BACK TO SCHOOL: RE-ENGAGEMENT FROM THE ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVE

by

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Abstract

School absenteeism and disengagement is a growing concern among adolescents in North America. However, numerous students have been successful in reengaging into school and completing their education. As such, the purpose of this research was to contribute to literature on school re-engagement by exploring an adolescent perspective of the experiences that were helpful and unhelpful in returning to school. This qualitative study employed the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) to answer the following central research question: What meaningful experiences do adolescents perceive as influencing their high school re-engagement? More specifically, three sub-questions were addressed (a) What do adolescents perceive as being helpful in the re-engagement process? (b) What do adolescents perceive as being unhelpful in the re-engagement process? (c) What do adolescents feel would have been helpful during the time of their re-engagement? Semi-Structured interviews were conducted with 16 adolescents, ages 14-18, who had successfully re-engaged in high school after a period of problematic school absenteeism. Using a set of standardized procedures to analyze participants’ interview data, 14 meaningful categories emerged as being facilitative or hindering of the school re-engagement experience. According to participants, in decreasing order of importance, helping, hindering, and wish list categories included (a) teacher variables, (b) perspective shift, (c) emotional distress, (d) peer relationships, (e) family factors, (f) problem resolution, (g) sleep, (h) school factors, (i) consequences, (j) professional supports, (k) goal attainment, (l) extracurricular activity, (m) substance use, and (n) other priorities. Results of this study have important implications for training and practice. Moreover, directions for future research are discussed.
Preface

This research was proposed, designed, conducted, analyzed, and written by the primary researcher, Jackie Bendell, with guidance from Dr. Anusha Kassan and Dr. Bill Borgen. Committee members, Dr. Allison Cloth and Dr. Norman Amundson, contributed their expertise via feedback throughout the research process.

This research was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the University of British Columbia. The certificate number assigned by BREB was H14-00683.
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Dedication

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us”

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

I have had the great honour of working with youth who have shown unlimited perseverance in spite of the many hardships they have endured. Being witness to such resiliency has kindled my work in the counselling field, and more specifically, my research endeavors. This research is dedicated to the individuals that I have had the privilege to work with, especially those who were so eager to help others by openly sharing their personal journeys of school re-engagement. Your commitment to making a difference is inspirational.
Chapter One: Introduction

Research Problem

Adolescence is a crucial developmental phase which can present unique challenges as young people gain independence from their families, develop new relationships, and struggle with an emerging identity, all while making important life decisions. In addition, adolescents are developing physically, socially, and emotionally, and while the average teen will experience some degree of distress during this developmental stage, others will experience great distress that interferes with their ability to function in everyday life (Kaplan, 1997). For example, some adolescents may be unable to function in an academic environment, which often results in absenteeism from school. The present study broadly examined school re-engagement which stemmed from various forms of disengagement including an active refusal to attend school, truancy, skipping classes, and attendance challenges due to mental health functioning.

While many precipitants can lead to school refusal, research suggests that parents and children provide different explanations for this behavior. While adolescents often express anxiety as the basis for school refusal, parents feel that this phenomenon is closely associated with tangible rewards (Kearney & Bates, 2005). In contrast, the abundance of professional literature classifies the different types of school absenteeism based on precipitating factors, resulting counselling interventions (King et al., 1999; Walter et al., 2010), school based perspectives, in-school interventions (Kearney & Bates, 2005; Sturgeon & Beer, 1990), and activities aimed at increasing school wide attendance rates (Ready, 2010; Reid, 2007), but despite the extensive literature in the area of school absenteeism and re-engagement, many adolescents continue to struggle with school attendance. This problem is reflected by the broad estimate that 1-28% of students in the general population will experience problematic school absenteeism (Burke & Silverman, 1987; Lounsbury, Steel, Loveland, & Gibson, 2004; Kearney,
2001), and these rates are even greater amongst adolescents in clinical populations (Burke & Silverman, 1987).

The high percentage of student absenteeism presents numerous individual, familial, and systemic challenges. In the short term, school disengagement is often associated with severe emotional upset, somatic symptoms, delays in social and emotional development, and poor academic achievement (King et al., 1999). In the long term, students who disengage from school are more likely to have problems with employment, income, education, family development, early pregnancy, drug use, gang involvement, and mental illness (Kearney, 2008). School disengagement severely impacts not only students and families, but presents a social and economic problem for educators, community service providers, and society at large.

**Terminology**

To gain a greater understanding of the complexity of school re-engagement as a phenomenon, it is necessary to examine and understand the terminology that has described school attendance challenges over the past century. While Freud first addressed treatment options for childhood phobias early in the 20th century (as cited in Kennedy, 1965), by the middle of the century, the term ‘school phobia’ had been coined to describe children who were afraid of school and avoided attending. According to the psychoanalytical perspective, this avoidance was the result of an overdependence on the mother/child relationship as the mother attempts to fulfill her own emotional needs. Similarly, the relationship between the father and the child is symbiotic, leading to competing roles between the respective parents. As a result of these competing relationships, the child is unable to learn how to be independent and experiences feelings of guilt, depression, and anxiety over the desire to attain autonomy. The developmental objective to attain independence from one’s parents is obscured by the co-dependent
relationship, ultimately resulting in the child’s refusal to separate from the family unit to attend an educational institution (Kennedy, 1965).

Looking forward a couple of years in the literature, the term school refusal, synonymous with school phobia and school avoidance (Berg, Nichols, & Pritchard, 1969), was widely used to describe anxiety related school attendance difficulties (Brand & O’Conner, 2004). Specifically, school refusal was and still is used as a classification for students who (a) struggle to attend school resulting in extensive absenteeism, (b) display emotional outbursts, fear, and somatic complaints when encouraged to attend school, (c) are absent from school with parental awareness of the non-attendance, and (d) do not display antisocial characteristics. While this term is still in use today, it does not encompass the entire range of students’ experiences with school absenteeism challenges.

A more recent term, truancy, captures the other end of the spectrum of disengaged students. Truancy is defined by the child’s attempt to conceal non-attendance from his or her caregivers. Children who are truant tend to either leave for school in the morning and go elsewhere or start school and leave at some point during the day (Berg, 1996). Again, this term only classifies a small proportion of students who have disengaged from school.

Over the past several decades, the literature argues for the dichotomy between school refusal, expressed through internalizing symptoms, versus truancy, expressed through externalizing symptoms (Kearney & Silverman, 1996). Kearney and Silverman (1996) developed an all-encompassing terminology – school refusal behavior, a combination of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms, which may be displayed through depression, anxiety, fear, fatigue, somatic complaints, aggression, temper tantrums, non-compliance, and running away (Kearney, 2001). Specifically, this term includes children between the ages of 5-17 years
who (a) are chronic school absentees, and/or (b) start school in the morning and leave at some point during the day, and/or (c) experience morning distress and display behavioural problems prior to attending school, and/or (d) experience excessive distress during the school day leading to future pleas for non-attendance. This definition allows for various school attendance problems such as child motivated refusal to attend school, school avoidance due to anxiety, students who attend school but have great difficulties in doing so, and skipping school. In essence, the concept of ‘school refusal behaviour’ includes and replaces all out-dated terms such as school refusal, school phobia, school avoidance, and truancy.

Lastly, Kearney (2008) replaces the term school refusal behavior with problematic school absenteeism, which reduces the volitional aspect that is insinuated in the earlier terminology. Moreover, Kearney’s model presents problematic absenteeism as a continuum spanning from adolescent pleas to miss school to chronic long-term school absence. This study utilized the disengagement and re-engagement terminology synonymously with problematic school absenteeism. These terms illuminated the sequential nature of the onset and resolution of school disengagement, as well as allowed for the emergence of a wide range of re-engagement experiences.

Study Rationale and Purpose

While previous research focuses on the correlation between attendance and academic outcome, there is a noticeable need to go beyond academic achievement and to examine the various factors that influence school attendance such as small school size, parental attitudes towards school, students’ perception of student/teacher relationships, and students’ perception of the value of education (Roby, 2004). Preliminary findings from a small case study suggests that some non-attenders felt sad, bored, worried, and anxious when absent from school. Furthermore,
participants indicated that more supportive and positive relationships with adults would have made the re-engagement process much easier (Valles & Oddy, 1984). While this case study is arguably small and outdated, it does suggest a research area that requires further in-depth exploration. Moreover, high disengagement rates, the broad range of resulting difficulties, and the likelihood of failure for re-engagement suggests a need to tailor interventions specifically to the individual student’s needs (Shoote & Walsh, 2005).

Within the counselling psychology discipline, school re-engagement has been a concern for many years. Past research has explored the contributing factors involved in school absenteeism and has identified a number of ways that research and interventions can be modified to address this unique adolescent population. A meta-analysis of the impact of psychotherapy on academic related outcomes has found that counselling interventions for mental health challenges positively impacts high school achievement for youth of both diverse and non-diverse populations, suggesting a possible amalgamation of mental health and academic focused interventions (Baskin et al., 2010). Other research has suggested a link between school engagement, defined as a student’s sense of belonging to the school combined with valuing of the school experience, and career planning in a sample of predominantly non-White, low income students; these findings signify the importance of counselling interventions directed towards building career aspirations in the presence of social and economic barriers (Kenny et al., 2006). Similar research has suggested that academic self-efficacy predicts positive academic and career outcomes, while social support only affects career outcomes. The researchers identify several ways that interventions can support these findings including the provision of parenting classes, connecting students with community based mentors, providing career exploration classes, and consulting with teachers and parents to increase opportunities for social skill development as a
means of encouraging school engagement (Wettersten et al., 2005). Lastly, research that ties these findings together propose that the positive role of kinship support actually outweighs the detrimental effects of social and racial barriers across gender, racial and cultural groups in relation to students’ reported academic and occupational expectations. In essence, these findings suggest that counsellors should actively assess barriers and supports that influence the academic and occupational outcomes of students within their school, neighbourhood, and societal contexts. As such, they can tailor their interventions to the needs of the youth to ensure that each student will have access to social supports and be able to break through potential barriers (Kenny et al., 2003).

These earlier findings have provided a nice bridge to this study’s objective of exploring the common helpful and unhelpful practices in the re-engagement process. The underpinnings of this research were unusual in several ways: it was inclusive of students experiencing any type of problematic school absenteeism; it held the student perspective in high regard; it took a non-clinical approach to school re-engagement; and lastly, it used the enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009), which provided illumination of especially helpful and unhelpful practices in the field. By interviewing successfully re-engaged students, this research provided light on students’ experiences of helping and hindering incidents associated with returning to school, which increased our understanding of the re-engagement process, provided insight into the development of practical interventions, and stimulated new directions for future research. This research has highlighted potential and innovative ways of working with disengaged students, as well as identified what practices were not only unhelpful but hindering to the re-engagement process. The results of this study will provide professionals with information on how to help adolescents re-engage while trying to
reduce areas of hindrance in the re-engagement process. Over the long term, this broader understanding of school re-engagement will lead to the development of preventative strategies and new interventions aimed at reducing disengagement and increasing re-engagement, which would ideally result in an increase in graduation rates, employment rates and income, and reduce reliance on government aid.

**Research Questions**

To broaden our current knowledge of school re-engagement, this study proposed to examine critical incidents (CIs), whether helpful or unhelpful, in participants’ school return. To elicit CIs, the ECIT was used to address the central research question: what meaningful experiences do adolescents perceive as influencing their high school re-engagement? Specifically, the study addressed (a) What do adolescents perceive as being helpful in the re-engagement process? (b) What do adolescents perceive as being unhelpful in the re-engagement process? (c) What do adolescents feel would have been helpful during the time of their re-engagement? By asking these three questions, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their re-engagement experiences and identify any particularly meaningful incidents that played a role in either promoting or thwarting successful re-engagement. ECIT was selected as the research method of choice for its pragmatic approach aimed at finding viable solutions to practical problems. Specifically, the current study aimed to understand how intervening strategies at the individual, family, community, and school levels would promote or detract from a student’s successful school return. ECIT was a suitable methodology for meeting this objective, as it garnered expertise from participants who have experienced a successful re-engagement in their academic learning. This methodology assumes that individuals can access knowledge of their experiences by engaging in a self-reflective process, and this self-reflective process was
prompted during the participant interview. As a part of the methodology, the ECIT offered specific steps and protocols that guided both data collection and analysis, and provided extensive credibility checks that increased confidence in the research results. As ECIT’s primary function is to elicit critical helping and hindering factors and wish list (WL) items, the method was able to address the central and sub questions, which has increased our understanding of the helping and hindering factors that impact school re-engagement, particularly from the adolescent perspective. Additionally, students’ identified WL items generated new ways of helping adolescents re-engage in school, as well as provided a much needed perspective on what adolescents thought would be helpful to the re-engagement process. In essence, this study’s results has enhanced our understanding of the unique incidents that positively and negatively influence adolescent engagement, which will ideally help counselling professionals better support school re-engagement and reduce the occurrence of or impact of incidents that hinder the re-engagement process when working with this very exclusive adolescent population.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Over the last several decades, research has explored the concept of school absenteeism from multiple perspectives spanning across education, criminal justice, social work, clinical, and counselling perspectives, to name a few (King et al., 1999; Kearney, 2008; Kennedy 1965; Teasley, 2004; Burke & Silverman, 1987). The following section will introduce a well-established and comprehensive model of school absenteeism that will be used as a framework to guide the literature review process, while breaking this broad topic into various sub-sections including child, family, school, peer, community, cultural, and protective and risk factors. Finally, this chapter will explore assessment measures and interventions that have historically been used to support adolescents with school absenteeism difficulties and end with a review of the limited literature on re-engagement and the student perspective of this process.

Kearney’s (2008) Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism

To capture the complexities of problematic school absenteeism in a way that would create consistency in the language and description of this phenomenon across disciplines, the Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism was developed by Kearney (2008), a leading expert in this area of research. Kearney examined psychological, social, criminal justice, and educational perspectives of school absenteeism to cultivate an inclusive model addressing the school absenteeism phenomenon. During this process, Kearney identified several key components that must be included in this multidisciplinary model: the development of common terminology and definitions, a comprehensive account of proximal and distal factors that influence the phenomenon, the capacity to be fluid and flexible enough to capture the whole experience of and rapid changes in the phenomenon, and user-friendliness that facilitates assessment and treatment practices. Out of these identified components stems Kearney’s
Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism, which identifies non-problematic school absenteeism, a multi-dimensional approach to problematic school absenteeism that includes six overarching factors that contribute to school absenteeism, and a continuum that conveys the common progression from acute to chronic absenteeism to school dropout (see Appendix A).

**Non-problematic versus problematic school absenteeism.** Non-problematic school absenteeism, as defined by Kearney (2008), is any school absenteeism that parents and school officials agree is non-detrimental to the child’s education. This definition encompasses both short and long term absences due to genuine reasons such as child illness, religious holidays, or death in the family. Kearney also suggested that self-corrective behavior in which the student returns to a regular school schedule after having been absent from school for less than two weeks, common after long school breaks or during transition periods, is considered non-problematic school absenteeism.

Problematic school absenteeism, as defined by Kearney (2008), is based on a continuum that encompasses a wide scope of difficulties, without relying on definitions that must meet various criterions. This model does, however, suggest that problematic absenteeism is identified after two weeks to allow for self-corrective behavior or the identification of non-problematic school absenteeism. Within the context of the current study, it is important to consider non-problematic absenteeism, as it can progress into problematic absenteeism. Absenteeism in this population can be difficult to address, as some students appear to continue school despite medical complications, while others disengage from school beyond the duration of the medical problem. For example, for students who have disengaged due to medical reasons, re-engagement can be a challenging process. Students who have disengaged due to re-current headaches find that re-engagement after a prolonged absence can be difficult due to halted academic and social
development, as well as mood changes and academic difficulties that often accompany school absenteeism due to medical reasons (Breuner, Smith, & Womack, 2003). In addition to tracking the progression of school absenteeism difficulties, this model allows for early intervention during any stage of absenteeism and at any time during the school year rather than waiting until it is a chronic problem resulting in complete school dropout.

When looking at risk and protective factors involved in problematic school absenteeism, Kearney (2008) identified child factors as playing a role in the development of this problem; some of these include internalizing and externalizing symptoms of psychopathology, academic capability, history of absenteeism, low self-esteem, poor health, pregnancy, difficult relationships with authority, ethnicity, age, trauma history, and poorly developed social skills. While Kearney originally separated family and parent factors into two categories, these overlapping areas will be combined in this review, as the two categories are virtually inseparable in the literature. Using the family and parent categories, Kearney identified several contributing factors including parental expectations, parenting skills, family conflict, family composition, poverty, homelessness, parental psychopathology, and stressful family transitions. School factors include influences such as school safety, participation in extracurricular activities, poor relationships with teachers, and discrimination. Peer factors, which somewhat overlaps with school factors, includes the presence or absence of friendships, poor relationships with peers, and bullying. Lastly, Kearney identified several community factors as possible influences on school attendance, including unsafe neighbourhoods, economic distress, and a lack of community based supports.

Kearney (2008) proposed that the relationship between problematic school absenteeism and contributing factors, as well as the relationship between contributing factors and the
trajectory of absenteeism, is bi-directional in that problematic absenteeism can contribute to the proximal and distal factors, or alternatively, these factors can contribute to problematic school absenteeism, and may act as reinforcements. This model represents the importance of fully assessing student absenteeism on a case by case basis in order to determine whether or not absenteeism is non-problematic or problematic, identify the frequency, type, and function of absenteeism, as well as determine influential factors involved in the child’s school absenteeism. By completing this process, clinicians will be better able to address the underlying issues in the child’s school absenteeism and work with those issues to resolve difficulties that may be perpetuating the problem.

In terms of early prevention, Kearney (2008) acknowledges that students rarely attend counselling clinics, and thus the utility of this model must transfer to other disciplines. In terms of public policy, Kearney recommended that rather than using a zero tolerance model for absenteeism, school districts would benefit by using this multidisciplinary model to identify cases of problematic school absenteeism and implement interventions that are consistent with the frequency, type, and function of the absenteeism.

Kearney’s (2008) model of school absenteeism will provide a theoretical background that will guide the literature review in an exploration of the potential factors that contribute to school re-engagement. The model will guide the literature review in terms of defining school re-engagement based on Kearney’s continuum of problematic school absenteeism, while exploring factors that influence school re-engagement such as child, family, school, community, and cultural factors. The section will end with a look at assessment methods and intervention strategies. This research differs from Kearney’s in that it will take a qualitative approach that will explore the student perspective of school re-engagement to examine what helpful and
unhelpful incidents emerge within their stories, rather than using a deficiency model to explain problematic school absenteeism.

**Child Factors**

Numerous child factors can be implicated in school disengagement and subsequent re-engagement; for instance, age, mental and physical health status, academic capability, self-esteem, social skills development, history of absenteeism, personality traits, teenage pregnancy, age, ethnicity, trauma history, sexual orientation, level of internet use, and employment status can all have an impact on whether or not a youth develops school attendance difficulties and how these difficulties are resolved (Kearney, 2008). Three key areas of focus, however, emerge when exploring problematic school attendance: mental health functioning, reinforced learning, and motivation. To conclude this section, an examination of the strengths and limitations of the research to date will be discussed.

**Mental health factors.** Within the general population, 1% of children will experience school refusal behaviors at some point in their academic trajectory. Even more significant, 5% of clinically referred children will experience school refusal behaviors in their school years (Burke & Silverman, 1987). The significant difference in the rates of school absenteeism between clinical and non-clinical populations stresses the importance of examining previous literature to gain insight into the role of adolescent mental health in school engagement.

To start, an empirical study of looked at the treatment of 61 students with school refusal behaviors and a comorbid diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, mood disorder, or oppositional defiant disorder (Heyne et al., 2002). Participants were randomly assigned to three treatment groups: a child cognitive behavior therapy group, a parent training group, and a child cognitive behavior therapy plus parent training group. Interestingly, all three treatment groups showed
improvements in school attendance, distress, and self-efficacy. Specifically, students who were in the beginning stages of school refusal and experiencing mild forms of fear, anxiety, or depression, showed improvements when parents learned new strategies for managing their child’s complex behaviors. Unfortunately, some students showed no response to the intervention procedures, while others would relapse after a period of improvement. The researchers predict that students with limited social skills or high levels of depression are most likely to benefit from the child therapy groups.

In a functional outcome study of 118 adolescent students in treatment for school refusal, findings suggested that dysthymia, major depression, oppositional defiant disorder and other comorbid diagnoses were most likely to affect short-term outcomes, but not long-term outcomes in terms of education and employment. In contrast, social phobia and learning challenges affected long-term educational and employment functioning in this sample. Overall, this study indicated a significant improvement in educational and employment engagement following interventions targeted towards school refusal. The researchers felt optimistic that these findings offered hope to students and their families for positive treatment outcomes and a bright future. Furthermore, the researchers emphasized the importance of offering tailored treatment options for a longer duration and with follow-up options for students who struggle more over the long term, especially those with social phobia and/or learning challenges (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2004).

In a qualitative study, 17 non-clinical adolescents who were referred for services regarding school refusal and their parents were interviewed to determine the need for a change of approach when working with this select population. Demographically, these adolescents came from socially isolated families from low income neighbourhoods. In terms of family dynamics,
school refusing youth often came from highly enmeshed families with poor overall family functioning. Findings from parent and child interviews indicated that these youth were experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression; one youth, in particular, expressed having school phobia, while the other students reported bullying as the primary fear of returning to school. These school refusing adolescents lacked problem solving skills and, when compared to their same age peers, perceived themselves as less able to cope with difficult situations. To add to the challenges, this group often focused on the uncertainty in their lives and future, rather than finding solutions to their difficulties. Moreover, they were less like to express their fears, tended to view experiences as entirely negative, and were unable to use coping strategies to reduce anxiety. The authors concluded that professionals need to be aware of these unique characteristics and that specialized programming is needed to support students who do not fit within the mainstream school system. Specifically, interventions should be targeted towards these deficits by working with family challenges, helping the child develop social skills and friendships, and aiding in the development of coping skills (Place, Hulsmeier, Davis & Taylor, 2000).

To conclude this section on mental health factors in youth who refuse to attend school, it is important to acknowledge that many students with problematic school absenteeism have comorbid diagnosis such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and oppositional defiant disorder, and it is critical to acknowledge these diagnoses as the primary problem. Moreover, much of the research has focused on school refusal, which is commonly associated with emotional difficulties, but lacks information on school attendance challenges for students with other mental health diagnoses. As a final concern, most of the research in the area of school absenteeism and mental health is quantitative and clinical in nature; the research tends to focus on assessment
measures and treatment outcomes, but gives little regard to the student experience of school refusal in relation to mental health challenges.

**Reinforcement learning.** Youth with high rates of non-attendance often miss school to avoid anxiety producing situations, to avoid evaluative or unpleasant social situations, or to gain some tangible reward (Kearney and Bates, 2005). It is possible, however, that a combination of these factors may be at play. When looking at interventions that will assist youth in returning to school, it is important to know the function of school absenteeism so that interventions can be tailored to work on anxiety reduction and/or to reduce the reward of staying at home or staying away from school.

Dube and Orpinas (2009) conducted a study of grade 3 to grade 8 American students where three groups of school refusal students were identified: 17% had school refusal profiles of multiple positive and negative reinforcements, 60% had a profile of positive reinforcement only, and 22% had no profile. Interestingly, these profiles were similar between genders and the most common profile for both boys and girls was positive reinforcement only, especially for older students. According to student self-reports, academic achievement did not differ between the reinforcement groups. Students with multiple reinforcement profiles, compared to students with other profiles, had significantly more emotional and behavioral challenges as defined by difficulties with emotions, peer relationships, conduct behaviors, hyperactivity, inattention, aggression, and victimization. The positive reinforcement only group showed similar differences when compared to the no profile group. An awareness of this multi-layered profile should alert professionals to the increased risk of dropout for this particularly susceptible population. Determining the mode by which school refusal is positively and negatively reinforced may provide a renewed understanding of the underlying causes of school refusal.
This research can inform clinical practice in that students with different school refusal profiles and their families often require tailored interventions specific to the different reinforcement patterns at play, and early recognition of these profiles can lead to school refusal preventative efforts. Moreover, students who already experience school refusal may be more vulnerable to the effects of positive reinforcement outside of the academic environment, leading to an increased risk of complete dropout. The researchers made a recommendation for future research to build on these findings by exploring the parents and the students’ experiences of reinforcement (Dube & Orpinas, 2009).

Motivation. While Kearney’s (2008) model of school absenteeism is broad, it does not explicitly look at the child based factor of motivation. Based on other research to date, however, motivation can play a large role in a child’s school engagement and thus a large role in school attendance. While there are various models to explain motivation, this section will only briefly examine some of the key theories that are specific to achievement motivation in education. In an early article, for example, Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) emphasized the importance of assisting youngsters in developing internalized motivation: “ideal school systems are ones that succeed in promoting in students a genuine enthusiasm for learning and accomplishment and a sense of volitional involvement in the educational enterprise” (p. 325). In other words, these researchers expressed the importance of facilitating students’ development of a healthy curiosity that will guide their educational interests.

One study in particular addressed the development of learning motivation rather than achievement motivation by examining how children develop values, interests, and an appreciation for education (Brophy, 1999). Findings suggested that students are more likely to gain a sustainable interest in a particular topic area when they are supported in developing
educational related values and interests. To develop this area, it is important that the level of teaching and the learning environment both fit with the learner’s prior education and experiences. Furthermore it is important that the curriculum is relevant for the learner, the activities are suited to the individual child’s cognitive and motivational capacity, and the teacher facilitates the development of motivational schemas, which will aid in promoting an appreciation for education. This type of intrinsic motivational learning is based on what the learner intrinsically hopes to gain rather than a motivation to achieve some externally pre-determined goal such as pass or fail. According to Brophy, learning motivation can be optimized by promoting a socially supportive learning environment, a match between the learners’ abilities and what is expected (readiness to learn), and learning activities and outcomes that students perceive as valuable and relevant to their lives.

For knowledge to have relevance in learners’ lives, Brophy (1999) identified three major domains that must be included in the development of any school curriculum including knowledge that is valuable to society, knowledge that builds on adolescents’ prior experience, and knowledge that endures over time. For knowledge to be relevant and worthwhile, all three domains must be included so that students and teachers will be engaged in and understand the importance of the curriculum. To achieve these ends, teachers must scaffold motivational learning by preparing students for understanding, appreciation for, and practical application of the lessons. To help students build these schematic frameworks, teachers can model techniques by showing students how, when, and what it is like use these lessons in the real world. Coaching can be another way of building this framework through the development of goals, providing cues to the next steps, and helping learners navigate challenges in the learning process. Lastly feedback can provide an opportunity to recognize the student’s acquisition of knowledge or
skills, as well as make adjustments and corrections early in the learning process. Brophy proposes that attribution theory may be a possible avenue for understanding student motivation, as it can examine students’ attributed reasons for successes and failures, as well as their reasons for engaging, or not engaging, in learning.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis looking at the differences between intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (2001) found that extrinsic rewards can interfere with intrinsic motivation, resulting in a reduction of self-motivation, curiosity, and persistence. Deci and Ryan (as cited in Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001) created the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), which suggests that intrinsic motivation is driven by a psychological need for competence and self-determination. The theory predicts that intrinsic motivation is lowered through external reward, as rewards can reduce the perception of competence and self-determination. Conversely, intrinsic rewards will increase perceptions of competence and self-determination, thereby also increasing intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, it is important to note that any events that decrease perceived competence will also decrease intrinsic motivation.

The researchers highlighted two key aspects of any reward: the informational aspect which communicates competence within the individual, and the controlling aspect which communicates an external reward system independent of self-determination. The current meta-analysis corroborated these results, however, they found that unexpected rewards and non-contingent rewards did not affect intrinsic motivation, but expected rewards significantly impacted intrinsic motivation. The researchers suggested that students should not be externally motivated but rather intrinsically motivated by providing activities that are of interest to them, opportunities to make their own choices, and novel but achievable challenges (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001).
In an older study Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991), proposed a motivational model that is still used today to examine the influence of self-determination and persistence involved in high school dropout. This model suggests that the less parents and school staff support an adolescent’s autonomy, the less likely that adolescent will feel competent and autonomous, resulting in lower levels of self-determined school motivation and an increased likelihood of school drop-out. This study conceptualized motivation as having varying degrees based on how the student is regulated – internally or externally. Internal regulation is based on internal motivation, or in other words, motivation that stems from a self-determined drive to participate in an activity based on the individual’s experience of satisfaction from engaging in the activity. External regulation, on the other hand, is part of three components of extrinsic motivation: extrinsic regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation. A more recently coined term, amotivation, is used to describe a lack or complete absence of motivation, often a consequence of viewing an activity as personally irrelevant or lacking purpose or meaning for the individual learner.

The researchers proposed that increasing students’ motivation towards learning is arguably most effective when the learner is supported in developing his or her internal motivation rather than provided with external motivators. The authors argue that improving students’ perceptions of autonomy by allowing students to make choices and decisions regarding their learning path will improve their internal motivation towards education. Also, an increase in autonomy is beneficial for other educational outcomes such as increased effort, positive emotional responses in the school environment, psychological adjustment, improved concentration, increased academic satisfaction, and increased desire to continue involvement in education. Conversely, restricting students’ autonomy will decrease their motivation towards
educational goals. In regards to school dropout, high levels of amotivation combined with low
levels of intrinsic, introjected, and identified regulation were associated with high levels of
school dropout. The researchers acknowledged that many students are not intrinsically
motivated; however, when students are externally motivated and have autonomy, they are more
likely to persist through school than students who are do not have a sense of self-determination
(Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

It is important to note that the development of intrinsic motivation towards education is
not solely the responsibility of school staff, as evidenced by the finding that parents play a highly
influential role on the development of their child’s motivation by promoting their children’s
development of competence and autonomy (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). This study
supports the idea that the presence of child-based internal motivation is highly influential in
promoting the child’s feelings of autonomy and competence.

In concluding the childhood factors section, it is important to mention the progress that
has been made in the area of school engagement, especially in relation to childhood factors such
as mental health, reinforced learning, and motivation. The literature has been illuminated many
areas for consideration when looking through a school re-engagement lens. For example, past
research has highlighted the fact that not all treatments/strategies work equally well for all
students, and thus careful assessments are needed so that alternative interventions can be tailored
to adolescents with various mental health, reinforcement, and motivational profiles. Essentially,
these findings converge with a similar message: it is vitally important that professionals working
with this group of adolescents understand the adolescent’s context in which they present with re-
engagement difficulties. This past research does, however, present some gaps. For one, the
literature is lacking in its examination of childhood factors from the child or youth perspective.
So, while there is a lot of data presented in this area, many students remain disengaged and it appears as though the research has not asked the population under investigation why that is. Moreover, this research is very specific in nature, and thus gives the impression that with the resolution of mental health challenges, the proper use of reinforcements, or the scaffolding of internalized motivation will resolve school attendance challenges. As the literature moves forward, it will become clear that this is not the case and that the complexity of school re-engagement presents numerous challenges.

