CREATING A NEW VISION FOR AN IMAGINED SCHOOL: YOUNG PEOPLE FROM
ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS EXPLORE THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOLING

by

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Human Development, Learning and Culture)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April, 2018

Abstract

Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which states that learning and development takes place in the relation between an individual and his or her sociocultural environment, this research focused on the schooling experiences of students attending alternative programs (APs) in British Columbia. Two research questions were addressed: 1) What do the students attending APs say they need to graduate from high school? 2) What would a school look like that provides opportunities for meeting the students' educational needs and integrating their strengths?

Through qualitative methods, eleven students were engaged in a three-phase research process. First, they were interviewed individually. Second, they worked in groups and sharing circles with the support of a researcher, a community Elder and two architects. Third, they created a model for an imagined school that would meet their educational needs and integrate their needs for high school completion.

Using thematic analysis, the students reported that mainstream schools did not provide the support and care they needed, did not recognize their teaching and learning needs in a timely manner and did not include their strengths to facilitate school engagement. Conversely, they described the APs as having limited learning opportunities, but providing support and care. Therefore, in their imagined school, they created spaces for: positive relationships with their teachers, rich learning experiences leading to a career, hands-on learning spaces, a garden and a farm. Further, their imagined school was an open and spacious facility connected to the outdoors.

The current study contributes to the literature by building from interviews with young people to create with them an imagined school that provides opportunities for both addressing educational needs and building from strengths. Unique to Vygotsky's theory is a recognition that, along with an experience itself, what matters is the meaning that is made from experience;

individuals create meaning in the moment, as well as reinterpret the meaning of experience over time. Through reflection and reinterpretation of experience, the young people in this study were enabled to imagine a school that they had never experienced and, thus, create a school *for* education.

Lay Summary

Based upon Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that our sociocultural environment contributes to development, this study addressed two research questions: 1) Whatdo the students attending APs say they need to graduate from high school? 2) What would a school look like that provides opportunities for meeting the students' educational needs and integrating their strengths? Eleven students were interviewed, worked in groups with a researcher, an Elder, and two architects, and created a model for an imagined school. While rich in resources, the mainstream schools did not provide much learning support or care. The APs had limited resources and remedial classes, but provided more care and support. Positive relationships with teachers and learning experiences that lead to a career were important to students. Implications highlight the importance of positive relationships with teachers, rich educational experiences, collaborative work and engaging with planning learning experiences for graduating from high school.

Preface

The author was responsible for all the aspects entailed in developing the study, including: the conceptualization and design of the study, collecting and analyzing the data, and reporting the findings. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia (H15-03039).

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Photos

Acknowledgements

Dedication

To all thechildren who have experienced institutionalized schooling.

Ideas about identity and social space are grounded in the possibilities of imagination, in streams of fantasy that rise up to either order or disrupt our comprehension of the world.

(Shulman&Watkins, 2008, p. 151)

Chapter 1.Introduction

Alternative programs offered by the public school system in British Columbia (BC) are often the last resource for students to complete high school before they turn 20 years old. Alternative programming offered by the mainstream school system often has a negative connotation "as performing a supplementary role to regular education" (Nagata, 2007, p. 5). The students attending such programs are considered to be "at-risk" of failing the mainstream school system for variety of personal, social, and academic reasons. There is a lack of research that addresses the experiences of students attending alternative programs and how, based on their needs, students envision their relationship with learning and schooling, especially in relation to academic, social, cultural and other aspects of their development. Shinn and Yoshikawa (2008) stated that:

> ...we still know too little about how to change the settings of youths' daily lives in ways that matter for their development. ...Although hundreds of studies have shown how to assess characteristics of youth development, very few focus on assessing youth-serving settings. (pp. 3-4)

Mainstream schools and alternative programs are student-serving settings that play a critical role in student development, however, what is known about youths' development is not reflected in the school system and some students continue to struggle with completing highschool. The existing literature provides many ideas for what needs to change, "but not how to get there" (Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008, p. 4).

In order to learn students' perspectives on "how to get there," this research was focused on the participants' experiences with schooling. Although a part of education broadly, schooling contrasts with education and"relies on the adoption of bounded educational routines that are assumednot only to have predictable outcomes but also to be repeatable or transferable from setting to setting" (Hamilton &Zufiaurre, 2014, p. 6). *Schooling* tends to be based on commonalities to a singular model, rather than creativity, and contributes to the social marginalization of students (Spring, 2000). *Education* is a creative process that provides students with a wide spectrum of opportunities to experience freedom through self-expression in ways meaningful to them (Freire, 2001; Greene, 2000; Vygotsky, 1994a, 2004). Education enables a child to learn how to think as a free person (John-Steiner, 1997; Vygotsky 1994a, 1994b), to make decisions and strive for what is good and right for both the child as an individual, and as a member of society. In the introductory quote above, Shulman and Watkin (2008) highlighted the relation between identity and social space as grounded in imagination. It is through the imagination, a core psychological function, that humans can re-create the social institution of schooling in a manner more aligned with the equity oriented goals of education.

The goal for this research was to engage with students, to learn from and to reflect on their schooling experiences and—through interviews, collaborative efforts, and sharing circles— to enable participants to create a vision for an imagined school that was focused on education, rather than schooling. Students' engagement with this research was mediated by the researcher, an Elder, and two architects; their goal was to imagine a school that would support the needs and recognize the strengths of students attending alternative programs offered in their school district. The following questions were addressed in this research to explore the students' experiences

with schooling and engage them in re-envisioning a school that provides an equitable educational experience.

1) What do the students attending alternative programs say they need to graduate from high school?

2) What would a school look like that provides opportunities for meeting the students' educational needs and integrating their strengths?

Including students in the research process may enable the creation of equitable educational opportunities for all children.

This chapter consists of five sections. The first section provides an overview of the governance of schools in Canada with attention toalternative programs in British Columbia; describes the profiles of students attending these programs and their schooling experiences with alternative programs; and addresses the students' educational and employment rates. Information from similar programs in Australia, the United States (US), and the United Kingdom (UK) is also presented. In the second section, I address the relationship between social and school issues and how they contribute to the marginalization of children and youths. In the third section, I present the research questions. The fourth section includes a brief overview of Vygotsky's theoretical framework that guides this research. The fifth section is an overview of methodology. The chapter ends with a brief summary and an overview of the dissertation.

1.1   Social context of BC school system and alternative programs

Canada does not have a unified school system. Instead, each province or territory has a responsibility for their own school system that is governed by a provincial or territorial Ministry of Education. There are public and independent schools and programs adhere to K-12 curriculum mandated by the provincial or territorial Ministry of Education. School attendance is compulsory

for all children from the age of 5 to 6 years old and until 16years old in most provinces, but 18 years old in Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick. The school year usually begins in September and finishes at the end of June with traditional winter and spring breaks. Schools that are located within a designated area of a province or territory are run by a school board, members of which are elected trustees (Government of Canada, 2018).

Some public schools have a specific focus in their educational provisions in addition to fulfilling the requirements for graduation. These may include French immersion schools and French immersion programs within schools, fine arts schools, and environmental programs. Public schools are fully funded by the Government of each province and territory. There are also independent schools that include faith-based schools, non-denominational private schools and schools that follow a certain philosophy (e.g., Montessori or Waldorf Schools), as well as private schools and programs with a special focus (e.g., technology, sports, or arts). These schools are partly funded by the Provincial Government and by the parents. All schools require teachers to complete a university degree that provides teacher certification (Government of Canada, 2018).

In BC, public and independent schools require teacher certification for teachers. There is also a home-schooling association that consists of parents who provide home-based education to their children. In particular, BC school system has about 553K students attending public schools, 81K students attending independent schools, and more than 2,200 students are home-schooled (BC Ministry of Education, 2018).

The most recent report by the Fraser Institute, entitled the "Report card on British Columbia's secondary schools 2016" (Cowley & Easton, 2016), ranks schools by the level of students' achievement in the province of British Columbia and across Canada. Rather than demonstrate the differences between schools, it demonstrates the differences between

marginalized and privileged children and the contexts in which they grow and attend schools. Thetop achieving schools in the report are prestigious private schools while the last ones on the list are the schools located primarily in inner-city, rural, and Indigenous communities. The highest ranking schools are predominantly located in upper class neighbourhoods; however, the socioeconomic status of the families is not accounted for in this report (Mutyala, 2012). The overall rating also does not reflect "the special needs learners, or students for whom English is a second language" (Raptis, 2012, p. 189). Year after year, the school rankings report reinforces the public desire for simplified, but insufficient "truths" (Raptis, 2012, p. 194): that the rankings are solely based on academic achievement. This disregards a number of variables present in the social context that have an impact on academic achievement. The continuous marginalization of certain groups of children from particular contexts has a negative effect on the development and wellbeing of children and youths, leaving them "feeling locked into a world others have constructed" and often with having "no hope, no capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 2000, p. 12).

According to the British Columbia Ministry of Education Alternate Education Program Policy statement:

> Alternate education programs focus on educational, social and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. An alternate education program provides its support through differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students' needs. (BC Ministry of Education, 2009)

Alternative programs (APs) developed by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia claim to provide an option for the students who learn better in non-traditional school settings to address their diverse learning and social and emotional needs. APs are offered in a variety of settings across the province, in schools, community and youth centers (Smith et al., 2008). Access to services and extracurricular activities varies among the programs depending on location, the number of students enrolled and the scale of the program. These programs are funded by the provincial government and are part of the public school system. These alternative programs are considered "second chance" educational facilities created for the students who, for a variety of reasons, do not "fit-in,"and disengage or leave mainstream school prior to completion of graduation requirements (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2013). These alternative programs provide a chance for high school completion before students "age out" from the public school system after turning 19 years old. Alternative programs are often remedial, lack diverse opportunities for teaching and learning in comparison to mainstream schools, and focus on students' completion of "minimum education credentials" (p. 36)to attain a high school diploma. There are also private alternative programs that some parents find more suitable for their children if they can afford the cost that comes with this choice. In this research, I have focused on public alternative programs.

1.1.1   Students attending alternative programs in BC

The McCreary Center Society's review of alternative programs in British Columbia (Smith et al., 2008) demonstrated that, of the 339 youths from across the province who participated in their research, 49% were female and 51% were male students; 57% were of European background, 36% were Indigenous, and others represented diverse cultural minority groups (e.g., East Asian, South Asian, African, Southeast Asian, Latin American, West Asian, and other). Some of these

students were of mixed cultural backgrounds. Among them, 58% were attending APs offered by the school district, but outside of regular school; 25% attended a program offered in one of the community settings; 13% were attending a program within a school setting and others were not sure about the type of program they were attending (Smith et al., 2008).

The majority of students came to APs from a regular school program, while others took correspondence and internet-based courses, or were homeschooled or attended classes while in a custody center prior to attending APs. About 75% of youths were referred to APs by one of the following: a counsellor, a teacher, their family, a social worker, a youth support worker or a probation officer. Twenty five percent of students self-referred. Many of them faced a number of life and academic challenges and over 75% of them reported they had left school previously. The most prevalent reason for leaving school was the students' experiences of a cognitive and/or emotional disconnect from school. Some students also felt they did not fit in and were bullied at school. The other reasons for leaving school in the past were related to social issues such as family situation, multiple moves, illness, pregnancy, other personal problems and other commitments. Many of the students in APs "[had] survived traumatic and damaging experiences" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 41) and were in great need for social and emotional supports in addition to support for their learning needs.

The students attending APs came from marginalized, low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, often had a chaotic family life, and lacked stable housing; many had cognitive, mental health and addiction related challenges; some experienced sexual exploitation, abuse, and some had attempted suicide. Indigenous students and those in care of the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development were overrepresented in APs. The complexity of students' backgrounds and their relationship with their environments must be considered when

addressing issues related to school dropout and school completion (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr &Godber,2001). A review of 86 alternative programs in the US demonstrated that the youths attending these programs faced similar life challenges and had various disabilities, left school due to similar reasons, and were referred to an alternative program by many of the same sources as their Canadian counterparts (Foley & Pang, 2006). In the US programs, the students from a dominant ethnic or cultural group in a community were predominantly represented in the alternative programs (Foley & Pang, 2006).

BC youths' decisions to return to school were based on their desire to graduate from high-school (53%) and make changes in life (47%) that provide a sense of accomplishment (29%). They also looked forward to getting a better job (32%), continuing with a post-secondary degree (32%) and pursuing a career (36%). Only 7% of youths referred to the conditions of probation or to a part of a Youths Agreement (6%) (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2017) as the reasons for going back to school (Smith et al., 2008). Some students (30%) felt that the flexibility of AP scheduling, as well as the fact that teaching and learning approaches (42%) provided "a combination of self-paced, hands-on, teacher assisted, and one-on-one learning styles" (p. 43), were the other factors that kept them in their program.Having friends attending and adults who respected them and cared for them at APs were some of the factors contributing to feeling connected to the program they attended.

Teachers, school counsellors, school and family support workers, doctors or nurses were among the top-rated adults whose support was reported to be the most helpful to students and their connectedness to school (Smith et al., 2008). Other, non-academic opportunities such as, job training (49%) and work experience (41%), "volunteer opportunities, life-skills, and out-door recreation programs enabled students who may not excel academically the opportunity to

experience other learning opportunity" (p. 46). These students also reported that the opportunities to develop new skills and to experience a sense of accomplishment motivated them to stay in their program. In another Canadian study, engagement in experiential learning and opportunities as part of an AP promoted positive emotional experiences, helped to build communication skills, and enabled students to develop a greater sense of personal responsibility, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing (Caulkins, 2010).

The McCreary report demonstrated that students in APs come from diverse, complex and often traumatic backgrounds;all need a different model of education(Smith et al., 2008). Although the majority of students had a clear understanding that school completion and further education at a post-secondary level is most likely to provide them with life benefits, they emphasized the need for non-academic supports and opportunities as invaluable to their high-school completion and further pursuit of educational and vocational opportunities. They also had a positive view of their future and felt that in five years they would be able to have stable employment (68%) or further pursue a post-secondary education (32%). Even though these students were faced with adversities and did not fit in with the mainstream school, they were "aware of their desire and right for quality education to set them along good paths as they define them" (Tilleczek, Furlong, & Ferguson, 2010, p. 9). Having an opportunity to attend an AP provided access to potential high school completion in a more flexible learning environment outside of the mainstream high school setting, and students understood that APs lacked many supports and were the last resource for them to graduate from high school.

Many students who participated in the McCreary study had a positive outlook for their future and felt that attending an AP was a chance to graduate from public high school and have a job or further study. However, they also clearly stated that it was not until they "failed" the

public school system and were labelled "at-risk" that they were given an option to attend an AP. The students said that the main reason for attending an AP was because they were "kicked out of school" or had fallen behind in their academic work and had lost hope for catching up, and so dropped out from a public high school. They often left school during Grade 8. Many youths attending an AP as an option for graduation had completed few or no courses required for graduation. Further, a number of students had left school and had not re-connected with any APs. In addition to this report, research shows that students often felt that APs have a stigma that only those who "fail" the regular school go to APs, rather than being a healthy and viable educational option that acknowledges and embraces the differences among learners' needs at any time during their school years (Foley & Pang, 2006).

1.1.2   Youths, education, and employment data

Alternative programs in countries like Canada, UK, the USA, and Australia often serve students who are underprivileged, marginalized, or from minority or Indigenous backgrounds who first dropped out from or had difficulties fitting into a public school (Morrissette, 2011). Historically, APs were developed to counter a blanket approach to educate masses of children and youths (Martin, 2000), and to offer an opportunity for students to learn in settings that are different from a traditional classroom. However, some APs perpetuate the stigma associated with alternative education (Kim & Taylor, 2008). APs often "struggle with negative stigmas as dumping grounds or warehouses for at-risk students who are falling behind, have behavioural problems, or are juvenile delinquents" (p. 207). Stigmas attached to alternative programs present problematic and ongoing concerns for addressing school dropout rates and poor academic outcomes of children and youths who do not fit into public schools.

In Canada and other post-colonial countries, Indigenous students lag behind the non-Indigenous students in their academic attainment at secondary and post-secondary levels (Mendelson, 2006; Morgan, 2009; National Indigenous Economic Development Board [NAEDB], 2015). According to the Indigenous Economic Progress Report (NAEDB, 2015), 44.1% of Indigenous and 80.6% of non-Indigenous youth in Canada completed high school in 2011 and about 25% of non-Indigenous and 8% of Indigenous people hold a post-secondary degree(Statistics Canada, 2006). The average graduation rate in the years 2012-2015 in Canada was 88%, in the United States was 83%, in UK around 90% (OECD, 2017), and Australia 88.4% (Australia Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). The completion of high school allows for post-secondary education, training, and further employment; exactly the type of opportunities that bring about other life benefits otherwise unavailable to those who did not complete high school or post-secondary education.

The impact from not completing high school affects employment rates. The employment rate in 2011 was 37.3% for Indigenous and 51.3% for non-Indigenous youths between the ages 15 and 24 (NAEDB, 2015). Unemployment and low income is prevalent among young people who do not complete high-school. Overall, in January 2018, 10.9% of all youths in Canada were unemployed. This percentage is similar to Australia at 12.3%, and the UK at 12.2%, and higher than the 9.2% in the United States (Trading Economics, 2018). Specifically, Indigenous people around the world have a more difficult time finding meaningful employment, experience poorer health outcomes, and are more likely to have lower income work opportunities and to live in poverty if they did not graduate from high-school (Mendelson, 2004, 2009; Morgan, 2009; NAEDB, 2015; te Riele, 2007). Although the school completion and employment rates vary between different Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities within and between provinces,

the numbers presented above demonstrate that over 50% of Indigenous and around 20% of non-Indigenousyouthsin Canada experience challenges with the public school system and, for variety of reasons, leave school before graduating.

1.2   Societal marginalization of children and youths

The complexity of challenges faced by the public school system are both educational and societal issues, and are compounded by the socioeconomic situations faced by many families and children today (First Call: BC Child and Youths Advocacy Coalition, 2017; Young-Bruehl, 2012). The result is the societal marginalization of children and youths, where the classification of children and youths as "at-risk" becomes a label that is often accepted by many children and youths as a part of their identity when they do not fit the "mold" of public school system and "education means standardization and identity erasure" (Young-Bruehl, 2012, p. 290). Oppressive societal labels, terminology, and classification are used widely in public school systems, communities, social services, health care, criminal justice, and media toward children and youths and their families who are struggling to deal with adversity in their lives (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). This form of communication in our social institutions creates "a generation of suspects" and "den[ies] justice for youths" (Conrad, 2006, p. 1). By creating a group of youths "at-risk" the societal attitude contributes to a climate of "fear," "panic" and "crisis" directed toward youths (Bessant, Hill, & Watts, 2003; Kelly, 2000, 2007). This societal attitude follows "a deficit model that blames youths, their families and communities for deficiencies, focusing on ways that they need to change" (Conrad, 2006, p. 3), rather than attending to these challenges as originating in multiple societal institutions, including schools.

Valencia (2010) addressed two different existing perspectives on the "at-risk" discourse. First, blaming children and their families for their deficiencies as a result of poverty and

academic challengesleads to marginalization. Second, attributing "at-risk" conditions to the "systemic inequities in society" as central to examining "why numerous students are predisposed to experience serious academic problems" (p. 125). The latter perspective, he argued, is clearly supported in research that shows that children and families are not inherently at-risk. Instead, schools, as part of a larger societal structure, reflect "inequities in the distribution of teacher quality characteristics and inequities in the distribution of economic resources for schooling" (p. 125). As such, they are oppressive and contribute to school failure for students considered to be at-risk for leaving school. The social environment contributes to and has an impact on child development: the "environment is the source of development and not its setting" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 349). As the source of development, both the lived experiences of students who are marginalized and the environments in which they are placed need support in efforts toward social change.

In a complementary way, Jessor (1991) advocated for understanding the strong connection between the social environment and child development. He stressed that diverse social environments present a complexity of interacting factors that contribute to situations that place students at risk, rather than continuing with perspectives that locate the risk behaviours as originating in students. The student-environment relationship impacts developmental trajectories; "risk is embedded in the larger social context of adolescent life and [the] reduction in risk requires social change" (p. 604). Assuming that young people are solely responsible for becoming at-risk by making poor choices in life denies "the complexity of the web of causation" (Jessor, 1991, p. 604), as well as the interrelationship between risk factors and protective factors that exist in the students' historical, social, and cultural environments that play a significant role in determining positive and negative outcomes for youths' development (Jessor, 1993).

1.3   The importance of students' experiences in re-imagining schooling

Societal marginalization takes many overt and covert forms that become the status-quo positioning young people in society (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Societal marginalization contributes to silencing voices of underprivileged youths and their families and "render[s] irrelevant the lived experiences, passions, concerns, communities, and biographies of low-income, minority students. In the process, the very voices of these students and their communities, which public education claims to enrich, shut down" (Fine, 2010, p. 16). A central way to challenge this approach is to create an avenue where the experiences of young people are shared and contribute to the change of oppressive policies so that the role of children and youths as members of society can be re-considered as valuable contributors in the process of cultural development (Fine & Weis, 2010; Shields, Bishop, &Mazawi, 2005). Many young people who have been continuously placed in a disadvantaged position while growing up, become silent in their marginalization and accept their struggles and problems as "normal." It becomes unthinkable for them to imagine the possibility of a different life, different future, and an opportunity for "learning to be free" (Barber, 1992, p. 4) in a meaningful and liberating way.

Schools are youth-serving settings and the voices and experiences of marginalized youth must be included to contribute to the reduction of the persistent ideology of blame and shame, judgement, and the classification of children and youths practiced in schools. Such practices place children and youth in a disadvantaged position that identifies them as the problem. Perhaps, what is seen in children and youth as challenging behaviour and attitudes is instead a reflection of the conditions and state of their society (UN General Assembly, 1989).

1.4 Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

This research is based on Vygotsky's(1994a, 2004) sociocultural theory and, specifically, his theoretical perspective on imagination and creativity. A fundamental idea in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is the general genetic law of cultural development (Vygotsky, 1981). The use of the word "genetic" addresses a process of developmental growth and change for an individual over time, from birth to death, that takes place in relation to a historical, social, and cultural environment. For Vygotsky (1987), all psychological functions develop between people in social relationships, where "[e]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and later on, then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (p. 57). All development is socialin origin and "[s]ocial relations or relations among people genetically underline all higher functions and their relationships" (p. 163).What this means is that the students' interactions with their school environments are relational and have a direct impact on their development.

Sociocultural rules and norms, communicated through signs and semiotic systems, influence development and identity, including how we create meaning for our experiences in the world (John-Steiner, 1997; Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). While the social environment shapes us, we also shape our environment, and by doing so we contribute to change in our social world. Child development is dialectical in nature, and "[the] relations which exist between environment and child development are characteristic of childhood development" (Vygotsky, 1994b, p. 347). It is through this relationship that learning and development take place.

The relationship that a child develops with her environment shapes her ability to imagine the future and make meanings of her environments based on personal characteristics of the child

and her lived experiences (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003;Vygotsky, 1994b, 1997). The dialectical relationship between a child's experiences, meaning making and the environment forms a foundation for the development of imagination and creativity that guides imagining and constructing potential individual and social futures (Sawyer, 2003; Sternberg, 2003; Vadeboncoeur, Perone, & Panina-Beard, 2016; Vygotsky, 2004). It is in light of experiences, and the meanings made of them, that identities and social futures are created.

1.5   Methodology overview

The goal of this dissertation was to engagestudents from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds whowere attending APs in a collaborative process to reflect on experiences in mainstream school and APs. Specifically, these students were invited to participate in interviews and in sharing circles in order to imagine a future school environment that addressed their learning needs and built on their strengths. Utilizing qualitative methodology, the approach was threefold. First, I invited students to participate in individual interviews to reflect on their experiences in mainstream schools and APs and to share their vision for an imagined school. Second, I further engaged students, an Elder, and two architects in sharing circles to discuss ideas and insights from the interviews.Sharing circles are a traditional way of communication grounded in the oral tradition of many Indigenous cultures through which participants explore and facilitate growth, understanding, and transformation in the participants, including the researcher (Graveline, 2000; Lavallee, 2009). The participation of an Elder and two architects in sharing circles provided students with guidance and expertise that engaged the students with their imagination and guided them in expressing their vision. Third, I created a space for students to collaborate as a group to create and express their vision based on their interviews and sharing circles. Each aspect of this research merged and the sharing circles became a place for the

expression of a model for a new learning environment, an imagined school *for* education. This model was presented to the school board that governed the two APs in the district.

1.6 Summary and dissertation overview

This chapter provided an overview of the research. I discussed the social context of BC's alternative programs, the characteristics of the students who attend them, and the impact of educational attainment on youth employment. I further argued that social institutions, including schools, contribute to marginalization of children and youths and place them "at-risk" for academic failure. I argued that the present public school system must respond to the experiences of youths. The complexity of the challenges facing students who are marginalized must be understood and attended to from a multi-dimensional perspective that includes students' experiences. Following from that, I presented the research questions guiding this dissertation and provided an overview of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Students' relationship with their social environments and their interpretation of the relationship they develop with their environments lays the foundation for their development (Vygotsky, 1994b). Finally, the methodological overview was provided.

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature that provides a foundation for this research. I attend to the gap in research that explores the schooling experiences of students attending alternative programs and elaborate Vygotsky's theoretical perspective on imagination and creativity. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological approach utilized in this research. Chapter 4 presents the first of four themes: Theme 1, "Fit In or else": Institutionalizing children. This theme reflected students' experiences of the organization of schools. Chapter 5 discusses Themes 2 and 3. Theme 2, Students' participation in learning: Staying or leaving a "catch 22," addressed students' experiences participating in school and the

process of learning. Theme 3, Wellbeing and schooling: A perpetual cycle, explored the relationship between students' school experiences and their mental health in relation to their identity development. Chapter 6 discusses Theme 4, Re-designing schooling and re-creating futures: Employing imagination to create a new vision for a school, documenting the process of creating an imagined school that reflects the broader goals of education. Chapter 7 offers conclusions, implications, and ideas for future research.

Chapter2. Review of the literature

This literature review is shaped by and reflects the research questions addressed in this study. This chapter is divided into fivesections. In the first section,I present literature on the creation of successful alternative programs. The second section addresses the differences in schooling and education and the myth of meritocracy in the public school system. In the third section I focus on Vygotsky's theoretical perspective, and especially, the development of imaginativeplay, imagination and creativity that informs the theoretical framework for this research. The fourth section is focused on the literature on social imagination and innovation: an approach to engage youths' in an exploration of their schooling experiences in a creative way to address challenges they face in schools.In the fifth section, I discuss the concept ofsocial futures and participatory democracyin relation to the educational participation of youths who are marginalized.The chapter ends with a brief conclusion.

2.1   Alternative programs

The needs of learners change as society continues to change. Contemporary learners have diverse needs, strengths, and backgrounds that require the educational system to adapt and change by considering their interests and motivation for learning. It is essential that "school officials must address these [diverse needs] by thinking outside the box and creating alternative education settings that acknowledge the fact that not everyone can learn in the traditional classroom setting" (D'Angelo&Zemanick, 2009, p. 211). A variety of educational environments that can address the diversity of educational needs of children and youths is the key to their successful and meaningful learning experiences. The idea of equitable and just educational opportunities for a diversity of learners does not imply conformity with the existing style of mainstream schools and the need to be "fixed" in order to fit in (teRiele, 2007). Every student is unique and has

diverse educational and developmental needs and strengths that must be addressed and met by the public school system through diverse educational options that meet high educational standards.

The educational and employment situation in Canada clearly indicates that many children and youths do not fit into the mainstream educational system. They are in need of alternative programs that provide diverse high quality educational opportunities (NAEDB, 2015). Although, the number of alternative programs is on the rise in the United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia, the majority of students who attend these programs come from marginalized backgrounds. Many of these programs are stigmatized and hold "a deficit-focused paradigm that blames low-socioeconomic-strata students for their failure in school" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 208). These perceived stigmas place the blame for school failure and other challenges faced by the students on individual students and their families and disregard systemic factors.

Research demonstrates that alternative programs often provide safe and caring environments to their students, however, they do not meet the expectations for equitable education. In particular, in one alternative program in the United States (Kim & Taylor, 2008), the students were not prepared to continue their education at a post-secondary level after the completion of the program. The authors suggested the need for more rigorous curricula that "emphasizes critical thinking, synthesis, and higher order thinking" (p. 216) to provide the students with an opportunity to graduate with the grades needed to pursue post-secondary education. Although their building was new and had resources, the students and the teachers were not included in the decision making about their school. The large size of the building and inclusion of middle school students created a feeling of being back to the mainstream school that resulted in a loss of closeness and community-like feeling among the students. Students and

teachers need to be included in planning and developing the organization of learning and structure of the school.

Mills and McGregor (2016) evaluated alternative programs in Australia to discover what factors contributed to learning environments that addressed "the holistic needs of young people, particularly those on the margins of societies" (p. 198). The students in these programs came from marginalized backgrounds, and often experienced leaving school early, had challenging relationships with school teachers and administration, and some had personal challenges not related to school. The students lacked a system of supports while in the mainstream school that would have helped them to cope with adversities and stay in school. The authors emphasized that when the alternative program was "viewed 'different from' not 'inferior to' mainstream education" (p. 200) the students felt engaged with their program. The factors that promoted school engagement in alternative programs were: 1) material support for schools that provided teaching and learning opportunities, and 2) support services available through the program and in the community. Caring and positive relationships with teachers helped students to builda strong sense of self-esteem and confidenceand fostered interest in learning among students. Including students in creating "individualised approaches to assessing the starting point for each young person and then developing learning plans" (p. 213) helped teachers and students to work toward setting and attaining educational goals.

Alternative programs that offer a relational approach to education, identified as the key to children and youths' success in a program, are focused on "the following four themes: education of the whole person; young person-centered learning choices; supportive and highly skilled multidisciplinary staff; integration with quality community connections" (Morgan, 2009, p. 18). Holistic and person-centered practices are consistent with a non-punitive approach to deal with

students' challenges and consider their life and educational experiences to build trust between the students and their teachers and demonstrate respect for youths (Jeffries, Hollowell, & Powell, 2004). A holistic approach is also inclusive of building relationships with parents and communities and understanding their social, economic, emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs in addition to academic graduation requirements (Noddings, 2005; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Students' participation in decision making and governance of the learning program and mentorship are additional factors that contribute to the success of an alternative program.

