD are entitled to an education that is commensurate to that of their more typical peers, but this requires a thoughtful approach to understanding their needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) suggest that educational aspirations can only be achieved once more

basic needs for security and belonging are met. Indeed, creating safe and positive school climates to address bullying and to foster positive teacher-student and peer relationships should be a priority in promoting both well-being and learning. It may be that students' emotional and behavioural struggles are typical and expected reactions to hostile interactions and toxic environments, and could be mitigated by systemic changes. Rather than focusing on the individual and on intervening only when difficulties become disruptive, preventative and early intervention strategies should be implemented at the broader school and district levels. Practitioners and researchers alike must consider the multi-faceted and multi-level nature of schooling in their consideration of how to best serve students in a least restrictive manner.

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Appendix A: E-mail to the Principals of the Target Alternate Programs

Dear _____,

My name is Liane Pereira and I am a former Surrey School District Teacher who is now completing a PhD at McGill University in Montreal, QC. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study about the educational experiences of students in special alternate school programs, with permission from McGill and the Surry School District (see attached). [Attach approval letters to email]

I would like to contact the teacher(s) of the Connections alternate program at your school to introduce myself and the study and ask permission to come to their classes to invite students to participate in the study. The recruitment presentation would take about five minutes and teacher involvement would be minimal. I would describe the study which involves students making a map of their school journey and answering 3 open-ended questions about their school experiences; this would take approximately 90 minutes to complete. During the recruitment presentation, I would hand out consent/assent and demographic forms to be completed by interested students. Teachers would only need to accept completed forms and hold onto them. I will contact them after a week to see if any students are interested and to make arrangements to come back and set a date, time, and location for meeting with the student.

Please let me know if you would be willing to allow me to speak with your Connections teacher(s) about this study. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at liane.pereira@mail.mcgill.ca or 604-813-2325.

Sincerely,

Liane Pereira

Appendix B: E-mail to the Teachers of the Target Alternate Programs

Dear _____,

My name is Liane Pereira and I am a former Surrey School District Teacher who is now completing a PhD at McGill University in Montreal, QC. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study about the educational experiences of students in special alternate school programs, with permission from McGill and the Surry School District (see attached). [attach approval letters to email]

I would like to come into your class to introduce myself and the study and invite students to participate. The recruitment presentation would take about five minutes and your involvement would be minimal. The study itself involves students making a map of their school journey and answering 3 open-ended questions about their school experiences; this would take approximately 90 minutes to complete.

During the recruitment presentation, I would describe the study and hand out consent/assent and demographic forms to be completed by interested students. You would only need to accept completed forms and hold onto them. I will contact you after a week to see if any students are interested and to make arrangements to come back and set a date, time, and location for meeting with the student.

Please let me know if you would be willing to let me come in to your class and speak with your students about this study. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at liane.pereira@mail.mcgill.ca or 604-813-2325.

Sincerely,

Liane Pereira

Appendix C: Script for the Recruitment Presentation

Hi everyone. My name is Liane Pereira and I'm a student at McGill University which is in Montreal. I used to be a teacher in Surrey and now I am interested to learn about what school has been like for students in programs like Connections. I'm going to be in your school and other schools to do a study about students' experiences and what school life is like. I want to make it very clear that even though I used to be a teacher in Surrey, there is no pressure to take part in this study and if you don't take part it won't affect your grades in any way. This is something completely different from school.

The study has two parts. For the first part you would make a map that represents your school journey so far; I will give you everything you need to make it and there are no rules about what it should look like or include. For the second part you be interviewed by me and answer some general questions about your school life and experiences, but again, there are no "right" answers—I am really interested in your opinion and what you have to say about being a student. Completing the two parts would take about 90 minutes and would happen at a time and place that works for you. Your answers to the questions would be recorded with this [show digital recorder] so that I can hear your answers again later. Your answers will not be heard by anyone at school or in the district, including your classmates and teachers. I will not share your name or any other personal information about you with anyone at the school or in the community.