**Family Factors**

According to the Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism (Kearney, 2008), a number of family and parent based factors can play a role in an adolescent’s school absenteeism. This model provides an exhaustive list of these factors and the following section will focus specifically on some of the ways in which family and parental factors influence adolescents’ school attendance beginning with family health status, parental involvement in education, parental values of education, family instability, socioeconomic status, and ending with family based interventions.

**Family mental and physical health factors.** One study examined the long term outcomes for 192 adults who were once school refusers and found that both inpatient and community treatment program groups had experienced frequent school and home changes, family conflict, and separation. Moreover, non-attenders had high rates of physical illness (37%), as did their mothers (18%), and fathers (14%), and psychiatric illness also occurred at higher rates in non-attenders mothers (53%) and fathers (34%). In addition, high school completion rates were low (40%) for both mothers and fathers of school non-attenders. Findings from this study indicated that family factors are one of the most influential stressors associated
with school refusal (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001); however similar research suggested that family psychiatric history, specifically, does not influence the long term treatment outcomes for school refusing adolescents (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2004).

**Parental involvement in education.** In Sheppard’s (2009) literature review, she concluded that parental involvement in their child’s education is most influential in helping the child attain academic goals. When it comes to examining parental influences on student attendance, Sheppard found that absentee students often perceive their parents as being unable or unwilling to help with homework, and results showed that these parents often failed to promote study skills, which put the child at risk for having a negative attitude towards school. Sheppard hypothesized that negative parent attitudes may be a reflection of their own negative experiences in school and interventions might best be tailored towards helping parents set boundaries at home, teaching them how to support their child’s educational needs, and increasing their capacity to be involved in their child’s schooling. Overall, Sheppard concluded that disengaged students often come from families where parents have experienced academic challenges themselves and therefore may struggle with helping their children succeed in school. Sheppard recommended parent training for motivated parents, but recognized that families with multiple barriers and complex needs would need further support.

In one study exploring the effects of internet usage on school absenteeism, male and female adolescents were more likely to stay at home when their mothers were home than when their fathers were home. Interestingly, however, students of both genders were less likely to have sick days when parents were involved in the youth’s education, regardless of which parent was involved. These findings extended to other forms of parental involvement; when parents monitored youths’ internet time by encouraging use of the internet for academic purposes rather
than recreational purposes, students tended to have lower rates of school absenteeism. To optimize the benefits of the internet and reduce school absenteeism, the researchers suggested that internet use should be monitored in the home, and moderate internet use should be permitted on school grounds to encourage students to attend (Austin & Totaro, 2011).

In a large longitudinal study assessing the relationship between school absenteeism, somatic symptoms, and bulling, the researchers found over-involvement in the parent/child relationship. Specifically, adolescents who had overprotective parents were more likely to experience somatic symptoms. Typically, the youth’s somatic symptoms would elicit an over-reaction from the parents who then kept the child home from school, and thus the cycle of school non-attendance would begin. The authors do, however, point out one caveat: parents who are overprotective want to attend to their child’s health needs, but also recognize the importance of school attendance (Janssens et al., 2011).

Parents’ values of education. In a large study of 2000 parents, Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) compared parents of children with high school attendance rates with parents of children with low attendance rates, and found that both groups expressed similar values on the importance of education, felt responsible for getting their children to attend, and felt that non-attendance was inappropriate in most circumstances. In terms of educational outcome, however, parents of low attendance children did have different beliefs than parents of high attendance children. For instance, parents of low attenders had conflicting views about the importance of education: most believe that education is important and to obtain an education, it is important for students to be present in class, but they do not believe that one is dependent on the other. Also, this group placed less importance on regular school attendance and gaining qualifications and did not view low attendance as a safety risk. A small proportion of these parents believed that school work
was irrelevant to real life and others felt that their children could come back to education later in life. Parents of absentee children often attributed their child’s poor attendance to illness, behavioral problems, bullying, or the school environment, whereas parents of high attenders did not report these as acceptable reasons to miss school, with the exception of illness. The majority of the parents of absentee children felt confident in their parenting abilities and enjoyed the challenges of raising a child. Nearly one fifth of parents, however, felt powerless in childrearing, held the belief that children are disrespectful to their parents, and found it difficult to make time to talk to their children. Many of these parents described feelings of helplessness, as they had exhausted many avenues trying to get their children back to school. Many of these exasperated parents reported feeling that at some level, it had become up to the child to take onus on returning to school and reclaiming their education.

Overall, both groups of parents agreed that they wanted better communication between the home and school; collaboration between agencies such as social services, medical agencies, and housing subsidies; involvement in their child’s support team, and an increase in school based supports. All parents reported wishing that help from the schools had been made available prior to absenteeism becoming a chronic problem. Parents acknowledged that they did not know how to access help or services, and information about these invaluable resources would have been helpful (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005).

In a small study examining the student perspective of the parent-child interaction, findings suggested that parental expectations for school attendance combined with basic parenting strategies can strongly influence adolescents’ willingness to attend school (Sheppard, 2007). For example, child initiated requests to miss school and the parental consistency in responding to this request can have a significant effect on school attendance. While parent
approved absenteeism contributes to a majority of student based absenteeism, parents have three basic ways of responding to requests to miss school based feigned illnesses: (a) inconsistently allow or disallow absenteeism, (b) problem solve with the child to creatively find solutions to the request for absences, and/or (c) the parent strictly orders the child to school. When participants were asked what would happen if they were truant from school, most responded that their parents would emotionally react with anger and/or disappointment, and that they were likely to yell at, punish, or take action to prevent such truancy from happening in the future. Participants predicted these reactions based on past punishments and on their parent’s general attitudes and beliefs around the importance of education. Sheppard’s (2007) results suggested that low attenders make more frequent requests to miss school and tend to be more successful in these requests than their high-attending counterparts. Moreover, the results indicated that successful pleas for non-attendance often elicits coercive family interactions in which children gain power in the parent/child relationship. Conclusively, the findings indicated that low attenders’ parents tended to be more inconsistent in their responses to requests for absenteeism than high attenders’ parents; this inconsistency reinforced requests for absenteeism, and led to increased requests for absenteeism. Parents of high attenders, in contrast, tended to discuss the reasons for the requested absence and aimed to resolve the underlying issue that lead to the initial request. Parents’ of high attenders also placed more value on education while low attenders received conflicting messages about the value of attendance and education. This study concludes with the importance of providing families with extra support around family behaviors, organization, and parenting techniques during the students’ school re-engagement process (Sheppard, 2007).

**Family instability.** In a particularly important study of 108 inpatient adolescents being treated for severe school absenteeism, it was found that adolescents were more likely to return to
school when they came from stable home environments with few arguments. Students who never returned to school reported more instances of family instability, were less likely to keep family ties, more likely to move out of the family home, often defied parents’ wishes, and felt long-term resentment towards their family. Despite this family friction, both students who had and had not successfully returned to school had similar family-based dependency needs. Other family variables, such as child/parent separation, family size, family members’ psychiatric history, and social class did not influence successful school return in this sample of adolescents. Even more importantly, this sample of students, once graduated from high school, had similar job outcomes as defined by number of jobs held, number of job dismissals, missed days due to illness, and unemployment rates, which would indicate similar levels of work adjustment (Valles & Oddy, 1984).

In contrast to the above findings, research findings suggested that parents may not regard their child’s school absenteeism as a priority when family instability involves larger family crises such as homelessness, unemployment, domestic violence, and serious psychiatric disturbances (Kearney & Albano, 2000). Some researchers hypothesize that students are actually afraid to attend school based on the belief that they are responsible for holding the family together, and in their absence, the family will disintegrate (Valles & Oddy, 1984).

**Socioeconomic status.** The research to date is unclear as to the impact of socioeconomic status on school attendance. Some research has suggested that socioeconomic status does not directly play a role in school attendance (Heyne, King, Tonge, & Cooper, 2001), while other studies have supported socioeconomic status as a contributing factor to school absenteeism. For example, findings from a study assessing internet use in an adolescent population have found that students who come from higher income levels generally miss fewer days of school due to
skipping and/or illness. The authors have speculated that lower socioeconomic status often results in poorer school quality and health care, which increases the likelihood that students will miss school due to medical reasons (Austin & Totaro, 2011).

Another study on school absenteeism found that chronic absenteeism can be due to a family’s social and economic demands, requiring parents to work longer hours and preventing them from being more involved with their children. Additionally, youth may have to work to contribute to the family or stay at home to look after family members (DeSocio et al., 2007). A lack of parental involvement is often related to the parents own social background – those who came from high social status tended to be more involved in their children’s education than those who come from lower social status. Furthermore, parents from lower socioeconomic classes often have English as a second language, which makes it more difficult for them to be actively involved in their child’s homework and complicates efforts in connecting with school staff. This study did find multiple socioeconomic factors that influence youth’s attendance including finances, family breakdown and conflict, housing and health. Similar findings emerged in a qualitative study of 17 families with children where half of the parental pairs were semi-skilled or unskilled workers, and most of the families lived in economically deprived areas, subsidized housing, and had limited resources. Oftentimes, non-attending students came from single-parent homes with few resources and high levels of family conflict (Place, Hulsmeier, Davis, & Taylor, 2000).

**Family based interventions.** Oftentimes, re-engaging a student in the school system requires strategies that are implemented at both the individual and family level. While the student themselves engages in therapy, it may be useful for parents to engage in parent training related to establishing daily routines, using behavior management strategies, and learning how to
reduce their child’s re-assurance seeking behavior in times of distress (Kearney & Bates, 2005). Additionally, parents are mentored and supported in establishing house rules, using clear and concise commands, supervising sleep schedules, escorting children to school, restricting activities when the child is away from school, and pursuing support for child and family needs as necessary.

Fortunately, parents often self-refer the family for assistance with re-engaging the child back into the school environment, and are eager and motivated to resolve absenteeism issues. For those parents who are not aware of absenteeism issues, most parents, once notified, are willing to work towards a solution. In contrast, some parents are reluctant to acknowledge problematic absenteeism and are less trusting of school supports or, alternatively, look for quick fixes and leave problem solving in the hands of school professionals. Parents may be resistant to implementing change, passively agree to action plans, fear that the child will be harmed by coercion strategies, or feel ambivalent or unsure of which path of action to take (Kearney & Bates, 2005). Oftentimes parents feel exasperated, fatigued, and generally unmotivated after several unsuccessful attempts to re-engage their teens into high school. Kearney and Bates (2005) make several recommendations for eliciting parental compliance, including working collaboratively with the family and providing resources to other supports as needed (e.g., financial, legal, mental health, social services). Parents are often more likely to accept support when they realize that the support can be tailored to more than just the student absenteeism, but also provide support for a variety of other problems. Families are often more likely to agree upon interventions when they are frequently contacted by supporting staff. When these contacts are made, it is useful to reinforce any efforts and small successes made in implementing the
intervention. When a family is in crisis, however, the crisis should be of primary concern rather than the student absenteeism.

In a small case study of three adolescent students, Brand and O’Conner (2004) found several parent/child interactions that can be detrimental to the youth including having powerful parents with high expectations, fearing parental criticism, and believing that love is conditional upon school success. Moreover, parent/child power struggles, blurred boundaries between child and parental wishes, parental anxiety around school attendance, and parental over involvement also impacts school attendance matters. In this small study, parents were encouraged to allow their child to explore his or her own academic, vocational, and career choices, while identifying personal needs and goals, allowing the child the freedom to explore potential opportunities. In one successful case, when the parents reverted back to a controlling manner, the student once again became symptomatic until parental pressure was reduced. Overall, students continued to experience distress in relation to attendance difficulties, and thus, the therapists assisted parents with reducing their anxiety by supporting them and reminding them that high school completion may take longer than expected and may take a non-traditional fashion, but overtime, their children would likely complete the high school curriculum (Brand & O’Conner, 2004).

Lastly, in light of recent findings, parents have benefited from cognitive behavioral therapy that has focused on helping their children by reducing positive reinforcements for staying at home, preparing the child for school return, re-establishing morning routines, and using behavior management strategies. Additionally, parents themselves may benefit from treatment focused on anxiety management and relaxation strategies aimed at coping during this transition period. Complex parental psychopathology and marital distress, however, often
requires counselling and/or clinical support prior to becoming actively involved in their child’s re-engagement process (Heyne et al., 2001).

To conclude this section on family factors, it is important to recognize the role that the family plays in school absenteeism. For example, higher than average rates of poverty, mental and physical health problems, family instability and conflict, and lack of parental involvement will often impact a youth’s school attendance. These findings suggest the need for a collaborative and multi-systemic approach that can address the many influences that are contributing to the youth’s school absenteeism. Recommendations for a school refusal treatment program suggest the use of multiple supports such as financial aid, parent training, individual therapy, and family therapy (Place, Hulsmeier, Davis, & Taylor, 2000). Acknowledging the complexity of these influential factors has been a strength in this research as it broadens the scope of what we need to consider when working with this population. It is vitally important, however, to look at these factors as part of the youth’s context and to be especially careful not to place blame on the family system. Given that students with problematic absenteeism often come from underprivileged neighbourhoods, future research would benefit from an increased understanding of adolescents’ narratives to see how they construct social disadvantage in relation to academic and occupational attainment.

School Factors

In Kearney’s (2008) Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism, school based factors included poor staff training, tedious curriculum, friendship and belongingness, discrimination, and poor participation in extracurricular activities. The following sections will summarize how these factors can influence school absenteeism in high school aged youth.
**Educator perspective.** In a study examining school staffs’ views on how to reduce the obstacles they encounter and improve student attendance, many reported that they had received inadequate training on this problematic situation (Reid, 2007). School staff indicated that even if they were provided with adequate training in this area, alternative schooling options and vocational opportunities would still be the preferred solutions for re-engaging students with poor attendance. Staff did chastise parents for contributing to non-attendance by taking children on vacation during school time and allowing children to miss school without sufficient reason. Results were surprising in terms of the heavy reliance on law enforcement strategies to manage student attendance, including requiring parents to pay the legal fees for court proceedings, to attend parental management classes, to go to follow-up interviews for every unexcused absence, and to sign binding contracts with implications for non-attendance such as the expulsion of students who do not regularly attend school. While some school professionals believed that jailing parents or making use of significant fines might be a short term solution, most believed that the long term outcomes were less certain (Reid, 2007).

**The student perspective.** One study sought the student perspective to gain an understanding of the differences between high attenders and low attenders. When comparing these two groups on their reasons for completing school work, both groups gave the same reasons “they did work when it was easy or fun” (p. 109). The high attendance group, however, gave further reasons such as understanding the importance of education for future opportunities. Even for the high attendance group, when work becomes too difficult, they reported feeling unmotivated and tended to give up on their assignments. When comparing three groups of students - those who were absent to escape anxiety, those who were absent to gain tangible rewards, or those who did not identify a reason for absenteeism - all three groups were apathetic
towards all class subjects. Findings further suggested that as students missed more classes, they viewed education as less important. Students who attended school on a regular basis expressed liking social, academic, reading, and non-academic aspects of school, while their non-attending peers lacked enjoyment in all aspects of school, expressed concern over unfair treatment, poor quality of teaching, and disciplinary measures used in the classroom. When absentee students were asked how schools could be improved, they indicated that they would like more academic help, more facilities, career advising, bully prevention, and smaller schools, as well as more frivolous wishes such as more school trips and free meals for everyone. While some students suggested that reward, punishment, or court ordered action would positively influence their school return, others indicated that no measure would force on-going attendance, which suggested the need for individually tailored and flexible intervention plans (Sheppard, 2009).

While the above research presents the student ideal, studies have supported some of the above wish list items. Specifically, researchers examined the differences between high drop-out schools and low drop-out schools and found that low drop-out schools had higher rates of academic success, attendance, less failures, fewer suspensions, and fewer problematic behaviors, while having similar rates of criminal activity, ethnic diversity, enrollment, and expulsion from school (Christle, Lolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Perhaps these low dropout schools provided what the students in Sheppard’s (2009) study had concerns over – academic quality, the availability of extra help, fair treatment, and anti-bullying protocols. Also interesting, high drop-out school buildings were in poorer physical condition, and had lower standards of cleanliness and organization. Research observers reported that low drop out schools had students who were smiling more often and had fewer negative interactions. Lastly, low drop-out schools tended to have clearly defined and well understood rules, higher staff/student ratios, more teacher/students
interactions, and more student engagement than in low drop out schools. The authors acknowledged that these low drop out schools tended to be well looked after, in good condition, and organized, but that this could be due to higher socioeconomic status within the community, which may also play a role in the student attitudes and dropout rates (Christle et al., 2007).

**Friendship and school belongingness.** In a qualitative study of school belongingness, results identified several students who did not feel a sense of belonging due to peer based cliques and low acceptance of others. Moreover, students reported that they felt disconnected from their academics, bored with classes, and lacked the opportunity to connect with friends. They did, however, attribute any feelings of belongingness to their friendships, which countered those centered on a lack of acceptance and alienation. Students identified that their friendships played a role in four fundamental domains: reliable alliance, intimacy, enhancement of worth, and companionship. Students often felt overwhelmed by school expectations, but friends provided emotional and academic support. Also, students reported that their talents were not valued within the school system and that they often had feelings of worthlessness, but friends shared interests and talents, which promoted their sense of self-worth. In terms of companionship, this virtue of friendship was most valued in the classroom environment, where students often felt disengaged; one student expressed her thoughts, “if I did not have friends, I would not want to go to school. And it affects my desire to do good” (p. 72). It appears as though friendships are crucial in the development of school belongingness, facilitating the motivation to do well, and buffering against some of the disconnectedness and alienation that students can feel (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

**School motivation via extracurricular opportunities.** Past research has emphasized the importance of viewing the school facility as more than an academic environment, but also as
a place where students can express their passions and talents, and create meaningful experiences through extracurricular activities such as athletics, focused academic pursuits, vocational activities, and fine arts clubs. A longitudinal study of 392 grade 7 students examined the effects of school-based extracurricular activities and found that involvement in such activities significantly reduced dropout rates, and dropouts were negatively correlated with the number of activities participated in, especially for students who were deemed at risk of dropping out of high school. Unfortunately, the exclusionary nature of many extra-curricular activities, such as tryouts for sports teams, often screens out the students who would most benefit from these opportunities. Active involvement in these activities provides a means of developing social networks, extending individual interests, experiencing success, and progressing towards the student’s individual goals (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

**School based interventions.** Various school based interventions such as providing an alternative course schedule, monitoring attendance, addressing any attendance issues with student and family, modifying the amount of make-up work, and reducing expectations around class grades and course credit, can reduce or eliminate school based risk factors (Kearney, 2008). In later research, multidisciplinary interventions are used, which may include requesting documentation explaining legitimacy of absence, providing a peer mentor or staff member who assists with on-time arrival to class and homework completion, providing a reward for attendance, using attendance contracts, mediating student/staff and student/peer conflicts, and involving students in extracurricular activities (Kearney & Bates, 2005). Additionally, the school can take measures to involve parents by asking them to keep in close contact when children are struggling with attendance, assisting parents in establishing clear expectations around morning routines, and in finding relevant community supports. It is vitally important to
communicate even small steps in the child’s progress to the family, as parents often fail to notice these improvements and start to feel discouraged by the perceived lack of change. Unfortunately, this sort of school based program takes a lot of resources, but case management could be delegated to one school-based official so that communications will be clear and consistent, and resources will be appropriately activated. This approach may have additional benefits as particularly vulnerable youth, especially those who have been subjected to severe bullying, benefit from positive school based adult supports. In fact, positive adult supports are protective factors against sexual orientation victimization, school avoidance, and drug and alcohol consumption (Darwich, Hymel, & Waterhouse, 2012).

In terms of school safety, research has found that fear of attending school due to the perception of violence is directly associated with having been the victimized in the past, rather than being witness to school violence. It would seem then that interventions to re-engage students in school need to be tailored towards reducing the risk of future victimization by dealing with the perpetrators directly, providing a safe place for the at risk student, and taking measures to improve overall school climate and reduce violence (Astor et al., 2002).

**Alternative programming.** Schools often promote engagement through a variety of means such as providing students with extra supports, encouraging involvement in fun activities, creating a safe learning environment, and offering non-traditional time tabling. These school based modifications are often enough to entice student attendance, however, sometimes more specific options such as alternative or online schooling are necessary. Reid (2012) has proposed a school-based action plan that is designed to help students re-engage in high school. This action plan starts with providing students with more opportunities to experience success, resulting in an increased sense of self-efficacy. The second component of the action plan involves flagging
students with attendance problems early, which requires allotted staff time to regularly review attendance records. Thirdly, as bullying is identified as a key factor in school avoidance, preventative measures and consequences need to be clearly defined and implemented by school staff to increase school safety. Perhaps more appealing to students, schools may be able to increase attendance through the development of better in-school programming to provide enriching and enjoyable experiences outside of the academic curriculum. Alternative options that include basic literary and numeracy, as well as vocational options, would assist with engaging students who are on the non-academic track. Lastly, school staff, especially support staff, would benefit from better training in school attendance issues, which may start with learning better classroom management techniques, given that students often start to avoid school due to others’ unruly classroom behavior. Overall, this plan is designed to support the needs of the learner, especially those who have unique learning challenges.

Perhaps another solution to keeping students in school is by providing specialized programs through alternative schools. Research shows that students who were treated in a cognitive behavioral therapy treatment program for youth with comorbid anxiety or depression and school absenteeism were able to transfer to a specialized school once they experienced a decrease in clinical symptoms and an improvement in learning behaviors. Outcomes suggest the need for an increased availability of alternative programs that have the resources to support youth with complex needs (Walter et al., 2010). If students have ongoing struggles with school refusal and all options have been exhausted, they can elect to enrol in distance or online education. This is used as a last resort for students who have extreme levels of distress preventing them from returning to school or seeking employment. Unfortunately, this group of youth rarely succeed with distance education, as it does not provide adequate academic support,
often does not provide the proper graduation credits, reduces employment options, and socially isolates the youth (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2004).

The past literature that examines the influence of school factors on school absenteeism is more comprehensive in perspective and scope than some of the other contributing factors. For example, it addresses both the educator perspective and student perspective, while offering strategies for helping keep students engaged, as well as how to re-engage students. The research does not, however, provide suggestions for how to deal with poor staff training. Additionally, much of the research focuses on punishing the youth and the youth’s parents as a strategy for attaining student attendance, which according to the research is not an effective method (Sheppard, 2009). Most concerning, this disciplinary approach is suggestive of parental blame and does not accommodate Kearney’s (2008) continuum of school absenteeism. That is, it assumes bad behavior on the behalf of the student and does not make room for students who are struggling with mental illness, disability, cultural transitions, and so on. Future research would likely benefit from examining the gaps in staff training aimed at dealing with school attendance issues, while continuing to explore strategies for working with rather than disciplining the disengaged student and their families.

**Peer Factors**

In Kearney’s (2008) model of school absenteeism, peer factors was identified as one of the contributing factors of school disengagement. Specifically, peer factors included, but were not limited peer pressure, peer victimization, gang activity, and a lack of extracurricular activities. This section will specifically focus on the negative influence of peers and bullying as contributing factors to school absenteeism.
Influence of peers on school dropout. As mentioned earlier, peer and school factors overlap in several areas (e.g., bullying in the school environment and developing extracurricular activities to engage students) and some research focuses solely on the relationship between these two factors. For example, it has been suggested that peers have the potential to positively or negatively influence school dropout amongst friends (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997). Specifically, in a study of 191 middle class high school students, those at high risk for dropping out, as determined by a stringent risk assessment, had significantly more friends who also dropped out, and this was particularly salient for at-risk females. Moreover, at-risk males and females were more likely to have friends who dropped out during their middle adolescence. Oftentimes, dropout friends represent potential employment connections for at-risk students, which may motivate students to seek full-time employment rather than education. At the school level, both at-risk and not at-risk groups had similar close relationships, but as the year progressed, at-risk students experienced more rejection and had fewer school based friends. Surprisingly, at-risk students were no more vulnerable to peer influence, experienced similar levels of attachment in peer relationships, and interacted with peers equally as often as not at-risk peers. (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997).

Bullying. In a comparison study of students who were non-victims, escaped victims, continuing victims, and new victims of bullying; findings demonstrated that continuing victims were the least well-adjusted students, followed by new victims, escaped victims, and non-victims. Escaped victims tended to experience greater peer problems than non-victims, but were similar in all other aspects. Continuing victims and new victims, however, experienced greater difficulties as they often disliked their peers, felt uncomfortable during break times, and were absent from school more frequently; these students tended to enjoy classes, like teachers, and do
their homework, but were afraid of being bullied and lacked supportive friends. Students who had escaped bullying had, in general, sought support from teachers and other adults, and attempted to change friendship groups, while new victims and continuing victims tried to ignore the bullying. Additionally, new and continuing victims blamed themselves and attributed the bullying to something that was inherently wrong with them (Smith et al., 2004).

To conclude this section, it is vitally important to consider peer based factors that play a role school attendance. In a review of 192 medical files of adolescents who had been treated for school refusal, 34% of non-attendees identified conflict with peers as the primary reason for not attending school, while 14% identified bullying as theirs (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001). Combined, nearly 50% of that sample identified peer factors as the key reason for not attending school. As the research has demonstrated, peer factors presents a real problem but an empirically supported resolution remains to be seen. Moreover, the past research focuses on the reasons that students have disengaged, but there appears to be little research on how this impacts school re-engagement for adolescents.

Community Factors

As the last of Kearney’s (2008) six contributing factors in school absenteeism, community factors encompass neighbourhood safety, community economy and the availability of professional and lay person jobs, the communities cultural values, the active presence of gangs, racial tensions, and a lack of community support services. Kearney has suggested that negative community factors alone do not generally lead to school absenteeism, but rather combining vulnerable adolescents with negative community factors can substantially increase the risk of school drop-out, which in an unstable neighbourhood, can lead to wide spread absenteeism. To understand the impact of such community dynamics in school re-engagement, a
review of the literature will look at several underlying mechanisms that contribute to school absenteeism in the first place, including neighbourhood distress, the role socioeconomic status in relation to community factors, the reciprocal relationship between negative community influences and school dropout, and the protective benefits of extracurricular involvement.

**Neighbourhood distress.** Of critical importance, attendance is closely associated with community factors such as neighbourhood support and safety. Neighbourhood safety is often directly related to something as simple as the students commute to and from school; for example, students may feel uncomfortable taking the bus or walking to school, which could lead to non-attendance. When this is the case, students are not best served by counselling or legal interventions, but rather via safe alternative modes of transit, as “incentives [or punishments] cannot protect students from neighborhood bullies, criminal activity, and other threatening circumstances” (Chapman, 2003, p. 13). Early research pertaining to the effects of neighbourhood distress on school attendance revealed that young women typically have strong social networks in their community and hence are more likely to be influenced by neighbourhood disadvantages than teenage boys. Additionally, submersion in the social environment increases young women’s vulnerability to the influence of groups who fail to promote educational values. Furthermore, females from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are much more likely to engage in early sexual behaviors leading to unwanted pregnancies in which they often discontinue school to care for the young child (Baumer & South, 2001).

Contrary evidence suggests that women’s high level of integration into the local community may actually result in increased supervision and educational support that buffers the negative effects of community distress (Crowder & South, 2003). Neighbourhood distress can also be buffered by the family’s socioeconomic status, or more specifically, the combination of
family income and parental education. Unfortunately, when the family has limited financial means, neighbourhood distress has a larger impact on income, job availability, and feelings of hopelessness. This downward spiral leaves neighbourhood adolescents feeling discouraged about their educational goals and increases the risk of school dropout. While research evidence is mixed, some findings suggest that adolescents who interact with more affluent families are able to witness success and strive towards educational potential (Wilson, 1996). Some research, however, finds a less desirable outcome in which adolescents from low income neighbourhoods tend to act out more frequently when surrounded by more affluent peers (Turley, 2002).

**Socioeconomic status.** In an extensive study of the effects of affluence, or lack thereof, and its impact on adolescent school attendance, findings suggested that neighbourhood socioeconomic status plays a large role in school drop-out. Crowder and South (2003) described a collective socialization perspective as a social learning model whereby adults are role models for behaviors, beliefs, and aspirations. The theory posits that low income communities are ridden with poverty, unemployment, and low educational expectations, which become the common experience of adolescents who have learned this way of life. These negative neighbourhood influences were found to be more detrimental to youth who were greatly immersed in a community culture that failed to transmit educational values. Perhaps in direct contrast to the collective socialization perspective, adolescents who were new to the neighbourhood were found to be even more vulnerable to the effects of low socioeconomic status, as they have yet to develop any sort of positive network that can provide support within the community. Thus, newcomer adolescents are at increased risk of school dropout due to a lack of adult supervision, community support, and educational encouragement. Furthermore, low income neighbourhoods were found lacking in adult supervision, which may have
contributed to the increase in neighbourhood distress and related school absenteeism; this effect was even more pronounced amongst youth who did not have strong parental ties in the home, making single parent families more vulnerable to the effects of economic disadvantage and school drop-out.

**Negative community influences.** The relationship between community factors and school absenteeism is not uni-directional, in fact it is reciprocal in that students who fail to attend school are at increased risk of violence, injury, substance use, and financial challenges, all of which will negatively impact the safety and economic security of the community itself (Kearney, 2008). Moreover, school absenteeism will likely have a major impact on social and economic factors in that costs will continue to mount for professional interventions aimed at re-engaging youth into school, but these costs do not outweigh that of the long term expenses including legal fees, social and housing support, crime prevention, and health care expenses (Reid, 2005).

**Extracurricular involvement.** Research on the benefit of student involvement in extracurricular activities, especially for those most at risk of dropping out of school, emphasized the community’s role in providing these opportunities, which were mostly sponsored by teacher and/or parent volunteers and funded by community sponsors and educational grants. A community oriented population and school is able to contribute to the availability of these opportunities, which ultimately provides students with a meaningful and rich experience that encourages attendance and development, while providing a safe place for at-risk students to make connections and stay engaged in pro-social activities (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

To summarize this section, neighbourhood distress and socioeconomic disadvantage play a significant role in problematic school absenteeism, and it appears that this problem is community wide rather than centralized on a small proportion of students. Moreover, the
reciprocal relationship between community factors and school absenteeism emphasizes the importance of intervening at either the individual or the community level to discontinue this negative cycle (Reid, 2007). In the short term, the negative impact of community factors can be reduced by increasing communication between professional services such as police, social services, and schools with the intention of providing multidisciplinary supports at the individual level, which will begin the long process of community wide stability (Kearney, 2008). Providing these extra supports will likely have a major impact on social and economic resources in that costs will continue to mount for professional interventions aimed at re-engaging the youth into school, but these costs do not outweigh that of long term legal fees, social and housing support, crime prevention, and health care expenses (Reid, 2005). Mahoney and Cairns (1997) suggested providing youth with extracurricular activities, which can be a protective factors against school discontinuation. Unfortunately, extracurricular activities are often cutback during times of economic distress, and yet these activities could be the impetus for keeping students in school, which will ultimately lead to better individual and family outcomes and strengthen the economy within these vulnerable communities. Clearly community plays a large role in school absenteeism and it is critical to examine how to reduce its negative influence on school absenteeism in youth.