Small student teacher ratio is another way to build mentorship-like relationships between students and their teachers (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009) and create a safe and supportive learning environment (Aron, 2003; de Jong, 2005; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Research also shows that programs are likely to be successful when a program's mission statement and a vision are: clear, specific and reflect students' needs; set out and follow through with high expectations for students' behaviour and performance; and facilitate personal responsibility and accountability for the students, (Conner & McKee, 2008; Johnston, Cooch, & Pollard, 2004; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004).

Student-focused approaches address the needs of young people as a priority, develop a learning plan that offers flexible program hours and, in many cases, include work experiences with local communities (Aron, 2003; de Jong, 2005; de Jong & Griffith, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Mills & McGregor, 2010; O'Brien, Thesing, & Herbert, 2001). Programs tend to be successful if they target the specific needs for curriculum modification, offer special courses that facilitate learning and life skills, address individual learning styles, and provide one-on-one assistance (Conner & McKee, 2008;Johnston et al., 2004; Lehr et al., 2004).

Flexible learning and work experiences provide youth with opportunities to explore potential career opportunities and develop life skills that support youth in their transition to post-secondary learning and employment. Teachers' and support staffs' professional competencies are invaluable in addressing complex and multidimensional needs of youth attending alternative programs (Morgan, 2009; Nelson, Sprague, Jolivette, Smith, & Tobin, 2009). Researchers note the potential of the approaches employed by the successful alternative programs to inform the mainstream schools' "practices positively and thus retain many of their more vulnerable students" (Mills & McGregor, 2016, p. 198).

2.2   From schooling to education

Schooling has been described as a system of inflexible rules and norms that offer limited learning opportunities that hinder the process of learning how to think (Spring, 2000; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). *Education,* on the other hand, creates an environment where a child feels free to express herself through diverse learning opportunities offered by the school system (Freire, 2001; Greene, 2000; John-Steiner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1994a). Freedom of expression in education is facilitated by teaching and learning approaches through which a child learns how to think, as well as how to construct and transform knowledge (John-Steiner, 1997; Vygotsky 1994a, b).

Learning is essential to child development. We are born to learn and learning sustains our lives (Ostroff, 2012). While learning takes place in both formal and informal contexts, systems of public education are the largest social institutions charged with teaching and learning in the western world. When schooling becomes compulsory and children and youths are required to attend, schools become responsible for the experiences of students. School becomes the dominant formal context and, thus, the primary learning experience for students. Schools are part of the educational system organized to provide opportunities for child development and for

fostering a desire to learn and develop further interest in future vocational and career aspirations that are meaningful and fulfilling to students. However, there are many systemic challenges to providing such opportunities for learning and development for all children based on their educational and developmental needs,and many students do not have equal and equitable opportunities within public schools.

In his history and sociology of American education, Spring (1996, 2000) identified the problems wrought by the myth of meritocracy. Although the state of education in the United States is in many ways different from that in Canada, the critique of the American school system illuminates potential concerns in Canadian schools. Spring (1996) noted that "[m]eritocracy is a concept of society based on the idea that each individual's social and occupational position is determined by individual merit, not political or economic influence" (p. 254). The idea of equal educational opportunities in the school system is supported by the myth of meritocracy.

The myth of meritocracy plays out in the school system in two ways: one, that the school system provides equal educational opportunities to all children; and two, that success in this "equal" environment is judged equitably and based on the merit of each student's individual work. The individual child, then, becomes responsible for making poor choices or for lack of effort if they are unsuccessful. The underlying issues perpetuating the cycle of oppressive marginalization are ignored or erased when the individual child is blamed. The goal of meritocratic education that called for "objectively selecting and preparing students for their ideal places in the social order" (p. 254) disregards the social and cultural biases—including biases related to political and economic power, social class, gender, race, sexual orientation—as having an impact on educators' abilities to evaluate the merit of children's work. Meritocracy is a tool that helps "to legitimize and protect [the] economic and social power" and to "manag[e] the

human capital" (p. 278). The idea that individual ability and hard work underpins success is a dominant ideology in Western/North American society and, as such, helps to legitimize and protect those in economic and social power. School systems are part of the expression of this power to the extent that they teach the idea that ability and hard work are rewarded fairly and, thus, legitimize the myth of meritocracy and position it as valid and appropriate.

Alternative programs can be viewed in relation to assumptions about meritocratic education. They provide an educational option to students who do not fit in with the mainstream school. However, as discussed earlier, the majority of students who attend alternative programs have challenging life trajectories and often come from marginalized backgrounds (Smith et al., 2008). The myth of meritocracy becomes clearly visible as they are placed in an alternative program because they are labelled "at-risk" for failing mainstream school while their life trajectories are often disregarded in place of individual blame.

From a Vygotskian perspective, neither the individual nor the environment determines paths in learning and development. Rather it is the relationship between a child and her environment that contributes to both the development of the child and the environment. In this study, the students attending alternative programs reflected on their experiences with schooling as having an impact on their educational trajectory. Thus, their relationship with the school environment played an important role in their school success, as did the meanings they made of their experiences in schools.

2.3   Vygotsky's perspective on child development, creativity, and freedom

Vygotsky (1987, 2011) focused on the dynamic process of change in child development, rather than static outcomes. He explained that child development and the development of culture are interconnected and based on the domains underlying the general genetic law of cultural

development: phylogenesis, sociocultural history, and ontogenesis (Wertsch, 1985). For Vygotsky, phylogenesis is the evolutionary process of the development of the human species that provides a starting point for each individual as a human being in a sociocultural environment. Ontogenesis addresses the process of change in individual development that takes place in social interactions between a child and her social environment: "In ontogenesis, a natural and cultural, or social, line of development interact to create the dynamics of change" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 22). Further, and different from his colleagues who argued that ontogeny merely recapitulated phylogeny, Vygotsky argued that the development of a child is mediated by sociocultural history, or the tools and sign systems present in her social environment and"…that a cultural line of development involving mastery of the meditationalmeans provided by a culture is combined with a natural line of development involving development and maturation" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 25). Biological and cultural development are in dialectical relationship with one another and do not follow the same developmental trajectory. Thus, development is shaped by learning and developing as adaptation to environments and, even more important, learning and developing as transformation of environments as individuals come to understand the cultural norms for what it means to be a child, youth and an adult in a given social context and then imagine and create beyond them (Göncü, Jain, & Tuermer2007; Kozulin, 2002; Vygotsky, 1994a).

The domain that Vygotsky (1994, 2004) added, sociocultural history, further specifies that learning and development take place in a specific historical and sociocultural context that influences an individual's imagination. The domain of sociocultural history addresses human development as an integral process in the historical development of culture. The relationship with the social environment is mediated through the use of cultural tools and signs; the most significant cultural tools and signs are semiotic systems, or systems of meaning making

(Wertsch, 1985). All human experience is mediated and all three domains are mutually connected in the process of development. A child's response to stimuli is mediated by the use of cultural tools and signs, and "the [child] actively modifies the stimulus situation as a part of the process of responding to it" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 14). It is through interaction with the social environment that microgenesis takes place through the creating of meaning of experiences. Mediated semiotic activity plays a significant role in the transformation of psychological functions from social to individual: "the interaction between mediational means and the individuals using them results in a continuous process of transformation and creativity" (Wertsch & Rupert, 1993, p. 230).

This study is focused on the relationship of the students attending alternative programs with their social environments and their vision for an imagined school. Applying Vygotsky's (1994, 2004) law of cultural development would emphasize that the challenges faced by students from marginalized backgrounds can be explained by exploring their complex relationships with their social environments, and that their imagination can guide them to form a vision for a new approach to education and learning.

2. 3.1 Imaginative play and imagination

Culture becomes visible in child's imaginative play. A child begins to appropriate cultural tools and sign systems in social interactions and develops her understandings and meanings through play and learning activities (Gajdamashko, 2006). Children possess imagination and creativity, but to a lesser extent than adolescents and adults given their limited experiences. Imagination develops graduallyand the development of imagination and reason are relatively independent of each other during childhood.

A child's imagination is largely based on a concrete thinking and the use of objects in play.From a developmental perspective, play is an opportunity for children to move from concrete thinking toward thinking abstractly (Vygotsky, 1978). Children's use and manipulation of concrete objects helps to facilitate and represent their imaginative ideas in play. For example, a box can represent a house or a car, or many other things that children imagine in their play. Imagination develops in childhood play when a child creates a new meaning and a function for an object: "whenever an object (for example, a stick) becomes a pivot for severing the meaning of a horse from a real horse" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 97). The symbolic representation of a horse on a stick is an imaginative process whereby a child begins to develop an understanding of "how to mediate a situation by the use of symbols" (Gajdamashko, 2006, p. 39). As the child continues to use an object in her play, however, it is the child's imagination that creates and recreates the symbolic meaning for an object, different from its original meaning.

Imaginative play is an important developmental activity that "has a dual function of being both a social interaction and a means of directing one's thoughts and actions" (Smolucha & Smolucha, 1986, p. 5). In play, a child is required to regulate her emotions and impulses, collaborate, discuss and solve problems, and create imagined situations and the rules for play to make play possible (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). A child develops the ability to sustain attention for the imagined situation by staying consumed by play following its rules and an imagined situation; one of the most important abilities developed in play. Imaginative play facilitates the ability to mentally engage with and sustain an imagined situation that leads to further development of conceptual thinking as the essential cognitive function in the future development of imagination(Bodrova et al., 2013).

Imagination begins to develop in childhood and develops rapidly in adolescence, and continues to develop "into the productive imagination of the adult" (Gajdamashko, 2006, p. 39). In adolescence, imaginative play becomes more abstract and conceptual in nature than the concrete manipulation of toys and other objects in children's play, such that "images, eidetic pictures and visual conceptions begin to play the same role in the imagination as a doll representing a child, or a chair representing a steam engine, in childish play" (Vygotsky, 1994a, p. 274). The concrete play of childhood evolves "in that it breaks its links with real object" (p. 279) and "the essential change which the adolescent's imagination undergoes, is the external rapprochement with thinking in concepts" (p. 281). The developmental transition from concrete or more context dependent thinking toward conceptual thinking is a process that further fosters fantasy, imagination, and creativity in adolescents and adults.

The development of imagination is an emergent process that "proceed[s] here not in a circle but in a spiral, passing through the same point at each new revolution while advancing to a higher level" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56). In addition to developmental changes taking place in the child, the social environments, often influenced by historical events, contribute to the change in imaginative play. The development of conceptual thinking allows imagination to create new knowledge, new solutions and understandings that potentially contribute to social change. "Imagination in adolescence is the successor to child play" (Vygotsky, 1994a, p. 275) that builds a desire for creative outcomes.

This study was focused on engaging students with their imagination. They reflected on their educational experiences, as well as their needs and strengths in learning and developing. Two processes allowed students to conceptualize and formulate a new vision for education that was further realized in building a model for an imagined school. Vygotsky's (1994a, 2004)

sociocultural theory and, specifically, his theoretical perspective on imagination and creativity provided theoretical grounding for this research.

2.3.2 Imagination and freedom

Imagination is a complex psychological function that develops rapidly in adolescence, plays an important role in the human ability to think in concepts, and is expressed in many creative forms. Vygotsky (2004) stressed that "the entire future of humanity will be attained through the creative imagination; orientation to the future, behaviour based on the future and derived from this future, is the most important function of the imagination" (p. 87). The development of imagination is essential to concept development and learning how to think, use, embrace, change and develop new ideas and knowledge. According to Vygotsky, the main goal in education should be to provide opportunities for the development and expression of the imagination in children and youths so that they can create their future, contribute to social change, and,thus, the development of culture. Imagination facilitates the development of the freedom of thought that allows individuals to openly reflect on their experiences and transform what is already known by re-imagining and re-creating cultural concepts and knowledge into something new. Freedom of thought and freedom of expression may enable the awareness of oppression and marginalization, providing opportunities for social change. Thus, for Vygotsky, the role of imagination in child development is to advance possibilities that will enhance cultural development.

The development of imagination plays a critical role in our ability to apply, change, and advance knowledge to perform and accomplish variety of tasks, and is the foundation for learning to be free (Barber, 1992; Vygotsky, 1994a). It is imagination that allows one to break away from "unfreedom" (Vygotsky, 1994a, p. 268),defined as a situational dependency and an inability to create new ideas for a given situation to make a change. The "fundamental task of

education in a democracy is theapprenticeship of liberty" (Barber, 1992, p. 4). When the development of imagination is hindered and educational environments are unable to create opportunities for breaking away from "unfreedom," children's "growth may be blocked; they are stopped from becoming different, from discovering a project, from creating an identity. …It is to deny the significance of *eros,* of desire – the passion, the energy, that moves human beings to explore, to learn to learn" (Greene, 2000, p. 9). Through their imagination,human beings transform knowledge, cultural tools, and ways of being by thinking beyond the context and the constraints imposed by various past environments.

The four laws of imagination explain how imagination and creativity develop based on the relationship between individual and sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 2004). The first law addresses the need for rich and diverse experiences. The second states that learning occurs through the experiences of others, shared through storytelling or written in texts, and from the events that take place and are represented in art, theatre, and other cultural forms in our sociocultural contexts. The third law explains the relationship between imagination and emotion as reciprocal and dialectical; imagination influences emotions and emotions influence the perceptions of events and experiences and influence meaning made and further imaginings. The fourth law states that imagination can become a reality in many diverse forms, such as a product, an event, a performance, and can have an affective influence on others.

The fundamental ideas underlying these laws are that cognition and emotion both influence imagination, and an individual's imagination and creativity can have a profound effect on further personal and cultural development. Imagination and creativity are the processes that involve a transformation of knowledge and a creation of new knowledge, a progression from what is already known toward new, innovative ideas based on social and cultural needs in a

specific context. Imagination and creativity are psychological functions of every human being and the goal of education is to facilitate their development (Vygotsky, 2004). Imagination is a psychological function essential to our ability to think in concepts and transform current knowledge, a process that leads to future learning and meaning making (Vygotsky, 2004). Creativity is the outcome of imagination, a manifestation of the transformation of knowledge from what is already known into new ideas that can become a reality.

Related to Vygotsky's (2004) ideas of transformation of knowledge as an opportunity to engage in meaningful learning experiences, Dewey's (1932/1997) definition of educative and mis-educative experiences provides a complementary view on how the relationship with a learning environment may promote or hinder child development. Dewey (1932/1997) discussed two kinds of educational experiences that influence the further development of the child. "Mis-educative" and "educative" (p. 25) experiences have different educational outcomes that can support or hinder a child's development. "Mis-educative" experiences stagnate learning and development by stalling the development of imagination and creativity. Such experiences might appear to be enjoyable and fun, exciting and interesting, however, if they have no connection or "continuity" (p. 35), and cumulatively do not enrich one another, or if they rely only on the transmission of the past knowledge, then they "may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits. The consequence of formation of such habits is inability to control future experiences" (p. 26). "Educative" experiences, on the other hand, promote the ability of a child to take what is known from the past, connect it with the present, and transform it into new knowledge that contributes to further learning and development. These experiences "which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences" (p. 27).

Both Vygotsky (1994) and Dewey (1932/1997) explained that experiences and their interactions, and the continuity of emotional connection to experiences,are invaluable to the development of intellect and affect that enable a child's future experiences. A child, who can transform her experiences through her imagination, has the capacity to realize her potential and re-envision her future.A child's reflection on her experiences impacts the vision of the future she develops throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. A child's vision for her future is largely shaped by the relationships she develops with others—parents and caregivers, peers, schools, social and community services, religious organizations, government, political and economic situation in the region—society and culture (John-Steiner, & Mahn, 1996;Moran & John-Steiner, 2003; Vygotsky, 1994a, b). The relations that a child develops with her social environment areof central importance; the dialectical relationship between the social environment and the experiences of a child influences how the child develops and makes meanings from the experiences. A change in a learning environment is reflected in a change in a child's relationship with that environment. In this research, students engaged with their imagination to reflect on their previous and current experiences with schooling and to create a teaching and learning environment they hadnever experienced before. For these students, freedom to imagine a school was consistent with Vygotsky's commitment to moving toward more equitable teaching and learning options for all children.

Vygotsky's ideas are elaborated through the scholarship of other theorists who addressed the differences between schooling and education (Dewey, 1932/1997; Greene, 2000).The systematic, continuous, regimented, standardized approach to learning that "enforce[s] artificial uniformity" (Dewey, 1932/1997, p. 62) is the experience of schoolingthat can be oppressive to some students who do not "fit-in" with the organization of learning and the structure of

mainstream schools.As opposed to schooling, education is liberating rather than oppressive; a processthrough whicha child engages in educational experiences that allow opportunities to enjoy the process of learning in a continuous and non-threatening manner and that promote the feeling of connectedness to the learning process (Dewey, 1932/1997). Education must be able to guide a child toward the development of imagination and creativity to unblock:

> the inner spaces that imagination can open up when it discloses alternative realities or ways of being, [and where] individuals are far more likely to break with the ordinary and the taken-for-granted. Visions may appear before their mind's eye –visions of what might be, what ought to be. Experiences of this kind are what direct attention to the deficiencies, the inequities in lived situations; they may, in fact, provoke persons to take action together – to transcend the deficiencies, to transform. (Greene, 2000, p. 9)

Diversity of and access to educational opportunities available to all children and youths contribute to the creation of equitable education and "every effort should be made to find a program suited to the student's talents, interests, and willingness to persevere" (Noddings, 2011, p. 5).Opportunities to explore individual talents and interests offered to children and youth through educational engagement must be available to contribute to equality of education that is socially just.

In this research, students engaged in reflecting on their schooling experiences, discussed their emotional responses further providing an avenue for re-imagining and envisioning innovative ways to create different opportunities for learning, and built upon strengths to craft a model for an imagined school that would address their developmental and learning needs.

2.4   Social imagination and innovation

Existing approaches in the school system that offer to balance and reduce differences in academic achievement are often band-aid style approaches; moreover, they have not been shown to be useful or successful in addressing the challenges faced by the children and youths in their pursuit of education (Shields et al., 2005). This situation reproduces deficit thinking and perpetuates a disparity between the opportunities for learning and future success of many children and youths (Valencia, 2010). Including experiences and the needs of children, youth, their families, and their teachers provides a foundation for envisioning different educational opportunities that may prove to be meaningful for people who have historically been marginalized in the process of schooling (Fine, 2010).

Social imagination may be one way to address deficit thinking in school system: social imagination can be defined as "a capacity to envisage a transcending of the violence, the unfairness, the alienation, the carelessness we see and feel around us" (Greene, 2000, p. 13). Social imagination addresses the need for understanding the development of imagination as a social responsibility.Creative exploration, as an acofimagination

> is required to disclose a different state of things, to open the windows of consciousness to what might be, what ought to be. Imagination allows for empathy, for a tuning in to another's feelings, for new beginning in transactions with the world. (Greene, 2008, p. 18)

Social imagination is a key to social innovation, defined by Goldenberg (2004), as a collaborative approach involving young people together with experts from a diversity of disciplines to challenge and address the complexity of unmet needs in public schools today. Social innovation is an emerging concept and practice that is defined "as an iterative process that

often entailsprecisely these new forms of collaboration, including "co-creation" and "co-production" among citizens and institutional actors" and may be seen "as responding to challenges that are not beingaddressed through conventional approaches and thatoften require new forms of collaboration" (Government of Canada Policy Research Initiative, 2010, p. 1). Social innovation is a future oriented emergent process, where "outcomes of iterative and 'messy' processes are unpredictable and often take years to fully manifest; they are largely local and place-based, though often leading to 'significant [long-term] society wide changes'" (Conrad, 2015, p. 4).

Involving youths as valuable stakeholders in social innovation provides an opportunity to hear ideas that may help to transform existing knowledge, create new knowledge, and transform experiences in schools. A central point "is that marginalized youths (and youths more generally) are already marginalized and that a responsible and just education has to invest students' lives with the right and the ability to have an influence" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 334) in decision making about their learning and their future. Engaging students with their imagination to express their vision for a new school in a creative way may contribute to social innovation (Government of Canada Policy Research Initiative, 2010).Contributing to social innovation through self-expression allows young people to embrace and openly experience their understandings of the need for education and of their positioning by society as marginalized or "at-risk" (Conrad, 2015). For youths, engaging in social innovation is likely to be a liberating and empowering experience, reflecting on their abilities to transform past knowledge and understandings of their lives and their future. The complexity of challenges faced by youths who are marginalized calls for multidimensional interconnected perspectives to address these challenges by engaging in transdisciplinary initiatives that go beyond a single discipline.

2.5   Toward social futures and participatory democracy

The development of imagination, the freedom of thought, and "a universal human ethic" (Freire, 2001, p. 23) becomes stagnated if individuals believe that their thoughts and actions are determined by the environment and cannot change. Imagination is required to think of different possibilities to resolve problematic societal issues. It is through educational practice that we can "offer youths an opportunity to find and develop their creative voices as a means to 'push beyond ascribed lives' and to find a place in collective movements for social change and social justice" (O'Connor & Allen, 2010, p. 165).

There is a need for a place wherein adults, as mentors and organizers, share a vision for social change and justice with silenced and marginalized young people and together they create a place for connection, for the transformation of knowledge and the development of self-expression. Mentorship and recognition, high expectations and a commitment to a cause are some of the ways to support young people in finding their voice and provide an avenue for the voice to be heard (O'Connor & Allen, 2010). With this comes the ability to re-envision and re-create a path toward a meaningful life that does not exist in isolation and can have an impact on one's self and others. During such a process of knowledge construction and re-construction, youths can engage in "apprenticeship" (p. 161) with the community of learners and mentors where "[t]hey are learning how to listen, how to consider the perspectives of others" (p. 169) and it is through this process that learning takes place. Learning is an emergent process rather than a predicted practice, and is the key for the development of imagination and creativity that facilitates freedom to explore and imagine, test different ideas, develop new ones, build a trajectory of learning, experience a sense of meaningfulness and accomplishment and organize

"social futures" for young people by connecting the past, present and the potential future experiences and actions.

Learning opportunities where young people engage in the development of imagination and creativity as an ongoing and emergent process, brings about an experience of "participatory democracy" where youths can participate as "apprentice citizens" guided by their educators as "masters practitioners… …in collective self-government" (Kelly, 2014, p. 391) with the goal in mind of becoming full democratic citizens. The ideas of participatory democracy in relation to school organization often contradict the top-down dominant power structures of many public schools. Children and youth from marginalized backgrounds might be more attuned to such inequality in relationships with their educational environments. The most vulnerable children and youth become further marginalized by the lack of democratic participation in their schools, instead they need to be given an opportunity to become apprentice citizens and be "treated as de facto citizens or full-fledged political actors" (p. 391). As discussed earlier, public alternative programs are often lack resources, and are often marginalized and stigmatized to be able to embrace participatory democracy and to strive for equality in educational opportunities and encourage the participation of students.

One reason for establishing public alternative programs is to provide an opportunity for completing high-school for those children and youths who are labelled "at risk" for leaving school or already have left school. These students are rarely included in collaborative discussion with teachers and school administration about their challenges or breaking a school rule. The consequences for misbehaviour are often predetermined and imposed, and "too many alternative programs operate similarly, by threatening to exclude those who violate attendance and other rules" (Kelly, 2014, p. 400). Only through meaningful participation in their educational

environments can youth stay on a path of democratic citizenship and be engaged political actors. Educational environments are supposed to strive "to create more participatory governance models and socially just curricula and pedagogies that help to keep alive the promise of a more egalitarian and democratic society" (p. 405). Learning to be free from imposed constraints and past experiences, to be able to challenge marginalization and oppression, and to re-envision future possibilities and opportunities is the goal of democratic education.

2.6   Summary

In Chapter 2, I first presented a review of the literature on alternative programs and addressed the educational approaches and factors contributing to the creation of successful alternative programs. Next, I attended to differences between schooling and education. The idea of meritocracy in public education was discussed to emphasise that the relationship between a learning environment and a child's experiences with schooling directly impacts a child's development. Further, I addressed Vygotsky's theoretical perspective on imagination and creativity to provide theoretical grounding that addresses the goal for this research. This research is focused on youths' engagement with their imagination to create a vision for educational and learning experiences that embrace social futures and participatory democracy model. Then, I discussed the importance of engaging youths in the process of social innovation as the means to address a challenging situation in an unconventional and creative way to initiate a positive change in their educational experiences.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The exploratory nature of the research questions and the complexity of the phenomenon were the main reasons for choosing a qualitative approach to conduct this study (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This research engaged students in a process to explore their vision for education guided by the following questions:

1) What do the students attending alternative programs say they need to graduate from high school?

2) What would a school look like that provides opportunities for meeting these students' educational needs and integrating their strengths?

Chapter 3 is divided into sevensections. The first section addresses the researcher's positionality. The second sectiondescribes the process-orientedqualitative approach utilized in this research. The third section presents participants and therecruitment process. The process of informed consent to participate in research is also discussed. The fourth sectiondiscusses data collection. The fifth section describes the sharing circles and the project to create a school model schedule. The sixth section addresses the procedure for analysing interviews and sharing circles. The seventh section discusses the issue of validity in this research. This chapter ends with a short summary.

3.1   Researcher's positionality

My interest in this research topic grew out of my personal experiences with in/equalities in public education in the countries where I have lived for extended periods of time. These experiences motivated me to examine the relationships between educational issues and social contexts and, in particular, how these relationships influence individual students' lives.

Growing up in the former Soviet Union, opportunities for education and development appeared to be available to all children who lived in large urban areas. I grew up in a large industrial city. I remember my engagement at school was not only focused on academic performance, but also on life-skills, trades, home-economics, arts and music, sports and dance. These opportunities were part of the school program starting in Grade 4 and 5 and they continued throughout high-school. Some of these opportunities were offered at the school and others were at the local community center. My education was free; there was no cost attached to any academic, non-academic, or extracurricular activities offered at the school or in the community. In addition to opportunities for holistic learning and development, schools also provided a hot breakfast and lunch to all students. The cost was insignificant, and children whose families could not afford to pay were provided with free food daily, just as everyone else. As every student in all public schools, I wore a uniform from elementary through high school and in many ways, I was happy to have a uniform as my family could not afford the variety of clothing I would have needed for everyday of school. Some would argue that a uniform is a strategy for conformity. For me, it was an opportunity for equity; with a uniform there was little visible difference between the students of different SES in my school. Opportunities for self-expression and participation in diverse learning environments were available for every student to demonstrate and further develop their unique skills, interests and talents.

There were numerous options for post-secondary education that met the diverse educational needs of students and provided choices for educational advancement. A student completing Grade 8 could make a decision to stay in a mainstream high-school until full completion at Grade 10 or to apply to a variety of professionally focused post-secondary educational settings. There, they would have an opportunity to complete high school and receive

a professional certificate that would lead to employment. Anyone of these students would have enough credentials to continue their education at a university if they wished. Those who stayed on to complete high school had the same options for access to a professional post-secondary option or any university. I do not recall any incidents of my classmates dropping out of school. I completed the full 10 years of high school and went onto university to complete my first degree in engineering sciences. Regardless of age, or level of education attained, it seemed that anyone could pursue any post-secondary educational option for free at that time.

I come from a collectivist culture where the traditional values of Russian heritage are followed, preserved, and, by virtue of individual commitments, transformed by every generation. These traditions provided me with the cultural development that is the foundation for my identity. Stories, songs, dance, and legends shared were the building blocks of who I became and continue to become. Russian culture is rich and also has a dramatic history of oppression, dictatorship, wars and poverty that has shaped my life and the experiences of my family. Despite that, my educational experiences were positive and provided me with opportunities that were offered to every child, at least in the urban areas. Revisiting Noddings's (2011) statement that "every effort should be made to find a program suited to the student's talents, interests, and willingness to persevere" (p. 5), I feel I was given the opportunity to engage with education, rather than schooling, to build my identity on a positive ground and persevere with the many things I wanted to do as a child. The cultural and historical situation and the ideology of the country within which I grew shaped the structure of my school and learning environments.In turn, my relationship with my school and learning environments shaped my development.

Before my immigration to Canada, I had little knowledge of educational programs outside Russia. Through my experiences with education in Canada, I began to learn more about

educational issues in western countries such as Canada, the United States, the UK, and Australia. The more I learned the more I became concerned about the lack of equalityin educational options, especially for children and youth who were marginalised and poor, just like I was when I was growing up. My first encounter with the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people in Canada took place in my undergraduate English literature course. One of the readings was the play,"The Ecstasy of Rita Joe," written by a son of Ukrainianimmigrants to Canada, George Riga (1967). This play was the turning point in my life when I became deeply moved and engaged in learning further about the history of Indigenous people in Canada.Learning about the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people and minorities in Canada and other countries, I often felt a strong calling to work for justice for the people who aremarginalised, especially minorities, immigrants, single parent families, and Indigenous people.

Although I come into this study as a Caucasian, European female immigrant, I feel deeply connected to the issues of inequality of education in Canada. I understand that my position as researcher is a privileged one, and that I had many educational and learning opportunities that the students I have engaged with in this research did not and do not have. However, the goal I had for this research wasto work together with these youths to create an opportunityto engage with their imagination, and to create a vision for education that meets their needs and recognizes their unique strengths and talents. I am grateful to have had this privilege toengage with the ideas and visions of the youths who are most silenced by the system and placed into a category of young people who are "at-risk," "lost," and/or "troubled."

It is also important to me as a researcher to attend to the issue of representation of the students' voices in my research. I understand that engaging them in research is a circular process of interaction and that the relationship influences the process and the outcome of the research.

My goal was to learn from the participants and share their experiences, however, I recognize I cannot adequately represent their voices. Students are the experts in their experiences. Sharing what they have shared with me will never fully represent their perspectives. My perceptions and my understandings of their experiences have an impact on representing them in my own words. I am not able to share their voices,yet I helpedto createan opportunity for sharing their stories. Through member checking, the studentsreviewed their interviews and my understandings throughout sharing circles and provided immediate feedback reflecting on and connecting with what I wrote they were saying.