Transportation to the interview will be provided and there will be snacks during our meeting. If you spend any time working on the map you will get a $10 gift card, and if you spend any time answering the questions you will get another $10 gift card. Again, there is no pressure to participate; you can stop our meeting at any time, choose not to answer certain questions, and only talk about things that you choose. You will still receive the gift card for your time.

Does anyone have any questions?

I have some letters here for you and your parents or guardians that describe the study, and ask for some general information about you. If you are interested in participating in my study, you **and** your parents need to fill out and sign the forms. Then you can bring them back to school and hand it in to your teacher. I will check in with them in a week and then come back to decide

with you a good time and place for us to meet. [distribute consent, assent, and demographic forms to each student]. I want to be very clear that you do not have to participate, and if you are not interested you can ignore these forms.

Thank you so much for your attention and time.

Appendix D: Consent/Assent Form

Title of Project: Understanding the Lived School Experiences of Students in Alternate School Programs: Exploring Educational, Emotional, and Behavioural Needs

To the Parent or Legal Guardian,

My name is Liane Pereira and I'm a graduate student at McGill University in the department of Educational and Counseling Psychology. My supervisor's name is _____.

I am writing to ask your son/daughter to participate in my study about the experiences of high school students in special school programs. I am interested in learning about their past and present experiences and about what school is like for them.

My goal is to understand the experiences of students enrolled in Connections programs. I hope that what they say will help to improve learning and feelings about school. If you let your son/daughter participate, s/he will make a map of their school journey from Kindergarten until now and answer questions about school in an interview. I will be helping your child to make the map, and would like to record their answers to the questions so I can go over them later. If your child would like to keep the map and it has no identifying information on it, I will take a picture of it so I can go over it later. I will only show it in public if it does not identify your child in any way.

I will meet with your child at his or her school to do the interview and make the map; this can be before or after school or during class time if it is okay with the teacher. If your child does not want to meet at school, we can meet at a coffee shop or library that is close by that s/he chooses. If your child has to take the bus to get to our meeting, I will give your child bus tickets to get to and from our meeting.

When the study is done, I will share what I learned with other people through articles or presentations, but the names of people and schools will stay anonymous. Your child's real name will not be used; your child can choose a fake name instead. Any information your child gives me during the interview and while making the map will stay on my password-protected computer and hard-drive which I will keep safe by bringing home with me every day. All the information will be kept for five years after the end of the study and then it will be destroyed. Only my supervisor, Dr. _____, and I will see your child's personal information. I will hire a professional service to type out your child's recorded comments, but they will not have access to your child's identification (name, age, school, etc.). The audio recording of your child will be for me and my supervisor only, and will not be shared with anyone else.

I do not think there will be any risks for your child by participating in my study. However, if your child feels sad, frustrated, or angry when they thinking about school, they are free to stop at any time. At the end of the interview, I will also give your child information about free school and community people they can talk to (e.g. youth helplines, counseling services, etc.) if they want.

There are no direct benefits for your child. However, making a school journey map could be a good experience where s/he gets to talk about school in a fun and helpful way. Your child might also feel "part of" something important – having someone really listen to them and then try to use their ideas to improve how school programs help students like them.

Your child does not have to participate and can stop at any time; s/he will still get a gift card. The whole meeting should take about 90 minutes, and your child gets a $10 gift card for working on the map and another $10 gift card for answering any of the questions. This study has nothing to do with your child's

school and their grades will not be affected if they decide not to participate or to stop during one of the activities. Finally, your child may keep the map if it doesn't name people or places.