**Cultural Factors**

Culture is based on a set of principles that is passed down over generations and guides ones’ perceptions, beliefs, communication, and behaviors amongst a group of people who share the same language, history, and geographic location (Triandis, 1996). To date, very little research acknowledges the influence of culture on school engagement, and even less on school re-engagement. Furthermore, in the school refusal literature, very few studies include the
experiences of individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds. Kearney (2008) summarizes some cultural factors that likely play a role in an adolescent’s reluctance to attend school including discrimination, interracial tension, and minority based cultural values that contrast with the majority’s values. To see how culture plays a role in adolescent high school absenteeism, social structures and economic factors will be highlighted, followed by specific examples of cultural influence on school absenteeism.

**Social influences.** Recent research has identified that adolescents from non-majority ethnicities are increasingly struggling from school refusal behaviors, and absenteeism rates are increasing in youth coming from urban and poverty stricken neighborhoods (Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Given low-income families are often of minority cultures, it is particularly concerning that this population is underrepresented in the research on school refusal behaviors. More concerning is the language used to describe school disengagement, which also predicts the accessibility of services. For example, in this study, students who were labeled as truants were dealt with in a punitive manner and often referred to the criminal justice system where they were unable to receive individualized services. Students who were labeled as school refusers were often referred to mental health agencies, and those who did not have an official mental health diagnosis were declined from services and referred back to the legal system. Studies have suggested that the distinction between truancy and school refusal is artificial and interferes with assessment measures and suitable interventions (Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Unfortunately, those students who were the most likely to experience problematic absenteeism were also those who represent visible minorities, come from low-income families, and have limited access to mental health services. Limited access to supportive services means that most students who have
problematic absenteeism will receive punitive interventions aimed at reducing truancy rather than receiving specialized interventions and community assistance.

In Blumer’s work, (as cited in Bauer, Loomis, & Akkari, 2012), identities were used to describe multiple entities that can be activated or expressed when in the presence of others. These entities are fluid in that they are dependent on situational, social, and personal dynamics that are inherent in our social roles. Identity formation is crucial during adolescent development as it plays a role in youth’s investment in school education. In more recent qualitative work, an examination of immigrant youth in Geneva and Switzerland explored the influence of family, friends, and school on identity development. Findings suggested that cultural diversity is recognized and positively experienced amongst adolescent youth; interestingly, they accepted diversity as the norm and thus did not recognize their situation as unique, nor did they recognize Geneva as having a unique perspective on cultural diversity. When it came to culture, adolescents were relatively uninterested in their cultural heritage but were more interested in youth culture, as was expressed through similar enjoyed activities and generational influences. Furthermore, Swiss culture had instilled French as the normative language and students reported that cultural membership was often based on an individual’s fluency in using the language. Diversity within this sample was interesting in that everyone knew that it existed, and yet nobody spoke of it; even in the classroom context, diversity was not addressed. Youth did, however, express that this diversity was beneficial to their learning experience and opened their mind to other ways of being. Overall, students’ abilities to activate different home and school identities corroborates early theories that recognize identity as a dynamic aspect of the self that can be activated and switched on according to our environment (Bauer, Loomis, & Akkari, 2012).
In past research exploring the psychological adjustment of immigrant youth, adolescents who had integrated both their ethnic and national identities tended to fair better than those who had low identification with these identities (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Similarly, both ethnic and national identities were related to school performance and achievement in immigrant adolescents, although these findings were stronger for the development of national identity than ethnic identity, suggesting that schools operate with an assimilationist perspective. It is important to mention that these findings were influenced by gender, age at the time of immigration, and the adolescent’s generation of immigration. In most cultures, females have traditionally been responsible for the transmission of cultural and traditional practices, but younger women who have assimilated into the host culture were found to often identify more with the hosts’ cultural values, particularly those that allow women greater freedoms. This study showed that both genders struggled with navigating the host and ethnic cultures during the acculturation process, and this appeared to be especially difficult during the adolescent years of identity formation. For an adolescent whose primary task is to adjust and succeed in the educational environment, a lot of pressure is placed on assimilating to the dominant school culture, as education is viewed as being an avenue towards future success. Newcomers hoping to join the host culture often experience increased difficulty in the face of rejection and/or discrimination. If the host community is accepting of immigrants, newcomers will have the opportunity to adopt a national identity, while maintaining their ethnic identity. The authors cautioned against the American assimilation model, which encourages newcomer youth to assimilate into the mainstream culture by leaving behind their native language while at school; this pressure to assimilate inadvertently marginalizes students who are unable to
communicate in a foreign tongue and can potentially lead to a halt in the development of peer relationships and school engagement.

**Economic barriers.** An American study compared the effects of neighborhood distress and school dropout between African Americans and Caucasians by using theories of collective socialization, social capital, and social control (Crowder & South, 2003). Briefly, collective socialization refers to the transmission of cultural norms, values, aspirations and behaviors from non-relatives in the community; social capital refers to institutional transmission of norms and attitudes towards social, educational, and occupational opportunities; and social control refers to the positive and negative living conditions that influence the respective success or failure of the individual growing up in that context. From the collective socialization perspective, adolescents who grow up in communities with few opportunities are less likely to develop educational aspirations of their own, and are at an increased risk of early school dropout. Furthermore, adolescents who are highly integrated into their communities are more affected by neighbourhood distress than those who are less connected. To counter this collective socialization perspective, new-comers to the area tend to be more affected by neighbourhood distress and are more likely to drop out of school; these findings provided support for the social capital perspective, which suggests that those who have lived in a community longer had developed more connections and support networks, while newcomers are less likely to have these supportive connections. Lastly, findings from the social control perspective have indicated that adolescent school dropout is directly affected by the quantity and quality of community based adult supervision, which can be offset by family based supervision.

In this study, findings suggest that African American adolescents in U.S schools are increasingly susceptible to the effects of neighbourhood distress and are more likely to drop out
from school, especially when they come from single-parent families. Moreover, according to the social control perspective, when neighborhood distress is combined with family distress, adolescents are even more likely to leave school early. Crowder and South (2003) summarize the overall findings as follows: neighbourhood poverty is more damaging to individuals with low socioeconomic status, which negatively impacts the likelihood of school completion, and this is especially true for newcomers, young adolescents, and African American adolescents. While both groups are impacted by this trend, residents who are new to the area are even more affected. The authors theorize that disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to be segregated from more affluent neighborhoods, and as these disadvantaged neighbourhoods grow, they suffer from increased isolation, less resources, and fewer opportunities for growth.

In an American study comparing Mexican and Non-Latino Caucasiains, findings suggested that engagement in non-academic related activities has helped adolescents create social networks with others who view education positively (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). It would appear that these organized and unorganized activities actually create a positive social environment for adolescents to grow both socially and academically, while buffering them from the negative effects of peers who drop out of school. Unfortunately, not all adolescents engage in these extracurricular activities due to financial constraints, as those from low income families may have other obligations such as working to supplement family income or looking after family members while their parents are at work. To extend the challenges that already exist, Mexican American students tend to live in low income neighbourhoods and attend resource poor schools, which may limit the schools ability to offer non-academic opportunities.

This research identifies that all students, regardless of economic circumstance, benefit from engaging in extracurricular activities as a means of developing friendships and promoting
high school graduation. Unfortunately, the continuing inequities of employment opportunities and associated income continue to present a problem for minority families; moreover, adolescents continue to struggle with access to out-of-school activities. In essence, those who could benefit most from engagement in extracurricular activities are those who are the least likely to have access to such opportunities. And it is this very group of disadvantaged students who will create friendship networks with other disadvantaged adolescents who are less likely to complete high school. The challenge: disengaged youth are expected to overcome family poverty, segregation, neighbourhood distress, and other barriers that created disengagement in the beginning (Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

Similar findings emerge from a study conducted by Brown and Evans (2002), which looked at the relationship between youth participation in extracurricular activities and school connectedness in over 1700 students. Specifically, findings indicated a strong relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and school connectedness for all students, but many extracurricular activities were focused on the common interests of the European American students and lacked the interests of minority students. Feelings of school connectedness were most significant when youth were engaged in more extracurricular activities and when those activities were either sport related or separate from the everyday school routine; for example, activities such as boys and girls clubs, scouts, and youth groups were more important to school connectedness than school-based or fine arts activities. The researchers theorized that the nature of these group activities promote the development of life skills and social relationships, which may generalize to the school environment.

Additionally, findings revealed that ethnic minority groups tended to be less involved in activities compared to their majority counterparts, with the exception of sports activities, which
appeared to facilitate engagement across ethnic groups. A common problem in many extracurricular activities, however, is that students often have to be gifted in the activity or popular with their peers to be selected for participation, and they often need to maintain a certain grade point average to be involved. Unfortunately, many of these barriers prevent the very students who need to be connected most from participating in these activities. To address some of these barriers and to make extracurricular activities ethnically inclusive, the authors suggested encouraging parental and community involvement in developing extracurricular activities; identifying and troubleshooting possible barriers to participation such as language, communication, cultural, and economic barriers; holding community and school based multicultural events; holding culturally sensitive parent teacher nights; and developing culturally relevant curriculum (Brown & Evans, 2002).

In a qualitative study of 32 students, Blustein et al., (2010) looked at the relationship between school, work, race, and ethnicity to understand how students constructed their opportunities for academic and occupational achievement based on their backgrounds. Most students identified a clear connection between school achievement and occupational opportunities, but they felt the pressures of societal racism and held perceptions that the community placed lower expectations for minority students. This qualitative study showed that students constructed various meanings around societal racism: some students were unsure of the implications of racism in their future success, some were motivated to resist racial barriers, and some felt pessimistic about their future successes. In contrast, some students felt that society had high educational and occupational expectations for them. While students felt the impact of societal racism, in terms of socially held expectations, most were unsure as to how these expectations would play out in their future successes.
To complete this section on cultural factors, the research has provided a deeper understanding of the complexity of culture. Moreover, it has emphasized the challenges that youth experience when they come from a minority culture, which is even more challenging in the presence of negative social and economic factors. Research has suggested that these negative influences can be buffered through extracurricular activity involvement. Unfortunately, however, most of these students cannot afford to participate in such activities or do not have the time to participate as they need to earn an income. Again, those who would benefit most from these resources are the least likely to have access to them. While the research has examined the impact of cultural differences in many ways, the research on school absenteeism is conducted on predominantly Caucasian participants, and thus, for the most part, does not reflect cultural diversity. To influence the present negative cultural, social, and economic patterns, it is important that research start including participants from minority groups so that the literature will reflect cultural diversity and inform service providers in using assessment and intervention strategies with minority populations, rather than relying on a punitive strategy aimed towards enforcing re-engagement. Also, the literature has not addressed school absenteeism in relation to the expectation of assimilation within the public education system, which would likely make school engagement difficult for many students. In essence, it would be helpful to re-examine the individual, family, peer, and community factors that play a role in school absenteeism within a minority population, as these factors may be vastly different than what has been found for the majority group. For example, cultural values around education may need to be re-examined, as beliefs around the importance of education may vary between cultures. And lastly, the research on school absenteeism does not take into consideration the role of cultural factors at the level of
disengagement, and more specifically, re-engagement. Overall, the literature has come a long way in addressing cultural contexts of minority individuals, but the research is still in its infancy.

Interventions

To date, a lot of research has focused on specific interventions aimed at re-engaging youth in school. Most of these studies, however, have been quantitative in nature, have focused on students with clinical diagnoses, and are based on treatment outcomes. To have a better understanding of the interventions used with the disengaged adolescent population, this section will review the effectiveness of cognitive behavior therapy, family therapy, early return, inpatient treatment, and pharmacology.

Cognitive behavioral therapy. To date, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been one of the leading interventions for students with school attendance difficulties, especially those with school refusal behaviors. In an outcome study of 20 school refusing children and adolescents, students received six individual sessions of child therapy, which included identifying anxiety provoking situations and coping responses, coping skills training, as well as imaginal and in-vivo exposure. Meanwhile, a parent training component focused on behavioral management, developing morning routines, and learning new responses to children’s somatic complaints and negative comments. Teacher training was used to discuss school return and to enlist their help in facilitating a positive school return experience. Results revealed several changes, including an increase in school attendance, a decrease in negative student affect, and an increase in confidence in the ability to cope with difficult situations. Even more significant, all 20 participants had a diagnosable anxiety disorder at the pre-treatment assessment, and at post-treatment, only three students still met the diagnostic criteria. The authors found it difficult to determine the exact effects of the parent training, but believed that this element was crucial to the
successful intervention and felt that this combination treatment should be a first-line treatment for any student experiencing school refusal (King et al., 1999). A similar study supports these results but emphasizes the importance of relapse prevention, given the moderate rate of relapse in this school refusing population (Heyne et al., 2002). Other CBT outcome studies suggest that relaxation training, cognitive restructuring, self-statement training, and social skills training are helpful adjuncts to the aforementioned treatment protocol aimed at reducing school absenteeism (Lauchlan, 2003).

**Family therapy.** The results of a qualitative study pertaining to intervention strategies demonstrated the usefulness of family therapy in working with school refusal students and families. The authors recognize that CBT methods often contain a parent training component, but this component is usually focused around child management strategies rather than systemic family problems. Research has highlighted that school refusing students are often from families where there is a high level of marital or family conflict or enmeshment between its members. Hence, family therapy can address these underlying family issues and doing so may be integral to the student’s success in returning to school (Place, Hulmsmeier, Davis, & Taylor, 2000). An earlier study on school returnees and non-returnees found that the resolution of family conflict is an essential component in an adolescent’s successful school return. Children from unstable families are less likely to return to school, and these difficult relationships continue into adulthood and result in persistent relational instability, defiance, and resentment (Valles & Oddy, 1984).

**Early return.** While school refusal is complex, there is an argument that early return to school is preferable to delayed school return, as it minimizes the secondary complications that arise with prolonged school absence (e.g., missed classwork, isolation from peers, and secondary
gains by staying home). In contrast, there is an argument against early school return that suggests rapid return may actually interfere with the therapy process and leave underlying conflicts unresolved. Looking at the process of school return in 34 participants who are now adults, Valles and Oddy (1984) compared the overall functioning of school returnees and non-returnees. Results indicated that the treatment of school refusal was successful when the measure of success was strictly based on school return. Unfortunately, school returnees continued to experience poor emotional adjustment later in life. Results also suggested that return to school was not directly tied to later adjustment, but rather that upon discharge from the program, adolescents who responded well to treatment had better outcomes than those who had little response to treatment, regardless of school attendance outcomes. In general, both returnees and non-returnees tended to have positive work outcomes, difficult social functioning, and poor family dynamics as adults. Those who failed to return to school, however, tended to be more involved with the criminal justice system, experienced more anxiety and depression, and were more socially isolated. Overall, findings regarding school return showed that early return is likely beneficial to younger students, but it is critical for older students to receive the support they need prior to school return.

**Inpatient treatment.** A comprehensive inpatient treatment program was implemented for adolescents who struggled with severe school refusal and a comorbid anxiety disorder, depressive disorder, or mixed disorder of conduct and emotions. Adolescents had three individual CBT sessions per week and one parent or family session per week, while also engaging in graduated exposure activities and therapeutic homework throughout the eight weeks of treatment. Approximately 12% of the sample also received pharmacological interventions when CBT did not appear to be enough to promote change. Depending on the severity of school
refusal, students were either integrated back to home schools or into the clinic school. At the end of the treatment program, participants showed significant improvements in both school attendance and mental health problems, as reflected by fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, and disruptive behavior. Results indicated that specialized schooling or alternative school placements were necessary for nearly half of the sample. Given the cost and time needed to implement this inpatient program, only the most severe and resistant to treatment school refusal cases should be considered for this type of intervention (Walter et al., 2010).

**Pharmacology.** Typically, pharmacological treatments are not a first line intervention in treating school refusal behaviors. When combined with other psychotherapeutic interventions, however, they have been shown to help alleviate the underlying symptoms of anxiety and depression that are common to school refusal in adolescents. Presently, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI’s) are the most commonly prescribed treatment for anxiety and depression in adolescents. Benzodiazepines have also been used to treat acute symptoms of anxiety in students with school refusal, but the associated side effects and addictive properties make this a short-term treatment with limited long-term changes (Fremont, 2013).

One study of 488 children with separation anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder or social phobia, indicated that 80.7% of the participants in a CBT plus Sertraline (SSRI) group showed the most improvement, followed by the CBT only group (59.7%), sertraline only group (54.9%), and the placebo group (23.7%). Unfortunately, the medication groups reported more side effects such as insomnia, sedation, tiredness, and restlessness (Walkup et al., 2008).

In regards to school refusal specifically, one study compared the outcomes of two treatment groups: an Imipramine (a tricyclic antidepressant) plus CBT group and a CBT plus a placebo group. Results indicated poorer outcomes for students in the CBT plus placebo group,
especially for those with severe school absenteeism or a diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder. Participants who had the highest rate of attendance at the end of the study were those who had less severe school absenteeism at the beginning of the study and received the drug treatment. The research suggests that the addition of the pharmacological treatment increased the likelihood of positive outcomes via a reduction in depressive symptoms; that is, medication reduced the depressive symptoms enough that participants could engage in CBT interventions, between session activities, and school return. Students with more severe school refusal, as seen in those with separation anxiety disorder, may need more intense or alternative treatments than what was used in this study. Due to these inconsistent results, the authors highlighted the importance of developing individualized interventions targeted towards clients’ presenting problems (Layne, Bernstein, Egan, & Kushner, 2003).

In summary, the presented interventions, CBT, family therapy, early return, inpatient treatment, and pharmacology, are each effective in working with adolescents with school absenteeism challenges. It is important to note, however, that these studies were based on complex cases that typically involved one or more clinical diagnoses, which would be a priority in terms of interventions. This directs us towards a clear gap in the literature; research in the area of re-engagement for youth without mental health diagnoses is limited. It is helpful to have this more clinical vantage point as Kearney’s (2008) continuum of problematic school absenteeism does encompass this population. Finally, of concern, the intervention section focused primarily on quantitative clinical outcome studies, and therefore, we have little understanding as to the youths’ experience of these interventions.
Re-Engagement

While the literature has addressed high school re-engagement from the angle of evidence based clinical interventions, there is very little qualitative research than explores the experience of re-engagement from a non-clinical approach. Furthermore, there is even less research that takes the youth perspective into account when exploring suitable interventions aimed at re-engaging youth in their education. While the past literature tends to take a quantitative approach when looking at school re-engagement, there are some qualitative studies emerging at the thesis and dissertation level. This section will concentrate on earlier published findings looking at the impact of the length of disengagement, employment factors, school connectedness, and alternative programming on school re-engagement.

Length of disengagement and employment factors. One research study examined the likelihood of school return as time out of school progressed. This research found that re-engagement was most likely within the first year of dropping out and declined dramatically over time (Black, Polidano, & Tseng, 2012). The researchers investigated whether or not there was an association between employment and school engagement and found that youth who gained employment and engaged in an occupation that they enjoyed were often motivated to return to school to finish their education, especially if they could see the direct relevance of education to their identified career plan. Those who had become adults, however, often substituted on-the-job experience and training in place of formalized education aimed at high school completion. Both youth and adults who had been out of work and school for extended periods of time tended to be unmotivated to re-engage in schooling, perhaps due to some inherent traits or challenges that make it difficult for them to engage in either employment or education. Surprisingly, low paying, part-time, and unstable employment did not predict school re-engagement for neither
youth nor adults. For students who had disengaged to raise children, they were less likely to re-engage than non-parents, but this reversed once children grew up. At this point in their lives, early school leavers with children were more likely to re-engage than school leavers without children. Surprisingly, students who failed their first re-engagement attempt were more likely to re-engage in schooling in the future than those who had not attempted a school return. Based on these findings, the researchers emphasized the importance of career exploration, planning, and work experience, especially for youth who are at risk of disengaging from high school (Black et al., 2012).

In contrast to the above findings, in a qualitative study of disengaged 14 to 16 year old adolescents, researchers found that skills attained in students place of employment, as well as their level of employment engagement, did not easily transfer to the school environment, likely due to the lack of similarity between the two environments. Furthermore, it was found that low motivation towards education was sometimes reinforced once students felt respected, independent, and successful in their places of employment. Some students did, however, find that adult relationships outside of the school environment helped them positively change their attitudes and behaviors towards school staff and other adults in their lives. Students reported both positive and negative perspectives regarding being separated from their peers; some students felt that this separation provided an opportunity to develop their own identity, while others reported feeling socially isolated when away from their peers. Most students reported that the best work related experience was forming new relationships with other young people and adults. These findings direct our attention to the idea that work experience can be helpful to disengaged youth, but that the skills and knowledge gained at school and in the workplace must
be taught in a way that they can be adapted to other environments and contexts (Hall & Raffo, 2006).

**School Connectedness.** Other research looked at a number of measures assessing school attachment, bonding, connectedness, and engagement. Items were extracted from these categories and they included academic engagement, belonging, discipline and fairness, extracurricular activities, liking school, student voice, peer relationships, safety, and teacher support. More specifically, these items looked at the extent to which students are motivated to learn, their involvement in school activities, feeling respected, feeling that rules were fair, the degree to which they looked forward to going to school, the ability to make important decisions, having friends, feeling safe, and feeling valued and supported by the teacher. Students that identified these factors as a part of their school experience tended to do better at school. In addition, non-academic related factors, such as extracurricular involvement, contributed significantly to school engagement and success (Libbey, 2004).

Similar to the research above, several other studies have looked at the importance of extracurricular activities in relation to school engagement. For example, researchers discussed the importance of physical activities in re-engaging at-risk youth in the school environment, while also having other positive effects such as reducing obesity, improving fitness, health, concentration, self-esteem, and decreasing depression, violence, and crime. These changes are also reported as contributing to increased attendance, better behavior, and higher achievement (Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). This research suggested that sports can help students develop personal agency, caring for others, as well as learning about equity, inclusion, conflict negotiation, and responsibility. While the research was mixed on the exact mechanism by which physical activity and sport achieves these end goals, it did support collaboration between
students, families, schools, and community programs so that at-risk youth have the opportunity to capitalize on these resources and transfer learned skills across environments. The researchers compared these learned skills to a social currency that provided students with an accumulation of skills that could be used in other contexts. Overall, the researchers identified that some of the most successful programs aimed at engaging youth have been successful due to careful planning of select activities, keeping the groups small, and encouraging youth input in program design (Sandford et al., 2006).

**Alternative programming.** Lastly, in a review article of strategies that work for students who have disengaged from high school, Wilson, Stemp, and McGinty (2011) found that the key factor to re-engagement lies within flexible or alternative school programming. More specifically, they found that students were more likely to engage when there were opportunities for multiple learning pathways, career development, and mentoring within the school. The importance of multiple learning pathways comes from the notion that disengaged students have different needs from most other students. Some recommendations for increasing flexibility and alternatives included offering voluntary meaningful activities, providing schooling in a non-school environment, providing tailored one-on-one support, employing school staff who are eager to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with youth, collaborating with other agencies, providing choices to the student, and engaging in collaborative decision making between authority and youth. When students were asked what they believed made a positive learning environment, they reported similar key areas of importance: opportunities to take various subjects and participate in workplace training, having a relaxed school environment, and having supportive school staff who were respectful and developed strong connections with their students.
While the re-engagement literature is in its beginnings, it has started to identify some of the key aspects of re-engagement such as the importance of early school return, employment factors, and student input. The literature has suggested that re-engagement in this youth population is not a straightforward process, and there is not a one size fits all solution. For example, past research has indicated that physical activity is useful in the process of re-engaging adolescents. Although physical activity appears to help, it seems that it only helps some students to some degree in some circumstances (Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). To further disadvantage, the re-engagement literature is lacking in systematic research design that may provide improve clarity of the re-engagement process. To do this, Sandford, Armour, and Warmington, (2006) suggest that future research should a) re-evaluate current school practice and policy, b) recognize the importance of social relationships, c) recognize the importance of a strong community, d) identify the need for inter-agency collaboration, e) acknowledge the importance of sustainability in programming, and f) take a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating program outcomes.

**Student Perspective**

While research looking at school disengagement from the adolescent perspective is uncommon, it is not absent. Much of the research on adolescent school disengagement, as defined in this study, focuses on what has led to the disengagement and what psychological, educational, or pharmacological interventions will promote re-engagement. Moreover, much of this research is quantitative in nature, and thus, fails to acknowledge the experience and meaning of re-engagement for the adolescent. The following section will look at research that has explicitly considered the adolescent perspective in regards to school re-engagement with a focus on the value of education, the effects of helping, and the impact of peer relationships.
Value of education. In one of the more current quantitative studies, grade 8 non-attenders and attenders were asked to complete questionnaires examining their perceptions of schoolwork and parental involvement in their education. Findings suggested that students with attendance problems tended to like school less, while students with good attendance still expressed a discontent with class work yet were able to understand the long-term advantages of education. Furthermore, attenders were more likely to see their parents as involved in their school work and obey them in school related matters, whereas non-attenders perceived their parents as unwilling or unable to help with homework and overall, uninvolved in their academic learning (Sheppard, 2009).

Helping. One qualitative study looked at the effects of a peer mentoring model on school engagement for both mentors and mentees. This study collected data from school administrators, teachers, and students themselves. From the student perspective, peer teaching was beneficial to both the mentees and the mentors. For example, the mentees felt more confident in their ability to deal with conflict after having taught younger students how to manage similar conflicts. The younger mentees were very enthusiastic to learn from their older mentors and experienced positive outcomes such as increased confidence in their abilities to deal with conflict and bullying. Perhaps most relevant to the topic at hand, students that had once been viewed as troublesome now perceived themselves as peer mentors, which resulted in behavioral changes that lead to an increase in academic engagement (Burton, 2012).

Peer relationships. As one last example, a quantitative study collected data from thousands of high school students, to examine their perceptions of school work, attitudes, behaviors, relationships, and family in relation to peer relationships and school engagement. Findings suggest that peer relationships influence school engagement, especially when peers
have strong academic values and aspirations. Moreover, perceived peer support in academics promotes competency and autonomy, which affects long-term academic behavior. This is an important factor in adolescent development, as acceptance within a peer group is extremely important to the adolescent experience and their sense of school engagement (You, 2011).

The above literature only represents a few examples of research that take the adolescent perspective into account, and this is due to the limited amount of information available on the topic of re-engagement. Furthermore, while these studies do take the student perspective into account, they do not delve into personal experiences and the factors that contribute to or detract from the student’s desire to attend school. To date, much of the literature studies the adolescent as the subject, rather than engaging with the adolescent to understand his or her experience and attributed meaning in relation to high school re-engagement. Moreover, so far as the author knows, there is no research to date that has actively questioned youth around their experience of the re-engagement process, and more specifically the factors that helped or hindered their experience of school return.

Overall, this review points out a number of gaps in the literature, but most pertinent to the proposed study are those concerning the lack of information on high school re-engagement particularly from the adolescent perspective. To begin to fill in this information gap, my research will aim to understand students’ perspectives of school re-engagement in terms of meaningful experiences that helped or hindered the re-engagement process. The following chapter will present my research questions and the ways in which I propose to answer them.
Chapter Three: Methods

This research sought to understand high-school re-engagement by exploring what adolescents have found to be facilitative and hindering in their high school re-engagement experiences. Specifically, this study addressed the primary research question: What meaningful experiences do adolescents perceive as influencing their high school re-engagement? Sub questions included (a) What do adolescents perceive as being helpful in the re-engagement process? (b) What do adolescents perceive as being unhelpful in the re-engagement process? (c) What do adolescents feel would have been helpful during the time of their re-engagement? To answer these questions, this research used the enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) to elicit and examine helping and hindering critical incidents (CI) that have impacted adolescents’ school re-engagement, as well as wish list (WL) items that express what adolescents wish had been done differently. This section will begin with my research paradigm, an introduction to the ECIT, participant selection and recruitment, participant demographics, procedures (initial contact and data collection), data analysis, researcher subjectivity, data interpretation and dissemination, data management, and ethical considerations.

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm is defined as beliefs or assumptions that guide the research endeavor. More specifically, these beliefs are founded on the researcher’s view of the nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the role of values, the use of language, and the methodological approach (Creswell, 2014). I will start by disclosing that I have a background in quantitative research, am proposing qualitative research, and have a research paradigm that is rooted in mixed methods design. Rather than addressing my research
paradigm based on the key points outlined above, I prefer to explain my beliefs within the pragmatic framework. The pragmatic worldview, as defined by Creswell (2014), has evolved out of existing situations, experiences, and actions. It is a paradigm that avoids the discussion of what is reality and rather situates itself within the context of “real world” problems (Feilzer, 2010). In the argument for and against objective and subjective worlds or between postpositivism and constructivism, the pragmatic worldview does not argue for either but rather endorses both (Feilzer, 2010). Thus, the pragmatic worldview does not hold the researcher to any one particular methodology, which fits well as my quantitative background and qualitative proposal intersect. To take a closer look at this intersection, it is important to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the pragmatic worldview. According to Creswell, the pragmatic worldview is not bound to any one reality, it allows for freedom of choice, views the world as one in which there are endless possibilities, and views truth as what works within the context of the situation. Moreover, pragmatists determine what and how they will conduct research based on their frame of reference, and they acknowledge that research is situated within social, historical, and political contexts. Lastly, they believe that there exists both a world external from the mind as well as one within the mind. In essence, this open belief system allows for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research, while also allowing the researcher the flexibility to conduct research based on his or her needs and the nature of the research problem.

I find that Creswell’s (2014) depiction of the pragmatic worldview aligns well with my own. That is, I believe that researchers have freedom of choice in their methodology, and I have chosen the ECIT as my method of choice is based on my research question and how I would like to use the results. Also, as someone who has a pragmatic worldview, I tend to view problems from multiple lenses, which provides the flexibility to consider the individual, social, cultural,
historical, and political influences central to the problem. Pragmatism is a fluid worldview that adjusts to my research needs and satisfies my undergraduate interest in quantitative research, while also meeting my present interest in qualitative research and the use of the ECIT. Similar to the first step in ECIT, identify the general aim of the activity, pragmatists want to know what the research is aiming to do, who the audience is, and the impact of the researchers’ values on the research. Upholding a pragmatic worldview has afforded me the flexibility to select the best methodology to answer my research questions, while also providing research outcomes that have practical applicability within the counselling profession.

**Enhanced Critical Incident Technique**

To fully understand the uniqueness of any method, Creswell (2014) emphasizes the importance of making explicit the rules of the chosen qualitative method. In following this recommendation, it is important to highlight that the ECIT has five rules: (a) the focus is on CIs that facilitate or hinder an event, (b) it originates from industrial and organizational psychology, (c) the interview is the primary mode of data collection, (d) data analysis occurs through a process of identifying the frame of reference, identifying the emerging categories, and determining the breadth and depth of the categories, and (e) each category is of narrative form with operational definitions and working titles (Butterfield et al., 2009).