3.2   Process-oriented qualitative research

Qualitative research, as an exploration, is in itself a process that takes time and involves relationship building with the participants. Participants must co-lead the inquiry into the realities of their lives. In process-oriented research,there are many aspects that cannot be controlled by the researcher; the process of research is emergent and the researcher needs to be able to deal with ambiguity and address the unexpected ups and downs in the process, continually reviewing and relating the process to the research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Frankel & Devers, 2000; Wilson, 2007). Wilson (2007) suggested that the researcher must continually reflect on the process of research in relation to the research questions and methods used in the research to address them including: relationship building between the researcher and participants; relationships between the topic of research and all those engaged; roles and responsibilities of the researcher; and the researcher's contribution to the relationship with the participants. There is a great deal of ethical responsibility in process-oriented research (Trenholm, 2014).

3.3 Participants and recruitment

Prior to recruitment, a number of meetings took place with the assistant superintendent of the school district to discuss my research, the district's interest in participation, and to establish a research protocol according to University of British ColumbiaBehavioural Research Ethics Board (UBC BREB) and the School District requirements. I also met with the principals of two alternative programs, a district counsellor overseeing alternative programs,and the Aboriginal Educational Committee to present on my research and receive their approval. I received the UBC BREBapproval and the participating School Districtpermission to conduct research. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, all names mentioned by the participants were changed, and all locations and school names were also changed for confidentiality.

Prior to connecting with any potential participant to invite their participation in my research, I spent two months volunteering at bothalternative programs to build relationships with the students, teachers, and administration. My experience volunteering was not part of the research or data collection, but provided me with an opportunity to immerse myself in the culture of the schools, and make connections with the youths and school staff.

3.3.1 Studentparticipants

The students attending two alternative programs in a school district in the Lower Mainland were invited to take part in this research project.The area where the programs were located shares an urban and rural style of living.An alternative middle schoolprogram was located in a rural setting and an alternative high school programwas located in anurban centerof the same school district. There were about two hundred studentsacross two programs. Male and female students from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds, between 15 and 19 years old,were invited to participate.

A total of 11 students between the ages 15 and 19 took part in the semi-structured interviews: Amber, Andrew, Conrad, Donna, Kelsey, Michelle, Shaelyn, and Tatiana were students from the alternative high school program (AHS), and Chris, Miranda, and Robert attended the alternative middle school program(AMS) at the start of the research project (see Table 3.1). Miranda transferred to the alternative high school later in the school year. Four of the students were from Indigenous backgrounds and others were of diverse European-Canadian backgrounds. They had spent from 1.5 to 5 years in alternative programs and all but one student lived in a single parent family or with a relative. One student was living by herself.The students had diverse educational and career interests, and all but one said they want to pursue post-secondary education.The student whodid notwant to pursue a post-secondary education was interested in getting a job and, possibly, to start his own business in a few years. All students shared mental health challenges, such as anxiety or depression, or a health related issue that contributed to theirabsence from mainstream school. One Indigenous student shared that participation in cultural practices kept her from attending school and became one of the reasons for falling behind in schoolwork. Some of the students came from a chaotic family life environment, experienced foster care, loss of a parent, parental divorce, poverty, abuse, addiction, and bullying in mainstream schools.

All students took part in the individual interviews and sharing circles. The number of students available for any given circle and the project to create an imagined school model varied between eight and one.Ten students had a parent or guardian whosigned the informed consent form. Michelle was 19 years old at the time and did not require her parents to sign the informed consent form.I asked the students and their parents to read and sign the consent form, place the complete form in an envelope provided to them, seal it, put my name on the envelope and drop it

off at the principal's office if I was not at the school. The principals at both school locations collected the consent forms in a sealed envelope and stored them for me to pick up. Parental consent was part of the single informed consent document that was provided to students and to parents (see Appendix B).

The research project was widely presented to the students in both school locations to create an inclusive climate for participation. The staff of both schools was aware of the study taking place in their schools based on my presentations in their classes and the distribution of information to the students. During my presentations, I talked with students about informed consent and the reasons for them and their parents or guardians to sign the consent. Studentswere asked to read the consent form and e-mail me or talk with me in person if they had any questions or wished to change or add something to the form.

To conduct research with vulnerable populations it is often helpful to have gatekeepers that provide access to potential participants and demonstrates support for their participation in research. The principals of both schools provided support in the recruitment process by talking with students on different occasions, explaining the reasons behind this study, and encouraging them to participate. Some of the students were introduced to me directly by the principals as potential participants; however, voluntary participation was emphasized on a number of occasions. Not all students who were introduced to me by the principals agreed to participate. Other potential participants brought their friends along to find out more about this research and decided to participate. Only the students who voluntarily expressed their interest in being part of this research project were further engaged. Pseudonyms were assigned and used in data collection, thisdissertation and the dissemination of results.Participating in the study was considered bythe school administration a learning experience for students, and the students

whoparticipated in the research project received an additional credit toward their graduation requirements. Every participant was provided with a gift card in the amount of $15 at the completion of the project.

Table 3.1 Student participants

Pseudonym / Gender / Age/ Program	Years in alternative program	Culturalheritage	Careergoal
Amber (F) 18 AHS	3	Indigenous	Educational Assistant /Post-secondary
Andrew (M)16 AHS	2	English/ French	Work/Self employed No post-secondary
Conrad (M)18 AHS	4	French and Ukrainian	Photographer/ Comedian/Art Work/post-secondary
Donna (F) 18 AHS	4	Scottish	Carpenter/ Building guitars Post-secondary
Kelsey (F) 17 AHS	2	Hungarian	Nursing/Vet assistant Post-secondary
Michelle (F) 19 AHS	5	Métis and German	Trades/ Post-secondary
Shaelyn (F) 17 AHS	1 ½	Indigenous Irish	Forensic Psychologist/ Post-secondary
Tatiana (F) 17 AHS	3	Italian	Fashion and marketing / Post-secondary
Miranda (F) 15 AMS	4	Indigenous Ukrainian	Roofing/Trades Post-secondary
Robert (M) 15 AMS	2	Did not share	Not sure
Chris (M) 15 AMS	2	Did not share	Conservation officer/Police Work Post-secondary

3.3.2 Adult participants

The area of the school district was located on the traditional ancestral unceded territory of the Stó:lō Nation with a number of First Nations reserves. The territory of Stó:lō Nation is vast, and "...the word Stó:lō (literally 'river') is applied to all the Indigenous people and communities along the lower Fraser River and its tributaries between Sailor Bar Rapids (nine kilometres above Yale) and the Strait of Georgia" (Carlson, 2001, p. 2) including the territory on both sides of the Fraser River. Although some of the Indigenous communities located on this territory are not officially affiliated with the Stó:lō Nation, "if there is one clear finding in the research ..., it is that the unity among and similarities between these diverse communities are greater than the still important and significant differences" (p. 2).Over the years, the school districthad built and continued to build astrong relationship with the First Nations communities. With support of the school district administration, I was invited to present my research proposal at the Aboriginal Educational Committee consisting of educators and community members to share my research proposal, ask for recommendations, and inquire about further connections with the community Elders. One of the members represented the Indigenous Community Elders' committee and invited me to further present on my research to the Elders at their next gathering. I attended the meeting and shared my research plan with over 20 community Elders. I invited them to consider participating in my project.

The rationale for including an Elder from the local community was to acknowledge the local Indigenous practice of holding sharing circles and to demonstrate respect for the traditional ancestral territory where the sharing circles took place. One of the Elders' contacted me two weeks later and offered her support and desire to participate. I met with the Elder after receiving the UBC BREB and School District's approvals. We discussed the research project and I shared

the handout and the informed consent form with her. She signed the informed consent form prior to her participation in the sharing circles. In appreciation for leading sharing circles,shewas provided with a $30gift card.

Two architects werealso invited to take part in sharing circles to guide the creative process of creating the imagined schoolwith the participating students.I discussed possible contacts with UBC faculty who connected me with Cameron via e-mail, one of the architects who agreed to participate in the project. I met with him to discuss the research and provided him with a written summary of the research and the informed consent form. He signed the consent form prior to his participation in sharing circles. As a result of our discussion, Cameron connected me with Paul via e-mail, another architect from the same community where the alternative programs were located. When I met with Paul, he shared with me that he was of Indigenous ancestry and lived in the community. I followed the same recruitment protocol with Paul and he signed an informed consent form. Both architects were experts in designing learning and educational spaces. Following an Indigenous traditional approach for recognizing someone who contributes their knowledge and time to support students, both received a$30 gift card.

3.3.2 On-going informed consent

All participants, including the Elder and the architects, signed an informed consent form that explained the nature of the study, the expectations for participation and indicated that participation was voluntary and any participant could withdraw from research at any time (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Ethical concerns have been raised when consent is a single document reviewed at the beginning of a study that allows the researcher to pursue the research over a period of time (Renold, Holland, Ross, & Hillman, 2008). First, consent as a document permitting researchers' engagement with potential participants originates from a positivist

paradigm. Second, although it explains the process of research and describes participation as voluntary, it does not take into consideration that qualitative inquiry is often an ongoing, interactive, relational process that evolves over time and engages the participants on a number of occasions and often in different contexts. For these reasons, it is important to address informed consent as an ongoing open-ended process of "critical reflexivity" (p. 429) where each participant is "becoming participant, which foregrounds the dynamic, complex and shifting nature of the ways in within 'participants' are positioned and position themselves within the research process" (p. 429). The participants were involved in a number of contexts in an on-going process-oriented research project and were reminded that their participation was voluntary and asked whether they had any concerns with their consent.

The students who participated in the project came from diverse backgrounds and a single review of the consent at the initial stage of the project only reinforced the power differential between the researcher and the participants;this goes against the position taken by the researcher in this study. As a qualitative research drawing onVygotsky's theoretical perspective,I recognize the role of the social environment and the relationshipsstudentscreated with their environment as evolving and changing. Considering the approach of "becoming participant" throughout the research process with youths who weremarginalised provided a continuing reminder to the participants of their choice to be part of the research. The process of "becoming participant" also reflects the idea of participatory democracy, in that it is a space for students to become contributors to and creators of the research process (Kelly, 2014).

I addressed informed consent in each interview, as well as in sharing circles, to address the process-oriented approach accepted in this research. The students were reminded that they couldadd their ideas and expectations for participation in this research. Every participant was

first invited to take part in an individual interview and then to participate in sharing circles and the project to create an imagined school. We addressed their further participation as negotiable and these points were reflected in the consent process throughout the research project. In addition, I asked if they had questions about any parts of the research; openly disclosed and demonstrated the recording equipment; stated that they have the right to withdraw at any time during the project. I also asked them to tell me if there was any information they shared that they wanted to exclude from the research data. I explained that, as a researcher, I kept field notes reflecting on my experiences and observations as the research evolved. As part of this research project, the studentswere involved in the creation of a visual representation of their ideas for education.On the informed consent form, I asked students for permission to include photographs of their artwork in my dissertation and further potential publications. I also informed all participants that I am obligated to report any information disclosed by the participants that implicates the participant or another person(s) as in danger of being harmed orofharming someone else.

3.3.3 Debriefing protocol

At the time of completion of the interviews, sharing circles, and informal gatherings where we worked to complete the model, I met with each participant to debrief about their experience with participating in this research(see Appendix D and Appendix E). Participation in the interviews and sharing circlesmay have provoked emotional responses that were stressful for the participants.I had the contact information for school support services, community supports, and a crisis line contact for the regional crisis response team in case any of the students needed support. However, although students shared some personal and sensitive experiences, they did not report experiencing emotional distress and did not request any additional support. All of the

students stated that they enjoyed the project. I provided them with the debriefing protocol to let them know that they couldcontact me or my research supervisor with any questions about the research if they arose later. In the debriefing protocol,I asked them to provide me with their contact information so I could send them the results of my research project.

3.4   Data collection

While the research was conductedover 14 months in total, 11qualitative semi-structured interviews were completed prior to ninesharing circlesthat occurred over four months duringschool. This time allowed the researcher both to "delve deeply into social and personal matters" while also gathering "a wider range of experience" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 41). Both were audio recorded and includedresearcher's field notes that were integrated in the data analyses.Triangulation of data from multiple sources was used to produce a comprehensive and well-developed response to the research questions (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). Table 3.2 demonstrates how the different sources of data addressedeach of the research questions.

The data collection procedure was guided by the theoretical and methodological frameworks for this research. Four sources of data collection included: the interviews, the sharing circles, the development of the imagined school completed by the students, the researcher and the architects, and the researcher's field notes (see Table 3.2). These sources of data were collected at the alternative program facilities during regular school hours, and a specific room was provided by the school administration.

Table 3.2 Data triangulation framework

Research questions	Source 1: Interviews	Source 2: Sharing circles	Source 3: Imagined school model	Source 4: Field notes
1. What do the students attending alternative programs say they need to graduate from high school?	Codes emerged from the transcription of the interview data. Themes emerged from the interviews.	Group responses based on the themes from the interviews addressed in each sharing circle. Codes and themes that emerged from the architects' and students' collaborative discussions. Cultural understandings derived from the Elder's participation	Visual expression of themes discussed in the interviews and sharing circles.	Researcher's observations collected during the students' participation in research.
2. What would a school look like that provides opportunities for meeting these students' educational needs and integrating their strengths?	Codes emerged from the transcription of the interview data. Themes emerged from the interviews.	Group responses based on the themes from the interviews addressed in each sharing circle. Codes and themes that emerged from the architects' and students' collaborative discussions. Cultural understandingsderived from the Elder's participation in sharing circles.	Visual expression of themes discussed in the interviews and sharing circles.	Researcher's observations collected during the students' participation in research.

The process of interviewing required the researcher's awareness of power differentials between the social roles of the researcher and the participants. It was important for me to be mindful of the reciprocal nature of the interviewing process and allow myself to contribute to the conversation when it appeared to be necessary to balance participation and build trust. As mentioned above, I volunteered at both schools prior to conducting my research to build relationships, as well as to learn about school dynamics, to meet and get to know the students and the teachers, and to allow time for them to learn about me. It was not an easy task to connect with some students; it would have been beneficial to have spent even more time in the schools before the start of research to get involved with some of their activities.

3.4.1 Interviews

Prior to interviewing the student participants, I conducted a pilot interview with one 17 year oldhigh school student to clarify interview questions and duration. The pilot interview lasted about 45 minutes and confirmed that the interview questions elicited the kind of responses expected. Data from the pilot interview was not included in the final analysis. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conductedover a two-month period prior to sharing circleswith each youth who agreed to participate in the study after discussing, negotiating, and signing an informed consent form. Three interviews were conducted at the alternativemiddle school program with three students attending this program: Chris (15), Robert (15), and Miranda (15). Eight interviews were conducted with eight students attending high school alternative program at another location:Andrew (16), Amber (18),Conrad (18), Kelsey(17), Shaelyn (17), Michelle (19), Tatiana (17), and Donna (18). The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1hour.Each program was located in a different area of the city and the buildings were not part of any mainstream school in the district.

The process of interviewing is a collaboration between the researcher and the participants, a social event where knowledge is co-constructed, and "[p]articipation in an interview involves meaning-making work" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114). The engagement of both parties is an "*active"*process that addresses the question of *"how"* the knowledge is constructed and meanings are created, and "*what"* is asked guides the interview to address the focus of the interview and the answers produced by the interviewee (p. 114). Another aspect of active interviewing is the idea of "interviews as a social practice" where the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer is valued as necessaryfor knowledge creation (Talmy, 2010).The approach of active interviewing as a social practice of knowledge production

is consistent with Vygotsky's (1994a, 2004) perspective that views social interaction as essential for meaning making and the creation of new knowledge.

I prepared guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C). These questions were helpful to begin the dialogueand provided support to stay on topic. As anticipated, I posedadditional questions and probed when questions did not elicit information pertaining to the research. When needed, I re-phrasedthe questions to clarify the meaning (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).The interviews were audio-recorded and the recorded data weredownloaded onto my personal computer and encrypted following the UBC BREB guidelines for the encryption of electronic documents. The data were deleted from the recording device after it was downloaded to my computer.

3.4.2   Sharing circles

Sharing circles are used in Indigenous communities as a means of communication to bring a group of people together for a discussion of:

> issues and topics in an egalitarian, supportive and non-confrontational manner. They
>
> reflect the indigenous*[sic]*people's values of sharing, supporting each other and
>
> respecting life experiences through the use of personal interactions, and group
>
> consensus to identify problems and derive solutions. (Rothe et al., 2009, p. 336)

The main purpose for using sharing circles in this research was to bring the participating students, together as a group to discuss their ideas and, in collaboration, create a vision for an imagined school. A sharing circle is a place where people gather to discuss diverse issues and topics in a collaborative atmosphere, "to capture people's experiences" (Lavallee, 2009, p. 28), and to create community membership where ideas and experiences can be shared in a safe and supportive environment. In research, hearingone's own story was a potential learning experience

for both participants and researcher. Sharing circles were chosen for this research given their differences from focus groups (see Table 3.3). Sharing circles are cultural practice and an Indigenous epistemology. This research was conducted on the traditional ancestral unceded territory of the Stó:lōpeople who has been caretakers for the land for thousands of years. It is a relevant way for all who share these lands today to harmonize the Indigenous and Western knowledges into a process of knowledge construction. Elders are the carriers of "the traditional teachings, the ceremonies, and the stories of all our relations" (Lavallee, 2009, p. 27). Stó:lō territory spreads over thousands of acres of land and acknowledging that this research took place on the Stó:lō traditional territory preserved the right of the ownership of the land. Sharing circles were conducted once or twice a week over a four month period.

As phase two of research, total of nine sharing circles were conducted after the completion of the interviews. All eleven students were invited to participate in every circle, however, participation in the circles varied from between eight students to one student. The Elder attended circles one and eight, Cameron attended circles four, five and seven, and Paul attended circle nine and also cameto one of the informal meetings with the students to help build the model. Intentionally, Idid not assign a pseudonym to the Elder, so that her presence as a carrierof and a contributortoIndigenous knowledgewould be recognized throughout this research, in writing thedissertation, and in further dissemination of results. All participants were reminded about the voluntary nature of their participation and asked whether they had anyquestions or comments prior to the start of each circle.All sharing circles were audio-recorded. The recorded data were treated in the same manner as the interview data in accordance with UBC BREB requirements.

It was a challenge to have all 11 participants come together as a group on the same day and time once a week. Students' program attendance, class schedule, personal relationships with other participants, and different program locations were factors that contributed to the difficulty with the students' availability. For these reasons the number of sharing circles increased from the initially anticipated five to nine, so that all students could take part in at least one circle to share and contribute ideas. Eight sharing circles took place at the alternative high school program location and one sharing circle took place at the alternative middle school program location. Robert and Chris attended one circle at the alternative high school program when their schedule allowed me to bring them there, as well as the circle at the alternative middle school program. The duration of each circle varied from 30 minutes to 1 hour and ten minutes, and seemed to depend on the number of the participants. The duration of the circle also depended on the students' interests. Rothe et al. (2009) indicated a circle takes from 3-8 hours. For my research, I estimated it would take from 1 to 2 hours given the limited time in the school day and arrangements for breaks, classes, field trips and other activities that determined the availability of youths for participation while they were at their program.

During circle time, each person spoke as long as they wished, and as we worked together our conversations became a more natural exchange of ideas and feedback. Students were mindful of others and tried not to interfere with each other's talking. Snacks and drinks were offered during each sharing circle. A circle usually ended when the participants felt that the topic was exhausted and no one had anything to add, or when everyone agreed to stop and continue next time. Sometimes a student had to go back to class, felt sick, or had to go on a field trip, and would leave a circle before it was finished. The Elder attended two sharing circles and was not

able to do the closing of the sharing circles as I had anticipated. I closed each circle by thanking everyone for coming and sharing their ideas and reminded them about the next meeting.

The Elder's support and guidance enriched the experience of all participants and set the tone for the duration of the project. The Elder engaged with the students in a mediated learning activity where she shared her own story, commented and validated students' experiences, kept students focused, and reinforced the value of their participation in this study. She also contributed to the positive and humble dynamics of the sharing circle experience and stimulated the students' engagement with reimagining a school *for* education. Through her actions and interactions with the students, she emphasized a process-oriented way of communicating ideas and experiences.Although not all participants shared Indigenous worldviews or came from an Indigenous cultural tradition, recognition and acknowledgment of the local Indigenous approach to sharing circles opened a space for discussion about cultural inclusion for Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants who might come from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Table 3.3Typical differences and similarities among person-to-person interview, focus groups and Sharing Circles (Rothe et al., 2009, p. 337)

Features	Person-to-person interviews	Focus group interviews	Sharing circle interviews
Interview location	Convenient, non-threatening location	Central and neutral large room	Culturally relevant location where rituals can be held
Length of interview	Typically, up to 1 h	Typically, up to 2 h	Range from 3 to 8 h
Speaker turn-taking	Led by interviewer	Led by interviewer	Cultural artifact such as a feather or ''talking stick'' is passed on to next speaker
Question format	Varies. Usually semi-structured. 10–15 questions	Varies. Usually semi-structured. 10–15 questions	Oral history or open-ended questions. Varies from 1 to 5 Questions

Features	Person-to-person interviews	Focus group interviews	Sharing circle interviews
Recruitment	Volunteers through intake services, organised groups, agencies or advertising in media	Volunteers from community, often through advertising in media or posters	Volunteers from community by word of mouth, initiated bycommunity group, cultural centre or local stakeholder
Interviewer quality	Trained interviewer who has a particular background (e.g, psychology)	Trained facilitator in group processes	Respected members of the community who are part of the culture such as Elders
Role of interviewer	May be objective data collector or co-participant	Usually objective data collector	Interviewer is one of the participants
Reimbursement	Varies. Expenses may be reimbursed. Food, coffee or small honorarium may be provided	Varies. Expenses may be reimbursed. Food, coffee or small honorarium may be provided	Varies. Usually culturally determined gifts (eg, tobacco) plus expenses, food, coffee
Interpersonal processes	Information provision is primarily one-way (from participant to interviewer)	Information sharing is primarily from participants to researcher and to each other. Socially supportive among participants	Co-participants share information equally. Socially supportive among participants and researcher; story telling
Entry	Greetings and rapport	Greetings and rapport	First Nations truth ceremonies, prayer, greetings and rapport

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he Elder participated in and led only two sharing circles and I took on the role of a facilitator for the rest of the circles. The most important difference between the sharing circles and other forms of group engagement in research process is that the leader or the facilitator of the sharing circles is a co-participant who is part of the knowledge co-construction process. The relationship in the sharing circles is reciprocal with only few questions for discussion. The questions asked to evoke a response and to facilitate further discussion or, in case of this research, an expressive activity that potentially leads toward growth and change among all participants.

I expected students to know each other from attending the same program or living in the same community and that this might make it easier for them to share their views in sharing circles (Rabiee, 2004). This was not exactly the case; the students did not know each other well.

It took a while for the group to develop a working relationship and share their ideas and experiences. For some it was easier and for others it was a challenge. My plan to share preliminary themes derived from the interviews in the circles, and ask students to comment on them, provided an initial direction for establishing group dialogue and engaging the students in discussion.

3.4.3   The project to create an imagined school

The process of developing a vision for a school took place over nine sharing circles and over four months.Afterthe students spent some time talking in the first and second circles,it became clear that they were ready to move on with creating and building a model of an imagined school.Phase two–sharing circles and phase three–project to create an imagined schoolwere originally planned to follow each other after completion of the phase one–interviews. However, the sharing circles incorporated the discussion about educational experiences and the project to create an imagined school, thus, the students discussed, imagined, created a vision, and built a model of their school *for* education during the sharing circles. First, the visual representation of the new school was created in the form of two posters, each representing a first and a second floor of the school. The students indicated all the learning spaces on each floor by placing sticky notes on each poster,thus schematically representing different learning spaces.The last circlewas completed when the group had finalized their postersfor theirimagined school and had nothing else to add or change.Paul took part in the last circle and the following informal meeting to teach us how to build a 3D model. Chris and Robert were the only participants who were available and expressed interest in building the model. We meton five different informal occasions to complete a 3D foam core model of the imagined school. These meetings were not audio-recorded. I

discuss the process for sharing circles and the project to create and imagined school in more detail in the next section.

The students' engagement with spoken language and visual language in this study was a social semiotic activity (van Leeuwen, 2005). Social semiotics are resources in our social environments to communicate and create meanings. Three principles guide social semiotics: 1) people see world around through signs; 2) people create the meanings for signs that are appropriate and make sense in their social environment; and 3) people choose to use different signs in meaningful ways and/or change their original meanings and create new ones (Harrison, 2003). Social semiotics are related to social environments and can be used in analyzing an image or an artwork. The model created by the studentswas analyzed based on a multimodal visual analysis approach introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996).

3.5   Sharing circles and the project for creating an imagined school schedule

The first sharing circle included introductions of all participants, and thecreation of a set of rules to attend to how ideas were shared in the circles. Eight students participated in the circle:Amber, Donna, Kelsey, Shaelyn, Tatiana, Andrew, Conrad, and Michelle. The Elder shared the guidelines for holding the sharing circles. We reviewed the informed consent form and the focus for sharing circles.I shared some preliminary themes from across the interviews to initiate discussion. Sometopics and questions occurred based on the themes introduced that allowed the students to reflecton what they shared with me in their interviews. Further dialogue was facilitated by the Elder as well. Eight out of 9 sharing circles took place at the alternative high school program and one circle at the alternative middle school program.

Five students attended the second circle: Amber, Donna, Kelsey, Shaelyn, and Tatiana. We continued to explore the preliminary themes that reflected the issues of students'

involvement in their education, school suspension, and diversity of cultures in school. However, the discussion evolved and the students engaged with designing and drawing what they believed an ideal homeroom should look like. The activity-based discussion, where they began to express their ideas in a visual form,had an engaging effect on students' participation.

The following week the plan for the thirdcircle did not work out as anticipated. It was the 4/20 day, or "Weed Day" as I found out, and many students from many high schools went to participate in a meeting in downtown Vancouver. Only Conrad was available and we met for about 40 minutes. Some of the ideas he discussed were around expelling and suspending students from school, students' participation in their education and student leadership, students' learning interests, the value of culture and history, the support systems available to students and students' relationships with adults in school. We then planned to meet the following week with a larger group and continue thinking and exploring ideas for an imagined school.

Prior to the fourthsharing circle,I met with Cameron and he was available to join the students during the fifth sharingcircle meeting. Six students—Amber, Conrad, Kelsey, Miranda, Shaelyn and Tatiana—participated in the fourth circle. I introduced Cameron to the group and we continued to outlinethe ideas for a vision of a school and discussed the layout of the school. I provided the list outlining types of learning spaces and environments shared by the students in their interviews. The students mapped some of the learning spaces on two separate pieces of poster paper, each representing their first and the second floor of their imagined school.

Circle five was held with Kelsey, Shaelyn, Tatiana, and Cameron. The main focus for this circle was to engage with Cameron to further explore the ideas shared in the interviews and work on the imagined school layout. The students decided that the first floor was an active learning

area and the second floor had quieter learning spaces. The connection between the indoors and outdoors was also discussed and more open spaces and easy access to the outdoorswas proposed.

Miranda and Conrad met with Cameron in circle six. They reviewed and asked questions about the school layout, made some changes and additions to the plan. A lot of time was devoted to the discussion about a smoke pit for the students. The discussion about having a smoke pit at the imagined school was beyond just having a spaceto smoke; it was about having a space for connection with other students. They also came up with the idea for a roof top garden as a space for connection accessible to the outdoors for the students on the second floor.

Circle seven took place at the alternative middle school where I met with Cameron, Chris, and Robert. This was the first time Chris and Robert were available to meet in a circle. Cameron and I showed them the plan and the list of ideas I shared with other students. When they discussed the active learning areas on the first floor, they saw an opportunity for collaborative learning opportunities between different specialty workshops.The students added glass walls and more transparency between different learning spaces and the outdoors. The idea of a retractable roof was a new addition to the design. A highlightof their contributions to the school was to have a large and elaborate library and a farm.

Miranda, the Elder,and I met in circle eight. The Elder's presence created an intimate dynamic where the relationship between the physical spaces and wellbeing were discussed in relation to emotional experiences and identity. The history of residential schools was weaved into the discussion by the Elder. The Elder emphasized that the Elders' presence in a school would be for everyone, not only for Indigenous students. The Elders' room and Indigenous cultural experience workshops for actively practicingcarving, painting, and weaving were added

to the plan.The Elder's room was to have a round shape to represent connectedness between all forms of life and to challenge the traditional school design.

The ninth circle was held with Conrad, Chris, Robert, Kelsey, Paul and I. It was the first time Paul came to meet with the students and share his expertise in school design. The aim of this circle was to finalize the layout of the imagined school. During this circle, Paul helped the students to plan and build a model of the imagined school out of foamcore. Three more informal meetings took place before the year's end and then two more meetings took place early at the start of the following school year to complete the model.

3.6   Procedure for analyzing interviews and sharing circles.

Thematic analysis of data was chosen as "the most useful [approach] in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set" (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011, p. 11). Complex and under-researched areas are well suited for applying thematic analysis (Braun &Clarke, 2006, p. 81).Inductive thematic analysis was consistent with the process-oriented approach to research and allowed new and unexpected questions and themes to be derived from the data analysis.The six steps for the data analysis are summarised in the Table 3.4 (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The following discussion explores the six phases in more detail, presents a framework for determining and acceptinga position for conducting a thematic analysis, aswell as provides the procedure for the analysis.

3.6.1   Phase 1: Becoming familiar with the data

The transcripts of interviews and sharing circles were created as apreliminary form of analysis (Ochs, 1979). My approach to transcription was informed by my research questions and the theoretical framework. I had the interviews and sharing circles transcribed by a professional transcriber. After receiving the initial transcripts, I edited them with the recordings for accuracy

and integrated the transcription conventions to make the transcripts meaningful in addressing my

research questions (Schiffrin, 1987)(see Appendix F).