If you sign this form, you are giving permission for

a) Your child to make a school journey map and answer the interview questions
b) Your child to describe himself or herself in writing
c) Me to keep the school journey map or picture of the map your child made
d) Me to audio record the meeting (sound only, no pictures)
e) My supervisor to hear the recording, read your child's description of himself or herself, and see his or her map
f) Me to hire a professional to listen to your child's comments and type them out

If you have any questions or are worried about your rights or your child's rights during this project, you may contact the **McGill Research Ethics Officer at 514-398-6831**

If you have questions about the research you can ask me or my supervisor, Dr. Jessica Ruglis, at any time.

Liane Pereira
604-XXX-XXXX
liane.pereira@mail.mcgill.ca

Dr. _____
514-398-XXXX
first.last name@mcgill.ca

Parent or Legal Guardian:

Signing here means that you have read this letter, or have had it read to you, and that you agree for your child to participate in this study. After you sign this form, put it in the envelope I gave you, seal it, and give it to your child's teacher. I will pick it up and meet with your child at school to pick a time and place for us to meet. If I do not see your child at school, I will contact you by phone to set up the meeting.

Name of daughter/son: _____ Phone number:_____

Signature:_____ Date:_____

I give permission/consent to my child being interviewed → YES ☐ NO ☐

I give permission/consent to my child being audio recorded → YES ☐ NO ☐

I give permission/consent to my child making a school journey map → YES ☐ NO ☐

Participant of the Study (Your Child):

Signing here means you've read this letter, or have had it read to you, and that you want participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date:_____

I agree to/assent to being interviewed → YES ☐ NO ☐

I agree to/assent being audio recorded → YES ☐ NO ☐

I agree to/assent to making a school journey map → YES ☐ NO ☐

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

How would you describe yourself to someone who has never met you?

How would you describe yourself as a student?

How would a teacher or principal describe you as a student?

Circle the last grade you completed.

1. Grade 6
2. Grade 7
3. Grade 8
4. Grade 9
5. Grade 10

List the names all the schools have you gone to between kindergarten and now:

What do you like to do when you are in school?

What do you like to do when you are not in school?

Please describe everyone who lives with you

Please describe the important people in your life.

Please describe where you live (neighbourhoods, buildings, rooms)

Appendix F: Protocols for the School Journey Map

[Have refreshments ready and offer them to the participant. Make sure there is a choice of seating that is comfortable and allow the participant to choose where he or she sits. The surroundings should be as free of clutter and distractions as possible]

Opening (2-3 minutes)
Thanks again for agreeing to participate in my project. Before we start I want to go over a few things.

So just to review, my name is Liane and I am a university student. I used to be a teacher here in Surrey and I am here to learn more about what it's like to be a student, especially in programs like Connections.

You and your parents said it was okay for you to take part in this study. What this means is that you agreed to meet with me today to make a map about your school journey from kindergarten until now, and then answer some questions about your school life. You also said it was okay for me to record what you say and take a picture of your map.

I want to remind you that what you say is confidential which means that no one but me and my supervisor will know your name or any other information about you that tells people who you are. Also, your answers will not affect your grades or school in any way. You can decide not to answer any of the questions or stop our meeting at any time. Do you have any questions?

Is it okay for us to begin now and for me to turn on the recorder? [if assent has been given and there is no objection, turn on the recording device]

Introduction of School Journey Map Activity (5-8 minutes)
I want to tell you again that you decide what you want to share with me and that there are no "right" or "wrong answers". You can draw or tell me anything you want. I do want you to know that the only time I will tell others what you say is if you tell me something about yourself or someone else being hurt in any way. Do you understand?

Before we start making the map, I was wondering what made you decide to take part in this study? [Acknowledge and respond neutrally to participant's comments and clarify any misunderstandings about the study and its purpose. Summarize what they said and mention that some of those ideas might come out in their map or when they answer the questions].

A school journey map is a picture that shows how you got to the school you go to now. Making a map can help us brainstorm things about your school life and get a lot of information down on paper without using a lot of words. School journey maps could have words, numbers, pictures, shapes, and different colours—there is no "right" way to make a map. You can put on the map anything that comes to mind when you think about your school life from kindergarten until now.