The roots of the critical incident technique (CIT) can be traced back nearly a century ago to the research of Sir Francis Galton, but more recently developed out of Flanagan’s work with the Aviation Psychology Program, which was responsible for examining the factors associated with high failure rates in the Air Forces pilot training program (Flanagan, 1954). CIT, in its earliest form, included specific steps that were to be explicitly followed in the research procedure: (a) developing and stating the general aim of a particular activity, (b) making plans and
specifications, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, and (e) data interpretation and reporting of research findings. A more current model of CIT, ECIT, includes contextual data, WL items, and nine credibility checks (Butterfield et al., 2009). It is crucial to note, however, that this exploratory method has the ability to go beyond CIs and to identify turning points in participants’ experiences, and to identify factual events, qualities, and attributes, while providing a foundation for theories or models (Woolsey, 1986), and providing a strong knowledge base for the future development of clinical tools that may be applicable in the counselling process (McCormick, 1997). Due to its versatility and practical applicability to real world situations, ECIT has expanded into multiple disciplines including counselling, psychology, nursing, education, business, employment and social work (Butterfield et al., 2009).

While the ECIT methodology is versatile in its use, it is critical to understand what constitutes a helping or hindering CI and WL item by defining these constructs. Previous research has used many different definitions to identify incidents, starting with Flanagan’s definition of an incident: “any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act” (p. 327) as well as his definition of what qualifies as critical: “an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects” (p. 327). For this study, ECIT was used to explore the key helpful and hindering incidents surrounding an identified event, as well as WL items. In other words, these incidents enabled the researcher to identify both positive and negative practices used in re-engaging adolescents, while promoting the development of innovative counselling strategies for use with this population. In the present research, a CI was defined according to the ECIT method: a CI is any event, incident, or factor
which positively or negatively affected the participant’s experience. To be considered a valid CI, the description of the incident must include antecedent information, a description of the event, and the resulting consequences of the event (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). Specific to the current research, helping and hindering CIs included any critical activities, supports, beliefs, thoughts, or feelings that helped or hindered students’ re-engagement in high school. The addition of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings allowed for a wide range of internal and external experiences to emerge. WL items were defined according to Butterfield and colleagues (2009) suggestion that WL items include “people, supports, information, programs, and so on, that were not present at the time of the participant’s experience, but those involved believed would have been helpful” (p. 267) during the period of re-engagement.

Participants

The next section will describe the inclusion and exclusion criteria that were set for participation in this study, followed by participant recruitment procedures, and participant demographics.

Criteria for participation. Based on the literature review, there is a paucity of research that considers the youth perspective on high school re-engagement. To address this gap, this research aimed to interview a sample of youth from this population to see if any unique findings would emerge from this different vantage point. As this was a study about high school re-engagement, participants were required to be between the ages of 14-19 so that they would have had the disengagement and re-engagement experience in question. Also important, according to Nelson and Quintana (2005), older adolescents are increasingly more capable of engaging in self-reflection, understanding the research questions, and providing detailed responses, which was an important factor in this inquiry. To be eligible, potential participants had to self-identify
as successfully re-engaged in high-school after having experienced a period of high school disengagement followed by difficulties in the re-engagement process. The period of disengagement must have lasted longer than two weeks to screen out those with non-problematic school absenteeism and self-corrected behavior, as defined by Kearney (2008). Specifically, to be eligible for the study the participant needed to report having missed approximately 25% of classes for at least two weeks, difficulty attending for two weeks or more with significant interference to his or her or the family’s routine, or been absent for at least 10 days during any 15 week period. Participants were required to have been successfully re-engaged for one full term (approximately three months), as this allowed a sufficient time frame for a range of experiences to trigger a return to disengagement. Additionally, the interview was conducted in English, and thus all participants had the English proficiency to engage in the interview process. Based on sampling procedures, participants were those who lived in the Richmond and Vancouver area. Had potential participants been in a state of psychological distress they would have been excluded from the study, but this exclusionary criteria was not relevant to this sample.

**Participant recruitment.** Participant recruitment began with posting flyers in high-school counselling centers and specialized programs with the goal of purposeful sampling; that is, recruiting participants who have had and can speak to the disengagement/re-engagement experience. The researcher spoke to classroom teachers and counsellors to explain the research, and school staff often took it upon themselves to further promote the research to their students. Some teachers and counsellors acted as liaisons between the student and the researcher by initiating screening phone calls and emails on behalf of the students. After the first round of recruitment, advertising was expanded to include posted flyers on Craigslist and in local community venues such as community centers, libraries, and coffee shops. In total, recruiting
procedures elicited 34 interested individuals and 16 viable participants. The primary reason for screening out participants was that they had not re-engaged in school or they did not return phone calls or emails. Once approximately 10 participants from alternative schools had been interviewed, subsequent volunteer participants from alternative schools were waitlisted, so as to interview participants who had re-engaged in mainstream school, which improved sample diversity. Eventually participants on this waitlist were interviewed when no further mainstream re-engagement participants volunteered.

**Participant demographics.** A diverse sample of 16 participants were interviewed for this study. Nine females and seven males met disengagement/re-engagement criteria required for the research interview. All participants spoke English and were able to participant in 1-2 hour long interviews. The age range of participants was between 14-18 years, with an average of 16.8 years old. Ethnicity was widely represented as participants’ backgrounds included European (7), Chinese (4), Malaysian/Chinese (1), Vietnamese (1), Irish/Filipino (1), Japanese (1) and Latino (1) backgrounds. Most participants lived with one or both of their parents, with the exception of one participant who lived independently. One participant identified having dyslexia and the rest of the sample identified having no diagnosed learning disabilities. Half of the sample had formerly been diagnosed with a major mental health disorder, and 13 expressed symptoms of mood and/or anxiety difficulties. With the exception of five participants, all volunteers spoke two or more languages. One participant identified as bi-sexual, while the rest of participants identified as heterosexual. The majority of participants, 13, either had been or still were involved in alternative school programs. Participants recalled that their disengagement had lasted one month to six years, with an average of 1.78 years. One participant recalled disengaging as early as grade three, while the majority had disengaged around grade eight or
nine. The length of time since re-engaging ranged from two months to three years with an average of 1.8 years. Most participants had attended more than one school with a range of one to four school changes during their high school years. When it comes to employment, six participants held at least one part-time job.

**Procedure**

The following section provides a detailed description of the procedures that were used to complete this study beginning with a description of the initial contact and data collection.

**Initial contact.** Students interested in participating in this study were directed to contact the researcher via email or telephone. As teachers and counsellors often facilitated the recruitment, they often relayed potential participants’ contact information to the researcher for a follow-up phone call. Initial phone calls pre-screened potential participants to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria set out for the study (see Appendix D). In addition, during this first contact, participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study, as well as the anticipated time commitment. Potential participants were notified that this study is part of a graduate student’s master’s thesis and that the interview would be conducted by the graduate student. For those participants who met criteria and agreed to participate, the researcher dropped off consent/assent forms as requested directly to the participant or for pick-up at the school. Consent and assent forms were completed by participants’ legal guardians and participants, respectively (see Appendix E and F). The rationale for including both consent and assent forms was based on the school district’s requirement that any research activity conducted within the district and in direct communication with students must attain informed consent from the students’ legal guardians. Participants recruited from the community were able to provide consent on their own behalf and did so on the day of the research interview. Research interviews
were scheduled according to the participants’ needs and occurred either in a private office space at the students’ school or in a private study room at the local library. All participants received a $20 gift certificate to Richmond Center or Starbucks as compensation for their time and contribution.

**Data collection.** Data collection consisted of 16 in-person interviews and follow-up emails. The duration of interviews varied between fifty-five minutes and two and a half hours, depending on the level of engagement between the participant and researcher. Upon meeting with each participant, the researcher collected the parental consent form and reviewed the ascent form with the participant, and answered any further questions he or she had about the study. Participants also completed a demographics form (see Appendix G). Participants were reminded of interview confidentiality and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty; fortunately, no participants withdrew their participation at any point during the research process. Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher explained the rationale for using the digital recorder and informed participants of when it would be recording, as well as explained the purpose of taking notes. Following Butterfield and colleagues (2005) interview protocol, the researcher started the interview with contextual questions to better understand participants’ high school experiences and the changes they have experienced as a result of improved school attendance. Participants were asked to rate their school attendance on a continuum from zero to ten, with zero indicating *doing poorly* and ten indicating *doing well*. Next the interview protocol asked participants questions that elicited CIs and WL items associated with the school re-engagement process (see Appendix H). While some participants had difficulty coming up with CIs and WL items, the use of probes, reflection, clarification, and asking for more details elicited valuable data from the participant. Once CIs and WL items were collected, the researcher
summarized all items for accuracy and verification and asked participants if they had anything else to add. Subsequently, the researcher asked participants to reflect on the interview experience by having them complete the aforementioned rating scale to determine whether or not their ratings had changed after having the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. The researcher ended the interview by asking participants if there was anything else that they would like the researcher to know about their school re-engagement experiences. Finally, the interview ended with two process questions to determine why the participant volunteered for the interview, which checked for catalytic validity, and how the interview experience was for the participant, which ensured that the participant had had a positive interview experience.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis used the ECIT to analyze contextual information, CIs, and WL items. This section will start by discussing how the contextual data, CIs, and WLs items were analyzed using Butterfield et al.’s (2009) three steps: determining the frame of reference, grouping CIs into common categories, and determining the level of specificity or generality. This section will conclude by describing the overall process of data analysis.

**Determining the frame of reference.** The first step entailed determining the frame of reference or, more specifically, determining the potential use of the data (Butterfield et al., 2009). In the present study, helping and hindering CIs were explored to better understand the process of school re-engagement. This increased understanding will stimulate future research and inform professional practice when counselling this population.

**Grouping critical incidents.** The second step involved grouping CIs into common categories, based on the researcher’s experience, judgement, and insight (Butterfield et al.,
In total, 572 items were extracted from the data and grouped into ten helping, ten hindering, and seven WL categories.

**Determining level of specificity or generality.** The third step involved determining the level of specificity or generality that would be most useful in reporting the results of the study (Butterfield et al., 2009). Determining the level of specificity or generality was a back and forth process of defining categories in a way that conveyed meaningful information without overlap between categories and without getting caught up in semantics. Even the final phases of data analysis, reporting of the results, involved the merging of categories that had artificial distinctions that were unable to make a clear argument for two separate categories. Thus, as the data categories emerged and were finalized, the level of specificity was determined based on what would be most beneficial given the intention of the results, which is to shed light on the re-engagement phenomenon, stimulate further research, and guide counselling practice.

**Critical incident and wish list item data analysis.** More specifically, data analysis started at the level of reading the first transcript and identifying both helping and hindering CIs, as well as the WL items. At this point, the researcher used an inductive process of identifying similarities and differences between the expressed CI’s and WL items and began to form preliminary categories, which were tracked electronically in a database format. Once the CIs and WL items were identified and categorized for the first transcript, the researcher followed the same process for the second and third transcripts. For these next two transcripts, CIs and WL items were placed in existing categories, and items that did not fit went on to create new categories. After analyzing the first three transcripts, several very specific categories emerged as the basis for further data categorization. Data analysis and categorization continued up until the fifteenth interview, at which time the categories became finalized and operational definitions
were developed. The last 10% of the interviews were then analyzed and categorized and no new categories emerged and no further modifications were made to the operational definitions. The initial data analysis process resulted in 56 helping categories, 56 hindering categories, and 43 WL categories. Through the use of credibility checks and an inductive process of making categories less specific and more thematic, the finalized categories were reduced to a total of ten helping categories, ten hindering categories, and seven WL categories.

**Contextual data analysis.** The contextual information was used to generate basic information regarding participants’ experiences of disengagement and re-engagement, and was analyzed by generating common themes between participants, which increased our understanding of the situational factors involved in the disengagement/re-engagement process. Specifically, the themes that emerged were in relation to what led the individual to disengage, whether or not they were involved and/or committed to their education, whether or not they had disengaged in the past, and lastly, what prompted them to participate in the interview.

**Rigour**

Flanagan (1954) stated that “the real errors are made not in the collection and analysis of the data but in the failure to interpret them properly” (p. 345). Flanagan explains that the first four steps of the CIT must be carefully studied to determine any possible bias, and any bias that does emerge, must be explicitly stated within the research. Moreover, any decisions or judgments made throughout the process of data collection and analysis must be recorded and reviewed. Taking these extra measures, according to Flanagan, will reduce the risk of making faulty inferences or generalizations. Butterfield and colleagues (2009) added nine credibility checks to ensure proper data interpretation, which they claim is especially useful when using interviews to gather data rather than direct behavioral observation. Each of the following
credibility checks were used in the present study: digital recording, interviewer fidelity, independent extraction of CIs and WL items, exhaustiveness, participation rates, independent categorization of CIs and WL items, expert opinions, cross-checking by participants, and theoretical agreement.

**Digital recording.** All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by the researcher or research assistant, and were proofed for accuracy by the researcher. This allowed for increased accuracy of participant accounts compared to traditional note taking methods, and allowed the researcher to extract CIs and WL items directly from the interview recordings.

**Interviewer fidelity.** Interviewer fidelity was checked by an independent coder familiar with the ECIT to ensure that the method was adhered to. Specifically, the expert ensured that the interviewer was not asking leading questions and that the proposed interview guide directed the interview process. This fidelity check was completed for four interviews and feedback was provided prior to the next set of interviews.

**Independent extraction of CIs and WL items.** In terms of individual identification of CIs and WL items, approximately 25% of the transcripts were reviewed and independently coded by a graduate student. This credibility check was developed to determine the rate of agreement between coders (Butterfield et al., 2005), and the rate of agreement for independent CI and WL extraction from the transcripts in this study was 100%.

**Exhaustiveness.** All items and categories were tracked to determine the point at which no new categories. Originally, the level of specificity of the categories suggested that data saturation did not occur until the twelfth participant for helping items, and the fourteenth participant for hindering and WL items. Taking a step back from the data, it became apparent that the categories were too specific to be meaningful and thus were combined to form more
practical categories that could be considered in the context of providing support for youth who are re-engaging in school. Taking this step back meant that exhaustiveness occurred much sooner than it had with the broader categories, and thus redundancy was met first with helping items (6 interviews), next hindering items (5 interviews), and finally WL items (8 interviews). Several more participants were interviewed with the anticipation of a later point of data saturation given the original specificity of categories; however with a more broad definition, we know with certainty that data saturation was met and the re-engagement phenomenon was fully captured within our categories, as suggested by the lack of emergent categories from the following eight participant interviews.

**Participation rates.** Butterfield and colleagues (2009) suggested that a category should have a 25% participation rate to be considered a valid category, and if this is not attainable, then the researcher would need to reconsider whether or not these items could suitably fit into another category or whether two categories could be combined under a different title without losing important information. To do this, each transcript was assigned a participant number and this number was attached to each of the extracted CIs and WL items found within that transcript. As CIs and WL items were categorized, the participant numbers were also attached to the category. This allowed the researcher to determine the participation rate, and, therefore, the relative strength of each category. All categories, except one WL category, *extracurricular activities*, met or exceeded the 25% participation rate as displayed in Tables 1-3 in the Results chapter.

**Independent categorization of CIs and WL items.** A graduate student from counselling psychology was asked to independently judge the placement of 25% of CIs and WL items into pre-determined categories. To do this, the researcher provided the independent judge with a random selection of 25% of the incidents from each category, with category titles and
operational definitions, along with the instructions to place incidents into their appropriate category. The rate of agreement was initially 89%, and reached 100% after discussion between the raters.

**Expert opinions.** The categories were submitted to a clinical counsellor who holds a Master’s degree in counselling and who has worked with youth who have disengaged from school. She was asked to review the categories and answer the following questions: (a) Are the categories useful in the topic area? (b) Do any of the categories surprise you? (c) Are there any categories missing based on your experience in this topic area? (d) Do the category names and definitions make sense? The expert reviewed category names and operational definitions and felt that these categories were consistent with her experience in working with this population of youth.

**Cross-checking by participants.** Participants received a follow-up contact via email, which contained individual CIs and WL items placed in their relevant categories. Participants were asked to review items, categories, and subcategories, and respond to a series of questions. Questions asked participants whether or not the CIs and WL items were correctly identified, if the categories made sense, and if their experience was accurately and fully captured (see Appendix I). Nine participants responded back to the follow-up contact and all respondents agreed with the category names and descriptions, and felt that their experiences were well portrayed. Two participants asked to clarify items and one participant felt that an item was misplaced in the wrong category. The researcher agreed with all clarifications, made the recommended adjustments, and emailed the requested changes back to the participant with an invitation for further comments, but no additional feedback was received, which indicated satisfaction with the final analysis. The follow-up email included a disclaimer indicating that
individuals who did not respond to the follow-up email would be considered to be in agreement with the research findings and the results reflect this assumption.

**Theoretical agreement.** Butterfield and colleagues (2009) describe theoretical agreement as a two part process: examining the theoretical assumptions of the research and relevant literature to see if these assumptions are supported and comparing emergent categories to past literature to see if the categories are supported. The primary theoretical assumption underlying this research was in regards to participants’ awareness of the CIs and WL items that impacted their re-engagement experiences and their ability to describe these incidents. Prior research suggests that adolescents are capable of engaging in self-reflection, understanding the research questions, and providing detailed responses (Nelson and Quintana, 2005). With regards to category support, past literature supports all but two of the emergent categories (see Discussion). The categories that were not reflected in the literature suggests that these are potentially new categories that need to be studied more extensively (Butterfield et al., 2009).

Each of the recommended credibility checks ensures the accuracy of inferences drawn from the data, which Flanagan (1954) believes is a vital aspect of research, followed by reporting the results. To fulfill the Flanagan’s reporting the results step, preliminary findings were reported at the Canadian Psychological Association conference (CPA; 2014) and all findings will be reported at the American Psychological Association conference (APA; 2015). Moreover, informal presentations will be given at the Richmond School District, and a digital file conveying the study results will be put on the school district conference website. Finally, the researcher aims to publish this study in a psychological journal that is pertinent to the topic at hand.
Researcher’s Subjective Stance

As the graduate student researcher, I have conducted all of the interviews and analyzed the resulting data. Since this research topic has developed out of my work as an Adolescent Mental Health Support Worker in the public education system, having a wider perspective of what promotes and what hinders positive outcomes in school re-engagement has directly benefited my own work with disengaged students. Given my past experience in working with this population, it has been critical that I examine and clearly identify any assumptions throughout this research process and manage these sources of bias.

Assumptions. It has been particularly important to identify my assumptions going into this research so that I can minimize the influence of bias. It is important to note, however, that data analysis is a subjective process and thus will be, to some degree, influenced by my knowledge, experiences, and judgments (Morrow, 2005). Specifically, Morrow (2005) suggests that bias is most likely to enter data collection and/or analysis when the researcher has an emotional investment in the research topic, has formed beliefs based on information gained from the literature review, or has had in-depth interactions with the participants. Given my work and academic experience, I do have an emotional investment in the topic, have worked with adolescents who have had experienced school disengagement/re-engagement, and have learned a great deal from the literature.

In my first year of work as a support worker, I experienced a lot of frustration with adolescents who were non-attenders. Now that I have more experience working with this population, I realize that I have made a number of erroneous assumptions about why these students were missing school. These erroneous assumptions led to many failed attempts at having students return to school and I quickly felt defeated while the students and families likely
felt misunderstood and unsupported. Fortunately, as I have gained experience, consulted with colleagues, and engaged in this research, some of my previously held assumptions have been disproved while others have been set aside so that I can effectively work with students and their families. While I have gained this knowledge and experience, however, I have noticed that even the most resourced students have difficulty re-engaging in school, students only receive specialized supports for so long, and those who fail to re-engage often drop out of school completely. Consequently, I hold several assumptions including (a) school re-engagement is extremely challenging for adolescents, (b) students who disengage from school often have a mental health diagnosis, (c) students are likely to re-engage and relapse, (d) early intervention plays a large role in school re-engagement, (e) adults tend to make important decisions regarding adolescents’ schooling, (f) youths’ voices are often unheard and unsolicited, and (g) the youth perspective of re-engagement is central to understanding school re-engagement and developing effective helping strategies.

**Managing researcher’s subjective stance.** To control for potential sources of bias, I have completed the nine credibility checks, which reduced the likelihood of bias from entering the data collection and analysis process. Another way I have reduced the influence of bias is through bracketing, a process of bringing the aforementioned biases into awareness and putting them aside while engaging in the research endeavor (Morrow, 2005). This increased self-awareness or the ability for self-reflection, coined reflexivity (Rennie, 2004), can be achieved by journaling throughout the research process (Morrow, 2005). Specific to Morrow’s recommendations, I have documented and tracked assumptions that have come up during data collection and analysis and in line with Hill and colleagues (2005) recommendation, I have consulted with others professionals on an as needed basis (e.g., colleagues, research supervisor).
as to how to best manage these assumptions so that they do not unduly influence my research work. While I am aware that these assumptions are bound to play a role in the research process, it is my hope that by having engaged in the recommended credibility checks, journaling and consulting, I have been able to manage the influence these assumptions have had on my work. Taking these precautionary measures has provided insurance that the participant experience is accurately and fairly reflected in this study’s research findings.

**Data Management**

In order to ensure the ethical management of the data collected, several measures were implemented. Namely, any electronic and written data collected from phone calls, emails, and interview procedures were saved in a secure filing cabinet and will be kept for a minimum of five years, at which time the data will be destroyed. Demographic information and interview transcripts were linked through numeric codes and kept in separate locations and only accessible to the primary researchers. All digital files were kept on the researcher’s computer, and the material has been encrypted and password protected to ensure maximum security and confidentiality.

**Ethical Considerations**

Given that this research took place with adolescents, within the public education system and in the school district in which I work, there were a number of ethical implications that required careful consideration and planning. In the following section, a number of ethical concerns are presented, along with the precautions implemented to reduce such risk.

**Informed consent/assent.** Given that participants were recruited through their high school, careful planning was required to ensure that parents provided consent and that the youth provided assent for his or her research involvement. The researcher provided two detailed
consent forms, one for the adolescent’s parent or guardian and one for the adolescent to provide consent/assent to being a participant. Parental consent was in written format, while participant assent was both written and verbal. Along with a consent form, the researcher verbally explained the risks and benefits to the youth involved in the research, as well as provided an opportunity for the youth to ask relevant questions and express any concerns.

To reduce the participant/researcher power differential, participants were reminded that (a) it was their choice to participate, (b) they could ask questions at any time, (c) they could refuse to answer difficult questions, and (d) they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. The researcher made sure that past or present students were not interviewed and that participants who may be referred to the Adolescent Support Team in the future are able to receive service from other team members.

**Risks.** A potential psychological risk for youth involved in this study is that the student could feel triggered by the reflective process. Such risk is minimal and has not been observed in prior research; however, measures were taken to reduce and/or eliminate risk. For example, the screening protocol asked participants if they were currently experiencing any difficulties that would make participation emotionally difficult; the researcher determined that none of the potential participants needed to be screened out for this reason. Also, participants were asked what the interview was like for them to ensure that they did not leave the interview in distress. Furthermore, the interviewer is a counselling student and trained to conduct qualitative interviews, and was therefore able to closely observe participants for any negative reactions and manage any potential emotional responses. In the situation that a student had experienced an increase in distress, the interviewer was prepared with a list of referrals for services, and, if the situation had further escalated could have consulted with a licenced counselling professional.
Fortunately, no participants exhibited emotional distress and precautionary measures were not employed.

**Benefits.** Participants had the opportunity to reflect on and process past challenges with school absenteeism, as well as gain an appreciation for their progress in school re-engagement. Participants were encouraged to identify factors that were helpful in the re-engagement process, which may have prompted the re-implementation of any strategies that have faded over time, leading to further improvement. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to have their voices heard as to what they found instrumental and detrimental to the re-engagement process, which will contribute to the knowledge base of school engagement. Furthermore, participants’ involvement resulted in a degree of catalytic validity, which as defined by Bailey (2010), is the degree to which the research process acts as a catalyst for the intended social transformation. In relation to this study, catalytic validity was achieved when participants felt a degree of satisfaction at being able to contribute their expertise to the growing literature on school disengagement and re-engagement. Moreover, they felt a sense of accomplishment at being able to contribute to future strategies aimed at making a positive difference in the lives of adolescents with similar challenges.

**Confidentiality.** Confidentiality was maintained at the school level by making sure that interviews were conducted either in a private school office or at a local library, based on the participant’s preference. As recruitment often happened on school grounds and with the assistance of school staff, both students and school staff were informed that information gained in the interview will be kept in strictest confidence within the standard boundaries of confidentiality. Situations which would warrant breaking confidentiality include (a) when the participant discloses imminent danger to self or others, (b) when a child is being harmed, or (c)
the researcher is legally required to reveal confidential material (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2007), but fortunately this was not an issue in this study.

**Cultural norms.** The researcher foresaw that cultural norms had the potential to influence the research procedures and data collection process. For example, different cultures have different norms around self-disclosure, talking about one’s challenges or successes, speaking about family members or friends, or expressing discontent with others. As a part of ongoing consent, participants were reminded of their right not to share information and that cultural differences will be respected. When cultural factors were explored within the interview process, the researcher listened and inquired with sensitivity and a respectful curiosity.
Chapter Four: Results

The aim of this research was to investigate adolescents’ experiences of school re-engagement. The central research question guiding this study was the following: what meaningful experiences do adolescents perceive as influencing their high school re-engagement? To this end, sixteen participant interviews examined helping and hindering critical incidents (CIs) and wish list (WL) items, as they pertained to participants’ successful school re-engagement. In total, 572 items were extracted from the transcribed interviews of which 278 incidents were deemed to be helpful to participants’ school re-engagement, 201 incidents were judged to be unhelpful, and 93 WL items were identified as supports that would have been helpful had they been available at the time of re-engagement. The incidents were thematically arranged into 27 categories: 10 categories of helping incidents, 10 categories of hindering incidents, and 7 categories of WL items. One helping and one WL category were further divided into subcategories to fully capture the themes that emerged within the data. With the exception of one WL category, all categories met Butterfield and colleagues (2009) 25% participation rate. In the following section, helping, hindering, and WL categories will be displayed using tables organized according to decreasing participation rates, and a qualitative explanation of the results will follow. To fully understand the results, each of the 27 categories will be explored individually, even though there is a degree of overlap as the helping, hindering, and WL categories map onto one another. In concluding this section, participants’ contextual information will be presented in order to promote a better understanding of their disengagement and re-engagement experiences.
Helping Critical Incident Categories

Results of this study revealed a total of 278 helping CIs, which were grouped into 10 categories, each of which surpassed the 25% participation rate outlined by Butterfield and colleagues (2009). The helping CI categories are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Helping Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helping Categories</th>
<th>Number of Incidents</th>
<th>% of Helping Incidents</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>% of Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teacher variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Classroom strategies</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Personal qualities</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perspective</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Peer relationships</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Consequences</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Problem resolution</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Alternative school factors</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Professional supports</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Goal attainment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total critical incidents: 278

Teacher variables. This category was by far the most significant, as 100% of the participants discussed 67 CIs regarding teachers’ positive contributions to their school re-engagement experiences. Helpful CIs in this area were grouped according to strategies that were used in the classroom, as well as teachers’ personal qualities that facilitated participants’ re-engagement.

Classroom strategies. Having teachers who provide for students’ needs formed one of the largest helping categories, with a total of 88% of participants identifying 37 CIs. The three
areas that were highlighted within this subcategory included the use of various course
adaptations, one-on-one support, and the assignment of meaningful and relevant school work.

Most of the participants reported that having a teacher who was willing and able to adapt
or modify course work was valuable in helping them re-engage into school. Some of the
adaptations that they identified included using various strategies to teach the core curriculum,
providing challenging work, offering individual support, and allowing for more time to complete
assignments. For example, one 17-year-old youth from mainstream school described how taking
a modified course helped her catch up on her work and improve her confidence:

Now I take this um modified course [mm hmm] uh, which is basically a homework
course, [oh, okay] and it helps take a load off of uh, my shoulders. . . . but it’s also helped
me get back to class because if I have my homework done I’m a lot less reluctant to show
up without my homework. . . It let me do my homework [mm hmm], and um, it also
allowed me some more time to do homework, I so, I had more time than other people
[mm hmm] in my class to do homework and really gave me uh, better projects to hand in
[right] which raised my mark and made me feel better about myself.

Also noteworthy, several participants emphasized the importance of having a teacher who
would explain the work in detail and individually. For these participants, having that one-on-one
support allowed them to function within the classroom, where they would have otherwise been
unable to complete the work. One of the participants, a 17-year-old female student from an
alternative school, clearly felt passionate about the importance of this type of support:

We have such small classrooms. Teachers can take time to like better explain things,
because I could read over something and like ‘nothing’ but if someone sat there and
explained it to me and read it out loud to me, I can do a lot with that.
Additionally, most participants identified the importance of having teachers who assign meaningful and relevant work, which engages them in the work, expands their perspective, and takes into account their personal opinions and/or reflections. By way of example, an 18-year-old female student aiming to complete her high school education through a combination of outreach and online schooling described her experience of having relatable assignments as helping her build confidence and a passion for her school work, which will later transfer to other more difficult academics:

It means that I can pour my heart out onto a piece of paper, it means that I can understand my work . . . it is going to get at least me back on the right track, because eventually, after doing all of this work, it doesn’t have to be relatable forever, right? It is such a bonus, but eventually I am going to have to do work that I don’t care about. . . . And eventually I am going to be able to do any type of work and with Samuel helping me, I have the confidence that I can do that.

**Teacher qualities.** This subcategory included incidents pertaining to teacher qualities, with 81% of the participants reporting 30 CIs. More specifically, participants identified specific teacher qualities that positively impacted their school re-engagement, including having teachers who care about their students, understand their unique needs, and go above and beyond the role of a teacher to help them.

Having teachers who care about their students was critical to many participants’ re-engagement experiences, as it allowed them to feel valued and wanted within the school environment. One student, a 16-year-old female from an alternative school, identified the importance of the teacher-student relationship in her description of a caring teacher who
increased her desire to be at school: “he checks in on you, and makes sure you are well fed and stuff like that, and like he is nice.”

Other participants reported that having teachers who understood their unique struggles helped them feel supported in the classroom, which facilitated their re-engagement. A 17-year-old female student who had moved between several schools and alternative programs discussed how having teachers who understood her situation was helpful:

The teachers, all of them were pretty nice and they were really chill. And they were very supportive, and they were very understanding, like if you didn’t really get anything or you needed them to slow down, they wouldn’t ask any questions, they would just be like ‘sure.’ [right] or they just kinda like give you a break or they’d let you go [for a water break].