Table 3.4 Phases of thematic analysis

Phases	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic "map" of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Choosing conventionsmay be challenging. On the one hand, it was important to have a

set of conventions that enhanced the quality of the transcript for its readability and

understanding. On the other hand, it was difficult to assume ahead of time what is worthy of

notation and not to create an overly extensive or limited list. Each transcript was formatted and

notations were created to identify participants and type of data: participant's pseudonym, name

of interview, interview category, location, date,name of interviewer, and transcribers'

name(McLellan, MacQueen, &Neidig, 2003). In addition to the set of conventions (see

Appendix F), McLellan et al.(2003) provided a clear protocol for "Sample Qualitative Data

Preparation and Transcription" that informed my transcription process (see Appendix G).

All identifiable information (names, places, specific events, specific locations, group or

Band affiliation) was substituted with pseudonyms or other related words or phrases to protect

the confidentiality of the participants and those mentioned. During the process of interviews and

sharing circles the participants were reminded they were free to omit some of the information completely if it wasa private matter(McLellan et al., 2003). None of the participants expressed concern with the information they provided and they did not ask for any omissions. All transcripts were checked against the recordings for review and early detection of any challenges with transcription that might hinder the analysis. Each interview and sharing circle had several inaudible words or phrases, but they did not appear to affect the meaning of data. The approach to further data analysis was not simply focused on the identification of patterns and salient themes, but the analysis was also focused on "demonstrate[ing] variations in how social phenomena are framed, articulated, and experienced as well as the relationships within and between particular elements of such phenomena" (McLellan et al., 2003, p. 67).

3.6.2   Phase 2: Generating initial codes

The views of studentswho took part in this research were unknown, thus I could not use a pre-existing coding system and "[i]n this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data-driven" (Braun &Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The initial generation of codes was developed after the data weretranscribed and continued throughout the process of analysis. The list of initial ideas represented in the data became a base for development of codes to reflect the research topic and the research questions. "Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst" (p. 88) and portraythe meaning of a part of the text related to the research topic. Coding emerged from the initial concepts and the process of coding was ongoing and reflective. Coding data were part of analysis that organized the data into the initial meaningful clusters of text used to identify themes.

Spending time reading the text initially and simply tagging interesting or meaningful parts of the text was necessary to become familiar with the data prior to making any conclusions

or creating themes, rather developing some conceptual ideas that emerged from the text (Guest et al., 2011). Guest et al. (2011) recommendeddeveloping a "codebook" (p. 53) consisting of initial codes that identify text segments with a specific question in mind: "What does this text mean to me?" (p. 53). In the process of reading and re-reading transcripts it became clear that the students had distinct experiences with schools they identified. Thefour categories that became the initial categories for codingrepresented their experiences in relation to:mainstream school characteristics, alternative program characteristics, imagined school characteristics,and participants' personal characteristics. All four categories directly related to the research questions and addressed the exploratory nature of this research, as well as the relational aspects between these categories.

The approach taken for coding involved identifying an utterance that portrayed an element of meaning related to one of the categories, as well as the position in text including the line number, and recording the description. If another utterance reflected the same meaning, the position of the utterance in text was added to the same description, or code. Coding throughout data in a systematic manner resulted in specific codes, relationships between the codes, and strengthened their definitions (Guest et al., 2011). The initial codes were created based on these four categories and evolved with the analytical process as "the emphasis shift[ed] to, 'What specific instances of meaning exist in this text?'" (p. 53). When the initial codes were created, a list of codes was developed for each category (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Initial codes

Students' Characteristics

Personal Characteristics
- Demographics
- Connection to nature
- Diagnosis
- Culture and cultural practices
- Family
- Non-school related challenges
- Strengths and needs
- Career goal

Imagined School Characteristics
- Aboriginal Elder
- Students work in groups, projects
- Community engagement
- Open spaces, natural light, large school size
- Hands-on learning, life skills, support
- Place to learn
- Teaching and learning based on students' interests
- Farm, animals, pets, garden.
- "School is good as is" – hard to imagine

Mainstream School Characteristics
- Relevance of personal interests
- Feeling overwhelmed and stressed
- Leaving school
- Lack of sense of belonging
- Bullying
- High school mobility
- Large school and class size
- Loss of meaning and purpose for school and future career and life goals
- Poor teacher –student relationships
- Lack of support
- Exclusion, punishment
- Loss of confidence
- Variety of teaching and learning opportunities

Alternative School Characteristics
- Limited teaching and learning opportunities
- "I am going to post-secondary"
- Meaning and purpose for school is to graduate
- Positive teacher – student relationships
- Academic and personal support
- "We did bad things, that's why we are here"
- Self-paced learning, flexibility of schedule
- Small school and class size

69

The initial list of codes under each category(mainstream school characteristics; alternative program characteristics; imagined school characteristics) werecoded across all four initial code categories and grouped by meaning into the four clusters of codes: environment of human relationships, environment of physical spaces, teaching and learning environment, and culture and identity environment. Environment of human relationships reflected the students' experiences with their teachers, administrators, parents, peers, and any other people they encountered through their schooling. Environment of physical spaces reflected the students' experiences with different physical aspects of the facility's learning spaces, its surroundings, furnishings, and equipment. Teaching and learning environment reflected the students' experiences with the organization of learning and school structures. Culture and identity environment reflected the students' perceptions of their identity development in relation to their schooling experiences. The personal characteristics category included the students' demographic information, their own distinct life experiences inclusive of their family situation, their experiences with school staff and students, their goals and aspirations, their values and worldviews.Following coding, I began to identify and analyze the themes (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 Clusters of codes

Environment of Human Relationships
•Collaboration
•Wellness
•Mental Health
•Support systems
•Teacher–student relationships

Environment of Physical Spaces
•Learning spaces
•Playing
•Resting
•Engagement in diverse learning opportunities

Environment of Teaching and Learning
•Meaning making
•Learning opportunities
•Career opportunities
•Equitable & Socially just education
•Community connections

Environment of Culture and Identity
•Role and identity
•Family relationships
•Culture and cultural practices
•Interests and career

3.6.3   Phase 3: Searching for themes

The researcher must determine what is considered to be a theme based on the proposed research questions and "some level of patterned response or meaning within data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Themes were identified at the latent level of analysis and this level of analysis and

this level of analysis "involves interpretive work" (p.84);thus, themes were analysed beyond the semantic level that simply described what was said by a participant. At a latent level of thematic analysis, a researcher "starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of data" (p. 84).

The prevalence of a theme can be considered as a level of analysis, however, in this thematic analysis, it was more important to focus not just on the quantity,but rather the quality and depth of a theme. An explanation for choosing a theme as representative and relational to the main topic or a more specific question determined its presence in the analysis of data. Coded data were further sorted into broader themes by analysing the "codes and consider[ing] how different codes may combine into an overarching theme" (p. 89) and sub-themes. This step organized all coded extracts of data under the preliminary themes and sub-themes (see Figure 3.3).The initial themes wereorganized, and the relationships between codes, themes and sub-themes were analyzed.

3.6.4   Phase 4: Reviewing themes

The initial themes and sub-themes were reviewed and refined in meaningful ways representative of a specific topic. Two steps were taken to further refine themes. First,reading all the coded extracts collected under the same theme or sub-theme to determine whether they "form a coherent pattern" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Those extracts that did not fit a theme or a sub-theme were re-worked and re-coded to create a new theme or a sub-theme. The entire set of coded extracts was organized to further review of the entire data set.

Figure 3.3 Initial themes

1. "Fit in or else" Institutionalizing children

- **Location and access, funding, learning options, alternative school stigma, sense of community**
- **Mobility within and between schools, school transition, structure of the learning process**
- **Quality of learning spaces: school responsibilities and expectations; school and class size**

3. Wellbeing of students

- **Personal challenges in relation to teaching and learning**
- **Mental health challenges, bullying, support services, healing spaces**
- **Equity of educational opportunities and mental wellbeing**

2. Social institution of school

- **Teacher–student relationships, peer-relationship, role of parents**
- **Meaning and purpose for school, school responsibilities, discipline/punishment**
- **Leaving school, failing, sense of belonging, collaboration in learning, power.**

4. Imagined school

- **Open spaces, access to outdoors, school design.**
- **Imagining opportunities for teaching and learning**
- **Focus on hands-on learning and diverse teaching and learning opportunities that lead to a future career,**

The second step was to evaluate the validity of themes and how they related to the entire data set considering the theoretical underpinnings of research. The review and re-coding was stopped when no new themes or sub-themes could be developedto gain any further significant information that reflected the research questions. The derived themes were linked to the overall research topic and were distinct from each other. During this level of analysis, it was important to stay focused on the analytical process that goes beyond semantic analysis of themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggestedreflecting on the following questions when a researcher comes close to the final stage of analysis:

> What does this theme mean? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of this theme? What conditions are likely to have given rise to it? Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way (as opposed to other ways)? and What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic? (p. 94)

These questions guided the analysis of each theme to identify the "essence"of each theme and the relation between themes.

3.6.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Themes were named and re-worked as more definite titles were created to"identif[y] the 'essence' of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures" (p. 92). The main focus in this part of analysis wasclarifying themes by reviewing the data extracts combined under each theme "and organizing them into a coherent and internally consistent account, with accompanying narrative" (p. 93). Themes should relate to each other in order to support the research questions. At this step in the analysis,the final themeswere described in a few sentences that explainedeach. Theme

1addressed the students' experiences of "fitting-in" with mainstream school: "Fit in or else": institutionalizing children.Further, Themes 2 and 3 were consolidated under one theme "Social institution of school, alternative program and wellbeing." Theme 4 presented the students engagement with the project to build a model of an imagined school: "Re-imagining the school *for* education"(see Figure 3.4).

3.6.6 Phase 6: Producing the dissertation

The writing of the report, or in this case, dissertation,aimed to produce a "concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and an interesting account of the story that the data tells—within and across themes" (p. 93). My goal was to provide a reader with enough evidence—such as extracts from the data and in-depth analysis—to support the argument that addressed the research questions and included the analysis of the school model created by the students.

Figure 3.4 Final themes
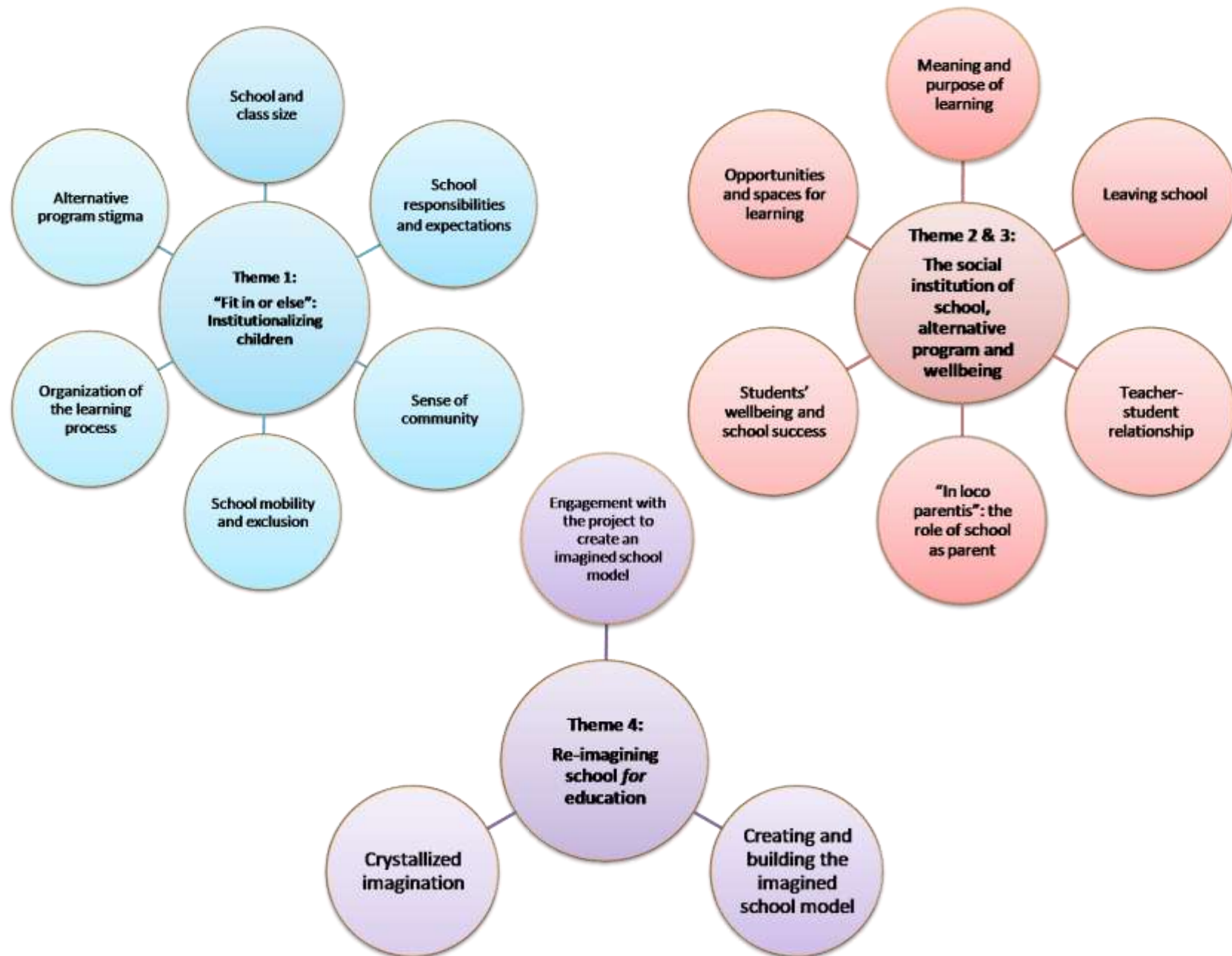
3.6.7   Visual analysis

For the imagined school model, the process of visual analysis,is described below, was used. The framework for visual analysis proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) was "effective in bringing out hidden meanings" (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004, p. 30) and to create new interpretations portrayed through artwork in addition to the textual analysis. The analysis of visual artwork contributed to the narrative data that was gathered from the interviews and sharing circles and provided an additional source for triangulation of data and to strengthen the validity of research.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) proposed a number of steps to be taken in the visual analysis. These steps for visual analysis provide a framework for examining the categories of images presented in the artwork and, further, the relationship between the images and participants, the images and the viewers, and the images and their organization. There are "three categories of images:the *index*; the *icon*; and the *symbol*" (Harrison, 2003, p. 50). The index is an image that conceptually represents a meaning for an action, object or subject and does not look like the concept it represents. The icon represents an image, the meaning of which relates to something specific and known, such as a photograph or an artwork.The symbol is an image that does not relate to anything that has a connection to an actual object or a subject, and represents meaning symbolically, such as numbers or letters, words, lines, arrows or pointing symbols. All three categories can be present in artwork and, in combination, these categories allow analyzing the purpose for the image and how it contributes to meaning creation.

In this research, the poster paper represented thefirst and second floor levels of the imagined school, and the sticky notes indicated a specific learning space on each floor; these were the index images. The classrooms, the perimeter of the school, and outbuildings built out of foamcore were the icon images. The names of the learning spaces written on the sticky notes and

the poster paper represented the symbol category. Writings on the model were also the symbol images.

The analysis of the relationship between the image categories and participantsaddressed the question: "what is the picture about" (Harrison, 2003, p. 50).An image might be described as an action image or a conceptual image. An action image demonstrates the dynamics or actions between participants, and a conceptual image provides a representation of "participants in terms of their more generalized and more/less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure, or meaning" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p.79).Theposters and the model created by the students were a conceptual representation of their ideas for an imagined school that represented the physical learning spaces.

The relationship between the images and the viewers is focused on an interaction between the image and the viewers and addressed the question: "How does the picture engage the viewer?" (Harrison, 2003, p. 53).The images can act to "offer" or "demand" something from a viewer and address the level of engagement and interest from the viewer.Point of view is the factor that speaks to the angles of image representation (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). The students created their model of an imagined school with the intention to engage others with their ideas through visual representation. The model was presented to the school trustees at the school board office at the completion of the research project.

The relationship between the images and their organization considered the complex interactions between the participants and the images, viewers and the images and integration of these interactions "into a meaningful whole" (Harrison, 2003, p. 55). Some aspects of this complex part of the analysis are the empty spaces between groupings or separate elements of the images, and modality, as an element of analysis that addressed the level of reality represented in

the images or their composition (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). In this research, these aspects were integrated into the analysis to address the openness of space within school and outside of school. The modality aspect addressed the visual representation of the foamcore model as a representation of the ideas for an imagined school.

3.7   Validity of research

This research design incorporateda number of specific approaches to enhance the validity of research through the triangulation of data. In this study, the validity of research was supported through the use of four methods of data collection: individual interviews,sharing circles, researcher's field notes, and the creation of the imagined school. Multiple sources of data collection provided depth and diverse perspectives in relation to the research topic minimizing the risk of missing important information and insights (Guest et al., 2011). Data collection, transcription, and coding followed a specific protocol to ensure systemization. Eliciting ongoing feedback from the participants ensured the transcripts and analysis of transcripts was coherent with the participants' stories and reflected the reliability of data. Reading and re-reading transcripts prior to coding allowedme to gain familiarization with the data and to make sure the transcription process fully addressed the confidentiality of the participants.

For the analysis of data, utilizing multiple methods of data collection enabled a rich examination of "the same trends and themes [that] emerge within the data from different participant groups and data collection methods" (Guest et al., 2011, p. 86) and increased the validity of findings. Using multiple steps in creating a descriptive list of codes and thematic mappingwas a rigorous process that allowed the interpretation of data from many contextual angles, and reflexivity supported the creation of an in-depth description of the data (Laverty, 2003). Writing the final analysis of themes in this dissertation was a process of "telling a

complicated story of [the] data in a way which convince[d] the reader of the merit and validity of [the] analysis" (Braun & Clark, 2008, p. 93). The validity of research was supported by providing excerpts of data to establish the themes. The excerpts were "imbedded within an analytic narrative" (p. 93) that represented the story told in this research and addressed the research questions. The imagined school model was analysed based on a visual analysis framework. Member-checking was part of the research process and the students worked with their ideas and my interpretation of their experiences. I engaged with my committee members throughout the analysis of data to consult and examine analytical processes (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Documenting the steps taken during the analysis of data created an audit trail that "ma[de] the analysis process more transparent" (Guest et al, 2011, p. 85) and helped to make visible the process of analysis.

3.8   Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology for this research. First, the researcher's positionality was discussed by outlining my experiences with education and my interests in the proposed research. Then the process-oriented approach for conducting this research was described as a fluid and evolving process of exploration and discovery. The recruitment procedure and participants were presented and informed consent was discussed as an on-going process. I explained the role of the youths and their parents in participating in the on-going consent. The process of data collection and data analysis was discussed. I described how interviewing, sharing circles, and building the imagined school model were part of the process of data collection and analysis. I discussed the thematic analysis of data collected from the interviews and sharing circles. Six steps of thematic data analysis were elaborated. The visual analysis framework for an imagined school model created by youths was also described. Finally, the issue of validity in research was presented.

The analysis generated four themes. These themes are described and discussed as follows: Chapter 4 discusses Themes 1: "Fit in or else": Institutionalizing children, Chapter 5 discusses Themes 2 and 3: The social institution of school, alternative program and wellbeing, and Chapter 6 discusses Theme 4: Re-imagining school *for* education.

Chapter 4. "Fit in or else": institutionalizing children

This chapter presents the participants' descriptions of their experiences with mainstream schools and alternative programsas social institutions, as well as their role in their experiences. In the following paragraphs, the factors related to school structure and students' understandings of "fitting in" are explored. The factorsare supported with excerpts from the interviews, sharing circles, as well as the researcher's field notes regarding: 1)school responsibilities and expectations; 2)school and class size; 3)structure of the learning process; 4)sense of community; 5)school mobility and exclusion; and 6)alternative program stigma. The aim of this theme is to demonstrate the participants' position within schools as social institutions based on their experiences with both mainstream schools and alternative programs.

4.1 School responsibilities and expectations

In mainstream schools, students had responsibilities and expectations placed upon them by virtue of the way school was structured. "Fitting in" was one of the main challenges for participants, given school responsibilitiesand expectations,and further shaped their ability to connect and develop meaningful relationships in schools. Students reported that the ability to "fit in" was the key to their success in school as Andrew described,"Like, they have like, they *((schools))* have everything, actually, that you really need. So I think you just need to fit in now" (In. ln. 552-553). However, the interactions between the school structure (e.g., physical space, emotional climate, teaching-learning environment and curriculum) and students' life trajectories created complex relationships that had an impact on the students' ability to fully participate in the process of learning and development that was offered by their mainstream school.

School responsibilities and expectations, as held by the student participants, were often confusing, as they tried to navigate the system and position themselves. The participants were

expected to "fit-in" with the mainstream school structure and take responsibility for "fitting in."

> Andrew: So they put me here*((AP))* for some reason. I don't know why.
>
> […]
>
> Natasha: Oh?
>
> Andrew: Because I wanted to do anything but go*((to the AP)),* but they
>
> they're like, "You can't do that." That's what they said.
>
> Natasha: And why do you think that happened?
>
> Andrew: I don't know. They just made up a bunch of excuses of why I
>
> couldn't go to certain*((mainstream schools)).* […] So I just didn't
>
> understand why they sent me here. (In. ln.74-92)

Here, Andrew is concerned about how he ended up at his AP. What is clear in his experience was that he was not meeting expectations of the mainstream school. He became disengaged, and experienced schooling as a top down process that did not consider his needs for learning.

School responsibilities and expectations were also reflected in the organization of the learning process and the learning options offered to students. Andrew was sent to the AP without a clear understanding why, and was first placed in self-paced class at the AP.The self-paced class provided students with a flexible individualized schedule to work on their own and at their own pace to fulfill the curriculum requirementsfor graduation. The class where Andrew was placed usually included 5-15 students each day whoworked on various paper-based assignments with one teacher present in the classroom.

> Andrew: [...] I was in the self-paced class and I just kind of found it was
>
> kind of pointless because […]. Like, why would they make me drive all
>
> the way down here to do self-paced work which I can't really do by

myself when they said that I couldn't do home schooling which would

have been more suitable than going to self-paced class. (In. ln.167-172)

For Andrew, working on his own was a challenge in the mainstream school and was one of the

reasons he could not keep up with academic expectations and became disinterested in going to

some classes. Yet, self-paced class offered no one-on-one support or guidance from a teacher to

create the learning environment that supported Andrew's needs for learning.The individual

responsibilities and expectations placed on Andrew in the self-paced class added more confusion

to his educational experiences with school. In addition to not fully understanding why he was

sent to the alternative program, Andrew felt he needed more instruction and help from a teacher

and was surprised when he was offered less of both.

Andrew's experience in school lacked the guidance and support of teachers who clarified

the purpose of school attendance.

Andrew: So it was like just weird to me why they would like be like "Oh,

well, you didn't attend classes…" but I never got one day of Saturday

school, and I never got one warning about skipping. Like, I mean, my

counsellor was like "Oh, well you have to like be worried about

skipping," and stuff like that. And I was like: "Of course. Yeah…" […]

Like, I know that it was my responsibility to just stay, but at the same

time they kind of let it go to that extent. So it's almost like "Why would

you let me do that?" almost. (In. ln.141-153)

School attendance was a challenge for Andrew and the school structure did not appear to have a

procedure in place to follow up with the students who missed school regularly. Andrew stated

that he needed a connection with his schoolenvironment, and in particular teachers, to develop a

84

meaningful understanding for the reasons to attend school.

Similarly, Miranda's experience at the alternative program was different from that of mainstream school. She felt that thealternative program took on more responsibility for their students' interest in learning and development by building closer relationships and providing timely and authentic support:

> Miranda: […] with the support you have and the counsellors and staff that actually like they actually take the time to get to know the students. Public schools are like: "Oh yeah, your name is Miranda, I understand that. You are person, you are female. You have red hair," I mean whatever. Whereas here it's like your name is Miranda, you love your dog, you have two bunnies. They actually <u>get to know you</u> as a person rather than <u>just another</u> student. (In. ln.157-162)

Students reported that in the APresponsibilities and expectations were grounded in relationships. Students felt "known" and not "just another student" reflecting a connection between students and learning environment.

Students' experiences with school responsibilities and expectations supported or hindered their relationship with their school and their interest in learning. They reported the effect of being pushed out of the mainstream school; not having learning needs met in both the alternative program and mainstream school; not attending mainstream school regularly and having a poor understanding for why one must go to school; and the importance of relationshipsbetween students and adults in both types of schools.

Research shows students being "pushed-out" of mainstream schools for lack of attendance, and poor engagement with learning processes (Kim, 2011). As a result, they are often

placed in alternative programs, and like Andrew, may not know why. Thus, alternative programs often become perceived by students, teachers, and community members as a "dumping ground" or a "warehouse" (Kim, 2011). The children and youth who do not fit in with the mainstream school approach are placed in the minimum graduation requirement option of an alternative program to have "another chance to be educated" (p. 79). However, being pushed out of the mainstream school, these students become further marginalized and faced with limited educational opportunities, rather than equitable learning opportunities (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Further, students who do not comply with the school expectations for attendance and/or behaviour often lack support from and have poor sense of connectedness with the school environment. However, a positive relationship with and support from an adult "who is mindful of the well-being of the students, who can be familiar with the life challenges of that student and who can identify what an absence might signify" (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2015, p.105) is another key factor that may contribute to school engagement. Opportunities for a meaningful connection with school became possible when "[y]outh were able to think about being present in school as coming to a place where they mattered" (p. 105).Fostering positive, caring student-teacher relationships fosters students' learning and development and is predictive of high school engagement (Vellos &Vadeboncoeur, 2015).

4.2   School and class size

An aspect of "fitting in" for students in this study was related to the size of mainstream schools and classes in schools. Both were large and every student noted that they felt overwhelmed, best summarized by Chris when he notes, "Yeah, and the size of the [mainstream] school. I hate crowds, but that was ridiculous. It was like six hundred kids" (In. ln.85-86). Likewise, Andrew's impression of the size of his former highschool indicated that the size was an issue: "Yeah, it was

seven, wait, yeah. It was seven thousand students, I think" (In. ln.25). Whether accurate or not, the perception of being in a high school of seven thousand students seemed to hinder opportunities for meaningful connections among students and teachers in Andrew's experience.

In addition to the size of the schools, students spoke about the size of their classes. Such as Donna who elaborated on the issue of relationships in large classrooms, stating that the needs of students should come before the needs of the school system:

> I understand there's a lot of people in the mainstream high school <u>and it's</u>
> <u>hard</u> to build a relationship like that with your teachers […] but I think
> that's something that they need to address, like having one teacher and 30
> students in the <u>class is not acceptable</u>. Everyone has different needs and
> no one's getting their needs met in situations like that. (In. ln.255-260)

For Donna, experience in mainstream school highlighted three important points. First, she needed and wanted a strong relationship with her teachers. Second, she expected the teachers to be able to respond to her needs, strengths, and interests. Third, she felt the large school and class size inhibited her ability to build a meaningful relationship with her teachers as role-models.

Large school and class size were associated with elevated levels of anxiety and stress. Conrad made a comment regarding teacher to student ratio and the relationship between the school size and the levels of anxiety he experienced when he compared the mainstream highschool with alternative programs: "As where the student to teacher ratio at the other school, like Valley Secondary or Mountain View, is ... I think it's like probably 70 to 1. Here it's like 10 to 1. Not even" (In. ln.152-153). When asked if a lower student-teacher ratio and smaller school, such as found in the alternative program he presently attended, made a difference for his learning and wellbeing, he responded with the following:

It does. Especially when you have social anxiety, like I do. It makes a whole difference. When you step into an assembly meeting here at the school, that's only like 100 students, if lucky, as where you step into one Valley Secondary or Mountain View and there's like 700 students. (In. ln.157-163)

Elevated levels of anxiety, for Conrad, hada negative effect on his learning and ability to connect with others in social situations. School often felt overwhelming, resulting in his lower interest in attending education.

Shaelyn's experience in the mainstream school was different from that in the alternative program: She explained,"I've never enjoyed work or the things in school or anything" (ln 195). "I don't understand it. Like, I was like always too scared to just ask for help like, or like the fact that the teachers they wouldn't help me properly, like to the extent that I needed" (ln 199-200).For Shaelyn, large class size was a barrier that teachers had to overcome to provide the learning and social support she needed. Shaelyn considered leaving school early in her elementary years. It was not until she came into the alternative program she felt more supported and less anxious.

For Shaelyn, having smaller classes, a student-centered pace of work, and teacher offeringsupport in the alternative program meant she could do more assignments with less anxiety:She noted,"Yeah. So like, we have a decent amount of time to like complete the worksheets instead of having a due date and then if you don't hand it in, like it won't be marked. And like it's less stressful" (In. ln.271-272). She did not feel rushed and felt she had time she needed to complete her school work. Unlike Andrew, Shaelyn reported that a self-paced program

worked for her and helped to reduce anxiety, but like all others agreed that a smaller class size contributed to having a positive experience in the program.

Donna's experience with mainstream school was also anxiety provoking and a barrier to engaging in school, while, the smaller alternative program felt more comfortable and encouraged her to attend and participate.In particular, large school and class sizes affected her relationship with her classmates and her teacher.

> When I was in a mainstream school … I'd have the answer, but I would be really nervous to raise my hand and answer, 'cause there were <u>so many people</u>, I was afraid that I would be or wrong or they would mock me. So I just wanted to stay unnoticed but in the class like this you <u>cannot stay unnoticed</u> 'cause there is only 15 kids and it is easier to answer the questions and get into discussions about things that are off topic usually, but you get into a quite deep discussion about <u>current life things</u> in classes that are smaller. (In. ln.273-279)

Donna noted the importance of being noticed, of participating in discussions, of relating school to "current life things." Working together with her teacher and her peers in small classesallowed her to make meaningful connections.