Now you are going to make your own school journey map on this poster paper [put large white poster paper on table] *using any of these materials* [provide felts, crayons, stickers, glitter pens, rulers, shape tracers, number tracers, etc]. *Include what you think is most important—whatever*

that is. It could include people, things that happened, things you felt, places, or ideas. And if you want me to help with anything just ask. You are in charge and I am here to help you as much or as little as you want. Do you have any questions before we start?

Activity (30 to 60 minutes)

[Begin making the school journey map. Ask for explanations and descriptions as the participant works.]

Appendix G: Protocols for the Semi-Structured Interview

Transition (2 minutes)
So now that we have finished making the map of your school journey, we are going to move on to the next part where I ask you some questions about schools. You may talk about the things on your map or anything else that is important to you. I am interested in what it has been like for you to be a student.

Is it okay to continue to the interview? [If no, then give them $10 gift card and thank them for their time. End the session as indicated at the end of the interview protocol and provide the participant with the list of free resources and bus tickets if applicable]

Introduction (5 minutes)
I want to remind you that you can decide not to answer any of the questions or stop the interview at any time. You control what you share with me and want you to only talk about things that you are comfortable with.

Just like your map, what you say confidential. Your name and who you are will not be connected to any comments you make. This is an opportunity for you to give me your honest opinions, and I encourage you to speak up. I also encourage you to speak about yourself and your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, so please feel free to be totally honest.

This interview is not formal—there are no rules about how much or how little you have to say or what you have to talk about. I really want to learn whatever you think is important to know about being a student and what your school life has been like. Just like I did for the school journey map, I will be recording the discussion to make sure that I heard your comments correctly.

I want you to have time to share your ideas, so I might sometimes stop to give you time to think or ask another question to make sure I understand what you are saying. I just want to make sure that you have a chance to give your honest opinions and that I am not confused about what you have told me.

Do you have any questions?

[Begin the interview—questions below]

Summary (5-7 minutes)
Thank you for sharing your ideas with me. I want to make sure that I really understand what is most important to you from everything you have told me today. A good way to do this is for you to summarize what you think the things you think are most important for me to know.

[Reflect participant's comments to check for understanding. Ask for clarification if necessary.]

Now that you have given me the summary of what you have already said, is there anything you would like to add about what it has been like for you to be a student?

[Summarize the participant's statement if s/he has something to add. If not move on to closing.]

MAIN QUESTIONS	PROBES	PROMPTS
Question 1 (8-12 minutes) What has it been like for you to be a student? **Question 2 (5-8 minutes)** What are your most memorable experiences you have had as a student? **Question 3 (5-8 minutes)** When you think of being a student, what feelings come to your mind? **Question 4 (5-8 minutes)** What meaning does being a student have in your life?	Describe for me a specific example of…. What would that look like? So, am I right in saying that… Please tell me more about ... Please give me another example. Please help me to understand that more. What is _____ like? Describe an event related to that. How did you feel when that happened? Tell me more about_____?	What does it mean to you to "get an education"? Describe the positive experiences you have had during your education. Describe the supports you have experienced during your education. Describe the negative experiences you have had during your education. Describe the barriers you have experienced during your education. What about your school makes you feel stressed? (When? Who is involved?) What about your school makes you feel comfortable? (When? Who is involved?)

Closing (2-3 minutes)
I want to thank you again for your time and all your work to help me understand what your life and experiences as a student have been like. I really appreciate your sharing ideas and personal stories with me.

Sometimes when people talk about their experiences, they might feel sad, frustrated, or angry so I am giving everyone I meet with a list of people they can talk to about these feelings if they want. [Hand them the list of free resources].

To thank you for your time you can choose any two of these gift cards [Assuming they completed the map activity. Present them with the gift cards].

Again it was really nice to meet you and I am grateful for your time and hard work today. [See student out or remain behind to answer any further questions or concerns].