Lastly, several participants identified that having teachers who go above and beyond their role as educators was helpful in their re-engagement. Participants most appreciated teachers who got to know them on a personal basis, solicited their opinions, and provided them with extra support. A recently graduated participant, an 18-year-old male from an alternative program, discussed how receiving extra help during lunch hours made all the difference in his re-engagement experience:

If you need extra help they’re there for you, which is like their time and they’re putting in their time to help you out. It shows that they care too. . . . When I was struggling with something then I’d stay and get help and like do my work then because I know that, that’s when I can get help. . . . That really helped because then you know it’s done. Like you know you understand and everything.
Perspective. Most participants in this study identified some sort of perspective shift as playing a positive role in their re-engagement experience, with 14 participants identifying a total of 34 CIs. Perspective shift encompassed both external incidents such as realizing the importance of education in obtaining one’s career goals, and internal incidents such as having a shift in beliefs, and taking responsibility for one’s own education.

Many participants identified that having an external perspective shift regarding the importance of education in relation to social, academic, and career goals provided them with the motivation they needed to re-engage in school. One participant, an 18-year-old male from an alternative program, came to the realization that education was really important if he wanted to follow his career aspirations:

I figured out I actually needed school to become a fireman. It was like my first plan, I was like alright, no school [Right, yeah ] It turns out I talked to my mentor and she is the head of recruiting for the Richmond Department, so it was like, and she told me, I did need school now. I was like, alright, ‘well, I will need uni and a certain amount of credits’ so I’m like ‘well alright well I need school to get into it.’

Other participants reported an internal shift in perspective, as a result of changing their beliefs about themselves, others, school, and their education. More specifically, they shared that a change in beliefs led to an increase in confidence, a shift in expectations toward themselves and others, and persistence even when encountering challenges. Many participants described this shift as a change in their self-talk. For example, one participant, a 15-year-old female from an alternative school, described her school return, which led to her experiencing small successes, an increase in confidence, a change in self-image, and a shift in her beliefs about what it means to have a mental health diagnosis, which has contributed to her successful re-engagement:
It makes me feel like I do, I am smart and I do have a purpose here, like I, a year ago, I would not have known that I wanted to, umm, I knew that I wanted to be some sort of an actor, but I wouldn’t have even tried. I would have been so scared because I didn’t have friends, and I couldn’t succeed in school. No one would take me seriously. My confidence level is soaring, and I feel like I found something that works for me, and I can umm, I can do school. I can go every day and I can attend somewhere, and then it is a good feeling . . . Mental health I will struggle with for my whole life, but knowing that I can probably get through school means that I can get through a lot of other things.

Participants also attributed their school success to changing their perspective from a position of blaming others to a position of taking responsibility for their own education. Oftentimes, taking ownership for their own education created feelings of self-determination, which gave them the drive to fully re-engage in the learning environment. One participant, an 18-year-old female who was completing grade 12 courses through an outreach program, acknowledged a shift in perspective where she realized she wanted more out of her life and hence it was her responsibility to achieve this goal:

It is just that nobody is going to hand anything to you, you know? I mean, you have to work for what you want, right? And I don’t, as I said, I don’t want to have nothing, I don’t want to be upset all the time, I want to enjoy life and live it to the fullest, and spend time with my family, and my friends, and go to school, cause I like, I didn’t get to do that, right? And I feel like I missed out. But anyways, it is all my choice. Everything is up to me.

**Peer relationships.** Peer relationships were an important element in school re-engagement for 81% of the participants who identified 24 CIs within this category. Specifically,
participants discussed peer relationships in terms of having at least one supportive friend, having peers who understood their challenges, and having peers with aspirations.

Nearly all participants described various aspects of their friendships as particularly helpful in the re-engagement process. Some participants identified supportive friends as being particularly helpful, as the presence of these friends improved their confidence and self-esteem, made school easier to attend, and made school “so much less scary.” One of the participants, a 16-year-old female, explained how a particularly supportive friend assisted her with her transition from an alternative to a mainstream school:

I actually slept over at her house the day before school because I didn’t want to go. I was really anxious and I was really freaking out, it probably had to be her as the reason that I started going . . . she kind of knew everything, and she was like ‘we need to get you on track.’ And so she is basically always there and she was always like ‘you can stay here if you need to, we can go to school together.’

Participants who had re-engaged in alternative programs disclosed that having friends and peers with similar challenges (especially mental health issues) helps them feel more understood and less judged than they had in mainstream schools. Moreover, they believed that feeling truly accepted within the school allowed them to re-engage with greater ease. The impact of this acceptance is seen within this narrative from one participant, a 15-year-old female from an alternative school:

I am not alone because other kids deal with stuff too, and they are there because they had personal issues that were hard for them to come to school, so I feel like there is a mutual understand there, an unspoken mutual understanding. And umm, I think it means to that I feel it is a safe, it just makes you feel safe.
Some participants described the positive impact of having friends who had their own aspirations, as they represented good role models and encouraged them to get back on track with school. Such friendships were said to increase participants’ own motivation and ambition for the future. For example, an 18-year-old male from an alternative program found it helpful to have friends who held and worked towards high aspirations: “he said a lot of things that were motivation, but it wasn’t what he told me. It’s not what he told me. . . . Seeing how he’s so successful [mmm hmm], I can never be as good as he is, but I can try.”

**Family.** This category was deemed to be helpful to the process of school re-engagement by 81% of participants who identified 22 CIs in this area. More explicitly, they reported that family support, changes within the family system, and shifts in family communication contributed to their successful return to school.

Participants identified various aspects of family support that were helpful in their re-engagement experience, including receiving help with homework, encouragement to go to school, and accommodations for their mental health needs. Such characteristics allowed them to feel supported in their education as well as their emotional well-being. For example, a 17-year-old male from an alternative program described the impact of having his mom’s support:

> When I wasn’t doing well in school, and I was behind on a lot of work, she took all my work and put it on a big pile on the kitchen table. She said ‘sit here for one hour everyday’ and she would get my sister to monitor me, so I had to sit there for an hour every day to catch up on things. . . . When I was a kid, like my mom was always at work and my dad was never really there, so it’s like when you’re getting support from those people who weren’t really there before it like, it’s nice. It’s nice to have.
Some of the participants indicated that a change in their family system increased their ability to re-engage in school. Some of the identified family system changes included the youth moving out of the family home, gaining independence from the family, and parental separation. Family system changes were deemed to be particularly helpful to some participants because they allowed them to focus more on school and less on the family conflict. One youth, a 17-year-old female from an alternative program who had struggled with school attendance for six years, reports that her home environment became more peaceful when her father left, and as a result, she disclosed feeling more supported by her mother:

She is focused more on us and that has really helped. . . . She understands a lot better now with my schooling. . . . she like will say ‘okay, then what can I do to help you with that?’ Instead of just getting upset about it, and like grounding me for a week because I am not getting good grades and such . . . she is like ‘okay, well then what do we need to do to make it better?’ Which is nice because it is not me getting in trouble anymore, it is ‘okay, what can I do to help you?’

Not only did this participant describe how nice it was to have her mother’s support and understanding, she also discussed how the newly peaceful home environment helped her:

Not to have to like think about home problems and home drama. It is just like easier on me when I get to school, I don’t have to like sit there and be like ‘oh great, I have to go home later and all this crap is going to come up.” It is nice to go to school and not have to think about things like that.

Change in family communication was also an important variable that aided school re-engagement for many participants. Such changes included having parents communicate rules and set boundaries with participants, discuss how to help rather than lecture them, and take new
approaches to deal with school attendance issues. According to participants, changes in family communication allowed them to feel more understood and supported by their families, as they undertook the process of re-engaging in school. For example, an 18-year-old female participant who re-engaged in an alternative school explained how her mother’s approach changed in dealing with school attendance issues:

When I started there, I had to focus on getting there by myself. Because, like it started at 9, and my mom couldn’t drive me and I couldn’t walk there. So, I had to be motivated and dedicated to go, which really helped because it was more independence. (Yeah). So it made me realize that I’m not being treated like a child anymore and people aren’t bossing me around and telling me I have to go to school. It was more me deciding that I wanted to be there.

**Consequences.** Some of the adolescents who participated in this study explained that the negative consequences of non-attendance functioned as a motivation to return to an educational environment, while others found that the positive consequences associated with attending school functioned as motivation towards a complete school return. That is, 75% of the participants identified 21 helping CIs that were either natural consequences of school absenteeism or positive reinforcement for school attendance.

Several participants recognized that if they did not attend school, they would risk failing a class, having to go to summer school, having to take an extra year to complete high school, possibly being expelled from the alternative program, or disappointing others. They recognized that these consequences of not attending school were too costly, and thus felt motivated to re-engage. For example, an 18-year-old male from a mainstream program expressed his fear of the consequences associated with missing classes:
I found out that if I failed some more courses, that I could actually have to take an extra year to finish high school and you know, that was one of things I really didn’t want to do, so that sort of served as a bit of incentive.

In contrast, many participants identified the positive consequences associated with attending school as playing a significant role in helping participants re-engage. Participants described school re-engagement as a process where once they started attending classes consistently, they began to experience little successes and a related increase in confidence in their own capacity, which made attending school easier over time. Particularly relevant, participants who identified this category expressed having experienced several failures during their school years, but found that once they began to experience the feelings associated with success, they became much more engaged in their own education. The experience of success reinforced school attendance for one 17-year-old female in mainstream school: “I just felt like I was getting things done, which made me want to like continue and get more things done, cause it’s a good feeling.”

**Problem resolution.** Many participants identified that once the original challenge that lead to their school disengagement was resolved, the re-engagement process was much easier. This perspective was shared by 69% of the participants via 22 CIs and included improvements in the area of mental illness and/or substance misuse, relief from sleep challenges, and resolution of school problems.

Participants who made positive strides with regard to their mental health and/or substance misuse issues felt like they could more easily re-engage in school. Specifically, as they began to experience less symptomology, they had more energy and felt less scared to go to and stay in school. Moreover, they were better able to engage in their work and social relationships. For
instance, a 14-year-old female participant who has just completed her grade eight year at an alternative school described the difficulties of struggling with anxiety, depression, and sleeping challenges prior to finding a medication that offered relief:

I think the reason I’m getting better now is because I finally found a medication that works for me. I tried Prozac, which is Fluoxetine, Cipralex, and a ton of other medications before I got to Sertraline . . . . I think Sertraline has helped to kind of stabilize my mood. Umm, I haven’t really been on one where, umm, before I would be super depressed and I would just stay in bed all day, and now that doesn’t happen anymore.

Several participants reported having a history of sleep challenges, which made going to school difficult for them. Participants had difficulty with falling asleep at night and waking up frequently, which made getting up for school in the morning and engaging in classes particularly challenging. As such problems faded, school re-engagement seemed more feasible and attendance improved significantly. As one participant, a 16-year-old female from mainstream school stated, “I used to go days at a time without sleeping [wow], which also inhibited my ability to go to school, as you can imagine [yeah, for sure], I was just too tired.” The resolution of such sleeping challenges helped this participant re-engage in school: “I’m still experiencing some problems sleeping now but it’s a lot less severe [right] which helps a lot.”

The resolution of school-based problems, such as bullying, academic difficulties, and peer conflict, helped some participants re-engage in school. Most participants identified that such challenges were resolved when they changed schools, which allowed them to have a “fresh start” and to “leave problems behind.” For example, a 16-year old male described his opportunity for a fresh start at an alternative school:
Leaving the problems that I had with other students at [the school] and having a chance at a different school. I would say that was a big reason of why I wasn’t going to school was because of conflict with other students.

He went on to describe the impact of leaving his problems behind:

You definitely get like, it is kind of like turning over a new leaf. You are still your same person, but you kind of get, you can make a new first impression on everybody, you know? I think that really helps with . . . how you feel about yourself when your image is what you want it to be instead of what it was.

**Alternative school factors.** Many of the participants in this study shared that they were currently enrolled in or had attended an alternative school. Accordingly, 63% of them identified 52 helping CIs that pertained to alternative education. More explicitly, participants identified several helping incidents related to this environment including a slow transition back into school, a unique program structure, and a sense of community. Each of these characteristics contributed to the overall alternative school environment, which were said to provide a climate where individual needs were met and students felt supported and welcomed.

Participants who re-engaged in an alternative school found that the transition back into education was a more gradual process than when they had previously attempted to re-engage in mainstream schooling. Specifically, participants identified that the program supported a gradual return with a modified schedule and teachers who were cognizant of the amount and difficulty of the work they assigned, which allowed participants to feel comfortable and at ease with re-engaging in the school environment. For example, one participant, an 18-year-old female engaged in an alternative program, summed up her experience in a way that reflected many participants’ views of the importance of a slow transition back into school:
Starting out like from not going at all then going for a few hours was better than jumping into like sitting there for 6 hours listening to people talk. It was more inclusive. With like your learning and getting you back and like they didn’t start out hard, they went easy on you. There was always a lot of extra help when you needed it. . . . If you’re like feeling down like, you could take a break from your learning like, go hang out with the dog or something. So, it was never like never pushed on you to be focused like the whole time. Because you need that little break, they would give it to you.

Several participants expressed that the structure of alternative programs facilitated school re-engagement, especially when programs were designed to have shorter days with shorter classes, fewer students in each class, and peers stayed together in all courses. Additionally, participants identified being more successful when they only had to take the core courses, were not assigned homework, and had sufficient support from school staff. This highly specialized program provided participants with a more manageable environment that countered the anxiety they had felt in mainstream school classrooms. When describing the importance of this school structure, a 16-year-old male from an alternative program skillfully explained the math:

You get more one on one time, I think . . . in like a normal class with 30 kids in it, that runs for an hour and a half or an hour and twenty minutes, if you divide it equally, you get like 3 minutes of one on one time per student. Of course it is never divided equally, right? Some kids need more than others, but if it was like 3 minutes a students, but here, because there is like two or three teachers per class, and there is less students, you get up to 5 minutes of one on one time each in a 15 minute period. So a period is shorter, and you are still getting more one on one time, which I think is really big factor that plays in is that one on one time.
Participants who had re-engaged in alternative programs valued the sense of community that was present in these school environments. Particularly important, this sense of community allowed participants to be themselves while feeling safe, welcomed, and appreciated. For example, one participant, an 18-year-old female who transitioned between an alternative program and into the hairdressing program, described this sense of community:

We actually had the time to like hang out … like get to know each other more and then we all became like a big family by the end of school. . . . We all came from the same place, like, we’re all in that program for the same reason. . . . We all can’t deal with school. We all have the same like learning problems and it’s never worked out for us. So we’re all like there together.

**Professional supports.** Professional supports, particularly mental health professionals, played a significant role in helping participants, as identified by 56% of the sample via 15 helping CIs. Mental health professionals played a positive role in participants’ school re-engagement experiences by providing general support for various presenting problems, coping skills, and collaboration with other professionals.

Participants felt that receiving support from counsellors was helpful in dealing with a variety of presenting problems. Participants found it helpful having someone who would listen to their concerns, help them understand their past, and provide options for dealing with problems. One such participant, an 18-year-old male from an alternative program described how helpful it is to have a mental health worker support him:

They always ask me like how I’m doing, how I’m feeling, how schools been going, give me options like if I have problems for example with school with a certain classmate, people bug me, they give me certain options about what to do, they give me techniques to
disengage from certain situations or just completely change, change situations completely [okay]. . . . They remind me that . . . where I have been to what I am doing now is a huge difference or improving because a lot of the time I feel like it’s not enough.

In working with mental health professionals, participants emphasized the importance of learning various coping skills for dealing with social, emotional, and academic challenges. Specifically, they found it helpful when counsellors worked with them to develop an arsenal of coping skills, which made school attendance possible. For example, one participant, a 15-year-old female from an alternative program, discussed how her counsellor has helped her cope with mood changes that are a part of her bi-polar disorder:

She has helped me find coping skills for when I do feel anxious at school, and I do want to go home, and I do feel super depressed or I am super super up and I am like ‘alright I don’t need to see you right now.’ And she is like ‘hey I can tell what your mood is like right now and I can tell that you are super manic right now, and I am going to come and get you and we are going, we are gonna sit and do some relaxation exercises.’ So she has been super there for me and that has been amazing.

Some participants reported that when their counsellors collaborated with other professionals, they were aided in their school re-engage process. Most salient was the professional collaboration that took place between counsellors and school staff. One participant, a 17-year-old female from a mainstream program, described the impact of professional collaboration:

My counsellors also talk to the teachers about my situation a bit and umm, so that they were more lenient with due dates for me, more than they would be with other students. I think that flexibility’s really important for students who are experiencing difficulty.
Goal attainment. Setting and working towards goals encouraged half of the participants to persevere through trying times during their school re-engagement process. Specifically, 50% of participants identified 11 CIs pertaining to career, academic, and personal goals.

Participants who had identified specific career goals that require a high school diploma and/or post-secondary education were motivated to attend high school as a “means to an end.” Having career oriented goals created incentives to go back to school and made it easier for participants to tolerate some of the ups and downs that came with being in an academic environment. For example, a grade 12 male from a mainstream school described how his broken dreams of being a nurse were restored when he found out that some colleges offer a nursing program that has attainable entrance requirements:

Well, the LPN program makes me think that I actually have a chance at getting to nursing. I don’t actually have to have an insanely high mark because 95% average, that sounds sounds insane [mmm hmm, right]. I mean I was one of those people who gets happy when they get over 60% on a test [mmm hmm] 95 percent is just ridiculous.

Furthermore, when asked how having career goals was helpful, he responded, “this meant for me that my mark in biology, math and English actually mean something [mmm hmm] so, you know, that’s an incentive I guess.”

Other participants set academic related goals for themselves, such as a achieving certain grades in classes, graduating, and graduating on time. When asked about what goals motivated him to return to school, a 17-year-old male from an alternative program identified a number of academic goals: “Little ones like, get 75% on a test. Like just set little goals and then like bigger goals, like actually graduate on time. That’s one of my big goals.” When questioned as to why
these goals were important to his successful re-engagement, the participant stated, “It just kinda gives you a reason to keep going.”

Lastly, some participants recognized various barriers and struggles that had made school engagement extremely difficult for them, and thus, they set out to overcome these difficulties by setting personal goals. These participants identified the need to work towards bettering their own lives and re-engaging in school was often a necessary part of achieving that end. For example, a 17-year-old female from a mainstream program stated, “I like it when I beat my challenges, cause like it is kind of a personal goal . . . it gives me something to like . . . a path, like a direction of where to go.”

**Extracurricular activities.** Almost half of the individuals who participated in this study discussed the role of extracurricular activities in their experiences of re-engagement. More explicitly, 44% of participants identified 10 CIs, such as physical activity and community involvement that improved their overall well-being, which in turn had a positive influence on the re-engagement process.

Participants often attributed physical activity as a helpful CI in their school re-engagement, as it made them feel “happier” or as one participant stated “the endorphins and the high you get from it, it is like a natural high, so I don’t have to go to other stuff for a high to make myself feel relaxed and better.” Another participant, a 16-year-old male from an alternative program, who had struggled with school attendance for several years associated getting back into physical shape with getting his life back into shape:

You know how going to the gym affects your head and makes you more happier inside, I mean that actually kind of helped too. . . . I’m getting back into shape again. I don’t do it just for looks and that, I mean it’s good to stay healthy . . . . I guess my goal [is] to get
back into shape with my life . . . . I can get a job, go back to school, [mmm hmm], get an education umm, have more social ability than I used to have.

Several participants identified that being actively engaged within their cultural community or school community, primarily through volunteerism or club involvement, made it easier to also engage in school. That is, they explained how it was easier for them to push through a tough day when they had something fun waiting for them on the other side. Participants felt that it was particularly important to have pleasant distractions from school, while others felt that it was a good opportunity to make new friends, be a part of something meaningful, and, for those involved in school based extracurricular activities, the activities provided them with a reason to go to school. One participant, a 17-year-old female in mainstream school, who is actively involved in a community based cooking club and gardening club stated, “I think people should do stuff out of school. Having your entire life revolve around school can make your entire life kind of unpleasant, you gotta have escapes from that too.”

**Hindering Critical Incident Categories**

In total, participants identified 201 CIs that negatively influenced their school re-engagement experience. Out of these incidents, 10 hindering categories emerged, all of which met significance with a 25% participation rate (Butterfield et al., 2009). The hindering CI categories are outlined in Table 2.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindering Categories</th>
<th>Number of Incidents</th>
<th>% of Hindering Incidents</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>% of Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Emotional distress/Psychiatric disorders</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Peer relationships</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Family</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Consequences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. School factors</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Teacher variables</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sleep challenges</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Professional supports</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Substance Misuse</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Other priorities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Critical Incidents: 201

**Emotional distress/Psychiatric disorders.** Emotional distress and/or psychiatric disorders emerged as the largest hindering category affecting school re-engagement, as identified by 94% of participants via 61 CIs. These hindering items tended to be discussed according to diagnostic categories such as anxiety, mood, and eating disorders, but also included feelings of distress, worthlessness, and low self-esteem.

A significant number of participants disclosed that feelings of fear and anxiety hindered their ability to re-engage into school. Specifically, they described such feelings as “crippling” and explained that they were filled with self-doubt as to their ability to succeed both academically and socially. Areas of anxiety included performance related fears (e.g., fears of failing or not meeting expectations of self or others), social anxiety, and anxious self-talk.

Participants were often so afraid of failing that they would rather be absent from school than risk not doing well. For example, one of the individuals, a 17-year-old male from an alternative
program described his avoidance coping: “it was just like ‘I don’t want to do any of this. I’m going to fail anyways, so what is the point. It is like if I don’t go, I don’t really fail because I was never really there.’”

Some participants disclosed that they had been diagnosed with a mood disorder (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder), which significantly impacted their experience of school re-engagement. That is, they explained how mood related symptoms made school re-engagement difficult, as they had difficulties getting out of bed, experienced “bad mornings” that impacted their mood for the rest of the day, felt unhappy, lacked energy and motivation – all of which affected their school attendance. For example, a 14-year-old female enrolled in an alternative school shared her experiences with depression and school re-engagement:

With the depression I just want to stay home. And some days I’ll feel really really depressed and don’t really want to talk to anyone, don’t want to go anywhere, and some days I just feel kind of empty and I just don’t care about anything anymore. And I’m kind of like this shell of a person . . . And then some days I’ll be in a really good mood and it just goes up and down, up and down. . . . I wouldn’t want to wake up in the morning and because of that I was in bed and then that would cause me to be really depressed and then that would cause me to not be able to do anything and that would cause me to not be able to fall asleep, and then it would just go over and over and over again.

Other participants identified eating disorders and accompanying body image difficulties as hindering their school re-engagement process. Mostly, they described challenges in attending school due to symptoms such as poor concentration, avoiding temptation, and binging and
purging behaviors. A 16-year-old female participant struggling with comorbid anxiety, depression, and an eating disorder described her challenges in re-engaging in school:

I don’t want to be around temptation like food, like the cafeteria food, cause I feel like whenever I go to school, I am around temptation and I can’t resist it, right? Since like I guess my weight really matters to me . . . makes me not want to be around school. I feel like I need to hide myself.

Lastly, participants described feeling discouraged and worthless, which contributed to an overall lack of motivation to re-engage in school. These individuals often explained these feelings of discouragement as stemming from a lack of caring from others, poor performance in school, and feeling like an outcast. One participant, an 18-year-old female participant from an alternative program, described feeling discouraged when everyone in her life had given up on her: “I just stopped caring cause everyone else seemed like they didn’t care, so why would care? . . . why would I want to go to school if no one cares?”

**Peer relationships.** The next hindering category that participants discussed related to peer relationships. More specifically, 81% of the participants identified 34 CIs pertaining to peer conflict, isolation, and the negative influence of others, which severely impacted their experiences of school re-engagement.

Peer conflict made school re-engagement difficult for a number of participants who experienced past or present bullying, had trouble getting along with others, had a negative reputation, or felt unsafe. For these participants, social concerns and safety needs trumped school attendance requirements. For example, a 16-year-old male from an alternative program described how negative peer interactions made school re-engagement challenging for him: “walking through the hallways getting stared at and what not. I mean it seems insignificant but it
is a reminder of, you know, it is kind of like psychological warfare.” Being jumped a couple of
times, he said, left him feeling like he had to look over his “shoulder all the time” and he
explained “that was a big reason of why I was wasn’t going to school was because of conflict
with other students.”

Isolation represented another area of concern for many participants who had difficulty
with school attendance. For example, many participants felt that re-engagement was difficult
because they had few connections, trouble making or keeping friends, felt left out of cliques, or
felt uncomfortable around their peers. For example, a 16-year-old female engaged in an
alternative program described how the presence of cliques left her feeling isolated:

Everyone is in cliques, you know? They already have their own groups already, and I
don’t really know which clique I belong to. . . . There was the athletes, and there was the
dancers. And there was the badminton . . . players, and then there were the skaters, right?
And I didn’t belong to any of that. . . . I think because I don’t have a hobby or a passion,
it was hard for me to stay in school because I didn’t have a clique to belong to. . . . I felt
really lonely. I had nowhere to go to during lunch or my break or when we have to
partner up for a project, I didn’t know who, everyone already knew their partners and I
was just alone.

Lastly, some participants stated that they formed friendships with individuals who
impacted them in negatively ways. They explained that their fiends negatively influenced them
by encouraging them to skip classes, use drugs, or disengage from classwork. Such influences
were counterproductive to their re-engagement goals in that they often delayed or interrupted a
successful school return. By way of example, a 17-year-old female from an alternative program
described her initial attempts to re-engage being thwarted by the influence of her friends when
she asked for their support on bad days and they would attempt to help by saying “well then, let’s just skip, let’s get your mind off of it.” She went on to discuss the difficulty of staying in class “when you don’t have that one friend just saying ‘you know, maybe we should just stay.’

**Family.** Family factors that hindered the process of school re-engagement were reported by 69% of the participants through 20 CIs. Family variables that were considered to make school re-engagement difficult included family involvement, pressure within or from the family, and mental health challenges within the family.

Participants frequently discussed the role of family involvement (either too little or too much) in their experiences of school re-engagement. In some cases, where families were uninvolved in participants’ lives, they felt like they did not receive much encouragement that would have helped them to attend school. In other cases, where families were overly involved or experienced a great deal of conflict, participants felt dragged down to a point that it interfered with their daily functioning. For example, one participant, a 17-year-old female who re-engaged in an alternative program, came from a family with a high degree of conflict and described the impact it had on her ability to get to school: “I was the punching bag. And it just made me feel worse and worse and worse. And I was at the point that I couldn’t get out of bed.”

Many participants identified that their family unit was under a lot of pressure or that their families exerted a considerable amount of pressure on them, and these factors interfered with their ability to re-engage in school. Some of the stress or pressure that impacted participants included on-going family stress, major family change, unhelpful comparisons between family members, and high family expectations. A 17-year-old female from an alternative program reported feeling discouraged when her parents placed a lot of pressure on her to do well:
It held me back because it was all like “well, I can’t do better. I don’t feel like I can.” Especially when you are already failing and they say “you know, we moved here, we just wanted to have a better life for you guys. We always just wanted you guys to do better than what we have been” . . . I am already failing classes and they are like “well, we want you to do better.” It is like “well, clearly I can’t” And then that just gets me discouraged.

Finally, mental health related factors (e.g., a lack of understanding of mental health within the family unit or family members struggling with their own mental health concerns), negatively impacted several participants school re-engagement experiences. An 18-year-old male from mainstream school described the challenges of living with several family members with addictions:

Let’s see…Dad is a gambling addict, mom is trying to cover the costs for it, brothers a gaming addict, I have to babysit little brother, all that in combination equal one very, how do you say, un-educational environment.

Consequences. Participants reported that the consequences of initially disengaging from school lead to some significant challenges, which made the process of re-engagement very difficult. More specifically, 69% of participants identified 14 CIs in this hindering category. The consequences were discussed in three areas: behavioral patterns, falling behind in class, and being questioned about absences upon returning to school, all of which represented an ongoing cycle that challenged school re-engagement.

Some of the participants talked about how their behavior patterns influenced their absenteeism, and how this eventually became a cycle that reinforced itself. Specifically, participants described a pattern of missing school, which became a routine of getting up late,
engaging in non-school related activities, and going to bed late. Eventually this pattern of behavior became a new routine that was unconducive to school attendance. As a 16-year-old male from an alternative school explained: “the cycle of getting up late, going to bed late, so you get up late the next day. Kind of sounds kidish saying bedtime, but that’s what it is, you know?”

And he went on to provide a specific example:

There was like 2 or 3 weeks where me and Victor, I would get up at like 12 or whenever . . . I would wake up, go to his house, we would sit and play video games, and smoke weed and stuff, and basically that got into a cycle, you know, it is just like every day you get up, you go to your friend’s house, you get stoned, you play video games, you eat, and you go home late.

Other participants discussed the negative consequences of missing school itself, including poor or failing grades, falling behind in classes, and having a loss of routine. Participants often described the feeling of being “trapped” once they began to miss school. For example, a 17-year-old female from mainstream school explained, “I would show up there having maybe missed two or three classes, and umm, I would have no idea what subject we are on . . . . the more I would miss, the more I didn’t want to show up.”

Lastly, in discussing consequences, participants acknowledged that they continued to miss school to avoid the negative consequences associated with returning back to school after a period of absenteeism. That is, they reported feeling uncomfortable returning to school because they would be faced with difficult questions from their teachers and peers. For example, a 14-year-old female participant detailed the discomfort she had to endure as a result of returning to school:
A lot of those questions are hard to answer. The issues I’m going through are hard to talk about and I don’t really want to talk about them. I know when I told some of my friends . . . one of them messaged me a while later . . . he was asking me about depression and anxiety because he needed it for a project.

**Teacher variables.** Adolescents reported that there were some teacher characteristics that impacted their experience of school re-engagement in a negative manner, as evidenced by 50% of participants via 21 CIs. They expressed that at times teachers were unable to properly support them as they did not understand their challenges, treated them unfairly, and assigned inappropriate amounts of work.

Several youth felt misunderstood by their teachers and found that this absence made school re-engagement difficult, as teachers often placed unrealistic expectations on them, were stricter with them than other students, and were generally insensitive to their unique needs and learning styles. One 17-year-old from mainstream school suggested that teachers misinterpret the actions of students with attendance challenges:

I feel like a lot of teachers will just see these students that aren’t doing as well or aren’t engaging in class and think that they are just shy. When it is not really just about being shy, it is more of an underlying problem going on. . . . I think sometimes they can be harder on that student. Maybe they see not engaging as being lazy.

Many of the participants felt like their teachers treated them unfairly, because they did not understanding their individual needs. This experience impacted students’ comfort in the classroom and made them less likely to attend school, hence, hindering the re-engagement process. A recently graduated female, an 18-year-old from the hairdressing program, described feeling isolated as a result of this unfair treatment:
I was the person that always talks so they’d choose me to isolate across the room, while the rest of my friends could stay and be loud and talk to each other. So I was like personally picked on in a lot of my classes. So that made it really like ‘I don’t want to be here.’ . . . I feel like I’ve been isolated my whole life cause I was always put in like resource or like having to go away in elementary school to like other classes. I never understood like why that was as a kid. . . . It’s what really made me feel like I’m different.