School and class size had an impact on each of the students in the current study in terms of their relationships, ability to participate, comfort level and anxiety, and ultimately, academic performance. The high levels of anxiety and stress experienced in mainstream schools by the students in this study supports the position that schooling may contribute to mental health issues or other risks for youths who do not "fit in" with the mainstream school (te Riele, 2006, 2007). Their inability to participate in large mainstream schoolsreveals that at least some students may

need to have different educational options to have positive experiences with schooling.A learning choice framework perspective holds that "[r]ather than assuming that something about the young person needs to change, it suggests something about educational provision needs to change" (te Riele, 2007, p. 56).

4.3   Organization of the learning process

The students' experiences with lack of support and inflexibility of the mainstream schools were some of the core challenges that contributed to their inability to "fit in." The students talked about the possibility ofhaving an alternative program within a mainstream school so that they might access both the benefits of a larger and more modern facility with the learning options available for mainstream students, as well as the characteristics of alternative programs.Andrew suggested that,

> A cool idea would be I don't know if other students really like it, but we have a really good community here [in the AP] but I think people would feel more connect if they almost had the alternative program course added to a school. Like a mainstream school, and just had that separate in a way. […] So that we could still use the other classrooms at that mainstream school, but still have a school in itself [...] (Cir 1, ln. 439-443)

The students discussed an alternative program within the mainstream school, arguing that keeping both together addressed their strengths and needs for learning and development. Andrew also indicated his desire to be part of a larger school, however, he still wanted to have an alternative option for the benefits, including small school and class size and "community."

Further dialog in sharing circles between Donna and Andrew emphasized that including

an alternative program within mainstream school did not actually work for them. Ultimately, they suggested a need for a fundamental change in the organization of the learning process.

> Donna: I disagree with what you just said there. When I was in Greenwood Middle School we had an alternative class in there that was structured similarly to this school, but it was within the rest of the school, and because it was mixed into a mainstream school all of the kids who were in that alternate class dealt with so much ridicule and bullying
>
> [[from absolutely everyone else…
>
> Andrew: [[Oh, really!?
>
> Donna: …because we were all different. We all had to be in the different class.
>
> Andrew: That makes sense, oh yeah I understand that.
>
> Donna: It was pretty awful, and you don't want that in almost every school.
>
> Andrew: Yeah, no yeah. That makes sense. I was just thinking more of a cost effective way instead of completely building a new school, or for a meantime type thing for other students or something like that.
>
> Donna: It was really bad. It made things so much worse, it didn't help anything. (Cir 1, ln. 439-455)

Andrew offered a "cost-effective" option, but Donna did not agree with his justification and highlighted the bullying she had experiencedThe students further discussed a possibility for an alternative program that employed the resources and opportunities offered by the mainstream school, and other students shared their experiences with joining a sports team in the mainstream

school while attending the alternative program. Many ideas were shared and discussed.

Their discussion was an argument for a foundational change in schools: recognizing the diversity of the students' developmental and learning needs, abilities, strengths and talents, as well as their life trajectories as essential in the structure of the learning process. The need for alternative programs is growing "not [as] an easy way out for students, but simply another route to the same destination" (Smith & Thompson, 2014, p. 118). Thus, is becomes especially important for alternative programs to be of a high quality and readily available educational choice "that successfully eliminate[s] inequalities and disequilibrium" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 217) so that all students have educational opportunities.

All students stated that they felt more connected with their teachers and had more support in their alternative programs. However, they also recognized the limitations of alternative programs, for example, as having fewer opportunitiesfor core and elective classes and sports in comparison to a mainstream school. They felt stigmatized as well. Kelsey described this when she said,

> Well, like everything that a normal school has should be in these types of
>
> schools, too. 'Cause we're not like us, kids here aren't really different. We
>
> shouldn't have like less learning opportunities, 'cause we go to a different
>
> type of school. We learn at different paces. I don't think we should get, I
>
> don't know, less of an education, I guess. (In.ln. 462-465)

The students clearly noticed the inequities existingbetween mainstream schools and alternative programs.Kelsey addressed the limitations in resources and educational opportunities for her and other students in the alternative program and expressed her concern regarding the need for equitable educational choices.

Robert, and other students, enjoyed the smaller school setting and closer connection with staff, but were also aware of the limitations of their alternative program and the effect these inequalities have on their learning and development. Robert expressed his concern about the trade-offs of attending an alternative program:

> I guess why like this *((alternative program))...* [is]good because it is a
>
> smaller area but it will still be nice to have a bigger school. Like you said
>
> it just doesn't seem fair that we get the short end of the stick in that
>
> situation. (Cir 9, ln. 85-88)

Although students felt more connected with the alternative programs and received more support to meet their goal for graduation from highschool, they also understood that they had limited options for learning. Both alternative programs did not have elective course options, or a gym, or a libraryas was available tostudents in the mainstream schools. Yet, rich and diverse educational experiencescontribute to cognitive development in children and youth, as well as the development of the imagination (Vygotsky, 2004). While many alternative programs provide remedial courses that focus on life skills and credentials to enter a workforce, this may exclude students from further post-secondary learning opportunities(Thomson & Russell, 2009).

The organization of the learning process in the mainstream school was experienced by all students as inflexible and not inclusive of their life trajectories. The students discussed the workload, the number of classes per day, and the pace of learning in the mainstream school as overwhelming and rushed:Amber commented on how there was"just an overload of work ((pause)) having to do so much work in so little time" (In. ln. 10). The time allowed for learning material felt short and insufficient to fully engage with material. Here, the demands of the school program were at odds with learning.For example, if a student missed even a small amount of

school time, it was difficult for him/her to catch up and get back on track with the expectations of the school.Chris narrated his experience of falling behind:

> Yeah, I got sick with a cold for about 4 or 5 days and I missed quite a lot of work and they handed me like 6 textbooks and worksheets and tons of it. I was just like "That's a lot." And I tried to get it done, you know? I started going to that homework club thing they have. And I still wasn't able to get it all done. So I was just like "Nope, I'm not doing this." And then I stopped coming to school. (In. ln.49-53)

For students whose school attendance was interrupted by illness or a life event there did not seem to be an option that allowed them to fulfill the requirements of the school program. Chris was unable to catch up even after attending the homework club.

Robert's experiences with family break up, placement in foster care, and diagnosis with ADHD were the life challenges that contributed to moving and changing schools, and losing established relationships with peers and teachers. These events, he reported, elevated his stress level, affected his learning and development, and the school's curriculum felt rushed and did not allow sufficient time for learning.

> I feel like that the education is really <u>rushed</u> […] a whole week or something you worked on a single thing while you're being given the fifty of the things as well to complete that's different from what you're doing. It's just seems you're <u>being really, really rushed</u>… (In. ln. 7-11)

Robert noted the fragmentation between different classes, the expectation to complete a number of unrelated assignments, and the feeling that he was running out of time to attend to his work.

Robert'scommitment to taking time to understand and learn may have contributed to his academic success and interest in school if he had not felt rushed:

> It's just nice to have people who do not <u>rush</u> you. That was one of the main problems in the mainstream school, even when I was still doing well and they were rushing me and it was getting annoying, I was just like "<u>I'll get it done, just stop constantly nagging at me!</u>" I think if that would <u>stop</u> a lot of people in high schools will not have to go through the fact where they have to drop out or have problems and hold back years and years because of being rushed. (In. ln.395-399)

The time required to complete academic work, an outcome-focused learning process, did not allow Robert to learn and understand the material. His teachers appeared more concerned about completing work than ensuring learning occurred and was meaningful.

For Vygotsky, teaching and learning takes place in the ZPD and "provides the opportunity for synthesizing several influences into the learner's novel modes of understanding and participation. [From social to individual], the novice acquires useful strategies and crucial knowledge" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p.192). It is collaboration between students and teachers and students that meaning making, learning, and developing.

For all these students, the inflexibility of school structure and organization of learning in mainstream schools made it clear that they were expected to "fit in" with the school requirements regardless of their situation. Having sufficient time to learn would reduce the pressure and anxiety in these students. Youth who do not fit in with the organization of learning in mainstream schools are still interested in learning and it is important to providethem with supports and opportunities to succeed in more flexible alternative programs(Mills & McGregor,

2016). Smaller schools and classrooms provide a number of opportunities for building positive relationships between students, members of their community, and teachers and their relationships to facilitate attendance, participation, learning and developing (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016).

4.4   Sense of community

All the students experienced a lack of a sense of community in the mainstream school.

"Fitting in" seems to be reinforced by the demands of the school; the responsibilities and the expectations were perceived by the students as dictated solely by the school system. Andrew, once again reinforced the idea of a disconnect between the school and the students: the school seemed to control all opportunities for learning and development, and was not flexible enough to respond to students if they did not conform to the organizational demands of the learning process:

> I think that a lot of students don't realize how beneficial school is until it's too late. Then they're like, "Well I only have two years left and now I'm not even going to really try" or they try but it makes it harder because they didn't try earlier on. I think that *((educators))* just need to somehow come up with something to make students understand that school is important. You need to learn, and it's going to be a part of you one day […]. (Cr 1, ln. 258-263)

Students recognized that the meanings they made for learning and education broadly, directly related to the relationship they built with their school environment and their position in the school system. In their experience, school was not a community of learners; instead school was a rigid environment that required them to change.

The following observation describes the alternative program as different from the mainstream. My participation as a volunteer and then as a researcher provided me with an opportunity to observe and speak with the students and teachers, administrators and counsellors. It is through these conversations and my observation of the school structure and organization of learning that I further understood that the alternative programs were places for the students who did not fit in with the organization of school and structure of learning given health or mental health challenges, learning disabilities, family situations, and/or cultural and community responsibilities. Their life trajectories did not "fit-in" with the demands of the mainstream school and they were further excluded from learning opportunities by placing them into a more impoverished situation for school completion; this placement further perpetuated exclusion (Fld. Nts. March 2, 2017).

Although the alternative program provided learning experiences that were more positive than those in the mainstream school, the students recognized that they were removed from the opportunities offered by the mainstream school. They felt greater care and support at the alternative program, but had limited resources for learning and development. In their experiences, mainstream schools had the resources, but lacked the ability or willingness to respond to students, to count the students as part of the learning community, and to provide learning resources and opportunities in relation to each student's needs and strengths.

Donna's experience with mainstream school further supported the inflexible nature of the system and the lack of community connection. Although the school had the resources, expectations were limited for what she could do shaped her experiences in elementary school:

> The schools need to be more accepting of what people want to do. I
>
> found that when I was in elementary school. […] When I was in

elementary school they're like, "No, you're a girl you can't be playing

with thetools, you can't be building things." That discouraged me <u>for a</u>

<u>long time</u> that I always thought that because I'm a girl I can't go into

carpentry or anything like that. [...]Yeah, back in elementary school they

just need to try to <u>encourage</u> dreams and stuff. (Cr 1, ln. 308-314)

Donna's experience demonstrated a gendered barrier in the way her elementary school would recognizethe interests of students and createan environment to support their interests, the school communicated that she was interested in a field that was inappropriate for girls. The school structure and the organization of learning prevented opportunities to explore interests and talents, thus, removing the motive for learning and developing.

A sense of community directly relates to the students' sense of connectedness and belonging to their school (Morrissette, 2011). School connectedness, in turn, relates to academic achievement, while"[a] lack of connectedness and belonging can lead to alienation from the school community and learning" (McGregor, Mills, te Riele, Baroutsis & Hayes, 2017, p. 96). The relational aspect of learning and teaching so paramount for Vygotsky (1987), contributes to the development of sense of community for both students and teachers. Therefore, disregarding the need for connectedness in school settings reduces possibilities for *"quality experiences"* and *"quality relationship or relationships"* that allow them to "see different possible futures for themselves by virtue of the relationships they develop with adults" (Vadeboncoeur & Murray, 2014, p. 638).

4.5   School mobility and exclusion

The students discussed the issue of power in relation to school structure and stated that they were not listened to, and their educational needs and talents were not considered in the learning

process if they did not match the expectations of the school. They felt that their participation in research was giving them a chance to be heard, which was not a typical experience for them in school:

> Conrad: It's certainly nice to have our inputs =
>
> Robert: = Exactly it's actually nice to be treated like we matter for once instead of being thrown in the school and like you're going to listen to us, you're going to do what we want. It's actually nice to have a voice for once instead of having to follow along with what the school board wants [[and all that.
>
> Chris: [[Yeah.
>
> Natasha: Right.
>
> Conrad: Since we've been, when you're treated like nothing. I've been through three, four high schools I believe in Greenville because I first started to go to Mountain View, Mountain View did not want me and send me to Valley Secondary, and then Valley Secondary like, "we'll send you to the alternative program." (Cir 9, ln. 146-156)

An unresponsiveness built into the school system for these students resulted in further challenges with school connection. Every student in this project was moved from one school to another a number of times. When a student did not "fit-in" with one school, he/she was moved to another high school, often without a clear understanding of why.

A higher level of school mobility and complex life eventscontributed to lower attendance and potential school leaving. All students in this project left school and upon return were placed in an alternative program. Often as a one-sided decision by the school district, a student was

notified about their placement in an alternative program as there were "no more" mainstream schools to move. The alternative program was the "last option" available. Conrad describes this process as he experienced it:

> Yeah. The principal was like, "Oh, there's this school over across town called Alternative High School." "What is it?" "[…] It's for students who are having a hard time dealing with school, normal school, and we think you should go there." I'm like, "Oh, wow. You don't want me at your school because I have a tendency to fight and because I skip too much." "No, no, no. We're not trying to say it like that." "You're saying it like that." "Okay. Well, yeah. This school will be more suited towards your needs." I'm like, "You realize that's all the way across town for me?" "Yeah, but there's buses." I was like, "Buses, I'm not comfortable with because I have social anxiety." "Yeah. Great. Well, just give it a shot."
>
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. (In. ln123-131)

The students felt powerless to makedecisions about their education. They were often told what to do, rather than having input into their situation. Further, it was communicated to them, as in Conrad'sexperience, that they could not stay in "normal school" because they were not "normal."

The school structure excludes those who do not conform to the expectations and do not fulfill the responsibilities required by the school system regardless of students' educational and life experiences. Kelsey, missed six months of school due to severe injury she received as a result of a car accident "and because of that I graduate a year late" (Cir 9, ln. 375-376). Placement in the alternative program allowed her to fulfill the requirements for graduation a year

later. However, if she was to return to the mainstream school and graduate as a "regular student" it would have taken her much longer: "Kelsey: Yeah, but if I wanted to be like the regular one I would graduate when I'm 20. (Cir 9, ln. 383-384). Yeah, that's kind of sucked (ln. 386). I don't know why it would take that much longer" (ln. 388). Exclusion was justified by the school system by placing these students in the "at-risk" category for failing school and possibly other risk factors (Kelly, 2014; te Riele, 2007).

When, after leaving from school, Conrad decided to come back to finish high school, he washesitant that he was looked upon as a "problem." Indeed, he was viewed as "problem" and was moved around several times.According to Conrad,

> They read my transcripts and they're like, "Oh, we don't really want you here." They said it in more polite terms. "You missed too much school up in your old high school. We think you'd best be suited for Valley Secondary." Okay, let's go to Valley Secondary. At Valley Secondary they said the same thing to me. "You'd better be suited for Mountain View." They sent me back to Mountain View. They're like, "Oh, okay. We'll give it a shot." They read further into my transcripts. Before my first day even started, they're like, "Yeah, too many complications with your old high school. You were missing too many days and you're too far behind. You'd be restarting grade 9 if you started here. You'd be three years behind instead of a year." It was like that's a kick in the pants right there. (In. ln.104-112)

Treated as an outsider and excluded before having a chance to connect with the school, Conrad's experience of being "moved" from one school to another demonstrates the way that school

structures contribute to perpetuating students' disengagement and rejection from the mainstream schools.

The students discussed school completion in relation to their mobility from school to school and the lack of alternative options earlier in their schooling. For Conrad, the issue of being moved from school to school instead of having an alternative option sooner, had a negative impact on his ability to complete school on time and have a positive experience of learning in school.

> Conrad: <u>The only crappy thing about this is why it takes some years to</u>
>
> <u>actually happen</u>.
>
> Natasha: I know! =
>
> Conrad: = That's the crappiest thing about this whole thing. It's like
>
> really couldn't you have done this like two years ago or three years ago?
>
> (Cir 9. ln. 577-580).

The option to attend an alternative program was available in the school district before Conrad left school, but it was not offered to him earlier in his school years. This option may have allowed him to transition from the mainstream school to the alternative program before he left school. The alternative program was offered to Conrad and other students only after they left school or missed school for health or family related reasons, and was the only option besides the mainstream school. The alternative program these students attended lacked many opportunities for learning and development and was the last option for graduation before they "aged out" of being able to attend public school.

Michelle's exclusion from the mainstream school began in the elementary years when due to lack of educational options, she was placed in a remedial class in her elementary school. She recalls,

> I got put into a class which I shouldn't have been put in, like for special needs students, because I'm ADHD I somehow ended up in that class so that was kind of a little far gone, and I moved on to Northfield Elementary from there where they told me I should just go into home schooling because I wasn't really made for the mainstream school system at all. (In. ln.8-12)

Homeschooling was not an option and she was not able to access learning opportunities if kept in the remedial class. There did not appear to be any options available to her within school system that recognized her learning needs and strengths and included her in the learning process.

One of the reasons Michelle was not placed in the alternative program at that time was because the alternative program was only available to middle-high school students. Michelle's experiences with the system's inability to provide inclusive education in elementary school was similar to that of Donna's:

> Michelle: I would have been in I think grade three. […] I think it was only for like two days actually because I freaked out and said, "I need to be doing actual school work, I'm not here to play with blocks!" No disrespect but they put me in a class with kids that couldn't speak they were actually mentally disabled and I was there walking, talking and saying "I need to work," and I had to talk to the principal to be able to get out of that class so it was a big deal.

Natasha: In Grade 3.

Michelle: Yes. It was probably the biggest piss off of my school

career*((laughter))* pretty ridiculous. (In. ln.109-117)

Based on the students' experiences,school mobility may have been considered by the school system as an educational option to find where a child "fits in." However, it was detrimental to the students' ability to connect with their teachers and for their learning and development. The alternative program option was provided as a last resort and only after the students had spent years "in-limbo" being moved from one school to another.

Challenges with mainstream schools faced by the students resulted in high mobility between schools as an approach taken by the school administration, presumably,to find the right fit for the students. The experiences of mobility further excluded them. In addition, "[e]xclusion from school does not equate to the abdication of the responsibility of educational authorities to ensure that the learning needs and aspirations of this particular group of young people are met" (Thompson & Russell, 2009, p. 426).

4.6   Alternative program stigma

When the school system provides an alternative program option as a last resort, it is stigmatized as an option for those who do not "fit-in" with mainstream school, or, as Conrad said, are not "normal." The stigma is present in the minds of the parents, students, and community; Miranda described how:

When I first got here there was a high level of stress because like with

my dad and with all the rumors and stuff that you heard, like the rumors I

heard is like ten years ago but that there are gangs here, and that kids

would bring knives and guns... (In. ln.174-176)

The students discussedthe stigma of a gang culture that existed in the alternative programs, and the inferior position it held in the school system. This was a strong indication that the alternative program was a least preferred option for a school. The students placed in the alternative programs were perceived by the parents, students, and community as those who were potentially dangerous, who needed to be excluded from the mainstream schools, and likely required rehabilitation in an alternative facility.

Experiences of being excluded from the mainstream school were elaborated on by Robert and Chris. They made a point that the students in the alternative programs are seen as bad or there is something wrong with them.

> Chris: Yeah, I think it's like a stigma around alternate schools.
>
> Robert: Uhm, yeah.
>
> Chris: They think it's like, "oh you go to alternate school you're just a bad kid."
>
> Robert: Or like you're special needs because you go there because apparently everyone who goes to alternate schools are branded special needs. But that's not true because how many people who go to school like that aren't. (Cir 9, ln. 70-79)

For Chris and Robert, not only they did not fit in with the mainstream school structure and organization of learning, they were further marginalized by being placed into the alternative program as a "last option" for students who cannot succeed in the "normal" school for "normal" students.

Chris came to the alternative program with a stigmatized idea about the program, but did not think of himself as a "bad kid." He wanted to have another option for education:

I've never really changed schools before. I've lived here my entire life

and gone to the same school. So when I switched from that school, I was

like "Oh great, I'm going to, you know, alternate program. That's where

all the screw-ups are going to be." And I really didn't think of myself as a

screw-up. I saw myself as just a kid who didn't really like school. And

then I got here and found out no, it's for kids who are just like me who

can't really function in a regular school. (In. ln.73-78)

Faced with a school option that is stigmatized, it is difficult to imagine participation in

alternative program would not leave potential traces on students' esteem and identity

(Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002).

At the time of the study, Chris had changed his original understanding about the

alternative programas a school for "screw-ups"; however, the stigma followed the students in the

community, as Chris described,

Oh, yeah. This is now a school for kids who cannot function in a regular

school. There's a kid who started here this year, and I knew him from

elementary school, same elementary school, and his mom and my mom

got to talking during the summer and she's like…my mom recommended

the alternative middle school. She's like "The alternative middle school?

Isn't that a school for bad kids? I didn't know your kid was bad." And

it's like no it's not about that, it's about kids who cannot function in

regular school. (In. ln.139-144)

Although Chris enjoyed the alternative program more than the mainstream school, his idea that it was his fault that he does not "fit-in" with the mainstream school was deeply imbedded in his understanding of who he was as a student.

The mainstream structure of school contributed to the students' concerns about their inability to "fit-in" with the school as their individual problem. Conrad was outspoken regarding the position of the alternative program in the school system and the students who attend it:

> It's because I feel like at this school and such as alternative middle school as well, because we are almost the outcasts of regular school. They feel it is necessary to put us in a smaller school and make us feel like we're lesser of students when we are actually not. We are the same. We are just been given scenarios than most students so by almost, if we were in a normal school we would prove that we are the same because we are. (Cir 9, ln. 62-67)

He challenged the idea of inferiority by claiming that the students in alternative programs should have equitable learning opportunities, rather than being stigmatized and blamed for not being able to fit-in with the mainstream system.

Similar experiences of students attending alternative programs in the United States address the issue of stigma as a result of their segregation from the mainstream school in an alternative program, and the documentation of their "bad" behaviours in both mainstream and alternative programs or in connection with the juvenile system (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009).The blame, then, can be easily assigned to the children and youth for not being "normal" or "good" enough for the mainstream school. The idea of merit, assumed here, does not work for the students who do not fit in with the mainstream school. Assuming that meritocracy applies to

these students perpetuates the exclusion of students and removes responsibility for equitable learning experiences from the mainstream school system (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). This allows the mainstream school system to maintainthe status quo.

Research has found that conditions of alternative programs, and "deficiencies in the learning environments of the alternative program contributed to students' identification of themselves as 'bad kids' and impeded their attempts to succeed" (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009, p. 418). The relationship with their learning environments throughout the years of schooling "illustrates the process through which a social identity such as 'at-risk' is co-constructed and structured continually" (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002, p. 98). Theiralternative program lacked resources, provided limited learning experiences and educational opportunities that perpetuated the stigma of unworthiness, lack of motivation, and delinquency.

In British Columbia, students in alternative programs have complex life trajectories and over the years of schooling, their options for succeeding in the school as structured are diminished. Alternative programs in BC are considered a Type 3 facility created for students with diverse needs who are not able to "fit-in" with the mainstream public school.

> To be Type Three facilities, Alternate education programs must focus on the educational, social and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. These education programs provide support to students through differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students' needs. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, n. p.)

An alternative program is often the last option for providing a learning environment for students to complete highschool requirements. It is after the students become "Ministry Identified," which

means they have been identified as special needs based on the results from a psycho-educational assessment or other assessments (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). These students usually meet criteria for behavioural, mental health, chronic health, drug and alcohol related diagnoses. A core assumption of alternative programs is the idea that the students attending such programs have deficits in one or a number of areas of a child's development. In this study, students discussed their experiences with alternative programs as lacking differentiated instruction and recognized the limitations in the teaching and learning approach employed.The students stated that they recognized that they needed a different kind of education early in their schooling. Most of them said that by Grade 7 (and some of them said by Grade 3), that they felt they did not fit in with the mainstream school and were not aware of alternative programs until they "failed" mainstream school and were placed into an alternative program. The experience of failure continued for many of these students over several years and had a negative impact on how they perceived themselvesas students and as learners. They also said they felt they were the "problem" and were responsible for not being able to "fit-in" with the mainstream school. However, they also recognized that if an option for an alternative program was available they would likely have more positive experienceswith schooling and education (Fld. Nts. May 5, 2017.

Another important organizational aspect of the alternative programwas that it wasviewed as a place of transition, not a choice or an option for education that was different than a mainstream school. It is "[a]n exit strategy to facilitate the student's transition back into regular school system, continuing education centre, graduation or to work or post-secondary training and education" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, n. p.). Students placed in the alternative programs felt that the alternative program is a place of transition and not an educational option or a choice. Kelsey summarizes,"Yeah. And then, there's extra stuff, because I

had to keep missing school for appointments and then another surgery. So then I fell really far behind. And I couldn't catch up normal school, so they put me in here to catch up, and then go back" (In. ln.43-45). The "deficits"these students possess require "rehabilitation" so they can get "fixed" to get back on track with their learning and return to the mainstream school.

4.7   Summary

This chapter discussed theme one which addressed students' experiences with the mainstream schools and alternative programs in relation to the following factors:1)school responsibilities and expectations; 2)school and class size; 3)structure of the learning process; 4)sense of community; 5)school mobility and exclusion; and 6)alternative program stigma. Students attending alternative programs have often faced adversities in their lives that complicate their ability to attend, participate and keep up with the expectations of mainstream schools. The students' experiences demonstrated that the organization of learning and structure of the mainstream school system was too rigid to respond to their life trajectories, did not provide support they needed, and did not promote their learning and development. Instead, students are expected to "fit in" with the requirements of the mainstream school, regardless of the events taking place in their lives.

The alternative programs provided more support and were smaller than the mainstream schools, but lacked resources and had limited learning opportunities. The Special Education Policy of the BC Ministry of Education (2016) articulated the original understanding for the alternative programs as schools for children and youth with special needs. An inability of the school system to recognize students' strengths and attend to their needs in a timely and positive manner perpetuated stigmatization for the alternative program as an educational option for their students. However, after participating in the alternative programs, students were able to form

relationships and community; two important features of alternative programs not offered in their experiences in mainstream schools. Their experiences with both mainstream schools and alternative programs came with dilemmas that most students do not face:on the one hand, an apparent loss of learning opportunities in the alternative programs but gaining positive teacher-student relationships and support of their program community, and on the other hand, while they appeared to lack positive teacher-student relationships and a sense of community in the mainstream schools, they had diverse learning opportunities.

Chapter 5. The social institution of school, alternative program and wellbeing

This chapter discusses two themes: 1) The students' experiences participating in their learning and development and the relationship they built with the school system, and 2) students' school experiences and their understandings of their mental health in relation to their identity development,schooling options and learning opportunities.This chapter clearly illustrates thestudents' complex relationships with their educational environments.Six sub-themes are explored and grounded in the data from the interviews, sharing circles, and researcher's field notes:—1)meaning and purpose of learning, 2)leaving school, 3)teacher-student relationships,4)the role of school as a "parent," 5)students' wellbeing and school success, and 6)opportunities and spaces for learning. These themes illustrate the students' understandings of the role they play in their education,and explore the meanings and purposes their educational experiences have for them.

5.1   Meaning and purpose of learning

Every student in this research project had a goal for their education. Their immediate goal was to graduate. However, the students did not think of graduation as a possibility while they were in the mainstream school:

> Natasha: […] how did going to a regular school make you feel about
>
> yourself and your ability to graduate?
>
> Michelle: I felt like it was a pretty unrealistic goal for myself. Nobody in
>
> my family had graduated until my sister a couple of years ago my sister
>
> did. […] So I tried really hard to attend school but I didn't feel like it was
>
> going to happen. Now I'm doing it*((laughter)).* (In. ln. 118-123)

Graduation was an "unrealistic goal" for Michelle and other participants. When their learning environment changed,they could finally begin to think about graduation as a possibility. Experiences in mainstream school had limited their perception of their abilities to complete high schoolgiven their poor relationship with the organization of learning and school structures. The alternative program provided more flexibility and enough support so that they began to see a possibility for a change in their educational trajectory and their educational futures. Vadeboncoeur and Padilla-Petry (2017) discussed the challenges some students face with mainstream schools and noted the issues of inflexible curricula and a disconnect between the curricula and life. They also highlighted differences between teacher-student relationships in mainstream schools and alternative programs stating that teachers in alternative programs are more likely to work with students to "creat[e] learning opportunities that both (1) re-center students and (2) meet the requirements of what is recognized as curricular objectives required by the formal educational arena" (p. 3).

Changing educational environment so students felt supported and encouraged resulted in educational possibilities that they could not have seen in the past. They discussed graduation from school asa future accomplishment that would allow them to re-construct how they perceived themselves in relation to their mainstream school experiences and plan their future in a new light. Shaelyn, for example, spoke about how her self-identity depended on graduating:

> I don't know, just like I needed to get it done now 'cause like I can't back
>
> up now like just to get it done, like I'll make my parents happy, like
>
> prove to them that I could actually <u>be normal person</u>, not like a low life,
>
> everything, so it'll make me really happy. (In. ln. 234-237)

Having support and a flexible plan for graduating became an important motivational factor for attending thealternative program and creating goals for their graduation, future education and career. This change in their perspective contributed to an understanding that they could re-envision their potential future and pursue a career goal.

On the other hand, also based on their experiences in schools, they wanted to leave school as soon as they acquired enough credits to graduate. As Shaelyn, Amber makes clear, graduating and finishing this stage of formal education is important:

> Amber: I just wanted to graduate.
>
> Natasha: Okay, there or here? Overall, that's the feeling?
>
> Amber: As long as I graduated. Back then I would have preferred to
>
> graduate there [the mainstream school] but now no, I am just happy to be
>
> graduating [from the alternative program]. (In. ln. 59-62)

Shaelyn echoes Amber when she says, "I just wanted to get out of there as fast as I could" (In. ln. 54). Indeed, all students said they wanted to graduate from school to pursue employment and post-secondary education. They all had an interest in a career and also understood that high school completion provided them with an opportunity to pursue theirinterests. For some of them, high school completion was an accomplishment that no one in their family achieved before and they were proud to be the first.However, they wanted to complete requirements for graduation and move on: Their focus was on meeting the requirements for graduation, not on learning, or gaining skills per se.