Beyond feeling as though they had been treated unfairly, participants identified that teachers’ assignments were often lengthy and un-engaging, which left participants feeling overwhelmed or bored, respectively. This sequence affected their beliefs in their capabilities, made them more likely to avoid school, and hindered their overall process of re-engagement. For example, a 17-year-old female from an alternative program described feeling hopeless when she tried to re-engage in mainstream school:

I guess homework really made like schooling really hard, because I can’t like, I don’t get that help at home . . . . When you don’t have that help at home, and then like you are not comfortable enough to go to your teacher and ask them, it is all like ‘okay then, I am not going to do it. I am not going to show up, I am not getting any help anywhere.

**Sleep challenges.** Many participants identified difficulties with their sleep patterns as an important hindering category. Specifically, 44% of participants identified 7 CIs such as having poor sleep schedules, insomnia, and frequent waking during the night. They explained that a lack of sleep significantly interfered with their school re-engagement, as they were often late for or absent from school. By way of example, a 17-year-old female in an alternative program
described her chronic sleep difficulties and the manner in which it interfered with her return to school:

I have had a lot of sleeping issues my entire life. I used to go days at a time without sleeping, which also inhibited my ability to go to school, as you can imagine [yeah, for sure], I was just too tired a lot of the time.

**School factors.** Fifty-six percent of participants identified 21 CIs related to mainstream education that contributed to their difficulties re-engaging in school. Some of the experiences that were identified in this category include rigid school schedules, strong focus on academics, lack of communication between home and school, and inconsistent schooling.

Rigid scheduling procedures common to mainstream schooling made re-engagement difficult for some participants who found early start times, long days, and strict bell schedules to increase their anxiety at school. Moreover, others found that having to move between classes prevented them from making connections with their peers. One of the participants, an 18-year-old female from an alternative program, found that transitioning back into mainstream school education was difficult because programming was inflexible and did not allow for a slow transition back into school. She explained, “it was just like I wasn’t used to it. And there’s like, I was surrounded with so much responsibility all of a sudden. . . . They just threw me in pretty much.”

For those who were not academically inclined, the heavy focus on core academics often resulted in on-going challenges with school work, which left participants feeling defeated and hopeless as they were typically unsuccessful in this academic environment. Moreover, participants reported being under informed about alternative and non-academic programs. Participants felt that this oversight prevented them from making decisions about alternative
modes of education sooner, which meant that they continued to disengage and re-engage in a school environment that was unable to meet their needs. For instance, an 18-year-old female participant graduating from the hairdressing program described her struggles in trying to navigate the education system:

They put down like trades and everything and it’s like you need to go and be a doctor, like but I’m not like doctor material. So it’s just kind of like stressful to think like I’m never gonna be there . . . they made you feel like you’re nothing. . . . [they’re] not giving you enough information and like letting you know about other things in life and they’re just making you think . . . all it is you have to like do good and be smart. Figure it out for yourself and go off to university.

Some participants reported that there was a lack of communication between their school and home, and hence they were not held accountable for attending classes within the mainstream system. For some participants, this absence of communication was interpreted as a lack of caring on the part of the school. More, they explained that the lack of communication allowed them to miss school without being disciplined. Ultimately, this experience made the process of re-engagement more challenging. For example, a 15-year-old female from an alternative program described:

I figured out the whole 15 minutes thing, for the last 15 minutes, I was like ‘oh okay, I won’t get caught and I won’t get in trouble for it, so I may as well do it.’ So I guess that made it easier to just not show up and not like want to put the effort in.

Inconsistent schooling, or in other words, frequent changes between schools or school programming, made re-engagement difficult for many participants. Particularly challenging, these frequent school changes, according to participants, resulted in feelings of isolation, gaps in
learning, and inability to settle into a new environment for fear that they would eventually move again. For instance, one youth, an 18-year-old female youth in an alternative program, described several moves back and forth between schools over the course of primary and secondary school, and believed that this constant movement created learning gaps in her education:

In elementary school my parents had split up quite a bit, so it was constantly moving . . . So one school I would be learning times tables, and I would go to another school and they would be done with that, so I wouldn’t have the chance to learn it. So when I got to high school, I was like really screwed because I had never had the chance to learn that.

**Professional supports.** Some of the individuals who participated in this study reported that the professional support they received from counsellors and social workers was unhelpful to their school re-engagement process. Specifically, 38% of the participants identified 13 hindering CIs that spoke to the lack of fit and understanding they experienced in counselling.

All of the participants who identified professional supports as a hindering factor acknowledged that they needed support in order to return to school. However, given that they did not connect with or feel understood by their counsellors or social workers, their re-engagement process was hindered. Most participants disclosed that when they had a poor relationship with their counsellors or social workers, they were more likely to be resistant or reactive to their interventions and suggestions. Moreover, in the case of seeing school counsellors, participants felt like they did not receive adequate support and/or actively avoided school so that they would not have to meet with the professional in question. A grade 12 participant currently working on completing her GED described the lack of connection she felt with her social worker: “I didn’t get along with her. We had no connection. So then when she
tried to offer me something, right away I would say ‘no, no, no, there are going to be traps and I am not going through them.’”

**Substance Misuse.** Approximately one-third of participants reported that substances were, in some capacity, a negative influence on their school re-engagement. That is, 31% of participants identified 9 hindering CIs related to the pressure to use drugs, participants’ lifestyles, and addictions.

Some participants felt pressured by other students to use drugs or alcohol, and this made school attendance particularly difficult, as they tried to avoid these peers. Consequently, the process of school re-engagement was impacted in a negative manner. For example, a 15-year old female from an alternative program described the pressure she felt:

> I wasn’t interested in doing drugs, like kids would invite me ‘do you want to drop acid on Halloween?’ and I said ‘no, I am not really interested.’ . . . I didn’t want to go back because I was so scared of what kids would say about me because I wasn’t interested . . . . I just didn’t want to be pressured, so I wouldn’t go to school.

Other participants who used substances on a regular basis, particularly alcohol and/or marijuana, found that it became a lifestyle that was not conducive to advancing their education. A 19-year-old female participant engaged in an outreach program described how her “partying” lifestyle and alcohol use hindered her school re-engagement:

> I knew if I went [to the party] I was not going to make it to class in the morning. And I said ‘I want to go, it is a party, I love parties, I love to socialize, I want to go.’ So I went. I said ‘okay, let’s put being hung over before going to school. . . .And that slowly, you know, happened more and more.
Some participants found that their substance use progressed into an addiction, which made school re-engagement particularly difficult (almost impossible) due to side effects such as withdrawal and relapse. By way of example, one participant, a 17-year-old female in mainstream school, described some of the symptoms of withdrawal from nicotine that she experienced which interfered with her ability to be in class and complete her work, “I would need to go out all the time and sometimes I would be late to class because I wouldn’t be done and I can’t not finish.” This same participant described the process of “getting clean” which, in and of itself, negatively impacted her school attendance, as she was “feeling tired. . . shaky. . . [and having] crazy withdrawals.”

Other priorities. Some participants reported that they had other priorities that took precedence over attending school, which negatively affected or delayed their re-engagement. More specifically, 25% of participants identified five hindering CIs in this category. These incidents were related to participants’ social lives, need to support themselves, and valuing work over education.

Some of the adolescents who participated in this study admitted that the value they placed on social opportunities inhibited their school re-engagement. That is, some reported socializing instead of attending school, and others disclosed using school as a medium to engage in social interactions. In both instances, participants fell behind in their school work. One participant, a 17-year-old female from an alternative program, described prioritizing her social life over learning:

It was more like the time that I got to hang out with my friends, because my parents were both strict, and I wasn’t really allowed to go out all the time, so I took like being at school
like “oh I get to be around my friends, oh let’s do something now, because I won’t be able to do it later.”

Moving out of the family home made school re-engagement particularly difficult for youth who suddenly found themselves having to earn an income to support themselves, worrying about where to live, and taking responsibility for their needs. An 18-year-old female participant completing her education through an outreach program described a situation in which she had to move out of her family home and had to change her priorities so that she could support herself:

It meant that I wasn’t going to get an education and that really concerned me [mmm hmm], but then at the same time, I, in that state of mind that I was at, I had better things to worry about apparently [right], friends, and you know, worrying about where I am going to be living, other things.

Lastly, work sometimes became a priority over gaining an education as it has more immediate benefits than school, which has long term, but delayed, rewards. A 16-year-old female from an alternative program described recently starting work and the impact it has had on her re-engagement:

Knowing the fact that after school I have work and I am going to be tired . . . . I am already tired in the mornings already, so I am going to be even more tired, so kind of work makes me not want to go to school. And I am like ‘I just want to stay in, and then go to work, and sometimes I see work as more beneficial because I get money now, but school is long term.

**Wish List Items**

In total, 16 participants identified 93 WL items that were organized into seven categories, six of which reached Butterfield and colleagues (2009) 25% participation rate. The WL categories are outlined in Table 3.
Table 3
Wish List Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wish List Items</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
<th>% of Wish List Items</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>% of Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Mainstream school factors</td>
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<td>37%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Alternative school factors</td>
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<td>25%</td>
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<td>56%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Family</td>
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</tr>
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<td>6. Peer relationships</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Wish List Items: 93

School factors. The largest category, school factors, was comprised of 34 WL items identified by 69% of the participants. In order to capture the nuances of this category, the school factors category was divided into two subcategories: mainstream school factors and alternative school factors.

Mainstream school factors. Fifty-six percent of the participants in this study identified 23 WL items related to changes in mainstream schooling that could have made their re-engagement experience easier. That is, they reported that re-engagement would have been easier if they had had more support, additional information about alternative programs, modified assignments, and flexible school schedules.

Many participants felt insufficiently supported within the mainstream educational system, and believed that if they had had more support they would have experienced more success in school – hence, making their re-engagement easier. Areas of desired support included increasing classroom support, accessibility to counselling, as well as teachers who were more caring and
understanding. Participants voiced a need for support from professionals who could adapt to their unique needs and learning styles. A recently graduated student, an 18-year-old female from the hair-dressing program, described her wish for more classroom support, “one teacher for 30 kids is not going to help, cause if there’s that one kid that needs more help, the teachers are helping the students that are so smart they want to advance even more.” She went on to suggest a solution to this challenge, “more EA’s in the classroom.”

A lack of information about alternative education made re-engagement difficult for some students. That is, without sufficient information, they were fearful of moving into unknown programs, and were afraid of being judged for completing alternative education. For example, a 15-year-old female engaged in alternative school identified her wish to have been informed about alternative modes of education, specifically the alternative school programs:

I wish I would have had the information I did now. I think that is pretty much to summarize it, I wish I would have had the information I have now about all the programs and things that I could have joined, and all the umm, I don’t know if I could possibly get more ahead than I am now, but I wouldn’t have had the struggles.

Homework and assignments presented difficulties for many participants, as they began to re-engage in school. As such, many wished for less homework, flexible due dates, and assignments tailored to their learning needs, which would have resulted in less frustration and defeat, which in turn, would have facilitated re-engagement. A grade 12 female participant from mainstream education wished that teachers could have individually tailored the curriculum, tests, and marking rubrics to suit each student’s individual learning outcomes. She quoted Einstein to portray her thoughts, “it’s like if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree.” She then explained this concept in the following manner:
It’s so true because like not everybody’s the same. So I wish that . . . the teachers would take into more perspective that not all the students are learning the same. . . . Like mark me more on my own ability rather than on somebody else’s ability.

She went on to describe the impact she believes this support would have had: “I think it actually would make me learn more and realize cause I just when I saw my grades were so low, I knew I was like actually trying but my grades never moved.”

The schedule in mainstream high school made the process of re-engagement difficult for many participants who wished school days were shorter, classes started later, and more breaks were provided. It was said that better scheduling would have allowed for improved sleep, increased energy, and reduced stress. For illustrative purposes, a 16-year-old female from an alternative program described her difficulty with mainstream school hours and how the alternative program hours met her needs better:

I am always tired. So sometimes I will come into school really late at like 9:00am or 10, or just skip the first block, so that makes it hard, I guess. That is like, I wish like school hours would be different so I could get in more sleep, feel more like awake, and stuff. . . . [at the alternative program], we had different school hours. It started a little bit later, an hour about. And that helped so much. I felt like so much better. And we ended earlier too, so it felt like I had time to go back home and sleep and take a quick bath and go to work and have enough energy.

**Alternative school factors.** For 25% of participants, there were some factors within the alternative schools that affected their experiences of re-engagement. Specifically, they identified 11 WL items in this area that could have been improved, such as having more alternative programs, as well as additional options within the programs.
Some of the adolescents who took part in this study expressed concern over the lack of available alternative programs. That is, they voiced concern over the fact that alternative programs do not meet the needs of senior students, especially those with mental health struggles. They believed such options would have improved their re-engagement process. One participant, a 15-year-old female from an alternative program, described how helpful it would be to have such a program for youth with mental health challenges:

I think it would be lovely to have a program up to grade 12. . . .I just don’t think I would have anxiety about moving on to different things and have to worry all summer if things are going to work out next year because I am doing something different every year for a couple of years.

Other participants wished that they would have had better options within the alternative programs, such as additional course options, more challenging classes, course-specific teachers, and a gradual transition back into mainstream school. Participants felt that greater flexibility within the programs would have allowed them to establish more connections with peers, obtain greater support from teachers, and be better prepared for mainstream education. For instance, one participant felt that the alternative school program was not equivalent to mainstream school and he wishes for “all the proper education, all the subjects and electives he can . . . get from a normal school.”

**Perspective.** Participants identified that they wished they had had a different perspective of their situation at the time of re-engagement. More explicitly, 63% of participants identified 19 WL items in this category. Each of these items reflected participants’ recognition that they held faulty beliefs, which prevented them from making decisions that were in their best interest.
Participants wished they had not been so influenced by others, had known the importance of education, and taken more responsibility for their schooling.

When it came to a shift in perspective, many participants identified wishing that they had known better than to be so greatly influenced by other youth, as this influence detracted from school-related goals. They added that having more maturity would have allowed them to re-engage in school more smoothly. For example, one participant, a 17-year-old female in from an alternative school, described how it would have been helpful if instead of worrying about what others thought of her, she had asked for the help she needed in school:

You never want to be that one kid who is always having to ask to repeat it, and so I guess, if I would have just not cared about that and was comfortable with myself for that, I think I would have done a lot better . . . . that might have maybe made them realize, ‘oh maybe she does need a little bit more help,’ if I am constantly asking and constantly not knowing what is going on.

Participants eventually came to realize the importance of education, but felt that this shift in perspective would have been helpful during their re-engagement, as they would have understood the importance of investing their time and effort into learning. One participant, a 16-year-old male from an alternative program, who became side tracked by peer conflict explained:

If they taught me how important it was to actually get your education and not really worry about other people too much, I think then maybe this whole thing wouldn’t have even happened. I would have still been at [my high school], doing my work, and I would have never come to [the alternative program], you know? . . . Sometimes you are laying there and you just think about what you are going to be like in 20 years if you don’t go
back to school. You will just be working at McDicks for the rest of your life and that is not something I wanted at all.

Others wished they had experienced a shift in perspective from blame to accountability, as they felt this would have helped them take responsibility for their own education. Reportedly, such a change would have improved the re-engagement process. One of the participants, a 17-year-old female who attended alternative schooling, disclosed that she wished she had realized that she needed to be responsible for her education and that she would have known how to “deal with things better.” Specially, she explained:

If I would have owned up to certain things and not have just blamed it on the teacher and have asked for the help instead of just expecting it to be given to me, maybe I would have done better.

**Family.** Numerous participants expressed a desire for family-based changes in order to enhance their experiences of school re-engagement. Specifically, 44% of participants listed 18 WL items pertaining to an increase in family involvement and a decrease in conflict.

Several participants wished that their families would have been more involved in their lives, understood their challengers better, showed greater support and caring, and provided encouragement during difficult experiences. According to participants, such involvement would have led to a better experience of school re-integration. For example, one youth, a 17-year-old female from mainstream schooling, described what she wished was available during her re-engagement process:

P: More like family involvement. It is like that stable backbone, right? I couldn’t really find it in my own home

I: How would family involvement been helpful?
P: I guess like if you have a bad day, then you want to come home and have someone be like ‘oh, it is okay,” comfort you. And I guess just leaving to like school knowing someone is there for you. It has that comfort. . . . How could they have? I guess just talking to me more, I guess, right? And encouraging me more, spending more time with me. . . . I guess just encouragement like to keep going, things like that, like. Once like you take a hit you want someone to be there and be like it’s okay, let’s get up.

In contrast to those who felt unsupported, many participants had family involvement that was fraught with conflict. These individuals felt that the conflictual family relationships represented distractions in school, impacted their concentration in class, and generally interfered with their school lives. Participants wished for fewer conflicts in the home, so as to ease school re-engagement. One participant described having countless conflicts amongst her family members, and especially with her twin sister:

School would be easier. Less gossip, less back stabbing, less mean competition. I would just feel better like knowing that I don’t have to watch my back in case she does something, or says something about me, or be paranoid. . . . I just wish we could like get along, be supportive, we could talk to each other.

**Early intervention.** This category centered explicitly on a wish for earlier intervention in the process of school re-engagement. Overall, 31% of the participants identified seven WL items in this area. Some participants wished that their challenges had been identified earlier on, others that they had had more information about various resources available to them, and some that they had been able to access these supports sooner than they did.

Many of the participants who were a part of this study disclosed various mental health, educational, and social challenges. They explained that they wished such challenges had been
identified earlier in their school trajectory, as this would have allowed them to receive necessary supports before the problem advanced. This is particularly relevant for a 15-year-old female from an alternative program who was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. She described a desire for more information on the identification of such difficulties:

I wish I would have had the information I did now. I don’t know if I could possible get more ahead than I am now, but I wouldn’t have had the struggles. . . . There should be education on everything. . . . I feel like mental health should be addressed everywhere. . . . We could have caught a lot of stuff sooner.

Some of the participants wished that they had learned about alternative education options sooner. Obtaining this information would have helped them re-engage in school earlier and eventually transition back into mainstream education with more developed skills and self-confidence. One participant, a 17-year-old female from an alternative program described the following wish:

Definitely to me, to have known about going to the [alternative] program from grade 9. So I could have gone for grade 9 and grade 10. And I feel like if I had had that extra year . . . with the same support, I think I would have done a lot better.

Lastly, participants reported that they received different types of services throughout their process of school re-engagement. However, they recognized that receiving these supports earlier would have helped them successfully re-engagement sooner, and perhaps even prevent them from disengaging in the first place. One participant, a 16-year-old male from an alternative school program, who identified several helping factors discussed his wish for earlier intervention:
I think the only thing that would have helped me is having the things that I said earlier that helped me re-engage, if those happened at an earlier timeline, it would have got me back into school quicker, I think. . . . I think all the stuff I went through would have happened earlier, maybe it would have gone through quicker and it wouldn’t be such a big deal, you know?

Professional supports. Some adolescents voiced the need for modifications in the professional services they received, as identified by 25% of participants through six WL items. In discussing the role of counsellors and/or social workers, participants wished for more support, stronger connections, as well as resources for their parents in the area of mental health.

Participants described the need for more immediate support from counsellors and/or social workers in order to help them cope with their emerging challenges. Reportedly, this support would be effective in preventing the escalation of problems as well as re-engaging in school earlier and more successfully. One participant, a 17-year-old female from mainstream school, described feeling troubled by counsellor waitlists and lack of follow-up support and wished that the situation had been different:

Actually I do wish there were more things that were different. I think some mental health workers don’t follow up enough. Umm, I think that the mental health program here is over flowing with people who need help and there is not enough help for them. Cause I know people that have been on that waiting list for over a year and still haven’t gotten any sort of counseling. I think if that changed, a lot of people would have better school attendance. . . . To skip the waitlist I had to like go to my counsellor and tell them I was suicidal, that is why I got help so fast in comparison to other people.
While some participants benefited from professional support, they wished they had developed stronger relationships with their counsellors and/or social workers. They explained that such connections might have accelerated their counselling progress and hence school re-engagement. For example, one participant, a 14-year-old female from an alternative program, recognized how helpful it would be to have a close connection with her counsellor:

I think just being more of a friend than a counselor. And that’s just really up to everyone’s kind of style of how they do things, but I think I would really like to have someone where I can rant to and tell them things and I wouldn’t feel like I was telling them to a stranger. . . . I think for me it’s really hard to confide in people that I don’t know very well. Or, um, it’s very hard to confide in people where they are very professional and they’re doing their job.

Some participants wished that their parents had been more understanding of their mental health and school-related challenges. Relatedly, they identified a lack of support for parents who have children with mental health challenges, explaining how it had a negative impact on their experiences of school re-engagement. Adolescents would have liked their parents to be informed about the nature of their diagnoses and available resources, in their native language. The same participant as above described her parents’ lack of understanding of mental health issues and suggested that it would have been helpful for them to have “more information…and definitely a better counselor for [her] parents so they can really understand what’s going on, and stop kind of going in different directions.”

**Peer relationships.** This category focused on improving friendships and peer relationships as a means to facilitate the re-engagement process. Overall, 25% of participants identified five WL items in this category. Specifically, they wished they had had more friends
and peers who were supportive, respectful, and represented positive influences. Such relationships would have promoted feelings of connectedness and safety, which would have increased school attendance. By way of example, a 17-year-old female participant from an alternative program wished that her friends had been “more supportive,” and “encouraging rather than judgmental,” which would have promoted feelings of safety that may have helped the re-engagement process.

**Extracurricular activities.** Thirteen percent of the participants who took part in this study identified four WL items that formed the last category pertaining to the importance of school and community based extracurricular activities. Central to this category was the wish to have more and better quality activities available to youth. These participants believed that being engaged in school or community activities would have given them something to look forward to after classes, making them more likely to attend school. For example, one youth, a 17-year-old female engaged in mainstream school, wished that she had been a part of school groups because “it’s another incentive for you to be there, in the building at least. . .I think it would have expanded my circle of friends a little, given me a sense of belonging.

**Contextual Results**

As part of the semi-structured interview protocol, participants answered contextual questions regarding various aspects of their school disengagement and re-engagement experience (e.g., precipitating factors, class attendance, involvement and commitment to education). In addition, at the conclusion of the interview, participants responded to follow-up questions addressing any additional information they may want to share, their reasons for participating in the study, and their thoughts about the interview experience.
**Aspects of disengagement.** Participants were asked about their disengagement experience in order to get a sense of their degree of absenteeism. These contextual questions focused on precipitating factors, school attendance, and previous disengagements.

**Precipitating factors.** When asked what led up to the participants’ disengagement, participants reported mental health concerns, peer relationships, family problems, and a lack of school support, all of which have been addressed throughout the results’ section. However, the manner in which these precipitating factors add contextual understanding to school disengagement will be highlighted below.

First, the most common answer reported related to mental health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, and body image concerns. For example, one participant, an 18-year-old male from an alternative program, described his struggles with mental health:

I started having suicidal thoughts because I felt more and more lonely going [mm hmm] and the first year I told the teacher and I got sent to a hospital, stayed there for a little while, it made me not want to go to school even more [right, yeah] but things got worse at my grade 9, I went to the hospital again, well this time for a shorter period [mm hmm] but I wasn’t happy.

Second, participants disclosed that peer relationships, conflict among friends, and bullying precipitated their disengagement from school. For example, one participant, a 16-year-old male from an alternative program, shared the following experience:

Grades 6 and 7 – I didn’t really do very much work. . . . The start of grade 8 wasn’t too bad, and as we progressed through grade 8, I had trouble with some of the other students, and my ability to get work done and so I stopped coming.
Third, adolescents stated that family difficulties, such as conflict, lack of involvement, and mental health concerns among family members, significantly contributed to disengagement. As one 16-year-old female participant from an alternative program reported, “a lot of stress from home. And like, I don’t have the best relationship with my dad, I guess. I dunno, because umm, he is super irresponsible, right? So he stresses me out a lot.”

Fourth, not receiving enough support at school was said to be a contributing factor to school disengagement. One participant, a recently graduated female from a hair dressing program, explained, “I never wanted to go cause I never got the help I needed. . . . cause I have different learning ways than everybody else. (Right). So it was harder to wanna be there. So I decided, I’m not going to go anymore.”

**Attendance.** Almost half of the participants reported having occasional absences that eventually progressed to chronic problematic school absenteeism. However, none of them formally withdrew from school. Some participants described having difficulties in the mornings and would only show up for their second or third period classes. Others described their absenteeism as “spotty.” For example, one participant, a 14-year-old female from an alternative program, explained, “I would miss a day here, a day there, but I don’t think I made it through a full week of school.”

**Previous disengagements.** To get a sense of potential disengagement and re-engagement patterns, participants were asked if they had ever disengaged and then re-engaged in the past. The majority of participants had experienced such a pattern in the past and more than once over the course of their schooling. One participant, a 17-year-old female from an alternative program, stated:
Even as a kid I had trouble getting to school on time . . . . also had trouble like making friends and stuff, right? [right], so I didn’t want to go to school and that’s why I was always late too. I’d take like a super long time getting ready just not to go.

**Aspects of re-engagement.** Participants were also asked about various aspects of their re-engagement in school. These contextual questions focused on school attendance, involvement and commitment to education, and engagement in extracurricular activities.

**Attendance.** The large majority of adolescents who participated in this study stated that their school attendance had improved a great deal since they initially disengaged. Reflecting on this change allowed participants to recognize how much positive work they had done through the process of school re-engagement. For example, a 16-year-old female from an alternative program reflected, “now thinking about it, like I am pretty proud of myself. I am pretty good compared to before.”

**Involvement and commitment.** Participants were asked how involved and committed they felt they were in their education. Involvement was defined as feeling actively engaged in their education and/or school community, and commitment was defined as being dedicated to finishing their education. The large majority of participants clearly stated that they felt involved and committed to their education. One participant, an 18-year-old female from a hair dressing program, demonstrated to what degree she felt involved and committed:

I actually wanted to learn, which was surprising. I actually realized learning is something you need. I actually had a lot of fun doing it. And then, for the last semester of high school, I actually volunteered in special needs resource room. (Oh, cool). Helping out with their learning and helping them. So it was nice.
**Extracurricular activity engagement.** When asked what participants enjoyed doing outside of school, many activities emerged, including exercising, engaging in various arts (painting, drawing, acting, music, and creative writing), online activities and video games, volunteering, being with friends, shopping, and being with animals. Overall, adolescents reported being very engaged in extracurricular activities, which brought about a sense of pride, confidence, belonging, and pleasure. By way of example, one of the participants, a 17-year-old female who transitioned from an alternative program back into mainstream school, described her involvement in sports, “I play soccer and I actually play on the women’s team for field hockey [nice]. And I am trying to get my scholarship . . . . I am not really a cocky person, but I am pretty good.”

**Follow-up questions.** At the end of the interview, participants were asked concluding contextual questions, which allowed them an opportunity to convey any final messages, discuss their reasons for volunteering to be a part of this study, and reflect on their experiences as study participants’.

**Additional information.** At the end of each interview, participants were asked, “Is there anything else that you think I should know about your re-engagement experience?” Half of the participants stated that they wanted professionals to know how difficult the experience of school disengagement and re-engagement was for them and why support to students in such situations is so important. One participant, a 16-year-old female from an alternative program, gives advice to professionals and others experiencing similar difficulties:

> It doesn’t happen quickly. It doesn’t. It takes a really really long time for you to get re-engaged. It is like, it is trial and error. It is like you try and then it fails a lot of times. . . . there is more failures than success. . . . There is always that one thing, that one thing that
will makes you motivated to stay in school. You just have to find that one thing. That is it.

**Reason for volunteering.** Participants’ stated that they volunteered for this study because they wanted to help others who might be in similar situations and to contribute to research in this area. For example, one participant, a 16-year-old male from an alternative program, hoped to have his voice heard by policy and decision makers:

The hope that there is another kid like me that will benefit from this study. And maybe somebody will look at this study, and some higher up somewhere, and they will make the changes that are necessary and that somebody will benefit from it.

**Participant experience.** When thinking about the experience of completing the interview, half of the participants reported that it was therapeutic for them to reflect on their process of school re-engagement. For example, one participant, a 14-year-old female from an alternative program stated:

I actually really like talking about this stuff, it was like kind of my rant moment where I could just spill my beans, I could spill my guts out and just talk about these things with, um, and knowing that everything’s going to be confidential. I thought this was actually going to be a lot scarier than it was.
Chapter Five: Discussion

The current study aimed to shed light on the phenomenon of school re-engagement among adolescent students. More specifically, the following research question was addressed: What meaningful experiences do adolescents perceive as influencing their high school re-engagement? This research question was divided into three areas of inquiry, including: (a) What do adolescents perceive as being helpful in the re-engagement process? (b) What do adolescents perceive as being unhelpful in the re-engagement process? (c) What do adolescents feel would have been helpful, but was not available, during the re-engagement process? Participants in this study identified 278 helping and 201 hindering critical incidents (CIs), as well as 93 wish list (WL) items, which impacted their process of school re-engagement. For a more integrative discussion of the findings, the 27 resulting categories will be explored thematically by reviewing the 14 overarching categories (those that overlap across the helping, hindering, and WL categories), and their fit within the existing literature. Results of this research were found to corroborate previous studies in the area of school re-engagement and added some new perspectives to the literature. As such, the following section outlines the manner in which findings fit with or differ from existing scholarship on school disengagement and re-engagement, as well as the unique contributions of this study.

Fit with the Literature

Results of this study revealed common themes between participants’ reported helping and hindering CIs that impacted their school return, as well as wish list (WL) items that they believed would have been desirable to their re-engagement. Findings that fit particularly well with the literature include the positive and negative impact of teacher variables, emotional distress, peer relationships, family factors, problem resolution, school factors, consequences, professional
supports, goal attainment, extracurricular activities, substance use, and other priorities. These results are presented in order of importance to participants.

**Teacher Variables.** Results of this study identified teacher qualities as the most reported helping incidents in student re-engagement and was comprised of items that could be further divided into three subcategories, including, teachers who can meet student needs by tailoring their teaching styles and work assignments, engaging students, and forming meaningful connections. More specifically, participants found it helpful when teachers tailored the work directly to their needs by providing one-on-one support, using different teaching strategies, modifying work, and allowing time for breaks. Participants found it easier to re-engage in school when teachers would provide engaging lessons that were interesting, meaningful, and relevant to the student, which allowed them to display their creativity, express their opinions, and be recognized for their strengths. Similarly, studies have demonstrated a necessity for teachers to adapt work in the classroom and assign meaningful homework in order to meet students’ needs (Demos & Foshay, 2010; Mills & McGregor, 2010; Sheppard, 2009).

Also important, participants reported that they valued having meaningful relationships with their teachers, which they described as supportive others who understood their specific challenges, showed concern and caring, provided encouragement, and took the time to get to know them on a personal basis. Studies in this area have also demonstrated how meaningful it can be for students to develop supportive relationships with their teachers (Darwich, Hymel, & Waterhouse, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2010).