Only Donna and Michelle, who took part in the trades exploration program, discussed their learning experiences as meaningful and connected to their future career. Prior to starting the alternative program, they knew they wanted to learn to make and create things, but they did not

have a clear idea of the education they needed or a career they wanted to pursue. Completing a

year of the trades exploration program at the alternative program allowed Donna to connect her

love for making things and her love for music:

> I'm going to go to the university once I graduate. I'm going to do
>
> journeymen work […]. And eventually, ultimately, I want to build
>
> guitars. […] Yeah. Everything I've ever been is going to be my career. I
>
> like building things, I like music, and that's all going into what I want to
>
> do. (In. ln. 174-182)

The connection between learning and life helped Donna and Michelle to re-envision their future

post-secondary education and career plans. Michelle details how the principal initially suggested

the trades program and that upon learning more about, she embraced the future opportunities it

provided. She noted,

> I actually did a parent-teachers conference with my mom and *((the*
>
> *principal))* kind of shoved it down my throat *((laughter))* like, "This is
>
> happening, I'm putting you in this class." Like kind of pushing me for it
>
> and I get to read about the opportunities that it was and all the different
>
> courses that we were going to get to do *((at the college))* and it was really
>
> promising you know. It's free education you know, it's a big deal and I
>
> think that it's a good idea 'cause I'm going to get to learn different trades
>
> you know, see a different side of the working world. So I just said," You
>
> know if they're going to allow me to finish school and do this, why not,
>
> right?" (In.ln. 189-185)

The trades program was initiated by the School District and offered to the students attending the alternative program. However, trades were the only career-related program offered at the alternative program. Opportunities to explore other possible interests were not available forstudents in the alternative programs. Although Donna and Michelle enjoyed the trades program as an opportunity to use their learning in a meaningful way, there appeared to be a sense of desperation among students to learn skills to find a job after graduation;thisinformed their idea of education as "meaningful" as also purposeful.

For Amanda, her goal for post-secondary education developed from experiences with support teachers at the alternativeprogram and motivated her to pursue a career as an Educational Assistant (EA). She valued the connection and support provided by her EAs and began to volunteer at another school as part of her work experience while completing the requirements for graduation. In the interview, Amber expressed how her wanting to be an EA also stems from a desire to make a tangible difference in an individual's life

> Amber: I want to become an Aboriginal EA myself.
>
> Natasha: Okay, in the school?
>
> Amber: Yeah, in a school, at elementary or alternate.
>
> Natasha: Not a teacher?
>
> Amber: No *((laughing))*
>
> Natasha: No? Tell me why not.
>
> Amber: Umm, ((pause)) I don't know, just helping with one student or
>
> few students feels ((pause)) I don't know, better than teaching a whole
>
> class. (In. ln. 204-214)

The students' experiences demonstrated that offering an exploration of learning and work opportunities encouraged them to participate in their learning and create educational and career goals. It is also important to note that Amanda stated that her interest in becoming an EA grew from her experience of valuing the work of EAs in the alternative program.

Robert and Chris were the youngest participants and were not yet sure what they wanted to do after graduation. School graduation was a long -term goal; and their immediate goal was to transition to the alternative program in the following year and then work toward graduation. Robert described his plans as follows

> Natasha: Let's say, what do you want to do after school, what is your
>
> goal for professional work?
>
> Robert: I'd say, I don't know…
>
> Natasha: You don't know yet? Ok.
>
> Robert: I am one of those people, that if you ask me that question on a
>
> spot, I'd be like "Ahhhhhhhh…, I don't know." (In. ln. 483-487)

Robert's school experiences did not provide him with diverse opportunities to explore his own interests and understanding of how what he enjoyed might relate to future professions. He loved animals, and had spoken about it extensively in the interview and sharing circles, however, he could not connect his love for animals with possible careers he could envision himself pursuing.

Robert made a point about his abilities, rather than possibilities, when he spoke further about how to answer my question about professional goals.

> The reason I don't know right now, cause it can change in a couple of
>
> years, […] 'cause I'm focusing on my stuff now or like year or two in a
>
> future, not on like… I like to be asked that question for the reason of

"What <u>can I do</u>? Not what can I not think of, what are the ideas <u>I can</u>

think of." That's why I kind of like to be asked that question, <u>not </u>for the

fact that "Oh, crap, I don't have an answer." (In. ln. 493-398)

The question proposed by Robert—"What can I do?"—highlightedhis present abilities and

relying on the present it was difficult to imagine future possibilities, or:"what can I not think

of."The question that I asked, "what do you want to do?" (In. ln. 483), became limited by his

perceptions of his current abilities, although I had hoped he would reflect on a future imagined

goal.

For all students, besides Andrew who wanted to get a job or start his own business after

graduation, the goal was going to college or university and they knew that they needed to

graduate in order to move into post-secondary education. Miranda captures that understanding

when she says:

Miranda: My personal goal is to finish grade 12.

Natasha: Graduate?

Miranda: <u>For sure</u> I want to graduate. And I am going to end up in one of

the universities getting my certificates for roofing or construction.

(Miranda, In. ln 191-193)

Miranda: I definitely want to go to university. (In. ln. 212).

They spoke proudly about their goal for future education and their possible careers. For Shaelyn,

Kelsey, Tatiana, Miranda, and Conrad their career goals were based on the interests they

developed and were not related to the learning opportunities they had at school:

Natasha: […] How did you come up with an idea that you want to go into

Psychology after school?

Shaelyn: I really enjoy Psychology and like I watch Criminal Minds all

the time. […], it's just something I'm really interested in, that I always

have been since I was younger […]. Yea. (In. ln. 127-133)

Natasha: […] Did school in any way help you to develop the interest in

that?

Shaelyn: <u>No</u>. It was all on my own. (In. ln. 127-133)

For Conrad, it was photography, digital arts, and comedy that attracted him. Importantly, in the

alternative programhe was able to begin to integrate his interests into his learning. For Kelsey,

her love for animals and helping people developed into a desire to become a nurse or a

veterinarian's assistant. Tatiana's interest in the fashion industry and marketing grew out of her

experiences at her mother's boutique fashion business. Miranda worked with one of her relatives

in construction and said that she would like to pursue her interest in construction at a post-

secondary level. These students did not see a connection between their learning experiences at

either the mainstream school or the alternative program and their own learning and career

interests.

Engaging in learning activities that connected students' developmental trajectory with

their interests was important for their participation in school. All of the students said that their

school experiences did not address their curiosity, did not provide hands-on or exploratory

learning opportunities, and that the subjects taught did not appear to have a meaningful

connection to one another. Students reported a lack of a sense of continuitybetween

subjects;subjects did not appear to be relevant or meaningful. For Robert, just sitting in class for

hours was enough to lose focus and interest in being in class:

Feel like if it's a middle school, I sit like for 6 hours or if it's a high

school like for 2 or 3, it's just, <u>oh, God!</u> It's, it's very irritating! you can't

just get up and leave and like at least have a stretch or go outside and

breathe and just get some air. It's kind of annoying sometimes. (In. ln.

620-622)

Active participation in learning requires students to engage with their imagination and, with

teachers, to work in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1994a, 2004). A shared

goal, collaboration with peers and support from teachers are some of the main factors that

positively contribute to learning and development. Robert's desire to have an opportunity to

move around in class, share and work together with his peers and seek support from his teachers

may have increased his ability to stay focused and interested in school.

For Conrad, engaging with learning meant participating in the process through hands-on

experiences, not paper-based learning. He felt bored at times and disconnected from the lessons.

In his interview, he detailed these feelings:

Conrad: […] I'd just be sitting there, staring out the window. I'd always

get in trouble, so I'd have to get moved a lot. Same through elementary

school and middle school. […]

Natasha: Was it not interesting?

Conrad: A little bit, but a little bit it was boring. I was understanding it

pretty easy. When it came down to quiz time ... The papers, if they gave

us worksheets, I'd do sometimes pretty good on it because I would retain

it but during the lessons, I would not pay attention or not do the sheets

they'd give me. (In.ln. 346-353)

Conrad's ability to complete work was not the issue;he struggled with staying engaged with how the lessons were taught in class. The options for learning appeared limited and were based on compliance and reproduction of knowledge, rather engaging students in more authentic academic tasks.

When I asked Conrad what would make a difference for his learning, he referred to the experiences he had with some of the teachers in mainstream school, who integrated hands-on or project-based learning in their teaching:

> Conrad: Hands-on learning would be ... Like when I was in grade 9 and 10 socials, they did paintballing to re-enact the wars.The civil wars. They would take out the 4 and 5 socials classes throughout the school. In my grade and the grade lower, and we'd go paint balling. […] you'd have to load it in and fire once and then load it again and fire once, to re-enact on how slow it could be.Then as we were doing it, they'd stop us right before the match would start and tell us what match this was versus like Poland or Switzerland or Germany versus who, and who actually ended up winning the battle, and if there were any major names that were part of this battle, who were killed or taken hostage or whatever. It was a lot more interesting. (In. ln. 358-373)

All students spoke about hands-on learning as key to their interest in learning. "Hands-on" was defined as meaning-making by engaging in embodied experiences and this is what they described as missing in their schools.Learning that related to real-life situationswas also an important aspect for engagement with school material.

Students reported that when they had a meaningful experience with their learning they

felt connected and engaged, they felt there was a purpose to their learning experiences, and they remembered what they learned on a deeper level. All students wanted to understand the material or subject through meaningful engagement with the material. Donna recounted her experience in English:

> We did a novel study and I was finding a lot of the assignments were very boring for me, because I'm a really good writer. […] and I was just finding those assignments for that book were just so boring I didn't want to do them. So I went and talked to my teacher and he's like "Okay, let's make it more challenging. Instead of doing all these assignments, do this one big difficult assignment and we'll just count it towards all those assignments." So being able to change your work to fit you really helps.
>
> (In. ln. 162-168)

Donna's desire to participate in her learning and the positive response from her teacher facilitated learning and development appropriate to Donna's abilities and interest. In addition, it also challenged her to move beyond her writing skills and to deepen her understanding of the novel.

Concern with thelack of meaningful experiences was extended to the alternative programs by some students as well. Andrew and other students spoke about the need for a learning environment in the alternative program that provides students with a clear understanding of the reasons why they have to come to school, and how what they learn prepares them for life beyond school. He explained that the students in the alternative program were placed there with no apparent purpose and the learning that took place was meaningless:

At this school it feels that, the schools basically took all these kids and put them in this one school,just to like have us here to do something almost, like. It's just kind of weird. It's not like a school almost; it's more like a daycare, really. We don't do much. (In. ln. 189-191)

Michelle and Andrew also spoke of the alternative programas a "daycare": a place to supervise the students with even more limited opportunities for learning and development than at the mainstream school. Neither mainstream schools nor alternative programs appeared able to provide an inclusive learning environment for these students. "Pushing" these students out of the mainstream system and into the alternative program did not necessarily translate into a better learning experience.

Andrew reinforced the point that the alternative program was not an equitable educational option for the students, because: "… I feel like our school doesn't have, like, students willing to, like, do, any kind of thing" (In. ln. 202-203). Although, it seemed that he had placed the blame for not being interested "in learning" on the students, this example demonstrated a diminished level of interest in school participation among the students that were pushed out of the mainstream system several years earlier. He further stated: "My class will be like one day we'll have like ten kids and the next we'll have like five or like three and it's like "Why am I here?" we're sitting there doing nothing, right?" (In. ln. 220-222). The alternative program,for him,was a last resource for graduation, but it did not provide meaningful learning opportunities.

The meaning of the learning experiences in mainstream school and the alternative programs were emphasized when more than half of them did not attend their alternative program on "weed day." This event is held yearly in downtown Vancouver by supporters of the movement to legalize marijuana. This event attracts young people as well, and a number of

students from the alternative programs attended the gathering. Perhaps, participation in "weed day" was an opportunity for some of the students to contribute as activists, to use their "voices," to experience themselves as free, engaged, and recognized. Whatever the reasons for their absence from the alternative programs, for those who participated, "weed day" seemed to offer a place to belong (Fld. Nts. April 20ᵗʰ, 2016). On this day, the meaning and purpose for being at the alternative program was less important than participating in "weed day." The alternative program provided support and flexibility, however, it was not organized to provide fully equitable learning opportunities for the students attending it. Marginalizing these students may have resulted in a continued reduction in attendance and participation.

Michelle's view was similar to Andrew's; she considered alternative program: "to be kind of like glorified babysitting *((laughter))* to be honest. It's kind of a way to let the parents go to work and make the government money" (In. ln. 76-78). She explored this point further to explain that the meaning for a school and education as portrayed by the system does not reflect the reality of life outside of school:

> They try and tell you that this is what you need for the real world but
> also, I find they shelter you from what the real world is really like. Like
> you don't get to leave class whenever you want, you don't get to show up
> late to school and get away with it you know it's like having a job. They
> don't really train you what is like to have a job and be in a working
> world. It's not really like that. (In. ln. 72-76)

For Michelle, school should prepare students for real life and support students in developing interest for learning. She stated that school should be like a job, however for her and all other students, there was a perceived lack of connection between what was taught in school and the

real world; this made it challenging for them to develop a sense of purpose for schooling and reasons for attending school.

In research with students from Australia, another "barrier to making learning meaningful is content that fails to reflect students' lives" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 62). Michelle described the limited connection between life and school:

> <u>Yeah</u>, they teach you about filing your taxes but it's very limited. They don't teach you about gardening in [both mainstream] school [and alternative program], they don't teach like how to be self-sustaining.[…] And they don't really like… <u>they kind of cushion you</u>, they try and tell you that everything is going to be okay and here's how to not be broke, nothing really works. I've been living on my own for a while now and <u>nothing really prepares you for that</u>. (In. ln. 84-90)

The students in these alternative programs had complex life trajectories and were interested in lessons that would help them build successful lives nonetheless. While life skills courses were valuable, they missed opportunities for learning and developing beyond basic life skills, as well as opportunities for rich pedagogical approaches. This was at the center of the loss of meaning for their schooling and their further marginalization. The "extensive evidence that schooling is not working for too many young people" supports "the need to re-imagine schooling *for* education" (McGregor et al. 2017, p. 63).

5.2   Leaving school

The term used by the students when they left school for different reasons was "dropped out" (Michelle, ln.39), "stopped coming" (Chris, ln.4 & 52), "kicked out" (Shaelyn, ln.162), and/or "missed so much" (Amber, ln.97). Leaving school did not feel like a choice. These phrases and

their use are reinforced by the mainstream school system when discussing the students who do not "fit in" with the mainstream school and are placed "at-risk" for a number of possible issues, one of which is "dropping out." The term "leaving school" is an alternative to the above categories in response to the inability of the mainstream school system to provide different educational options that promote learning and development. This perspective de-emphasizes the focus on the students as solely responsible for not "fitting in" with the mainstream school. Instead, it brings in a sociocultural perspective to reflect on the role of the relationship between the teaching and learning environment and the students leaving school.

All students contemplated leaving school because they felt disconnected from the learning process and their educational environment in the mainstream school. Michelle described well this disconnection:

> Most days I didn't want to go, I contemplated dropping out when I turned
>
> fourteen, thirteen actually. It was just like, there was no real motivation
>
> to be there because I wasn't learning anything, I didn't have a lot of
>
> assistance with learning anything. (In. ln. 68-70)

Michelle's experiences with the mainstream school system became a challenge early in her school years. By the time she was 13, she contemplated leaving school;it did not serve her learning needs and did not recognize her unique talents. This experience wasshared by all other students: Conrad, Shaelyn, Tatiana, Robert, Chris, Amber, Donna, Kelsey, Miranda, and Andrew. I list their names here to stress that their lives are unique and deserve equitable learning options. They all missed, skipped, dropped out, stopped coming, to mainstream school for the reasons related to "school and life circumstances" (Birioukov, 2016, p. 342) and they felt disconnected from and disregarded by the school system.

"Leaving school" was a powerful action. Although under tremendous pressure, feelings of desperation, and being "pushed out" from the mainstream school system, leaving school was perceived by the students as an "option" to leave an environment that did not respond to their learning needs and did not recognize their strengths and excluded them from participation in learning. The students could have stayed and kept complying with being moved from school to school trying to "fit-in" with the system, or become ambivalent and attended school to avoid punishment. "Leaving school" may reflect students' actions for standing against the oppressive systemic violation of their rights for equitable education. Donna detailed the active and passive processes that characterized her school and life circumstances, including leaving school:

> Originally, I dropped out in grade 8 towards the end. So they just pushed me through, so I finish grade 8, that's fine. And then we moved out to Riverside, so I tried the high school there […] I was there for 6 months, and it was the same thing. It just wasn't working for me so I dropped out for a year and a half and we decided to move back to Greenwoodbecause we liked it, and I'm like I want to go back to school. […] and we ended up finding this school 'cause we heard about an alternate program at the Greenwood Secondary, went to talk to them and they're like no, we're not going to take you because of these problems, here's a number for a school, call them. (In. ln. 95-103)

Although, leaving school further excluded them from learning in schools, they demonstrated the courage to end the perceived de-humanization of their life experiences by the system "that is not beneficial to the students, represents social reproduction, social control and reinforces existing inequities" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 208). McIntyre-Bharry (2008) addressed the issue of school

leaving "as the resistance of an oppression, a criticism of certain aspects our schools connected to our powerlessness to effect change" (p. 10). This idea positions the students' relationship with their learning environment as a social condition, rather than as students' individual factors contributing to leaving school (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2015).

5.3   Teacher-student relationship

All students explained that their relationship with teachers and other school personnel was a critical aspect in both mainstream schools and alternative programs that contributed to their level of interest in attending school, participating in learning, and developing a sense of belonging. Amber's experience with the change in her relationships from elementary to middle to high school was common to all students: "Umm, in the middle school the teachers knew me. We built a relationship, fairly close. They knew just how I needed to be helped, and I moved to secondary school and I just ((pause)) I just lost help" (In. ln. 84-85).

Loss of support and lack of close connection with the teachers had a negative impact on the students' ability to keep up with the demands of the mainstream school. Many students described loving their experiences in the elementary school but, with their transition to middle school, their experiences changed. As Chris stated,

> It was great. I loved being in that [elementary] school. There was tons of
>
> people I grew up with and then they went on to a different middle school
>
> and then I went to that middle school before this one. And then I started
>
> having issues there and I came here [middle alternative program]. I
>
> started off anhonor student in elementary school then the first middle
>
> school I went to I got a few Fs and Cs and Ds for the first term and then
>
> all fails the next term. (In. ln. 15-20)

For Chris, it was difficult to adjust to the new environment of middle school. There were new classmates, and teachers, a new building, and schedule, and new subjects and other changes to be adapted to, however, most challenging of all was his feeling unsupported in this process.

> Natasha: So how did that happen? Why? What happened?
>
> Chris: …At the other [mainstream] school, I didn't really have that. It was just like, "Ok, do this." Then they'd walk out of the classroom and they'd do their stuff and then they'd come back in after the fact. So I wouldn't really know what to do. They'd be like: "This is how you do it." And then they'd walk out. So if I had any questions, I couldn't really ask it because there was no one there. (In. ln. 20-26)

Chris's experiences with teachers who appeared to bedisconnected, overworked, or absent, provided littleopportunity to develop a positive relationship. He noted that teachers generally left him and other students to work on their own when they all needed guidance, support, encouragement, and instruction.

> Teachers need to recognize the students' needs and strengths, rather than treating them as having little ability to complete work. Miranda characterized teachers' attitude as"You are going to learn this, if you do not learn it you are a failure" (In. ln. 186-187).Shaelyn also experienced that attitude and further noted that losing faith in them because they needed instruction was another common shared experience:

> It's like, they act like as if you're not capable, like if you had hard times like in your work and you like call for help they like treat you like you're stupid, it feels like...
>
> Natasha: Because… what do they [[do to make you feel that way?

Shaelyn: [[Feel like... *((inaudible))* They just

keep explaining the same thing over and over and over again, and like, I

mean, obviously need more help like more in-depth help, […] like for

them to sit down with me and like, do the problem with me instead of

just telling me how to do it. (In. ln. 58-74)

Lack of support in the mainstream schools created an environment where students could not develop a sense of belonging, engage in learning, or feel connected with their teachers. Such experiences left them feeling inferior and unable to complete work, embarrassed for needing instruction and, worst of all, feeling "stupid."

Teacher-student relationships were a barrier for all students when they were in mainstream schools.Their sense of not having enough care, support, and options for learning that matched their educational needs and built on their strengths initially informed students' interactions with teachers in the alternative programs. While they were interested in building positive relationship with teachers and staff, there was an initial sense of caution toward adults. It took time and effort from the teachers in the alternative programs to overcome these experiences in mainstream schools and build relationships. It took time for me to connect with the students. At first, there was little eye contact, and youth often walked by without saying a word or without responding to "good morning" or "hi." It took several months and a continuous presence to create a possibility for connection. It seemed to be much harder to establish a connection with the male students: they seemed concerned with "control" – something they can decide for themselves, perhaps, because many things in their lives are not under their control and someone else continuously makes decisions for them. (Fld. Nts. February 12th, 2016).

Students reported that having teachers and other school staff at the alternative

programwith whom they could talk to about their lives, connect on more informal level, and stay with one homeroom teacher for more than a year gave them sense of connectedness with their environment and motivated them to stay at the alternative program, develop goals, and build self-esteem. For Conrad, connecting with teachers through social media seemed a step toward building positive relationships with his teacher:

I like it here [at the alternative program] because it's more brought down. You're not on a Mr. and Mrs. bases with the teachers. You can get to know your teachers. It's almost frowned upon if you added [on social media] your teacher in a normal school. Here, it's like, "Oh, sure. I'll add you." Here, it's more personal. They actually ask you how your weekend is and all this. You can have a one to one conversation with them. (In. ln. 143-150)

For Conrad, the experience of feeling more connected and having more individual support from adults at the alternative programreflects research showing that positive relationship with teachers contributes"to a sense of acceptance and belonging" (Morrissette, 2011, p. 179)

Donna shared a similar understanding of support from her teachers as important to the relationship building process that, in turn, facilitated further interest in coming to school. For her, learning required not only the academic, but also positive emotional connection with the teacher:

… the shop teacher and I talk a lot, I know if I am having problems at home or with the fact I do not live with my mom, or with my school or if I'm having problems with anything, I can go talk to him and he'll help me try to find the solution. In mainstream school, you can't do that because you don't have that sort of relationship with your teacher. […] I don't

know how they can get around that but I think that's something that they

need to address […]. (In. ln. 250-260)

This experience reflectsthe student-teacher relationships as one where both "students and teachers are 'seen,' are visible to each other, in the sense that they feel noticed, acknowledged, and heard" (Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017, p. 4) A teacher who knows his/her students, supports them as a whole person, and recognizes their diverse needs and strengths was the kind of teacher with whom students in the alternative programs wanted to learn and connect.These experiences resonate with the experiences of students attending alternative programs in Australia where teachers took interest in each of their students needs and strengths and "then developed learning plans that took into account the interests and aptitudes of each student" (Mills & McGregor, 2016, p. 213). The importance of personal connection and interest in students was shown to be one of the key factors for school attendance and interest in learning and school completion.

The level of academic support was also important to students' ability to re-build their sense of identity as a "student" when they came to the alternative program.Robert articulates how important that support was to him:

> They actually listen and actually help you, they do not just come by and
>
> like "Oh, yeah, you have to do this" and leave, they literally will stay and
>
> sit down with you for a couple of minutes and help you until you grasp
>
> on it and then you say "yes" and then they go to help other people. They
>
> actually help you […]. (In. ln. 255-258)

Helping and supportive environments allowed these students to re-connect with their learning and feel more confident in their abilities to meet their educational goals. Relationships between

the students and their teachers opened up opportunities for students to re-envision possibilities for their future "as a result of new relationships with caring, experienced, and creative adults" (Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017, p. 4). Teachers who were present, concerned, knowledgeable, supportive and interested in their students' learning were the teachers the students wanted to have in their classrooms.

Another important aspect of teacher-student relationships was teachers' relationships with parents. Donna did not have positive experiences with mainstream schools and one of the reasons for leaving school was the ongoing negative connection between the teachers and her mother:

> Like the teachers were always like phoning her and stuff and she would go to the parent-teacher meetings and it was never anything positive. It was always "she's not doing her work, she's not showing up, she's skipping class, she's mouthing off to the teachers."
>
> Natasha: So many times that the school connected with you was because of something not very good.
>
> Donna: Right.
>
> Natasha: Not because of something good.
>
> Donna: Right. (In. ln. 479-486)

The teacher-studentrelationship was not built on Donna's strengths. Instead, her problematic behaviours were emphasized as who Donna was as "a student" when her mother was contacted by the teachers. Sometimes, this deficit-focused approach was reinforced by a parent toward a child at home. Some students reported that their relationship with parents regarding their schooling was negatively affected and some students tried to keep their parents' connectionswith

the school to a minimum.

Thisdeficit-focused approach seemed to go beyond individual relationships between the students and their teachers. Donna's example above relates closely to a systemic top-down view on discipline toward the students that was often negative and described by the students as "punishment," rather than discipline. Conrad explained:

> There shouldn't be no, like, expelling a message truly necessary. But suspension more if you are going to do something stupid, then yeah, you have to be <u>punished</u>, cause' like if you are going to cause' a fight with some student and you are going to walk up and slug him in the jaw, and then, proceed to beat the crap out of him, then you should be, you know, punished and kept at home for at least a month or so. […] (Cir 3, ln. 12-17)

Some of the students believed that there must be punishment imposed on students if there was a reason, however, as in Conrad's words, they stopped at suspension. The students' experiences with the school system and their inferior position over a number of years manifested in a belief in the correctness of punishment toward them.

"Punishment" as the necessity for these students developed from the relationship with their school environment and was a mediated action (Vygotsky, 1997a). The concepts of internalized domination and internalized oppressionwere introduced by Tappan (2006) to emphasize the sociocultural, rather than psychological nature of the relationship between the dominant and non-dominant groups. The concept of internalized dominationproposes that dominant groups employ cultural tools "that transmit dominating/privileging ideologies, messages, and scripts" (p. 2127) to mediate their position of dominance over non-dominant

groups. The concept of internalized oppression "results from the mastery and ownership of cultural tools that transmit oppressive ideologies, messages, and scripts (p. 2127)." Students' experiences of feeling inferior, moving from school to school to find a "better" fit, and being separated from teaching seemed to lead to internalized oppression. Tappan (2006) argued "[i]magine, therefore, the power that these cultural tools amass over the course of many years" (p. 2133), and the potential impact of internalized domination and oppression on students'identities as "students" and "learners."

Other students argued that even suspension from school as a punishment was a one-sided approach to follow the school policy. Every student mentioned their experience with being suspended from school as a disciplinary action that was imposed without finding out the root cause of the problem and without a discussion of any alternative consequences with the students. In the second sharing circle, this was discussed:

> Kelsey: When you're expelled for something, and if you are not expelled, then you are like, you don't realize and like you'll do that again
>
> Donna: = Yeah, but they shouldn't suspend you without trying to figure out why you did what you did. I don't know what your situation is, but I got suspended and nobody asked why that situation happened in the first place. If they had just asked me to start talking about it, things would have been resolved a lot faster and things would have been a lot different, instead of just saying that I fucked up and now I'm suspended.
>
> Natasha: Yeah, because then you're missing school even more, right?
>
> Shaelyn: [[Yeah.

Donna: [[Which means you fall behind, and when you go back to

school, you don't feel motivated to catch up because you've missed, like,

two weeks of school. (Cir 2, ln. 120-130)

This discussion about suspension illustrates the perceptions of the students regarding their role

and position in the school; their participation in schooling depended on an application of

punishment that may not have reflected and understanding of "why" the situation happened in

the first place. The relationship between the adults and students appeared to be based on different

positions of power held by the two groups, and such "disparity in power is the cause of much

conflict between students and teachers and may lead to student marginalization and early

leaving" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 52).It is evident the school system addressed problem

behaviours and/or non-conformity using a deficit-focused approach.Other experiences of

suspension further illustrate the deficit-focused approach applied to students.Again, in sharing

circle 2, Tatiana added to the discussion on suspension:

Natasha: What did you do? What got you suspended in school, like,

what did they do?

Tatiana: Well, they just had me go to the office, and I was not allowed to

do anything, just work for the entire frikn day.

Donna: Oh, man, I had couple of those, that<u>sucked</u>.

Tatiana: Yeah, I had to go to the class and get my work and come back.

Natasha: Did it help?

Tatiana: I really hate that, I really hated that, Yeah, I didn't want to get

suspended any more. (Cir 2, ln. 158-168)

The experience of being suspended did not encourage learning, but it did create fear and the desire to avoid being suspended again. Suspension was perceived by the students as punishment that further excluded the students from their learning environment and reduced the time they had with their teachers. The teaching and learning process was disrupted, rather than reinforced.

The students discussed two types of suspension: in-school suspension or full suspension,as when a student is sent home. These punishment approachescreated an animosity in students toward their relationship with the school staff and the system overall. Placed in isolation for a day or more for in-school suspension, students were removed from their daily activities with their classmates and teachers. They were supervised and their movement and interaction were limited. Conrad articulates the experience of such suspensions:

> I had like a lot of in school suspension like I'd spend the full day just in one room doing my work. And that sucks. […] I've gotten that probably over twenty-thirty times.
>
> Natasha: Do you think that is better than being at home and doing nothing and actually having free time being away from school?
>
> Conrad: I would rather do frigging, like, I'd rather do suspension *((sent home))*, than in school suspension. In school suspension sucks.
>
> Natasha: Yeah?
>
> Conrad: Cause' when you are trapped in, like especially at my middle school in a tiny room with two or three other students and then the teacher and you are not even allowed to go to the washroom, it's like stupid. It's supposed to work, but it doesn't. (Cir3, ln. 34-50)

Full suspension meant the student was sent home for a specific number of days and was not allowed to come to school during that time. Both options have been found to be detrimental to the relationship between the students, the teachers, and the system overall. McGregor et al., (2017) stated that "[t]he most severe application of power by schools is the exclusion of students" (p. 55). Expulsion and suspension are excluding practices that are focused on punishment rather than discipline, and based on creating fear in the students for disobeying the rules instead of teaching a meaningful lesson that taps into a child's experience of justice and equity.

The American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP] (Council on School Health,2013) addressed a number of risks and disadvantages related to out-of-school suspension and expulsion as having adverse effects on students, their families, and school districts. Some of the risks were associated with furthering the challenges the students are already faced with, such as unsafe neighborhoods, and include issues with the juvenile system, higher rates of school leaving, and engagement in high-risk behaviours. School districts with high suspension rates"tend to have lower academic quality, pay less attention to school climate (social, cultural, academic, ethical), and receive lower ratings on school governance measures" (p. 1002). Suspension and expulsion do not address the underlying issues for poor school performance or absenteeism (Council of School Health, 2013).

5.4   "In loco parentis": the role of schoolas parents

Schools are social institutions responsible for educating children and youth.As stated earlier, education as defined here is a creative process focused on a holistic understanding of child development, opportunities for self-expression, meaningful learning, and freedom of thought (Freire, 2001; Greene, 2000; John-Steiner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1994a, b, 2004). The value of care

for children is fundamental to educational practice and "[w]hilsta child is in a teacher's care, some of the privileges of natural parents are transferred to the teacher so that he or she may carry out his or her duties" (Mohammed, Gbenu, & Lawal, 2014, p. 318). The school teacher, then, assumes the responsibilities and "both legal and moral obligations" (p. 318) to provide best possible care and learning experiences for their students.

Although, the term "in loco parentis" was removed from the British Columbia school policy, the students in this research shared that their experiences with schooling depended on their relationships with individual teachers and other school staff. All students discussed the importance of care and compassion in their relationships with their teachers as key factors contributing to their academic success and interest in school.They described being deeply concerned with the high level of stress experienced in the mainstream school, as well as what they perceived as poor care and support. All stated that when due to a life situation they could not attend school, the mainstream school did not have an educational option that would allow them to catch up with what they missed. Lack of learning support that is "[a]ctive, timely and appropriate […] for academic issues is absent in too many [mainstream] schools" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 58). However, the ideal of "in loco parentis" requires the school to go "[b]eyond academic activities, [and] the school should be seen as the second home of the child" (p. 320). When Amber's mother passed away, the school had no accommodation for her to take time off to grieve without falling behind in her schooling.

> Amber: = Grade 9 I think it was. My mum passed away so I had got a lot
>
> of anxiety, [[and, which made me, umm…
>
> Natasha:　[[I'm so sorry.

Amber: …lost focus in school. I stayed home for most of the time. It

made me... I was able to pass Grade 9 but I missed so much. I didn't

understand everything so I decided to redo Grade 9 again. (In.ln. 92-98)

The grief experienced by Amanda regarding the loss of her mother played a significant role in

her ability to participate in school. When Amanda returned to school later in the year, she

managed to complete the grade, but did not feel confident to go to Grade 10 the next year.

The following year Amber lost her cousin and took part in a traditional healing process at

the Long House in her community. During this time, she did not attend school and fell even

further behind in her school work. She was unable to catch up given the amount of work she

missed. As a result of falling behind, and without an option to catch up and stay at the

mainstream school to continue with her education, she was placed into the alternative program.

Amber: I feel like it affected my education a lot. My future, I looked on

my future differently. And, last year when […] when I started coming

here, I came here for a week and then my cousin passed away so I stayed

away again, and then it was Christmas break and then I got back and then

I stayed for a day but then on that day back I got initiated into the Long

House so I missed like another month and a half. But ever since then my

energy and positivity about everything has changed. (In. ln. 116-121)

Healing and support arrived from a mentorship program from her community. In contrast, the the

mainstream school, by apparently not being able to provide an option for catching up, responded,

instead, with the move to the alternative program. The alternative program did not offer the

access to all the learning opportunities of the mainstream school, so in order to continue with her

studies, she was forced to exchange opportunities in the mainstream school with relational

support in the alternative program. Family losses were compounded by the educational losses of being excluded from the rich learning environment of the mainstream school and being placed in a remedial program.This shifted Amber's outlook: from enjoying the process of learning, to just wanting to graduate after she came to the alternative program.

Although, the alternative program seemed to provide more personalized support to the students and attempted to fulfill the role of "in loco parentis," the teaching and learning opportunities were perceived as inferior by students. On the one hand they felt their transition to the alternative program provided them with more personal support, a positive and caring environment, flexibility and the opportunity for graduation from high school. However, on the other hand, they recognized that opportunities for learning had changed from diverse to limited and prescribed when they attended the alternative program. The approach of offering less to those who needed more fails to demonstrate equitable care and support for these students as evident in their experiences.

> Chris: I wish there was a bit more subjects, like we used to have science,
>
> but they just stopped doing that and I don't know why. I actually liked
>
> science.
>
> Natasha: There's no science?
>
> Chris: No. All we have is English, math and socials. So there's no
>
> science.
>
> Natasha: There's no science?
>
> Chris: No. There used to be science last year. You used to get a booklet
>
> and you'd copy it down on a piece of paper and then you'd hand it in.
>
> […] And I was really looking forward to that for Grade 9, but then they

just stopped it and then that really made me mad. I was like "That was

my favourite subject, why?" And they wouldn't actually give me a valid

reason. (In. ln. 297-305)

Despite it being a core course, science was not offered in eitheralternative program. There was also no library or gym at either location. Exclusion from learning opportunities was clearly reflected in these students' experiences: the years spent in the mainstream school and the alternative program did not provide an option for meaningful learning and care for their well-being. With Chris, I asked the question twice in disbelief. That the students in the alternative programs were excluded from the learning opportunities as basic as science seemed inconsistent with one of the main goals of democratic education: to provide the best possible care and opportunities to all students. Placing these children in an inferior learning environment appeared to have a cumulative negative effect on their mental health and identity development, which goes against the idea that schools are social institutions that provide care for their students.

While some students felt their parents played an important role in the school, others did not want their parents to be involved. The two different attitudes seemed to reflect their family situation and the level of support they received from their parents, as well as the relationship between their parents and the school. Students who experienced a lack of parental support described how important it was for them to have a meaningful connection with adults who can provide opportunities for learning life skills, prepare them for independent living, and have someone who will support them who they can trust.

Miranda: Yes. Just having that kind of like adult support, like "Hey it's

okay, I will be with you while you go. I am going to stand beside you and

you are going to be okay."

Natasha: So not necessarily just teachers?

Miranda: No. Not necessarily just teachers and counsellors and principals but like, really anyone who you can make a connection with that will stand by you no matter what and say "You know what, I am here for you and nothing is going to happen." (In. ln. 275-280)

McGregor and Mills (2012) addressed the notions of care and love as essential relational aspects of alternative school culture that must be practiced by the staff toward their students, especially if the students experience a lack of connection with their parents and/or come from traumatic home and school situations. Students' exclusion from the mainstream school and lack of connection with the school was evident in the youth's discussion regarding their relationship with the adults at the mainstream school.

Students tend to thrive when they form positive relationships with peers, feel part of a social group, and feel at ease at school. A lack of connectedness can adversely affect students' perceptions of themselves, their satisfaction with life, and their willingness to learn and to put effort into their studies. (OECD 2013, p. 51)

The developmental need for connection with adults who provide guidance and support was valued by all students, but was rarely experienced in the mainstream schools. The ethic of care proposed by Noddings (1988) addressed the need for an authentic expression of love and care by the school staff toward their students to establish a relationship of trust and care. It is this relationship that facilitates wellness and reduces levels of anxiety about school and the school environment. Experiences of being cared for further promote feelings of acceptance and

belonging among students "regardless of their physical or mental situation" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 101)

Kelsey, Andrew, Donna, Michelle, and Tatiana were not interested in having their parents involved in school, especially high school, and did not have much support from their parents. Trust and confidentiality was one concern shared by these students if their parents were present at school.

> Andrew: [[Yeah, it puts too much pressure on the student and I think that you can't be as open. Say you have issues at home. […] and you wanted to talk to your teacher […] and maybe you don't feel as safe because of your teacher might talk to your mom in your next class. […] You can't always trust that they're not going to say something to your mom […] you might not feel comfortable with that. Which, of course, you could go see the counsellor, but at the same time. What if your counsellor and your mom are friends, and of course there's a confidentiality thing, but… (In. ln. 787-794)

Trust and confidentiality weresignificant aspects of relationshipsfor these participants that positively or negatively contributed to the development of a supportive and caring environment between the students and adults in school. Research conducted in Australia with students experiencing negative educational trajectories and attending alternative schools is consistent with the experiences of the students in this research. The students in Australia stated that "trust was an essential component of caring relationships" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 104). When students do not experience support from their families, the need for connection with trusting and positiveadults is much greater.

5.5   Students' wellbeing and school success

The students said they often experienced high levels of stress and anxiety in school that contributed to their inability to participate in learning. Shaelyn, Miranda, Conrad, Michelle, and Robert had experienced bullying throughout their school years in the mainstream school. They had a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety for a number of years while attending mainstream schools. Describing her experience being bullied at school, Shaelyn noted the stress and that school became an environment where she often felt unsafe and threatened.

> […] I got bullied a lot. I don't know like teachers knew anything about it. Like they kicked me out at the end of the year. So like, that was really bad experience for me and like my anxiety hit really high in the hallways in there. (In. ln 18-20…I've been bullied since kindergarten, so like it always been hard for me to be in there. It was just not enjoyable. (In.ln. 190-191)

A mental health diagnosis, high levels of anxiety around school experiences, and a lack of support from the school staff, Shaelyn felt helpless andlost confidence in her abilities to graduate and live a fulfilling life.

> Shaelyn: […] I didn't think I was going anywhere, I'd like be dead before 20, 25.
>
> Natasha: That's how you felt before?
>
> Shaelyn: That's how I felt; I didn't think I'd live pass 25 years old. And then like now, it's just like I am actually getting my stuff done. And like it makes me really proud of myself how far I've come in the last couple of years. (In.ln. 240-245)

Suicidal thoughts and a loss of hope for living are indicators of mental health challenges experienced by Shaelyn while in the mainstream school.Although placement into the alternative program reduced her stress,past experiences inthe mainstream school continued to contribute to Shaelyn's challenges with mental health and wellbeing. In addition to poorrelationships with her teachers, she lacked family support as well, which created a fewer options for her to find a place to feel connected and understood.

Bullying was one of the factors that these studentsreported experiencing on several levels while attending mainstream school. The students said that teachers and administrators, as well as peers, took part in the bullying.

Miranda: There is a lot of bullying and stuff...

Natasha: In this school?

Miranda: Not in at the alternative middle school, like in public schools. […] through all my preschool […]. I would have had people pull my hair and throw me to the ground and stuff when I was younger. I kind of got used to the idea of me been bullied and I kind of just like, went numb almost emotionally. I just stopped caring. I think that is another reason that my grades went down because I did not care anymore. People were going to bully me no matter whether I dyed my hair, whether I got higher grades. (In.ln. 103-112)

If many of the acts of bullying from peers were overt, the lack of action from the adults was perceived as a silent act of bullying and neglect that perpetuated the issue and contributed to the students' emotional distress. They linked this distress to poor school performance and an increase in mental health related issues.

In addition, however, bullying was experienced by the students overtly from the teachers and administrators who did not provide a safe environment, and often students who were bullied reported being punished or further excluded from the mainstream school environment. The students' placement into the alternative program was often perceived as a punishment for their retaliation against bullying. For example, Miranda stated,

> Yes. I mean honestly I fully admit I have been bullied and at some point beaten that bully because I have gotten tired of it. I just bullied my bullies. And that is part of the reason I am here because I finally got so fed up. I slammed the kid into a locker and bent the locker door. Like I just got mad. […] I couldn't get help for that. And I think that there is so much bullying now, because a lot of the kids would sit there and ask for help and they won't be heard, and they will just give up and take matters into their own hands. (In. ln. 440-446)

Taking "matters in their own hands" without any guidance and support at a young age seemed to let to developing poor coping strategies in a situation where they lacked the power to change it.

Education is one of the social determinants of health and positively correlates with longevity and health related choices (Bryant, Raphael, Schrecker, & Labonte, 2011; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; Low, Low, Baumler, & Huynh, 2005; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Perpetual neglect of students' social and emotional needs creates an unsafe and hostile environment that is not conducive to learning and development. This "has negative impacts on learning, with concentration affected, and may even lead to the punishment or exclusion from school of victims of bullying" (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 51). This was the case for several students in this research. The school's approach, at least in some cases, seemed to be to remove

the "source" of bullying by placing them into an academically lower level alternative program that offered more social and emotional support. However, in many cases, this alternative further marginalized students, rather than helping them re-mediate experiences with peers, teachers and learning.

Schooling is not voluntary as it is mandated by the government for all children between 5 and 16 years old to attend school. Yet, some students, including those in this study, experienced schools as high stress institutions that perpetuate inequity and contribute to their mental health issues.Every student in this research had a diagnosis related to mental health, or a diagnosis related to their health issues. Every student was aware of their diagnosis of Anxiety, or ADHD, or ADD, or a behavioural or chronic health as one of the reasons they did not fit in with the mainstream school. When they spoke of their diagnosis, it sounded as if they spoke about their identity: "I'm ADHD" (Michelle, In. ln. 9); "I have attention-deficit problems" (Donna, In. ln. 25); "I have always been kind of stressed out with school and stuff" (Miranda, In. ln. 133); "I have cognitive issues" (Michelle, In. ln. 50); "And I'm here cause' of fighting, skipping school and anxiety issues" (Conrad, Circle 3, ln. 288); "I had really, really bad ADHD going. I think I had ADHD, ODD, and I think OCD" (Robert, In. ln. 317-318). However, the high levels of anxiety experienced by these students often related to their experiences of the school structure and organization of learning, a lack of support from the teachers and counsellors, bullying and a poor relationship between school, community, and parents, and a lack of flexible educational options. The students' experiences reported here exemplify or exacerbate the potentially school structure and to contribute to and/or exacerbate stress and anxiety.

Research shows that these factors can increase risk for emotional and behavioural problems among students, have a negative effect on their school participation, and contribute to

early school leaving (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011). Instead, low student to teacher ratio, school-based adult mentors, high quality academic instruction, social skills instruction, parent involvement, positive behavioural interventions and supports are practices that may be implemented in schools to support children and youth who have been diagnosed with emotional or behavioural concerns (Flower et al., 2011).

5.6   Opportunities and spaces for learning

Exclusion from mainstream school opportunities created a situation: on the one hand, the students felt more connected with their alternative program, their teachers, support staff and counsellors, and, on the other hand, they felt they had fewer and less rich learning options.The experience was a trade off; a cost was associated with attendance at the alternative program.

> Michelle: […] I'd say honestly it takes a lot of funding to make a good
>
> school <u>because broke schools can't have the resources so a good amount</u>
>
> <u>of funding to get those resources</u>. I think that alternate education is doing
>
> pretty good as it is, but the school, the fact that we don't have workshop
>
> space, we don't have the non-academic programs, the extra curriculum
>
> programs, we don't have sports teams, we don't have anything that a
>
> regular high school has so <u>it kind of sucks that we get to miss out on that</u>
>
> <u>just because we're kind of different</u> and that's kind of crap to be honest.
>
> (In. ln. 258-265)

The learning environment provided for these students lacked the opportunities available at the mainstream schools at the moment, it could be argued, when the need for rich and diverse learning experiences and positive supportive learning environments was greater for these students. Other research shows that alternative programs are often "under-resourced and underfunded" and further marginalize students (Kim & Taylor, 2008; McGregor et al., 2017).

Another aspect of positive learning environment that promoted students' engagement with learning was an opportunity to work on projects or assignments in collaboration with other students, and a teacher provided guidance and support.

> Robert: I don't think I need a teacher and an EA, just one staff helping
>
> out is fine, but, I don't mind other people, […] when we are working on
>
> the same math we are kind of working together, that was also nice,
>
> because that way we didn't actually need a staff, cause if one of us start
>
> on one question and the other one is done, then well, I'll explain to you
>
> how to do it. (In. ln. 426-430)

Working together with another student created a learning environment where studentscould work on solving problems and building confidence in one's abilities. The guidance available from a teacher or an EA provided reassurance and support when needed and, at the same time, seemed to promote the development of autonomy and belonging in students.

Students also saw working with their peers in a flexible physical environment as an opportunity for taking educational risks and trying new things. They seemed to be comfortable to ask for and offer help, move around the room and sit together as a small group, rather than in a traditional row of desks. As Robert found,

= It was a nice way to like, share the information and our knowledge, like

and because you are not <u>in rows</u>, you are actually can talk to people, as

long as it's not too loud, or as long as you are doing the same thing and

helping each other it actually helps you to grow in a way because, you

are hoping to work on each other's mind in a way, […] without staff

helping you to do it. It is really nice, because you are testing each other's

mental strength and it just nice. (In. ln. 430-435)

Working together as partners, the students felt more open to share their ideas with each other, make mistakes and ask for help: "Cause, like in a mainstream school when you are sitting in rows and try to help someone without teacher's permission you get in trouble for it" (Robert, In. ln. 437-438). Learning from each other allowed them to connect on social and emotional level and, perhaps even more important, they felt they could take risks and request help when needed.

Conrad and Michelle shared similar experiences with peer-group work and project based learning in the alternative program. Conrad said he felt more engaged and had an opportunity to learn from others when: "I'm working in a group, it's easier because people can help me more and get me more motivated" (In. ln. 388-389). Sharing ideas and learning from each other seemed as a great option for learning for Conrad: "Working in a group is almost better because then you can feed off other people's ideas and take in as a group credit instead of copying and plagiarism" (In. ln. 393-394). His experiences reflect the idea of community of learners where teaching and learning is interactive and engaging and where students work in the ZPD (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1994a, 2004).

Guidance and equity, rather than an imposition of knowledge and a hierarchical relationship between the teachers and students,were the aspects of learning environments

considered by the students as necessary to their learning. For Michelle, working with peers meant recognition and respect for the students' abilities to learn:

> Well, we're here to learn so I think we should be equals. Main thing I find in school is if I have a student willing to help me, I'll take that help over a teacher so having like peers working together to learn is a bigger deal to me than having people teach you. (In. ln. 315-317)

A creative approach to learning and developing in a school setting must be focused on "carefully conceived collaborations [that] link children to essential social sources, facilitating the measured appropriation of knowledge, skills, strategies and disposition" (Connery & John-Steiner, 2012, p. 134). Students felt respected and more confident when the teachers trusted them and acknowledged their ability to learn together.

The students saw both positive and negative aspects of learning environments offered by the mainstream schoolsand alternative programs. Given their exploration of educational experiences they saw the need for alternative learning options, but they also saw the inequity in the present system. Some combination of linked mainstream schools and alternative programs was suggested as a possible option that may support learning and developing for all students equitably. Robert suggested that:

> But, instead that you can mix the two, where you can work on your own in a way, because you get your work done or you can start working on it, if you are couple pages behind it doesn't matter and your staff can come around and help you once in a while. I think that would be a nice thing. (In. ln. 458-461)

The new possibilities—based on their experiences with both mainstream schools and alternative programs—supported the students to begin to envision a person-centered approach to teaching and learning in an environment that is holistic and positive.

5.7   Summary

Two themes were discussed in Chapter 5. The students' perspective on their participation in learning and their wellbeing in relation to their meaning and purpose of learning, teacher-student relationships, school leaving, schooling options, and learning opportunities were discussed.

The students' described their experiences with schooling as meaningful when their learning experiences related to their lives and incorporated their learning needs and built on their strengths. When the learning environments disregarded students' life trajectories, addressed their non-compliance or behavioural challenges from a punitive perspective that manifested in suspension and isolation, and did not provide learning support, the students stated that they feltexcluded from the mainstream schools. They discussed their experiences with leaving schoolas further excluding them from learning opportunities. However, I argued that leaving school was an action that demonstrated the failure of the school system to fulfill a promise for an equitable and just education for all students.

The students emphasized the role of the student-teacher relationship as a contributing factor to their engagement with school. Positive and supportive relationships with their teachers and support staff helped the students to develop sense of belonging to their alternative program, and feel confident in their abilities to learn and to graduatefrom school.The students attending these alternative programs had complex life trajectories and had multiple school and non-school related challenges.They discussed the role of mainstream schools and alternative programs as

systems that ought to provide equitable opportunities to all students. All students emphasized that mainstream schools lacked such supports and alternative programs lacked the resources.

In their experience, mainstream schools lacked the support and care needed for their learning. The role of school described as "in loco parentis" raised the issue of care for studentsbeyond provision of educational coursework to entail the building of a community of learners where children and youth are respected and recognized as valuable and contributing members of such community. Instead, the students discussedwhat appeared to be a practice of exclusion that was widely employed by the mainstream schools to target those children who were in greater need for support and care. The years of experience in the high-stress environment of mainstream schools had a negative effect on the students' wellbeing and their educational achievement. The next chapter presents the theme that addresses the process of imagining and creating a model of a school *for* education.

Chapter 6. Re-imagining school *for* education

The previous three themes provide a foundation for an analysis of the students' vision for their "imagined school." Theme 4, derived from the analysis of interview data and sharing circles, includesan analysis ofthe visual representation of the students' ideas for their imagined school. The analysis included the following sub-themes: 1)engagement with the project to create an imagined school model; 2)creating and building the imagined school model; and 3)crystallized imagination. The analysis focused on the students' transformation oftheir experiences in mainstream schools and alternative programs—past and present—for the creation of an "imagined school"—a future possibility of a school *for* education.Although not all students participated in every sharing circle, the ideas from one sharing circle were shared at the following circles, so the continuity of the students' participation included all possible ideas from all participants.

6.1   Engagement with the project to create an imagined school model

Students engaged with their imagination by reflecting on their experiences with schooling, re-imagining school, and thus creating a vision for a new school *for* education, and building a 3D model of the imagined school. When students shared and reflected on their school experiences in individual interviews, they had a challenging time imagining a school that was any different from the mainstream schools they had attended. The students had not had rich experiences with what a school *for* education could offer. The idea of creating an imagined school different from what the students had experienced presented a challenge to many of them. Amber's reaction epitomized many of the students' initial puzzlement at being asked to imagine a school:

Natasha: […] What kind of school will provide you or other young people with an opportunity to graduate and actually accomplish your professional and educational goals? […]

Amber: What kind of school, like public or alternate?

Natasha: […] Imagine your school. Doesn't have to be either or.

Amber: ((pause)) Uhmm. What kind of school would help my goals?

Natasha: Yeah. What do you want to see in the school that would really be helpful for you to accomplish your goals.

Amber: I think it as good as it is. (In. ln. 278-283)

The dichotomy of mainstream schools and alternative programs was known to the students. These were seen as the only two educational options and they seemed to have contributed to their negative educational trajectories. When asked to imagine a school or a learning environment that would meet all their learning and developmental needs, they often clarified whether I was asking abouta mainstream school or an alternative program. It was not an easy task for the students to think about a new learning environment that would be different from the schools and alternative programs they had experienced.Getting involved in the project to create an imagined school model allowed for new learning possibilities for all participants to imagine what they had never experienced before.

6.1.1 Imagination for learning and developing

The students were eager to share and reflect on their experiences with schooling. They first shared their own experiences, then heard and discussed the experiences of others, and worked together across differences to create an imagined school.Theimagined school represented their desire to have different educational experiences that would be built on their strengths, serve their

educational needs, and provide an environment that attends to human relationships at its core: a school *for* education.Walker (2014) discussed mediated learning in her research with multilingual youths who were marginalized and found that the students were able to re-imagine their life experiences when engaged in learning activities with mentors and teachers, as well as learning from each other's experiences.

The experiences shared by the Elder validated the experiences of these students and acknowledged the need for a different educational option that was inclusive of the students' diverse educational needs. She described her own schooling journey, telling the students:

> I went to Sprucegrove Junior High a lot of years ago, but I quit very young in Grade 9 because at that time there was no alternatives for us. You either stayed in that, or you got out and I failed. I had terribletime learning, and so what I needed, […] to learn was just exactly what you're saying. Somebody to sit down, and talk to me, and explain it to me. […] but I never got that in school so I quit […]. (Cir 1, ln. 156-161)

Coupling the Elder's experiences with the students' appeared to provide evidence that the mainstream school system had not fulfilled the promise for inclusive and equitable learning experiences for decades. The need for an imagined school was supported by the experiences of participants who had been students over several generations. The Elder's support and shared experiences contributed to students' engagement with the sharing circles. It seemed that she facilitated an affective experience among students that furthered their interest in sharing their experiences.

Considering their experiences of mainstream schools and alternative programs, the students suggested that the imagined school would reduce their anxiety, help promote a sense of

belonging, and create connections between students, and students and their teachers. Perhaps more importantly, the students emphasized that the value of human relationships was fundamental for creating an imagined school. One suggestion for achieving reaching these goals was a single homeroom throughout their school year. Andrew explained that,

> I think that if they have more of that homeroom experience […] in a high
>
> school or middle school it would take a lot of stress off students, and give
>
> the teachers a heads up on why students are acting like this or that. […] it
>
> would give them more to feel comfortable and have more of a point to go
>
> to school. […] I think that would be really good. (Cir 1, ln. 202-210)

A sense of belonging expressed by the students informedtheir desire to build and create a community of learners; the do-able suggestion of a continuous homeroom would promote their connection with school and engagement in learning.

In the mainstream school, many students felt that their strengths were not recognized, and their learning interests and talents had no avenue for expression, or development. This issue surfaced a bit differently, as well, in their experiences in the alternative programs. For example, Robert and Chris questioned the reasons for not having an opportunity to learn new skills while having the tools available at their alternative program.

> Robert: […] it's really sad but now it's all depends on trusting teenagers
>
> so it's kind of, of, kind of big leap just actually...
>
> Chris: What kind of shop or woodshop is that if we cannot touch power
>
> tools? (Cir 7, ln. 341-343)

They shared that though the tools were available, the students were not able to use them. Their learning interests were not recognized and Robert furthered Chris's complaint that the students

were not trusted to use new equipment, he felt that this was "[b]ecause teenagers are completely crapped on all those years 'cause most people are disrespectful nowadays" (Cir 7, ln. 345-347). The students wanted to take educational risks and explore their interests and questioned why they could not use the few resources they actually had available to them. In the imagined school, they wanted to have the trust and pedagogical support of their teachers in order to access tools and learn new skills.

The students agreed that the school they imagined would recognizethe students' abilities and interests as key to their success with learning and developing. Donna further stated that: "The schools need to be more accepting of what people want to do" (Cir 1, ln. 308). They wanted to have rich experiences and diverse learning opportunities available at their imagined school. As Donna said, "I think school should have, beginning opportunities for the students to be trying different things that they wouldn't think to try without the school there" (In. ln. 209-210). All students shared that they needed more hands-on experiences throughout their school years. Given that many of these students were marginalized and had limited access to hands-on experiences that facilitated self-expression, the imagined school was the place where they argued these experiences should be present. Vygotsky (2004) argued for the significance of providing multiple avenues for creative imagination and self-expression, particularly in high school. Lack of educational opportunities for hands-on engagement and self-expression in mainstream schools and their alternative programs was reflected in students' inconsistent attendance and/or school leaving.

In the imagined school, students described playing a new role by changing the style of communication between the students and their educators from authoritarian to egalitarian. Michelle argued for its importance when she noted that "[a] big thing that I think of is, again,

159

communication. Being talked to, being given the steps, and being able to see, feel, and hear everything that is going on so that it actually <u>sticks</u> in your head" (Cir 1, ln.365-367). The imagined school would ensure that students and teachers would use positive communication that facilitates care, compassion, and respect. They stated that positive student-teacher relationships would create opportunities for learning as an embodied experience that is meaningful, wherebyboth students and teachers would be recognized as equal participants in the learning process.

6.1.2   Imagining and creating in the zpd

It was when the students learned from the experiences of other students, the Elder and the architects, that they could begin to re-imagine an environment for learning and developing that was different from what they had already experienced. Guided by the researcher, the Elder, and the architects, the students in this study were able to discuss and draw out different ideas, by sharing together, for their imagined school.

In accordance with Vygotsky's (2004) perspective, the process of engagement of students and adults with the project to build an imagined school created a shared zone of proximal development, an ultimate threshold or space within which learning fosters development. The ZPD is where a child progresses from what s/he already knows and is able to do individually, or "actual development," toward his/her "potential development" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 67). In this research, with support, the students engaged in the exploration and learning of skills and developed abilities that they could not yet employ or demonstrate without the support of their more knowledgeable mentors. Their participation in learning and development was mediated through the use of new tools and sign systems (Vygotsky, 1987).Mediationis the process of meaning making and involves the use of tools and signs to derive meaning first from a social

context and then making it individual (Kridel, 2010). Vygotsky addressed the need for a mentorship as essential for learning and development to take place (Kozulin, 2011).

Connecting with an architect facilitated more openness in discussion about the need for change in the school system. When Paulcame to support the students designing an imagined school, he asked an important question that evoked a strong response from the students regarding the need to change their inferior position and the limitations in learning opportunities imposed on them.