Not surprisingly, when it came to the hindering items, participants’ responses tended to directly contrast the helpful items. Specifically, they felt that teachers who were inflexible in their teaching styles and work assignments, were un-engaging, and failed to create strong
relationships with them, challenged their process of school re-engagement. Moreover, participants in this study often reported that re-engagement was difficult for them because they felt that they were “treated unfairly by teachers” who did not understand their struggles. These results echo that of Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006), who interviewed adolescents who had dropped out of high school and asked them what might have helped them stay in school. They found that participants wanted improved teaching, relevant curriculum, access to supports, a positive academic school climate, and a caring relationship with one adult in the school.

Participants acknowledged that re-engaging was extremely difficult for them and they would have liked more support during the process, particularly in having helpful teachers who employ better teaching strategies, offer more academic support, and form strong connections with their students. Along the same lines, research has demonstrated that teachers express displeasure with the lack of training they receive in order to help them work with students who have attendance problems (Reid, 2007). It seems that both students and teachers are voicing similar desire in that students would like more support and teachers would like to learn how to offer such assistance.

While some participants claimed that “teacher strictness” impacted their school re-engagement, it appeared as both helping and hindering depending on the individual participant. More explicitly, some participants found strictness to be helpful, some unhelpful, and others wished for a moderate degree of strictness. Findings to date have not been as nuanced. For example, Kearney (2008) found that highly strict environments were a risk factor for future dropout.

With respect to expectations, results of this study revealed that it is important for teachers to develop appropriate expectations for their students, based on their individual needs and
experiences throughout the process of re-engagement. Conversely, a previous study on student disengagement found that teachers holding low expectations for student success is detrimental to student engagement and that students are more successful when teachers have high expectations of them (Reid, 2007).

Particularly unique, this study found that teacher qualities and strategies, particularly those within the alternative school system, made re-engagement easier for participants who had previously attempted and failed to re-engage in mainstream school. These individuals benefited from an alternative setting where teachers were able to provide flexible schedules, go above and beyond their duties, and assign a limited amount of homework.

In conclusion, results of past research, as well as this study, point to the critical role of teacher qualities in the process of school re-engagement among adolescent students. Hence, such should be considered when working with students who are at risk for disengaging from school and those who are in the process of re-engaging.

**Emotional Distress.** Almost all of the participants (94%) reported that emotional distress interrupted their re-engagement at some point in their academic trajectory. Specifically, individuals discussed emotional distress stemming from psychiatric disorders such as bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Similar findings have also been observed in the literature on school disengagement and re-engagement, as indicated by the proportionately higher non-attendance rates within clinical samples (Walter et al., 2010). Moreover, in his review of child factors contributing to disengagement, Kearney (2008) found that internalizing and externalizing symptoms of psychopathology represent a risk factor for problematic school absenteeism. Not surprisingly, much of the literature on treatments for school disengagement and re-engagement focuses on interventions that are tailored to reduce anxiety, depression, and
oppositional behavior and improve coping (Heyne et al., 2002; Lauchlan, 2003; Walter et al., 2010).

While previous studies show the impact of low self-esteem and lack of success as being detrimental to school engagement (e.g., Reid, 2012), the results of this study add the adolescent perspective to the literature regarding the impact of emotional distress on school re-engagement, specifically. For example, many participants described feeling discouraged and worthless, which made their school re-engagement particularly difficult.

Collectively, past research combined with this study’s findings suggest that emotional distress can play a significant hindering role in adolescents’ school re-engagement, as the presence of psychiatric disorders and distressing emotions can make daily activities, such as attending school, nearly unbearable. As such, students’ emotional difficulties and overall well-being need to be taken into consideration throughout the process of re-engagement.

**Peers.** In this study, the role of peer support was perceived to be vital to the school re-engagement process. That is, participants discussed the importance of understanding each other’s challenges, developing a positive social network, and avoiding cliques. Many participants identified the importance of having friends who understand them and accept them, which led to feelings of belongingness in the school environment. Past research suggests that friendship, as indicated by adolescents, contributes to a sense of belongingness, provides motivation to attend, and is a key protective factor against feelings of rejection and alienation within the school system (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Kearney, 2008). Acceptance within a peer group is shown to be extremely important for re-engagement (You, 2011), and peers can offer one another emotional and academic support, as well as recognize each other’s talents and offer validation (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Also important, participants were motivated to reach their
goals when they had peers who also had high aspirations. Research suggests that those who have academically inclined friends with high aspirations tend to be highly engaged themselves (You, 2011); whereas participants who are at-risk for drop-out tend to have friends who have dropped out of school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997).

On the other hand, participants expressed how difficult it was to re-engage in school when they felt unsafe due to the threat of being bullied, experiencing conflict with others, and having a bad reputation. Other participants described the negative influence of peers who either encouraged them to skip classes or prevented them from focusing in school. Similarly, some participants wished for better peer interactions and positive peer support, instead of being bullied, disrespected, and negatively influenced to engage in problem behaviors, which would have improved their school re-engagement experience. Research findings are reinforced by the literature; negative peer factors, such as a lack of social connection, social isolation, bullying, and a high degree of peer conflict, contributed to school non-attendance (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001; Pellegrini, 2007; Reid, 2012).

The unique findings pertinent to the peers category lies within participants’ disclosure of the importance of being with peers who understand their challenges, especially those related to mental health. Participants reported that this “mutual understanding” led to feelings of acceptance, which eased the transition back into school.

In summary, it appears that peer relationships can have either a positive or negative influence on school re-engagement for adolescent students. The direction of this influence depends on the nature of their relationships. That is, supportive and understanding friendships can facilitate re-engagement, and poor or conflictual relationships can hinder this process.
**Family.** In general, family factors were said to be important in the process of school re-engagement. Results of this study demonstrated that parental involvement, support, advocacy, and limit setting provided participants with much needed guidance and direction. Other family factors, such as having a shift in relationship dynamics or a change in family composition, improved the home situation for some adolescents, which made it easier for them to engage in their education. Previous research validates these findings that parental involvement and support is paramount in facilitating the re-engagement process for youth (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheppard, 2009).

In contrast, results of this study indicated that lack of involvement, conflict, and mental illness among family members hindered the process of school re-engagement for over half of the participants. Moreover, some students felt that their family members had failed to understand their challenges and experiences of re-engagement. Previous research supports hindering incidents reported by participants. Namely, it has been suggested that parental involvement and parenting skills, psychopathology, and family conflict are quite influential on students’ disengagement and re-engagement (Heyne et al., 2001; Kearney, 2008; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2004; Sheppard, 2009). Moreover, past research has shown that families in crisis do not view school attendance as a priority (Kearney & Albano, 2000; Kearney & Bates, 2005). Along the same line, many of the adolescents who participated in this study felt that if these areas of difficulty had been ameliorated, they would have been better supported and more able to focus on their schooling throughout the course of re-engagement. Past research points to the idea that parental involvement in their children’s education is the single most influential factor in helping them reach their academic goals (Sheppard, 2009).
In comparing and contrasting the literature and study results, this study adds new information to the pre-existing literature in both helping and hindering domains relevant to family interactions. Specifically, participants identified having greater freedom to make their own decisions as being facilitative in the re-engagement process, as making such decisions resulted in a higher degree of commitment to their education. In contrast, participants were often pressured by their families to engage and do well in school, and such pressure left them feeling “crippled,” which often resulted in repeated disengagement and re-engagement attempts.

To conclude, it appears that family factors are vital to participants’ experiences when re-engaging in school. The family assistance that youth need during this process is multi-layered, including parental involvement, understanding, and support. Moreover, when challenges occur within the family unit (e.g., conflict or mental health issue), they need to be addressed while also considering the re-engagement needs of adolescents.

**Problem Resolution.** Sixty-nine percent of participants in this study claimed that school re-engagement was easier once the problem that originally contributed to their disengagement had been resolved. Some of the events that triggered disengagement included problems with peers, family members, substance misuse, mental health symptoms, and academic struggles. It was reported that once these initial difficulties were removed from their lives, adolescents were able to focus on re-engaging in school, and felt supported and confident in their abilities. In line with these results, Kearney’s (2008) Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism identifies similar child, family, parent, school, peer, and community challenges that contribute to school disengagement. Our participants reported that it was the resolution of such challenges that led to re-engagement. Outcome research suggests that professionals need to help youth develop coping skills (King et al., 1999), provide extra academic support and flexibility in school programming,
offer alternative school options (Mills & McGregor, 2010; Reid, 2012; Walter et al., 2010), and provide support to families (Heyne et al., 2001; Kearney, 2008; Sheppard, 2009).

Conversely, individuals who took part in this study disclosed that the on-going presence of these challenges hindered their experiences of school re-engagement. Furthermore, the identified WL items suggest that many challenges are resistant to change. Past findings suggest that the enduring nature of these problems require continued support to assist adolescents in staying re-engaged (Walter et al., 2010). Other research suggests that returning students from an alternative program back into mainstream is often unsuccessful because they continue to experience difficulty with the challenges that brought them into the program (Bland, 2012).

Furthermore, almost one-third of participants wished that they had received help with their particular problems earlier. They explained that early intervention could have prevented disengagement altogether, led to re-engagement sooner, or improved the experience of returning to school. Kearney’s (2008) Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism was founded on the belief that school absenteeism exists on a continuum of severity and implementing interventions before school absenteeism becomes problematic is ideal. Research on the development of school disengagement emphasizes the importance of addressing problems before they become hindering factors in students’ academic trajectories (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Reid, 2012)

Past literature has yet to address the effectiveness of changing schools when school disengagement is related to school or peer related problems. Participants in this study, however, suggested that changing schools allowed them to leave their problems behind and have the opportunity for a “fresh start” in a new environment.

In this study, the category pertaining to problem resolution was deemed to be of utmost importance in the process of school disengagement and re-engagement, as it encapsulated the
underlying concerns that contributed to school absenteeism, the importance of resolving these difficulties, and the significance of early intervention. In order to assist youth in re-engagement, it will be crucial to understand the underlying factors that have precipitated, maintained, and perpetuated problematic absenteeism.

**School Factors.** The results of this study indicate that participants had a better experience of re-engagement in alternative schools, as alternative schools provided them with extra supports, flexibility in programming, specialized environments, and sensitivity to the students’ unique circumstances, which allowed them to continue their education in an environment that was responsive to their needs. Former research agrees with the above findings and suggests that it would be helpful to provide alternative course schedules, reduce the amount of make-up work, adjust expectations, provide extra support, and engage students in meaningful activities (Kearney, 2008; Mills & McGregor, 2010; Pellegrini, 2007; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011).

Interestingly, none of the participants identified helpful factors in the mainstream schooling system. Rather, they indicated that certain factors in these settings often hindered their process of re-engagement. For example, participants were challenged by inflexible schedules, strong academic focus, and lack of connection with others. In support of these findings, previous research has identified that school avoiders tended to have academic challenges, found work tedious, and had difficulty completing homework (Kearney, 2008; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001; Sheppard, 2009). Similar to the findings, Pellegrini (2007) recognized social isolation and peer conflict as contributing to school challenges. Also noteworthy is that participants who had frequently changed schools disclosed that they suffered from learning gaps, which negatively influenced their academic achievement. A prior meta-analysis of the literature reveals
that school refusal behavior is highly associated with frequent school changes (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001).

In terms of WL items, participants from mainstream schools voiced the need for more individualized support and personalized academic expectations. Similarly, earlier research suggests that at-risk youth should receive more academic support (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Sheppard, 2009) and reduced expectations around class grades and course credit (Kearney, 2008; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011). On the contrary, participants from alternative programs wished for greater course selection, more challenging work, and more teachers – the factors that were challenging to students in mainstream settings. These findings align well with previous research which suggests that youth would benefit from more alternative program options and availability (Mills & McGregor, 2010; Reid, 2012; Walter et al., 2010; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011). Another study asked students how their schools could be improved, and youth expressed that they would like more academic help, more facilities, more school trips, and smaller schools (Sheppard, 2009), which echoes the results of the most recent study.

The results pertaining to school factors are well documented in the literature. That being said, a unique feature of these results is that they are reflective of the participant experience, and this experience was almost unanimous amongst participants who had attended alternative programs. For example, most participants listed the unique features as a fixed set of items that were necessary to their success, including, gradual transition back into school, shorter classes with fewer students, smaller environments, later start times and shorter days, higher teacher-student ratio, fewer teachers, and a sense of community. These features were presented to the researcher as being necessary aspects of any alternative program. In contrast, it was absence of
such items that made re-engagement in mainstream school difficult, and these provided the platform for wished upon changes to mainstream schooling.

In essence, school-based factors played a crucial role in school disengagement and re-engagement. For participants in this study, the experience of re-engagement was more positive and successful in alternative programs, as they provided unique and supportive environments, which helped students succeed academically. It is important to examine such school factors to determine the underlying factors that can influence the success or failure of youths’ school re-engagement.

**Consequences.** A majority of the participants reported that the negative and positive consequences associated with school attendance factored into their re-engagement experiences. Results of this study highlight that the role these consequences played depended on the individual who experienced them. More specifically, some participants described being absent from school to escape the negative consequences of absenteeism, while others were motivated to return to school so that negative consequences would not ensue. In contrast, some individuals benefited from positive consequences; that is, once they had returned to school, they began to experience small successes, which reinforced future attendance.

Several participants described avoiding school due to the anxiety associated with the consequences of having been away, such as falling behind in their work or being asked questions about their absenteeism. Kearney and Bates (2005) suggested that students tend to miss school to avoid anxiety producing situations and negative social situations, which rings true in the present study. Moreover, Kearney’s (2008) research provided similar findings; that is, grade retention and harsh disciplinary measures were associated with continued absenteeism. Past research has proposed decreasing secondary complications by implementing extra supports, reducing focus on
grades, using reward systems, employing attendance contracts, and involving students in enjoyable extracurricular activities to motivate school return.

Unique to the current research, some participants described the negative consequences, such as the risk of falling behind in homework or failing a grade, as a motivating factor in school return. And while negative consequences played an important role in participants’ re-engagement experiences, positive consequences also impacted their overall re-engagement. More specifically, participants reported that positive consequences, such as experiencing small successes in school and re-connecting with friends, reinforced on-going attendance, which some participants described as being “on a roll.” While, prior scholarship has reported that success contributes to school achievement (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Reid, 2012), this study highlights its impact on school re-engagement.

To summarize, the consequences of school disengagement can perpetuate absenteeism for some students while motivating others to return. For those who do return, feelings of accomplishment can reinforce attendance while helping individuals build confidence in their own abilities. Given these findings, exploring the function of both negative and positive consequences associated with an individual’s school attendance is likely an important factor in resolving such issues.

**Professional Supports.** The role of professional supports emerged as both a helping and hindering CIs in participants’ school re-engagement. Of significance, over half of the participants felt that their counsellors/social workers had made their school re-engagement easier by providing support, teaching coping and problem solving skills, helping with confidence issues, and collaborating with teachers and/or support networks to provide continued care. With this assistance, participants felt prepared for their school return. That is, they believed
significant others would understand them better and those around them could offer assistance
during difficult times. Early literature has focused on treatment outcome research, which
supports the use of cognitive behavioral strategies such as parent training (Kearney & Bates,
2005), coping skills development, and social skills training (Lauchlan, 2003) in assisting youth in
school return. Moreover, past research has determined that psychotherapy improves academic
outcomes, especially when counseling professionals and educators work closely together to meet
student needs (Baskin, Slaten, Sorenson, & Glover-Russel, 2010). Such findings are further
corroborated by more recent literature that has suggested the importance of professional
collaboration, especially between mental health professionals and school staff (Fremont, 2013).

On the other hand, 35% of participants felt that their counsellors/social workers had
failed to form supportive relationships with them, understand their situation, and provide
assistance. Accordingly, these factors impeded their therapeutic process and thus delayed their
re-engagement. Former research has verified these findings, and, in fact has suggested that
adolescents need at least one adult in the school with whom they can connect with and share both
personal and school related problems (Bridgeland, DiIulio, Morison, 2006; DeSocio et al., 2007).

Not unexpectedly, participants wished they had had a counsellor/social worker who
connected well with them, was sensitive to emotions, and dealt with their presenting problems.
Similarly, past research has found that adolescents would benefit from additional supports and
adult advocates, including counsellors, support staff, and mentors, who could connect with and
support adolescents experiencing school re-engagement difficulties (Bridgeland, DiIuli, &
Morison, 2006).

An unidentified area in the literature, participants wished for more support; that is, they
wished that they could have received help faster (rather than being waitlisted), counsellors would
have followed up more, and support would have been available to their parents. Such professional support would have reportedly improved participants’ experiences of school re-engagement and overall well-being.

Much of the findings regarding professional supports echo what has already been established in the literature, namely, that ongoing supports and strong working relationships are helpful to the process of school re-engagement. However, participants in this study also highlighted a previously unexamined area of professional support (availability of support) that needs to be addressed in training, practice, and research.

**Goal attainment.** Goal attainment was identified as a motivating factor in school re-engagement. That is, 50% of participants suggested that having something to work towards made school more relevant and meaningful. Goals tended to fall into two categories: academic achievement-based goals and career-based goals. Many participants recognized that school re-engagement became easier for them once they had established some specific goals, as school suddenly seemed relevant and purposeful.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, research has yet to examine the relationship between goal setting and school re-engagement. However, a study comparing high versus low attendance found that students with high attendance have a better understanding of the importance of education in providing future opportunities (Sheppard, 2009). Moreover, research pertaining to the impact of career planning on school engagement found that students who were exposed to career planning in their classes, placed more value on education and were more engaged in their school work (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2013). Similarly, past research has suggested that students are more engaged in school when they recognize a clear connection between their learning and future opportunities (Black, Polidano, & Tseng, 2012;
Adopting a goal-oriented approach may help adolescent students develop personalized goals, and in turn, improve their re-engagement into school. According to participants in this study, goal setting, whether academic or career oriented, is an important aspect of school re-engagement. While past research has not explored goal setting in and of itself, it does suggest that youth are more engaged in school when they understand the importance of education in providing them with future opportunities.

**Extracurricular activities.** Half of the adolescents who took part in this study identified extracurricular activities as being helpful or having the potential to be helpful in their school re-engagement experiences. Specifically, they expressed that being involved within the community and/or being physically active improved their confidence and made them feel happier, which transferred into their educational environment and positively impacted their learning.

These findings are in-line with that of previous research on extracurricular activities. For example, Sandford, Armour, and Warmington (2006) found that physical activity improves fitness, health, concentration, and self-esteem, and decreases depression, violence, and crime—all of which collectively contribute to better school attendance, achievement, and behavior. Moreover, it has been suggested that adolescents who engage in sports develop a sense of personal agency, take personal responsibility, and learn conflict resolution. These positive effects can be transferred into the learning environment (Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006).

In addition, two of the participants in this study recognized the importance of being involved in extracurricular activity and wished that activities were more diverse, better organized, and more readily available to youth. Similarly, research has determined that
extracurricular activities are most successful when they are well organized, offered in small
groups, and designed in collaboration with youth (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Others believed
that if they had engaged in such activities, they would have had something to look forward to at
the end of the school day, which would have made re-engagement easier. Research in fact
supports this finding; by providing extracurricular opportunities to students, students are
encouraged to attend school so that they can be with their friends and engage in pleasurable
activities (Reid, 2012).

Novel to this research, by asking participants what would have facilitated their re-
engagement, a new perspective emerged. That is, participants identified that such activities
needed to be better advertised and made more accessible to youth. Had youth known and been
able to engage in the activities, they would have benefited from the positive effects associated
with extracurricular involvement, which would have promoted their school return.

Given these findings, involvement in extracurricular activities seems crucial in assisting
students who are re-engaging in school. Specifically, extra-curricular activities are said to
contribute to adolescents’ physical health, sense of wellbeing, and skill development, which in
turn, increase the likelihood of a successful school return.

**Substance misuse.** Another significant category centered on substance misuse. That is,
five participants relayed how substance misuse interfered with their school functioning. They
discussed missing school due to withdrawal effects or addiction recovery, as well as attending
school while intoxicated. They added that substance misuse was not conducive to the learning
environment, as they were often distracted by cravings, lacked motivation, and were encouraged
by others to partake in drug related behaviors, rather than attending school.
Literature on substance misuse among adolescents is quite extensive. More specifically, a positive correlation has been established between substance use and school disengagement, although causation is yet to be determined (Kearney, 2008b). By way of example, research examining the characteristics of students in the eight and tenth grades identified that nicotine, alcohol, and marijuana use were significantly higher for those who were frequently absent from school. As such, it has been suggested that youth who are at risk for truancy and substance use need to be identified early on in order to improve their chances of educational success (Henry, 2007).

New to this research, we have gained perspective of the adolescents’ lived experiences of substance misuse in relation to school non-attendance. Specifically, many adolescents described the impact of nicotine addiction as hindering school re-engagement, which has yet to be described in the literature. Youth described the addiction and withdrawal effects as time consuming and distracting. Moreover, these findings remind professionals that substance misuse has many negative effects on school re-engagement, including, intoxication effects, withdrawal symptoms, side effects of recovery, and relapse.

Results of this study support previous research findings that have demonstrated how substance misuse can play a role in school disengagement. For participants in this study, substance misuse was perceived to be a hindering factor, which directly impacted the process of school re-engagement in a negative manner. These findings suggest the importance of considering the impact of substance misuse for adolescents hoping to re-engage in school.

**Other priorities.** Twenty-five percent of participants expressed that they had other priorities that were more important than school, which made re-engagement particularly difficult. Two of the adolescents disclosed that they had to support themselves due to a lack of family
involvement. Similarly, past research suggests that family instability and family crisis, particularly homelessness, unemployment, domestic violence, and psychiatric diagnoses, take priority over school re-engagement (Kearney & Albano, 2000). In these instances, family challenges took precedence over school re-engagement and hence operated as hindering factors.

Furthermore, two of the individuals who participated in this study reported that they placed their social lives above that of their school re-engagement. In their research on school absenteeism, Dube and Orpinas (2009) found that 77% of youth were influenced by immediate positive reinforcement. Thus, enjoyable social experiences may act as positive reinforcements that sustain absenteeism.

The results of this study add a student perspective to school re-engagement that challenges the counsellor to consider each individual’s context and situation as it relates to school attendance. Particularly important, youth are telling us that school re-engagement is not a straightforward process and that they are often faced with many barriers preventing school return.

In essence, it seems that when youth have other priorities, school re-engagement is more challenging. Understanding the nature and extent of those other priorities will be helpful in order to determine how to best help students throughout their process of school re-engagement.

Collectively, the above results offer a student-oriented, multi-layered understanding of the experience of school re-engagement. At the same time, some aspects of these findings can be understood in the context of existing scholarship on school absenteeism, disengagement, and re-engagement. However, some of the results that emerged from this study have not been explored within this literature. Namely, the categories related to participants’ “perspective” and “sleep” add new information to the existing research.
Unique Findings

Categorically, the above results are well documented in the previous literature pertaining to school disengagement and re-engagement, with the exception of specific category details. Of particular importance, unique categories are potentially promising additions to the literature and require further investigation. Specifically, participants have identified newly emerging categories, “perspective” and “sleep,” as being both helpful and hindering in the re-engagement process.

Perspective. Results of this study identified a perspective shift as the second most important category that helped participants re-engage in school. That is, fifteen out of sixteen participants clearly identified three ways in which a perspective shift operated within their school re-engagement experiences, including, perspective shifts were helpful to re-engagement, an inability to shift perspective was detrimental to re-engagement, and had they had a different perspective or a shift in perspective, school re-engagement would have been easier. Of particular significance, participants described how helpful it was to gain insight into how they themselves played a role in their education, their expectations of themselves, their need for a change in self-talk, their ability and potential, the importance of education, and the need to decide for themselves that they want to be educated. In general, participants who had experienced some sort of internal or external perspective shift reported being actively involved and committed in their schooling, as they themselves had personally made the choice to invest their time and energy into attaining an education.

While participants did not explicitly state that a lack of perspective hindered their re-engagement, they did identify items that reflected a lack of such perspective: “I didn’t feel good enough;” “I felt worthless;” and “work became really difficult,” and they wished that they had
seen things differently. Participants believed that school re-engagement would have been easier had they had the perspective to take responsibility for their own choices, make different decisions, avoid worrying about what others think, and put themselves first, especially when it came to education.

To date, research has not addressed the role of a fundamental perspective shift in the area of re-engagement. While research has not directly addressed this category, some studies have suggested the importance of using cognitive behavioral therapy to help adolescents replace negative thoughts or change self-talk, and change ones beliefs about oneself (Heyne et al., 2002; King et al., 1999), which could arguably reflect a shift in perspective. Future research is needed to investigate the role of perspective shifts outside of a counselling context.

The results of this study are unique in that they unearth the critical role that a perspective shift can have for adolescents who are in the process of re-engaging into school. Interesting, this category was found to be meaningful to participants in their own personal reflections, and not specifically facilitated by a particular person or setting.

**Sleep.** The final category, which was identified by seven participants, focuses on the central role of sleep. Specifically, participants highlighted the importance of being able to fall asleep at night and then wake up in the morning, which in turn, facilitated school re-engagement. Moreover, better sleep contributed to more positive moods and concentration in class. That being said, nearly half of participants continue to report difficulties falling asleep, staying asleep, or not feeling rested in the morning, which continues to negatively impact their school re-engagement.

Sleep hygiene is well documented in the literature (Perkinson-Gloor, Lemola, & Grob, 2013). For example, recent research has shown that duration of sleep is positively correlated
with academic achievement and self-discipline, and negatively correlated with feelings of tiredness (Perkinson-Gloor, Lemola, & Grob, 2013). However, findings in this study are unique as they speak to the impact of sleep challenges as they relate specifically to school disengagement and/or re-engagement.

Clearly, this is an area of further consideration for researchers, who may wish to zoom in on the role of sleep in the process of school disengagement and re-engagement.

In summary, this study adds a student perspective of school re-engagement to the literature, which has been underexplored, especially when compared to the abundant amount of research on disengagement. Thus, some of the findings are well supported, while other findings will become worthy additions to the literature. Particularly important to highlight, each of these categories, teacher variables, emotional distress, peer relationships, family factors, problem resolution, school factors, consequences, professional supports, goal attainment, extracurricular activities, substance use, other priorities, perspective shift, and sleep, work interdependently as part of a larger puzzle. That is, it would not make sense to consider individual categories without looking at the bigger picture, as each identified factor is only part of the individual’s experience. Moreover, and of critical importance, high school drop-out is described as a “slow process of disengagement” (Bridgeland, DiOulio, & Morison, 2006), and participants in this study have described re-engagement as also being an on-going process of “trial and error,” rather than considering school return as a finite event. These results suggest the importance of taking a holistic approach that considers the emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social needs of youth who are re-engaging in school. Furthermore, professional collaboration is essential to providing support to these youth, as the challenges they face reach across disciplines, including counselling, social work, and education. Overall, these comprehensive findings add new
information to the literature and suggest implications for practice and future directions for research.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

Results of this study, which highlight the perspectives of students who have successfully re-engaged into school, must be considered in terms of their implications for (a) practice, training, and policy, (b) strengths and limitations, as well as (c) future research directions.

Implications

The adolescents who took part in this study provide us with a new vantage point through which to understand the phenomenon of school re-engagement. Their experiences suggest the need for a multifaceted, integrated approach between service providers, school personnel, family members, and community partners in supporting youth through the process of re-engagement. Specifically, youth identified helping and hindering critical incidents (CIs) that demonstrate the importance of early intervention and collaboration between members of their support network. In light of these findings, practical implications will be explored through an educational and counselling lens, and will be followed by considerations for professional training and policy changes.

The most participant identified finding in this study centered on the role of teacher variables. Participants placed high expectations on teachers to meet their needs in order to prevent them from disengaging and to help them re-engage in school. It appears that teachers, who are able to tailor their teaching styles, engage students, and form meaningful connections with them, are most helpful throughout the process of re-engagement. Moreover, many participants identified professional collaboration between school counsellors and teachers as being a helpful in their re-engagement. Thus, counsellors, in collaboration with their clients, could work with teachers to promote a comfortable environment in which students can successfully return to school. The emphasis on early intervention suggests that the sooner these
teacher variables and professional collaborations can be put into place, the easier it will be for students to re-engage.

Relatedly, there were many factors that occurred within the school that impacted school re-engagement. For example, participants disclosed that schools that are able to provide extra support, flexible programming, and specialized environments for their unique needs, were instrumental in helping them become re-involved in school. Furthermore, the consequences of non-attendance either promoted or dissuaded students’ re-engagement. As such, it might be helpful to develop individualized plans for adolescents who are in the process of re-engaging in school, in order to optimize their attendance. Similarly, collaboration among professionals could be helpful in establishing the best plan for re-engagement (e.g., partial return to school, daily support at school).

Also within the school, peer relationships were said to play a significant role in the school re-engagement process. As such, it may be important to facilitate supportive interpersonal relationships among adolescents who are experiencing difficulties re-engaging in school (e.g., peer-mentor programs, academic tutoring by other students). Moreover, attending to issues of intimidation, discrimination, and bullying within schools is critical in order to increase the chances of successful school re-engagement for the adolescents who are struggling, as well as create a positive learning environment for the entire student body.

Numerous participants identified how extracurricular involvement within the school and/or the community improved their experiences of school engagement. That is, they explained that extracurricular involvement made them feel physically and mentally stronger, and buffered against negative effects of challenging events in their lives. Having well organized, engaging activities that are available and accessible to youth would increase their engagement in school
and community. Hence, it would be beneficial for community centers and schools to develop and/or expand their extracurricular programs with vulnerable youth in mind. In addition to helping this population directly, such activities could improve the sense of camaraderie and community within schools.

In helping youth re-engaging in school, it may be helpful to assist them in considering the ‘bigger picture.’ For example, Black and colleagues (2012) found that youth who had an identified occupation were motivated to return to school to finish their education, as they were able to see the direct relevance of school in relation to their career goals. Similarly, goal attainment acted as a motivator for half of the participants in this study, and thus educational and counselling interventions centered on academic and occupational goals might be helpful to this population. Moreover, it may be beneficial to integrate career exploration and development into the curriculum early on in order to help students begin to think about the future, make connections between their education and eventual occupation, and possibly prevent school disengagement.

For all of the participants in this study, the presence of emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, eating challenges, substance misuse, and sleep difficulties) hindered their experiences of school re-engagement. Hence, it can be determined that counselling is of utmost importance to youth engaged in this process. In a study on the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy in addressing anxious responses and increasing coping strategies, King et al. (1999) found significant improvement in negative affect, school attendance, and confidence in ability to cope. These findings suggest that it is important to identify the underlying causes of school absenteeism and tailor counselling interventions accordingly in order to help students successfully return to school. Given that participants identified CIs in multiple domains, it is
crucial for counsellors to develop a holistic understanding of disengagement and re-engagement for each client.

Similarly, it is critical to engage in ongoing assessment of the range of challenges that might be affecting youth who are re-engaging in school and explore the context in each of these areas, as these can change frequently. For example, numerous individuals in this study disclosed experiencing a perspective shift in their process of re-engagement into school. These findings support research that demonstrates the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral techniques aimed at cognitive restructuring and changing self-talk (Lauchlan, 2003), which would foreshadow a shift in perspective. Practically speaking, counselling interventions could be focused on assisting youth in shifting their perspectives, as having new ideologies about education appears to facilitate the re-engagement process and act as the student’s driving force towards completing high school.

Along the same lines, participants identified a number of family factors that played a role in their experiences of school re-engagement (e.g., lack of family involvement, psychological well-being of family members). These results suggest that it might be helpful to involve family members in the counselling process, so that they understand the depth of the problem and can provide appropriate support. However, the nature and timing of family involvement should first be discussed with the student in question in order to increase collaboration and agency. Additionally, participants reported a high degree of mental health issues within their families. Accordingly, it may be helpful for counsellors to work beyond the individual student and reach out to family members in need of support to provide resources and referrals.

While psychological support appears to be quite helpful in the process of school re-engagement, it is necessary to consider the approach and focus of counselling, as participants in
this study expressed mixed feelings about the help they received in this area. Participants stated that they wanted more support in terms of gaining practical skills that they could use during the process of re-engagement. They also emphasized the importance of having a supportive counsellor who understood them and did not push their own agenda. In line with Kearney’s (2008) suggestion for implementing multidisciplinary supports, participants felt that it was extremely helpful when their support system could openly communicate on their behalf, as this improved the overall assistance they received from those around them. Lastly, several participants identified the research interview as being therapeutic in and of itself. Hence, professionals may find that simply asking clients what has been helpful, what has been unhelpful, and exploring what they need in order to be successful may be a useful counseling intervention for youth looking to re-engage.

Lastly, while this study focused on re-engagement, many of its results point to prevention, advocacy, and outreach. That is, numerous interventions could also be implemented as preventative measures for youth who are at risk of disengaging from school. Perhaps of most significance, participants expressed a desire for earlier intervention in their experiences of disengagement and subsequent re-engagement. Thus, if teachers can begin to provide additional, specialized supports to vulnerable students early on, these students might be more successful in their schooling. Additionally, counsellors who can work with their young clients to improve symptoms of emotional distress, develop future goals, and promote a sense of appreciation for education may improve their chances of success. Along the same lines, it may be helpful to develop educational and counselling interventions that are delivered outside of the classroom or counselling room (e.g., career-exploration workshops, support groups, after-school activities).
Results of this study also have practical implications for training educators and counsellors alike. In a study on school absenteeism, Reid’s (2007) found that school staff felt ill prepared to address school attendance issues with students. As such, it might be helpful to integrate some of the aforementioned suggestions in university teaching training programs as well as develop specialized professional development workshops in these areas. Given that many adolescents in this study have been successful in re-engaging into alternative programs, it might be helpful for mainstream school teachers to learn about and implement similar strategies into their classrooms. In terms of counselling training, professionals could benefit from additional training in therapeutic interventions aimed at re-engaging youth in school, including understanding the variables that can positively and negatively affect re-engagement. Finally, since participants have clearly stated the need for professional collaboration, it might be helpful for counsellors to work in partnership with teaching staff to develop school return programs that fit the needs of their clients.

In terms of policy, findings of this research suggest the need for changes at higher levels of organization, particularly within educational systems and counselling agencies. To start, participants expressed the need for flexibility within the mainstream school system, and perhaps it is time for school boards to consider adapting educational programs to meet the needs of vulnerable students. Moreover, many participants felt that mainstream school could never work for them, and hence advocated for more alternative school programs that are specially designed to accommodate their mental health needs. Participants felt strongly that these alternative systems were instrumental to their success, and had they not been able to attend such programs, they would have never re-engaged in school.
Turning to counselling agencies, participants expressed the need for more services. In particular, participants were discontent with waitlists, lack of follow-up, and lack of parental support. Furthermore, several participants identified the need to have their parents understand their challenges, stating that they had often been left out of their circle of care due to language barriers. These students felt that parental involvement was critical to their success in that they could have re-engaged into school faster had their parents understood their struggles and been in a position to offer more support. As such, it is imperative to examine the role of multicultural counselling competencies across agencies that work with youth throughout their process of school re-engagement.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This study has a number of strengths related to its’ inclusion criteria, sample, research design, and beneficial qualitative interview. Specifically, the inclusion criteria for this study was developed in order to shed light on the phenomenon of school re-engagement. Thus, results captured the experiences of students who had disengaged and subsequently re-engaged in school. The average length of re-engagement was 1.4 years, indicating a long-term commitment to school re-engagement among participants. Moreover, this research included students who had experienced various forms of problematic school absenteeism. This study had a large sample, which allowed for Butterfield et al’s (2009) credibility check for data saturation. Along the same lines, this sample reflected diversity with respect to age, sex, ethnicity, living situation, length of disengagement, employment status, and mental health functioning.

In addition, this research was the first to employ an ECIT (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) to examine the experience of re-engagement among students who had successfully returned to high school. Thus, this study focused on the helping and hindering CIs associated with re-engagement and included a strong degree of credibility and trustworthiness, as
it has employed each of the nine recommended credibility checks. Further, this research explored the lived experiences of adolescents who had gone through the process of school re-engagement. By adding the youth perspective to the literature, a broader understanding of this phenomenon can be offered.

Also noteworthy, over half of the participants (56%) felt that taking part in the qualitative interview was therapeutic to them, as it provided them with the opportunity to “rant,” “reflect,” and gain an appreciation for their own progress. Moreover, participants also expressed the hope that their stories would be able to help others struggling with similar challenges. These findings suggest a strong degree of catalytic validity, a research process that acts as a catalyst for social transformation through raising participant consciousness and involvement in change (Bailey, 2010). Specific to this study, participants felt a high degree of satisfaction at being able to contribute their knowledge and expertise to assist future generations of adolescents in similar situations. Moreover, they express feeling a sense of pride associated with engaging in research and making a helpful contribution to the literature and counselling profession.

While the current study has a number of strengths, it is not without limitations. The focus on this research was of school re-engagement and required that participants be successfully re-engaged at the time of data collection. As such, results do not directly speak to the experiences and challenges of youth who remain disengaged. Given that data collection was based primary on qualitative interviews, it is hoped that participants recalled the most salient and meaningful aspects of their experiences of school re-engagement. However, it is possible that certain influential elements were left out. Also, this study may have attracted students who are particularly motivated toward and/or interested in the phenomenon of school re-engagement.
Moreover, the demographic make-up of the sample may limit its transferability. For example, all of the participants were recruited from a single geographical location (i.e., larger west coast city). Inclusion criteria required that participants be able to engage in an interview conducted in English. Most of the adolescents who participated in this study attended an alternative high school. Although the sample was fairly diverse, the majority of participants were between the ages of 16-18 and thus results may be more reflective of older, rather than younger, high school students. Only one participant reported a learning disability, and thus, it is impossible to know the role that abilities/disabilities play in school re-engagement.

Of significance, results of this study should be considered within the conceptualization that re-engagement is not a single event, but rather an ongoing process, as indicated by participants who still struggled with many of the same issues they had prior to re-engagement. Thus, while findings are significant and meaningful, many of the adolescents who participated in this study remain at risk for future disengagement.

**Future Research Directions**

Results of this study add to our understanding of school re-engagement and identify remaining gaps in the literature. While scholarship on school disengagement is plentiful, research on re-engagement is limited. Areas of further investigation include population specific research, such as re-engagement in mainstream schooling, youth without comorbid diagnoses, and examining cultural influences of this phenomenon. Research is needed to help develop early intervention and identify youth who are at risk for disengagement. For example, future studies might look at developing an early screening tool to detect children at risk of school disengagement. Another area of development includes professional collaboration between agencies and institutions, so that students have an adequate continuum of care. Particular to the
counselling field, research examining the impact of counselling on school re-engagement may yield informative results that can be directly applied to practice. Lastly, helping, hindering, and wish list items could be explored categorically and in detail to broaden our understanding of their implications on school re-engagement. Of particular importance, further studies may add to our understanding of how the unique factors, perspective shifts and healthy sleep patterns, play a role in school re-engagement, and could go on to develop new interventions targeted towards helping youth with these difficulties.

**Conclusion**

Participants in this study openly discussed their personal stories of successful school re-engagement. These experiences were often attributed to receiving extra support from important people in their lives, including teachers, family members, and peers. Moreover, adolescents recognized their own role in the process, for example, having a shift in perspective, which allowed them to feel involved and committed in their educational endeavors. Given the importance of education in leading a healthy, happy, and productive life, these findings are critical to providing support to adolescents struggling with school re-engagement. As one participant sums up her experience with school re-engagement:

I want others to know that it is hard and it is something that requires a lot of support from multiple sources and you can’t do it alone. Or maybe you can if you are like a really strong person, but…umm, I am going to say you can’t do it alone, because most people who fall out aren’t going to be feeling very strong anyways.
References


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schoolwork and parental involvement in their education. *British Journal of Special Education, 36*, 104-111. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8578.2009.00413.x


Appendices

Appendix A: Kearney’s (2008) Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Recruitment Letter to Secondary School Principals

Principal Investigator: Jackie Bendell, MA student at the University of British Columbia (UBC)
Research Supervisors: Dr. Anusha Kassan, Assistant Professor, Ph.D., and Dr. William Borgen, Head of Department, Ph. D., Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC
Project Title: Back to School: Re-engagement from the Adolescent Perspective

Dear [insert name of person and school]

My name is Jackie Bendell and I am a Master of Arts student in my second year of the Community Counselling Program at UBC. As part of the degree program, I am conducting a research study that aims to understand what helps adolescents return to school after a period of school absence. To do this, I will be exploring what successfully re-engaged adolescents have found to be helpful and unhelpful in their school return experiences.

I am contacting your school to see if (school name) is interested in helping me recruit participants for this study. My aim is to interview approximately 12 students between the ages of 14-19 who have had school attendance problems in high school in the past. To meet criteria, the student must have had absenteeism problems that have lasted for more than two weeks, but, after some difficulty, they have now returned and have good attendance. All participants will receive a $20 gift certificate to Richmond School District in appreciation for their involvement.

If you would like to know more about my research, I would be happy to meet with you or provide you with a complete project proposal. The following information explains my background, interest in the topic, and why I think it is important and valuable for the participating youth. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please contact me for more information.

Sincerely,

Jackie Bendell
M.A Candidate, UBC
Study Rationale and Purpose:
This study aims to understand what adolescents have found to be facilitative and hindering in their high school re-engagement process. Up until now, research has focused on how professionals in counselling and education support youth with attendance difficulties, but unfortunately, despite the amount of information we have to date, many youth still have difficulty returning to school. In order for counsellors and educators to best support these youth, it is important to understand what the youth themselves report as being helpful and unhelpful in their successful re-engagement. This study will allow youth to engage with the researcher in a discussion about the most significant aspects that lead them to school and shed light on how to support other adolescents who are experiencing similar challenges.

Who is conducting the study?
Under the supervision and direction of Dr. Anusha Kassan and Dr. William Borgen, I will be the primary researcher of this thesis study. I am currently in my second year of the Master of Arts Counselling Psychology Program at UBC and hold a Bachelor of Arts Degree (Hons) degree in Psychology. I have several years of experience working with adolescents in the Richmond School district in my role as an Educational Assistant (3 years) and Adolescent Mental Health Support Worker (4 years). I have had the opportunity to support adolescents who have had difficulty attending school but have managed to successfully re-engage. My experiences working with youth have inspired me to further examine the factors that lead adolescents to successfully re-engage in their learning.

What is involved?
To advertise this research project, I would like to post flyers in the counselling waiting area and counselling offices (based on counsellor approval), as well as put my flyer in the school newspaper. Interested youth can contact me at the telephone number or email address provided on the poster. During the initial contact, I will complete a brief screening to see if they meet criteria to participate and to introduce them to the study and what it entails. If they agree to participate, we will mutually decide on a time and location. Participants and their parents will be sent an informed consent/assent forms to complete and return on the day of the interview. Participants will be asked to complete a demographics form prior to starting the interview. The interview itself is anticipated to take 1-2 hours and will consist of open-ended questions that will allow participants to describe their experiences of school return. Brief follow-up interviews will be conducted via telephone after the data has been analyzed to confirm that the data captures the participant’s experience. All participants will receive a $20 gift certificate to Richmond Center, as well as bus tickets to and from the interview.

Confidentiality, Consent, and Right to Withdraw
Participant interviews will be analyzed and findings will be used in my final thesis results and any future publications in academic journals. Participants’ identities will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be revealed. Additionally, consent to participate in this study is completely voluntary and participants will have the right to refuse answering any of the
interview questions and also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Participating high schools and participants will be offered a copy of my final findings.

**Contact Information:**

I appreciate your time and support in recruiting participants. If you have any other questions or concerns, please contact phone the Jackie Bendell by email.
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

**Did you ever have difficulty with attendance in high school?**

Did you have difficulty improving your attendance?

Yeah it was tough

Has your attendance improved?

It is better now

Are you interested in sharing your school attendance challenges?

It’s easy!

What would I have to do?

If you are 14-19 years old and you answered YES to these questions, you might be eligible to participate in a study on adolescents who have had challenges with school attendance. If you agree to participate, we will interview you to learn more about what helped you return to school. Your identity and the information you share will be kept confidential.

What’s in it for you?

You will receive a $20 gift card to Richmond Center. You will also have the opportunity to share your experiences, which will help counsellors, school staff, & community members support youth with attendance difficulties.

To learn more contact Jackie Bendell, MA Candidate at the University of British Columbia

Phone (604) 353-2149 or email j bendell@ssd38.bc.ca
Appendix D: Telephone Selection Interview

Hello, thank-you for your expressed interest in my research study “Back to School: Re-Engagement from the Adolescent Perspective.” This study aims to understand what has been helpful or unhelpful for youth as they have successfully re-engaged in school. I would like to ask you a couple of questions about your experience to see if this research study is a good fit for you. The following questions will ask you about your experience with school disengagement and re-engagement. A time you disengaged would be a time when you have had difficulties with school attendance, which can vary from difficulty getting ready in the morning to frequently missing classes to complete absenteeism from school for an extended period of time. Following disengagement would be the time period following disengagement when you successfully re-engaged in high school and participated in course work and class assignments.

Questions:

1) Can you briefly tell me a little about your most recent disengagement from school?
   a. When did you begin to disengage from school?
   b. How was your school attendance during the time of disengagement?
   c. Was school attendance difficult for you and what did that look like?
   d. Approximately how long did your attendance difficulties last?
   e. If you had to briefly explain your school absence, what would be your reason for having poor school attendance?

2) Would you say that returning to school was a difficult process for you? What made it difficult?

3) Can you briefly tell me about your re-engagement experience?
   a. When did you return to school?
   b. Would you say that you currently have good school attendance?
c. How long have you had good attendance for?

4) Do you feel involved and committed in your education and learning?

5) Do you feel connected to your school community?

6) Are you currently experiencing any difficulties that would make participation in this study emotionally difficult for you?

7) Would you be interested in participating in a 1-2 hour long interview to discuss your experience with school re-engagement?

8) Would you be willing to also participate in a brief follow-up interview via telephone to make sure that I have accurately reported your experience?
Appendix E: Informed Consent (Parent Version)

Informed Consent (Parent Version)

UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Faculty of Education

University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6T 1Z4

Participant Consent Form

Back to School: Re-engagement from the Adolescent Perspective

Principal Investigator:

Jackie Bendell (Master’s Student)

UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Faculty of Education)

Research Supervisors:

Dr. Anusha Kassan and Dr. William A. Borgen

UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Faculty of Education)

Your son or daughter is invited to participate in a study, Back to School: Re-Engagement from the Adolescent Perspective, conducted by Jackie Bendell (Principal Investigator) and supervised by Dr. Anusha Kassan (Research Supervisor). Jackie Bendell is a Master’s Student from UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, and the completion of this research thesis will contribute towards her degree. Dr. Anusha Kassan is a professor within the UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education and a supervisor for Jackie’s final research and final thesis. The following information will discuss the purpose and implications of volunteering in this research, which will help you make an informed decision about whether or not you would like your son or daughter to participate. If you have any further questions, please email Jackie.
Purpose and Objectives:

This qualitative study will examine students’ experiences of high school with a particular focus on students who have formerly had problematic school attendance but have successfully improved their attendance to date. More specifically, the interviewer will investigate what students’ attribute to their successful school return, as well as what has made the experience more difficult.

Participant Selection

Your son or daughter has expressed an interest in being a participant in this study and meets the study’s inclusion criteria: a high school aged student who has self-reported having had poor school attendance in the past, difficulty re-engaging, but currently reports good school attendance.

Participant Involvement

If you consent for your son or daughter to participate in this research, he or she will have a one to one meeting with Jackie Bendell (Principal Investigator and Interviewer) to discuss his or her high school attendance experiences. Your son or daughter will be asked to complete one 1.0-2.0 hour interview, as well as confirm the accuracy of the transcribed/written findings via email and telephone, which is estimated to take an additional 30 minutes. If your son or daughter opts not to respond to the follow-up email or phone calls, then it will be assumed that he or she agrees with research findings. All participants will be emailed the research findings once the research has been completed.

The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed, and brief notes will document participant responses. By signing this consent form, you agree to have your son or daughter participate in the interview AND to have that interview audiotaped.

In addition to the interview questions, your son or daughter will be asked to complete a demographic form, which includes basic information such as age, grade, sex, country of birth, 1st language, who he or she lives with (names not required), and his or her school program.

Your son or daughter will have the right to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw participation at any time without consequence. All interview and demographic data will be kept confidential.

Potential Risks:

There are some possible but unlikely risks to participating in this research. Participants may experience emotional responses to some of the interview questions, including feelings associated with past difficulties related to school attendance. Should a participant feel any uncomfortable feelings in response to the interview questions, he or she is free to leave the question unanswered or to discontinue the interview without consequence. In the unlikely event that the participant does experience emotional distress, the interviewer will provide him or her with a referral for supportive assistance.
Potential Benefits:

The potential benefits of participating in this study include an opportunity for participants to reflect on and process past challenges with school attendance, as well as reflect on their progress in school re-engagement. Participants may feel satisfaction at being able to contribute their expertise and having their voice heard as to what they found helpful and unhelpful in the school return process. Furthermore, participants’ roles in this research will contribute valuable information that may have a positive impact in the lives of adolescents who are currently experiencing similar challenges.

Confidentiality and Data Storage:

All information provided via phone calls, emails, interviews, and demographic questionnaires will be protected by using a numeric code in place of your son or daughters name, and any identifying information will be protected. Confidentiality will be maintained at the school level by making sure that interviews are conducted either in a private school office or private off site office, based on your son or daughters preference. As recruitment will likely happen on school campuses and with the assistance of school staff, both students and school staff will be informed that the interview will be kept in strictest confidence with the exceptions of (a) if a child is being harmed, (b) if there is imminent danger to self or others, or (c) if the researcher is legally required to reveal confidential material.

Any electronic, written, and audio data collected from phone calls, emails, and interview procedures will be kept in a secure filing cabinet in an office in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education at The University of British Columbia for a minimum of five years, at which time the data will be destroyed. Demographic information and consent forms will be linked to interview transcripts using numeric codes but will be kept in separate locations and only accessible to the primary researchers to ensure privacy. All digital files will be encrypted and password protected to ensure maximum security and confidentiality.

Compensation/Honorarium:

Participants will be offered a gesture of gratitude for their participation in the study via a $20 gift card. In the event that a participant withdraws from the study, he or she will still receive the awarded compensation.

Contact Information:

Should you have any further questions or concerns, or would like to receive a copy of the study’s results, please contact Jackie Bendell by email.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your son or daughters rights as a research participant, please call the Research Subject Information Line at the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.
Consent:

By signing the form below, you consent for your son or daughter to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you permit _______________________ to participate in the “Back to School” study, which will consist of an interview, audiotaping of that interview, and email correspondence.

Parent/Guardian Signature                                     Date

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian
Appendix F: Informed Assent (Student Version)

Informed Assent (Student Version)

UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Faculty of Education

University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6T 1Z4

Participant Consent Form
Back to School: Re-Engagement from the Adolescent Perspective

Principal Investigator:

Jackie Bendell (Master’s Student)
UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Faculty of Education)

Research Supervisor:
Dr. Anusha Kassan and Dr. William A. Borgen
UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Faculty of Education)

You are invited to participate in a study, Back to School: Re-Engagement from the Adolescent Perspective, conducted by Jackie Bendell (Principal Investigator) and is supervised by Dr. Anusha Kassan (Research Supervisor). Jackie Bendell is a Master’s Student from UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, and the completion of this research thesis will contribute towards her degree. Dr. Anusha Kassan is a professor within the UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education and a supervisor for Jackie’s final research and final thesis. The following information will discuss the purpose and implications of volunteering in this research, which will help you make an informed decision about whether or not you would like to participate. If you have any further questions, please email Jackie.

Purpose and Objectives:

This qualitative study will examine students’ experiences of high school with a particular focus on students who have formerly had problematic school attendance but have successfully improved their attendance to date. More specifically, the interviewer will investigate what students’ attribute to their successful school return, as well as what has made the experience more difficult.
Participant Selection

You are a participant who has volunteered to be a part of this study and have met the inclusion criteria: a high school aged student who has self-reported having had poor school attendance in the past, difficulty re-engaging, but currently reports good school attendance.

Participant Involvement

If you voluntarily consent to participate in this research, you will meet one-on-one with Jackie Bendell (Principal Investigator and Interviewer) to discuss your high school attendance experiences. Although you will only be asked to complete one 1.0-2.0 hour interview, you will be asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed/written findings via email and telephone, which is estimated to take an additional 30 minutes. If you opt not to respond to the follow-up email or phone calls, then it will be assumed that you agree with research findings. All participants will be emailed the research findings once the research has been completed.

The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed, and brief notes will document participant responses. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in the interview AND in having that interview audiotaped.

In addition to the interview questions, you will be asked to complete a demographic form, which includes basic information such as age, grade, sex, country of birth, 1st language, who you live with (names not required), and your school program.

It is important for you to know that you have the right to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. All interview and demographic data will be kept confidential.

Potential Risks:

There are some possible but unlikely risks to participating in this research. You may experience emotional responses to some of the interview questions, including feelings associated with past difficulties related to school attendance. Should you feel any uncomfortable feelings in response to the interview questions, you are free to leave the question unanswered or to discontinue the interview without consequence. In the unlikely event that you do experience emotional distress, the interviewer will provide you with a referral for supportive assistance.

Potential Benefits:

The potential benefits of participating in this study include having the opportunity to reflect on and process past challenges with school absenteeism, as well as reflect on your progress in school re-engagement. You may feel satisfaction at being able to contribute your expertise and having your voice heard as to what you found helpful and unhelpful in your school return process. Furthermore, your role in this research will contribute valuable information that may have a positive impact in the lives of adolescents who have similar challenges.
Confidentiality and Data Storage:

All information that you provide via phone calls, emails, interviews, and demographic questionnaires will be protected by using a numeric code in place of your name, and any identifying information will be protected. Confidentiality will be maintained at the school level by making sure that interviews are conducted either in a private school office or private off site office, based on your preference. As recruitment will likely happen on school campuses and with the assistance of school staff, both students and school staff will be informed that the interview will be kept in strictest confidence within the standard boundaries of confidentiality with the exceptions of (a) if a child is being harmed, (b) if there is imminent danger to self or others, or (c) if the researcher is legally required to reveal confidential material.

Any electronic, written, and audio data collected from phone calls, emails, and interview procedures will be kept in a secure filing cabinet in an office in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education at The University of British Columbia for a minimum of five years, at which time the data will be destroyed. Demographic information and consent forms will be linked to interview transcripts using numeric codes but will be kept in separate locations and only accessible to the primary researchers to ensure privacy. All digital files will be encrypted and password protected to ensure maximum security and confidentiality.

Compensation/Honorarium:

You will be offered a gesture of gratitude for your participation in the study via a $20 gift card. In the event that a participant withdraws from the study, he or she will still receive a $20 gift card.

Contact Information:

Should you have any further questions or concerns, or would like to receive a copy of the study’s results, please contact Jackie Bendell by email.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, please call the Research Subject Information Line at the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.
Consent:

You have volunteered to participate in this study and have the right to refuse participation at any time without consequence to your education, privacy, or compensation.

Your signature below indicates that you and the researcher have read and discussed the form and that you have received a copy of this form for your records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this research process including your participation in an interview, being audiotaped during the interview, and email correspondence.

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Participant

Participant Phone Number

Participant Email

Printed Name of Interviewer

Interviewer Signature
Appendix G: Demographics Form

Demographics Form

Participant Number: __________

Age:_________ Grade:_________ Gender:_________

What grade(s) were you in when you became disengaged from school? __________

How long were you disengaged from school? __________

How long have you been re-engaged in school? __________

How many high schools have you attended? __________

Country of Birth: __________ If not Canada, how long have you lived here?_____

Religious Affiliation ____________________________________________________________

Ethnic Background ____________________________________________________________

Languages Spoken ____________________________________________________________

Who do you live with? __________________________________________________________

Sexual Orientation ____________________________________________________________

Learning/Developmental Disability _______________________________________________

Chronic Health Issues __________________________________________________________

School Program (Circle One):

(a) High School (b) Alternative School (c) Modified or Adapted Courses

Do you work? If yes, what do you do?
____________________________________________________________________________

How did you hear about this study?
____________________________________________________________________________

What do you hope to get from this study?
____________________________________________________________________________
Appendix H: Participant Interview Guide

Participant Interview Guide

Participant #: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Interview Start Time: ______________________

Preamble:
As you know, I am investigating what makes students’ school returns successful after having had difficulty attending school. I will refer to this school attendance challenges as disengagement and school return as school re-engagement. This interview will likely take 1-2 hours, and its purpose is to collect information about your high school re-engagement experience and what made the experience easier and what made it more difficult.

1. **Ice Breaker Questions:**
Before I get into a discussion of school re-engagement, I would like to get to know you a little better. Perhaps you can tell me
   a. What are some things that you really enjoy doing?
   b. What do you hope to do once you have graduated?
   c.

2. **As I enter the interview on re-engagement, I will remind you that...**

3. **Ice Breaker Questions**
   a. What are some things that you really enjoy doing?
   b. What do you hope to do once you have graduated?

4. **Contextual Component**
As a warm up to our discussion on the factors that have influenced your school re-engagement, I will ask you a little bit about your school disengagement and re-engagement experiences. As a reminder, I am referring to disengagement as a time when attending school has been extremely difficult for you. Re-engagement refers to the time period following disengagement when you started to attend school and participate in courses and class assignments.

   a. As a way of getting started, perhaps you could tell me a little bit about your schooling experience and what lead you to have difficulties attending school.

   b. You volunteered to participate in this study because you identified yourself as having difficulty with school attendance in the past but currently being re-engaged. What does “difficult” mean to you in terms of having difficulty with school attendance? What does “re-engaged” mean to you?
c. On a scale of 0-10, where 0 is doing very poorly with your school re-engagement, 5 is OK, and 10 is doing very well, where would you place yourself? Why?

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d. You rate yourself as a _#_ in terms of school re-engagement, would you say that you feel involved and committed in your education?

e. Since you have re-engaged in school, what changes have you noticed in your school life?

f. How have these changes affected other areas of your life? (Probe: Has being re-engaged in school impacted any other areas of your life?)

g. Excluding the most current school return, have you ever disengaged and re-engaged from school in the past?

(Circle one) Yes No

h. If so, what made this school return a success compared to prior school returns. (Alternate question: what happened that made the most recent school return successful?)

5. **Critical Incident Component**

Transition to Critical Incident questions: You said that even with all these changes, you rated yourself as a 5-6 (or whatever the participant rated him- or herself in question 1 (c) above).

a. What has helped you re-engage in school? (Probes: What was the incident/factor? How did it impact you? Can you give me a specific example of where it helped? How did that help you to successfully re-engage in school?)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Helpful Factor &amp; What it Means to Participant (What do you mean by ..?)</th>
<th>Importance (How did it help? Tell me what it was about .. that you find so helpful.)</th>
<th>Example (What led up to it? Incident. Outcome of incident.)</th>
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b. Are there things that have made it more difficult for you to re-engage in high school? (Alternate question: What kinds of things have happened that made it harder for you to attend school?)
c. Summarize what has been discussed up to this point with the participant as a transition to the next question:

We’ve talked about what’s helped you to do well (name them), and some things that have made it more difficult for you to do well (name them). Are there other things that you wished were a part of your school return but were not available to you?

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<tr>
<th>Hindering Factor &amp; What it Means to Participant (What do you mean by ..?)</th>
<th>Importance (How did it hinder? Tell me what it was about .. that you find so unhelpful.)</th>
<th>Example (What led up to it? Incident. Outcome of incident.)</th>
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<th>Wish List Item &amp; What it Means to Participant (What do you mean by ..?)</th>
<th>Importance (How would it help? Tell me what it is about .. that you would find so helpful.)</th>
<th>Example (In what circumstances might this be helpful?)</th>
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a. Summary of interview information. To summarize what we have discussed so far, you have identified several factors that have helped you re-engage in school including ___,____, and ___. Is there anything else that you believed helped you re-engage in school? You have also identified factors that have made the re-engagement process difficult including ___,____, and ___. At this point, is there anything else that made re-engagement more difficult for you? Lastly, you mentioned some factors that you feel would have been helpful but were not available to you at the time of your re-engagement, and these included ___,____, and ___. Is there anything else that you believe would have been helpful?
b. Now that you’ve had a chance to reflect back on what’s helped and hindered, where would you place yourself on the same scale we discussed earlier? On a scale of 0-10, where 0 is doing very poorly with your school re-engagement, 5 is OK, and 10 is doing very well, where would you place yourself?

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c. What’s made the difference? (To be asked only if there is a difference in the first and second scaling question ratings.)

d. Is there anything else that you think I should know about your school re-engagement experience?

e. What prompted you to volunteer to do this interview?

f. What was this interview like for you?

Interview End Time: _______________

Length of interview: _______________

Interviewer’s Name: ____________________________
Appendix I: Participant Cross-Checking Email

Participant Cross-Checking Email

Thank-you for your participation in the “Back to School Study: Re-Engagement from the Adolescent Perspective.” Please read the information below (data analysis) and respond to the following questions.

Helpful Items:

a) Are the helpful items correct based on your experience school re-engagement?

b) Is anything missing from the list of helpful items?

c) Do any of the helpful items need revising?

d) Do you have any other comments?

Unhelpful Items:

e) Are the unhelpful items correct based on your experience of school re-engagement?

f) Is anything missing from the list of unhelpful items?

g) Do any of unhelpful items need revising?

h) Do you have any other comments?

Wish List Items:  These are the items that you wish had been done differently during your school re-engagement.

i) Are the wish list items correct based on your school re-engagement experience?

j) Is anything missing from the list of wish list items?

k) Do any of wish list items need revising?

l) Do you have any other comments?
Categories

- Do the category names make sense?
- Do the category names describe your experience?
- Are any of the items misplaced in the categories? If so, what category should they be in?