> Paul: I mean everybody here has sort of given input. What do you hope
>
> to get out of this? What do you want to do with this information?
>
> Conrad: Hopefully to have a school that we can go into and would
>
> actually be a school like other ones, instead of, as he said, being basically
>
> given the short end of the stick and outcast and just like "Here, you get
>
> this because we don't really care all that much."
>
> Paul: So how do you think you could do that? How do you think you can
>
> take this information to some place?
>
> Chris: To the school board. […]
>
> Robert: There are different ways but it all depends on really if they cared
>
> and respond. So like we can send this to them, […] but they don't have to
>
> do it. […] if they don't think it gives them any money. (Cir 9, ln. 283-
>
> 285)

The students' education histories—what they described as not being respected for their diverse learning needs and not recognized for their strengths and interests—seemed to be a barrier to designing an imagined school.Feeling as "outcasts," who had no place in mainstream schools,

may have been reflected in their scepticism that it was unlikely that their ideas would and be heard and responded to,

> Conrad: = Why not break it... *((the school building they are in))*
>
> Robert: = *((laughter))* just bring a wrecking ball... =
>
> Conrad: = If you really want to have a new school next year you have to take it to the hard way sometimes =
>
> Robert: = But they're not going to do a better one. They're probably going to plunk some pods here and say okay here have fun. (Cir 9, ln. 320-325)

Conrad wanted to create change; he did not want to wait any longer to have a school where he "fit in." He was graduating shortly, and his extreme approach seemed to reflect both his frustration and hopelessness. The sarcasm in Robert's words seemed, as well, to express a loss of hope for a school built on human relationships and reasonable resources.

Further interactions with both architects, Paul and Cameron, provided an opportunity not only to reflect on school experiences, but also begin a conversation about an imagined school that would attend to the challenges these students faced with both the mainstream schools and the alternative programs. Collaboration, as a process that facilitates imagination, was addressed in Vygotsky's (2004) second law of imagination; here, he states that reality builds upon the imagined experiences of others and social/historical events. Imagination can be used by children and adults to broaden their experiences "because [they] can imagine what [they have] not seen, can conceptualize something from another person's narration and description of what [they themselves] have never directly experienced" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 17). Here the process of imagination is still based on the memories from lived experiences, but one can

imagine someone else's experience or an event as "a product of [his/her] imagination, [which] corresponds to reality" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 17) even if s/he has never experienced it in real life. In this case, the imagination itself broadens the experiences, by creating a conceptual understanding based on the knowledge and experience shared by the mentors.

Through collaboration, they engaged in the project to create an imagined school; they planned, outlined and built a new school model. Cameron joined the group on several occasions and supported the students during the initial planning stage when they began to outline their ideas on a poster board. His contribution was essential to start the design process. The contribution by Cameron initiated the process of imagining and creating an imagined school, a process that engaged the students in a new project to build an imagined school model.

> Tatiana: Draw it on a board. […]
>
> Cameron: It can be circles. You know, we often do what's called a layout diagram professionally. Let's just think about the relationship of one space to another. So we start somewhere. Do you want to start in the middle or start at one end?
>
> Kelsey: In the middle =
>
> Cameron: = Let's start in the middle, the heart of the school, and what's going on in there and what relates to that, okay. […]
>
> Cameron: [[And they can be spaces inside each other…
>
> Natasha: [[Each of you can add something.
>
> Tatiana: Somebody help me *((laughter))*
>
> Natasha: Yes, let's start with something.
>
> Amber: What are we doing?

Kelsey: We are drawing a school. (Cir 4, ln. 161-177)

The engagement with the project, created an opportunity for these students to work together with their mentors in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1994a, 2004). The teaching and learning environment created by the Elder, Cameron and Paul, provided a place where students could take risks to explore new possibilities for their imagination. The engagement of students in collaborative activities where they could broaden their experiences using imagination created a ZPD that promoted their ability to transform the knowledge they already have into a new form. In collaboration, the experiences of the students, and the meanings made of experiences, were used to create new knowledge about school environments, including the environments of physical spaces, human relationships, teaching and learning, culture and identity. At the same time, the past did not determine the new knowledge. Instead, through the transformation of meaning, these students imagined beyond their past experiences and memories to create a new vision for a school. With the shared goal in place, Cameron validated their efforts and ideas, provided feedback, and modeled a communication pattern that helped the students to createthe first visual representation of their imagined school by placing numerous sticky notes on two large pieces of poster paper. The sticky notes represented different learning spaces that students wanted to have in their school. The poster paper and the sticky notes were the tools that mediated their engagement with the project to create and imagined school.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the students utilised the index category of images for outlining their ideas and representing different learning spaces conceptually. These index category images became crystallized concepts that were represented in a visual form as a possibility for further engagement with these images to make them more specific and more concrete. Positioning the sticky notes on the poster paper represented the location for different

imagined learning spaces. These index images were flexible tools that the students could manipulate as they worked on their project. The written text on sticky notes and on the poster paper as symbol images portrayed the conceptual representation for the specific learning spaces that students wanted to have in their imagined school. Another important point in this project to create an imagined school was that although students were guided by the mentors, their experiences with the project were mediated by using sticky notes as flexible learning tools to represent their ideas individually and as a group; they learned from each other as well as taught each other.

The impact from Cameron's collaboration with the students was evident in the students' level of engagement. First, Tatiana asked for help and Amber did not yet know what the group was doing. The peers and the researcher re-stated the task and then Tatiana made a shift from appearing helpless to offering a plan.

Natasha: We're laying out the school, right? We are taking some ideas,

let's say... =

Tatiana: = I think we should just lay it out, this is easier.

Natasha: Okay, let's lay them [[out.

Cameron: [[It's easier to move them, right? =

Tatiana: = Yeah. (Cir 4, ln. 161-180)

The students' participation began to shift from passive to active; they negotiated the ideas and began to initiate and progress in the project to create an imagined school, demonstrating they were engaged with their imagination through mediation. Their efforts manifested in the visual plan that provided validation of their abilities to work together on a new task (see Photos6.1and6.2).

Photo 6.1 Main floor layout

Photo 6.2 Second floor layout

6.1.3 Viewers and creators

Another important factor in the visual analysis was that the students were not only the creators of a visual school plan, but they were also the viewers. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argued that there is a relationship between an image and the viewers, as well as between an image and the creators. An image mediates the relationship between the viewers and the creators. Not all students were able to work together at the same time on creating the imagined school plan; they took turns engaging with the project in small groups at different times. Although, students worked on the imagined school plan and the model to engage the wider audience as viewers, they were also participating in this process as viewers, as well as the creators. When one group of students added new elements of index or symbol images to the plan, the next group of students first became the viewers before they continued to further create the imagined school plan by adding or making changes as creators. Harrison (2003) addressed this aspect of visual analysis as an important relational factor that contributes to the meaning making about the image not only by the creators of the image, but also by the viewers. The students engaged in a dialectical relationship with the imagined school plan they were creating. They viewed the plan first to gain an understanding of what the image was "offering" and what it was "demanding" of them as the viewers, and then as creators to continue their work to build their imagined school (Harrison, 2003; Jewitt & Oyama, 2004).

6.2   Creating and building the imagined school model

The imagined school layout was created from the idea that all learning spaces in the school would promote a positive connection with the teaching and learning process and address the relational aspect of learning and developing. The students discussed and proposed a number of learning and teaching opportunities they wished to have in their imagined school and were eager

to include all of them.It was only in the process of participating in the project to create an imagined school that the students experienced new combinations of ideas and experiences, feelings and connections with emotions, and that the lived spaces of the imagined school came to life in the model.

The imagined schoolconsisted of two storeys, with the main floor dedicated to hands-on learning spaces and active engagement with different learning activities including: a woodworking shop and Native arts carving shop, auto-body, metalwork, and welding, culinary arts and cafeteria, theatre and music auditorium, digital video-audio studio, fine arts and photography studio, science and forensics lab, fashion and design shop, makeup and hair stylist studio. The second floor was dedicated to quieter learning spaces and activities such as: homerooms, science labs, support services, health and counselling, an Indigenous Elder's room, and a library. Both floors included spaces for group and individual work, teacher preparation and lounge rooms, students' lounge and relaxation rooms (see Photos6.1 and 6.2). The students seemed keen to include all possible support systems, all their own individual interests, and all the learning and teaching opportunities they could imagine.

The students wanted to have more open space inside the school so that they could frequently meet with other students and adults, have places outside of the classrooms to work on projects, share ideas, or work independently. Andrew further linked open spaces to open-mindedness when he said, "I feel that when people go into a hallway, there's more open space so they feel the need to kind of have open-mindedness, so they don't think about that, like, one thing they need to think about right then" (In.ln. 525-527). Given the small size of their alternative program and their experiences with exclusion, they imagined large spaces for having more freedom for movement within and between spaces that would serve their need for

collaboration with others, connectedness to diverse spaces that provide a number of opportunities for learning and development, feelings of freedom, autonomy, and belonging. Donna strikingly noted, "I think classrooms should just feel less like a fourwalls claustrophobic thing that they areand it should feel more like a comfortable, laid back setting where you're still actually learning but you're comfortable(In. ln. 376-378). Feeling comfortable in their physical learning environment reflected the students' idea of feeling purposeful, able, recognized, supported, loved and cared for by others in the school as well as the learning spaces themselves.

The shape, the size, and the furnishings for classrooms were important to the students. A "home-like" environment in the homeroom was the main discussion of a classroom layout that included couches, tables, few desks, small kitchen, soft and natural lighting.

> Chris: I think it would look nice like that if the tables were really cool like that, but I think there should be like more natural light, not lamps, like lots of windows. Like if a kid wants to have a big window to look out of when they're doing the work, I think they should be allowed to do that, because all we have on our portables right now is three tiny windows along one side. (In.ln. 201-205)

The boundariescreated by walls were made more movable by the design offered by the students. The feelings of confinement andinferiority were replaced by the large free flowing spaces where the students couldlearn and develop in a positive, encouraging, and relational environment. It seemed that Chris's emphasis on natural light was both in contrast to the students' current conditions in the alternative programs, and also a demand for conditions that reflect and support a desire for connectedness to the outside through windows.

The students imagined their school as a large open space with smaller spaces for specific activities, all connected to the outdoors.The studentsdiscussed a learning environment that offered transparency between the indoor and outdoor spaces. They wanted to create a strong feeling of fluidity between the two environments supported in their imagined school layout.

> Natasha: Okay. And the outdoors is important? To be outdoors and do
>
> stuff on the outside?
>
> Donna: <u>Very important</u>. Some days, first coming into school 3 years ago,
>
> there were days were we just go sit outside on the tables and do our <u>work</u>
>
> <u>out there</u>. Just to be outside because it's a lot nicer to work outside than it
>
> is to work inside. (In. ln. 368-371)

The outdoor spaces were designed by the students to address the need for outside classroom and school experiences that contributed to their learning and development. Instead of equating school with sitting inside classrooms, they imagined that their imagined school could have more flexibility and provide them with less restriction in their movement. "I think we should have a field and undercover area with a benches underneath that, more like places to sit outside, like the picnic tables and stuff and that's really it, I don't know" (Tatiana, In. ln. 293-294). They also saw an opportunity for building relationships with their peers and adults when they could be outside. The relational aspect of learning was emphasized not only in personal relationships between students and teachers, but also as supported by the physical spaces for learning. The images that represented learning environments created by the students to demonstrate that rich learning and teaching opportunities could facilitate the engagement of both students and teachers and, thus, further contribute to positive relationships between them.

The fluidity of open spaces and a sense of connectedness to the outdoors was part of the whole school design. One part of the design included an opening from the main floor to the second floor in the middle of the school, and a large skylight with a retractable roof that opens to let in the fresh air and sunlight. First, the idea was presented by Cameron and was further built by the students.

> Is this space use glass, is the upper floor want to have any views to the lower floor? […]. […] So you can have it visually open, so maybe you can have an open space down below you can have an open space up above, for example, you can see your friends learning down below, and you don't feel disconnected just because you're upstairs. (Cir 4, ln. 560-568)

The group returned to this idea numerous times and the students' desire to stay connected to the outdoors and have transparent spaces inside the school manifested in their imagined school layout. They agreed to have a large opening to the second floor, with the library wrapped around the opening with the walls made of glass, large skylight in the roof and the roof top garden.

> Tatiana: I think it should be open with like…
>
> Natasha: Open to the 2nd floor?
>
> Tatiana: [[Yeah. With like glass and windows…
>
> Cameron: [[Nice, you get those skylights or something and glass to let light flow in all the way to the lower floors so it's not dark.
>
> Tatiana: Yeah. (Cir 5, ln. 40-45)

The students at the alternative middle school program built on the idea of having the skylight that will open or close for more natural light and fresh air circulating throughout the school.

Chris: It could be like skylights that can open [[or like one or two…

Robert: [[Yeah!

Chris: When its really, really sunny you can have some shutters or like

transparency that can go across and not to hurt the birds. […]

Robert: I would say like the skylights they can be also just slit open but,

but I guess it only matter for rains or something, or sunny something you

can open or close can do both… (Cir 7, ln. 117-124)

The students' view of their imaginedschool went beyond the building and included diverse

outdoor learning spaces. Their design followed a visual principle of transparency that allowed

them to move freely between the indoors and the outdoors with a purpose and a goal for learning

and developing.

        The second floor access to the outdoor was emphasized with the design of the roof top

garden. Initially, the idea came from the students' discussion about a designated smoke areaon

the second floor.

Miranda: Some schools have rooftop gardens. […] Maybe a rooftop

smoke pit. Well, when you're on the roof, there is an issue that you

could fall.

Conrad: Yeah just like a designated area where not only you can go apart

from smoking but if it's a nice day outside you can go up there with your

class. […]

Miranda: = Have a patio or something. (Cir 6, ln. 212-223)

Over time and through dialogue, the rooftop garden became more elaborate and the astronomy

lab—represented by a model of a telescope—was added to the rooftop, as well as the covered

study area and the area to relax and hangout. Robert was excited about the idea of the rooftop garden when he heard about it: "Oooh! Rooftop garden that seems as a better idea than the gardens on the outside" (Cir 7, ln. 570-571).

Another important aspect of the outdoors design was the idea to have a farm like setting available for learning and participation for all students and staff at the school. The idea of having pets at school was first discussed by some students in the individual interviews. For example, Amber thought "a bunny would be cool" (In. ln. 325) whileKelsey wanted "pets in the classroom. […] Like rabbits and stuff" (In. ln 481- 487). Robert added,"School should be like having a goat and a dog. I say it now, it's now on the record, […] I really wanna a goat and a dog" (In. ln. 650-651). The idea behind having pets in school was another connection to nature that developed further into a larger vision of having a small farm with farm animals and a garden. One reason behind the idea of having animals was related to the students' wellbeing, a sense of comfort, compassion, care, and love. Robert recounted his experience of the connection between animals and well-being:

> Robert: Animals would be amazing. […] As I said, my foster parents had
> goats 'cause that's was I was around for 2 years and they have a goat
> farm…. Like let me be the, *((students))* can go in there and kinda hangout
> with the goat and play and with the dog maybe […] 'cause I think that
> would really help with kids who are really stressed…I know animals are
> just like a nice little way to boost spirits and stuff […]. *(In. ln. 657-676)*

Robert reinforced his idea of the potential therapeutic influence of animals on the students again in a sharing circle when we discussed the outdoors: "Yes! What we need is a goat and then a dog to keep everyone alive" (Cir 7, ln. 278). The need for relationships that provide unconditional

173

positive regard was the culmination of the idea behind having animals in these students' lives;Robert advocated for the animals saying,"And they can feed them and they can actually love them…" (Cir 7,ln. 315). The farm and animals, the participants argued,would provide students with a connection to nature. Having a number of open spaces inside the school, such as large open space on the main floor with large windows, exits from classrooms and hallways directly outside, a large skylight, a rooftop garden and a large green school grounds expanded their idea of learning environments and provided them with a sense of openness to experiences, as well as wellbeing and connectedness with each other and their learning spaces.

6.3 Crystallized imagination

A suggestion to further embody their imagined school came from Paul who suggested that they build a model for the imagined school: "So another way you can do it, it's a lot of fun to do and everybody could do, is to build a model" (Cir 9, ln. 478-479). At first, the students were not sure how to go about it, however, with his expertise, support, and encouragement, the students were able to learn new skills and move forward to begin building a physical representation of their imagined school.Paul explained:

> But if you made something out of foam core, it's just paper glue, having
>
> knife and a ruler basically, and it doesn't have to be a scale, it doesn't
>
> have to have the details, […] ...=
>
> Robert: = It's a rough template, actually =
>
> Paul: =Yeah, and it just shows adjacencies. It shows things where you
>
> want stuff. […]It's conceptual.
>
> Robert: You would write on the blocks and put the labels like on a whole
>
> model.

Paul: Yeah, exactly you would label the whole model. (Cir 9, ln. 490-

449)

The students' owned the idea quickly and were excited to try a new activity, as well as to have their ideas represented in a model of their imagined school. Building a physical model became a process through which the students experienced the crystallization of their imagination in a model of a school they designed. The process of collaborative participation supported by the expert in the field provided the students with an opportunity to bring their ideas to life.

Creating a model seemed like an engaging and interesting opportunity for the students. However, to make their efforts more real would have been for them to share their imagined school model with others. Paul further explained the idea for sharing the model with others:"Yeah, and it becomes much more real when you present it to somebody" (Cir 9, ln. 540). "In fact really, everybody's imagination is, sort of, good, right. If you can dream it you can build it […]" (Cir 9, ln. 645-646). It seemed that Paul gave the students hope for their imagination to become reality. They discussed the idea of presenting the model to the school board, however, when the model was build, they were not able to participate in the presentation. I informed the administration of the school board that the students wanted to present with me, but was informed that the students would not be presenting. The reasons for not including them were not clearly stated.

There were several occasions when I met with students to build the model. Their engagement and dedication resulted in the construction of a two-storey model patiently built with support of adults. Guided by Paul, the initial process involved listing all the learning spaces they proposed, cutting the pieces out of foam core and gluing them together, labelling, and then

choosing a location for each learning space so that there was continuity and a meaning for their position on a school floor (see Photo6.3).

Photo 6.3 Initial model layout: first floor
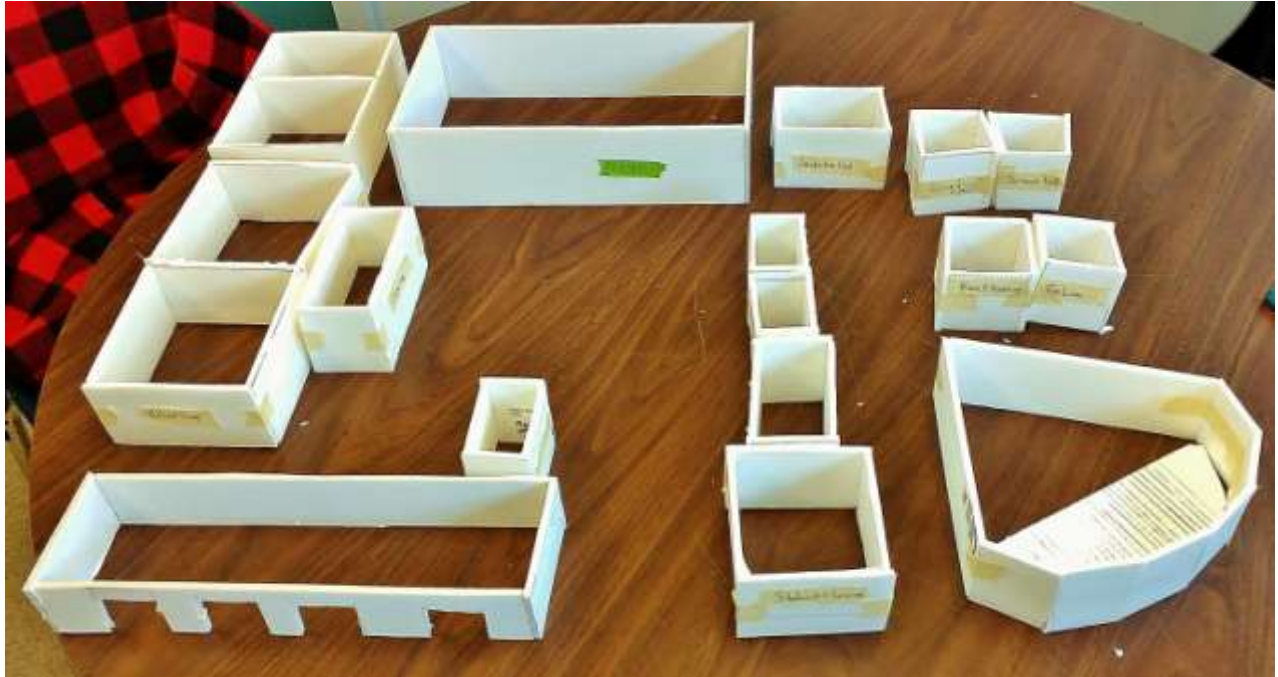
The final layout of the model—includingtwo floors with a rooftop garden—was inclusive of all the learning environemtns and parts of the school proposed by the students. The following five pictures present the conceptual representation of the learning spaces constructed by the students for their imagined school (see Photos 6.4; 6.5; 6.6; 6.7;6.8). Harrison (2003) addressed the complexity of the relationship between the images and their organization, the participants and the viewers, and how they interact with the images. These relationships and interactions comprise the meaning of the image. The imagined school discussed by the students was represented in the organization of different aspects of the model into a meaningful whole. The completed image of the imagined school represented on the poster paper became a model created by the students. The modality aspect of visual analysis was reflected in the foamcore model and addressed the level of reality represented in the model for an imagined school.

The first floor was a combination of small and large groups learning environments and was described by the students as active hands-on learning environment (see Photo 6.4). The open spaces throughout the main floor supported the students' interest in having access to open spaces for work and play. The second floor included a large opening in the middle representing a quiet learning environment. The library wrapped around opening had glass walls to create a sense of open space and connection between the main floor, the rooftop garden, and the outdoors (see Photo 6.5). Support rooms and the Elder's room were located on this floor. The Elder's room was given a round shape to metaphorically represent the need for change discussed by the students and the Elder to address the issues with the institutionalized approach to school design.

The roof top was created as a place of transparency between the inside and outside spaces with the large skylight in the middle, the garden represented by the green paper, and an undercover area for gatherings and activities to enable participants regardless of the weather. The astronomy lab was represented by the telescope (see Photo 6.6).

Photo 6.4 Imagined school: first floor

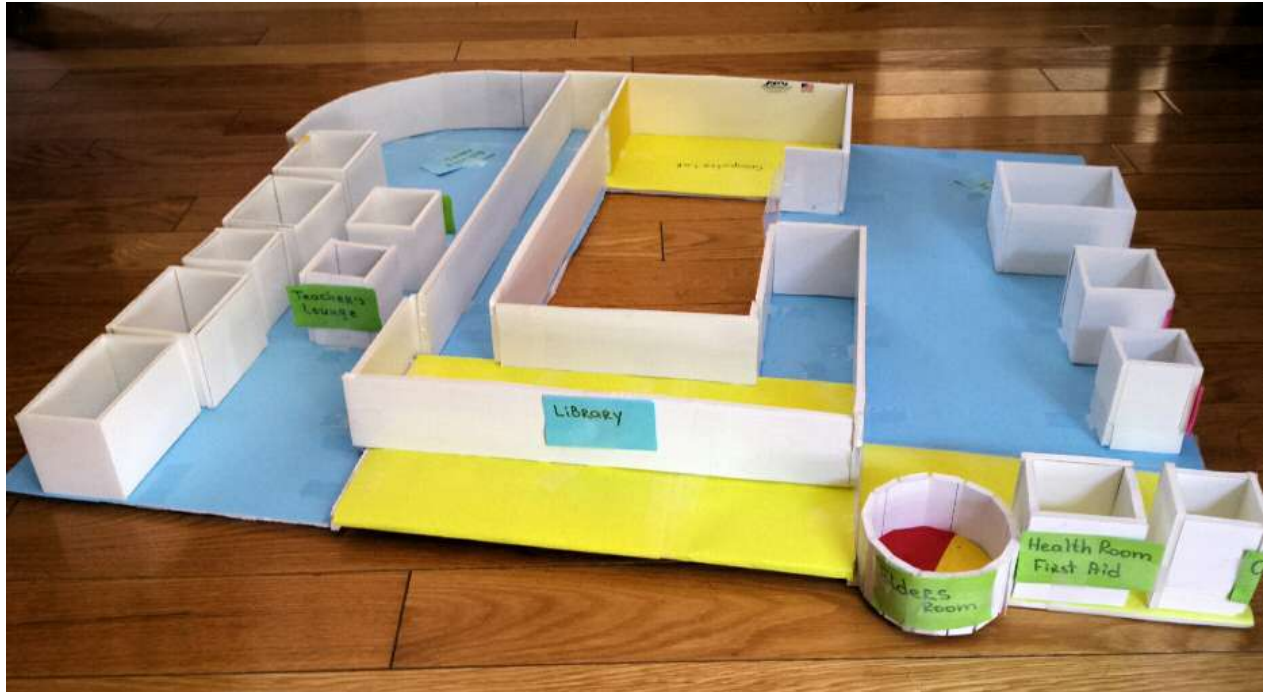**Photo 6.5 Imagined school: second floor**

Photo 6.6 Imagined school: roof top garden

Photo 6.7 Imagined school: complete school layout

Photo 6.8 Imagined school and farm

Together, all levels of the imagined school represented the students' vision for learning and development. In this space, they could envision educational options that provided an equitable educational environment inclusive of diverse students with unique needs and strengths (see Photo 6.7).The addition of the outdoor farm area to the complete school model was an importantprinciple of the design that addressed the students' interest to stay connected with the natural environment and to learn from the land (see Photo 6.8). The holistic view of education was manifested in this conceptual representation of students' engagement with their imagination based on their previous experiences and their development of new understandings about their educational goals.

6.4   Summary

Chapter six addressed the students' engagement in re-imagining and designing their imagined school and consisted of three subthemes: 1)engagement with the project to create an imagined school model; 2)creating and building the imagined school model; and 3)crystallized imaginationThe main aspect of the theme was the relationships the students built in the process of creating a model for an imagined school that involved the interactions between the students, students and their mentors, and students and their vision for a school. It was essential for the students to engage with their imagination as a group, to learn and reflect on each other's experiences with schooling to develop a model. Their interactions with the architects created opportunities for the students to look beyond what was already known to them, and to re-imagine what their school experiences should be like and how these imagined experiences should be represented in a visual formthat included environments informed by the physical, the relational, teaching and learning, and culture and identity. The students' engagement with their imagination reflected Vygotsky's laws of imagination when they worked as a group sharing their ideas and

experiences and learning from each other and receiving guidance and support from the adult mentors. Through this process of learning and development the students designed and created a model for their imagined school.

Chapter 7.A new learning environment for human relationships

This research addressed two research questions: 1) What do the students attending alternative programs say they need to graduate from high school?2) What would a school look like that provides opportunities for meeting these students' educational needs and integrating their strengths? Through this process students who attended alternative programs were engaged in creating an imagined school *for* education, a school that addressed their emotional and educational needs and integrated their strengths and a visual representation of this school that included physical, relational, teaching and learning, and culture and identity environments.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section addresses my research questions. The second section provides conclusions and implications. The third section presents research limitations. The forth section describes future research. The chapter ends with concluding thoughts.

7.1 Research questions

The students in this study had experiences in both mainstream schools and alternative programs. To address the first research question, the students built upon their experiences in mainstream schools and alternative programs, and the meanings made of their experiences, to reflect on these experiences in relation to their highschool graduation needs in individual interviews and sharing circles. To address the second research question, students engaged with an Elder, two architects, and the researcher to build upon their interviews in the sharing circles with an explicit purpose: to create an imagined school *for* education and, then, a school model was built collaboratively with participants.

7.1.1   Graduation needs and mainstream schools

The students reflected on their experiences with mainstream schools and stated that the organization of learning and the structure of the school did not provide them with teaching and learning opportunities that supported their graduation. When they attended mainstream schools, the students said they had a challenging time "fitting in" with these aspects and noted that the school responsibilities and expectations; large school and class size; structure of the learning process; high school mobility and exclusion; and a lack of a sense of community were the factors that negatively contributed to their ability to graduate from high school.

In particular, the students' interests, needs, and strengths were rarely addressed and, even more rarely, taken seriously and integrated into their educational trajectories. The students said that mainstream schools were too large and could not attend to the diverse needs of every student. Although, the mainstream schools had more educational resources, they were experienced as rigid and inflexible, and based on the expectation it was the student who had to change to "fit in" with the organization of learning and structure of school. Students stated that schools showed little care or compassion toward the students' needs. If a student fell behind for any number of reasons—from illness to family concerns to skipping—or was expelled from mainstream school due to absence, they were moved to a less well-resourced alternative program. When a student did not "fit in" with one school, she or he was moved to a different school, and so on, until an alternative program was left as a last option for graduation. High mobility from school to school contributed to the students' sense of confusion and exclusion from learning and teaching opportunities and limited their chances for graduation. Basically, the school system appeared to offer less to the students who needed more support and interactions

with teachers by removing them from the mainstream school and placing them in a remedial alternative program.

Other factors that students discussed in relation to their needs for graduation related to their environment of human relationships. Students said that having meaningful learning experiences; positive teacher-student relationships; the school acting as a "parent" and showing concern for the student; concern for students' wellbeing; and opportunities and spaces for learning were important factors contributing to their ability to graduate. All participants expressed that they wanted to graduate from highschool, and all but Andrew said they wanted to continue with post-secondary schooling after graduating. Students said that mainstream school did not provide them with meaningful learning that related to their interests and needs. When they spoke about their post-secondary goals they said their learning experiences in mainstream school did not reflect their post-secondary interests and career goals. In addition, consistent with international research, they were not prepared to attend post-secondary school (Kim, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; McGregor, et al., 2017).

The relationship between teachers and students was another important factor contributing to school engagement and graduation. Only a few students spoke about the teachers with whom they had built a positive relationship in mainstream schools. All students said that they had had teachers who were disconnected and showed little interest in their students' learning. The high level of school mobility among these students made it difficult to developrelationships with teachers who may have, potentially, offered them care, compassion, and/or showed an interest in their learning. Large school and class sizes in mainstream schools did not help teachers to learn about their students' interests and to develop mentoring relationships with them.

Students also reflected on the role of mainstream schools in providing care for their wellbeing, academic support, and serving in a capacity of a "parent" while students were in school. The students stated that mainstream schools lacked flexibility, compassion, and care toward them. Although likely unintentional, years of experiencing systemic neglect and exclusion had contributed to theirperceived loss of hope for equitable educational opportunities; they stated that they felt that they were placed in an inferior position.The mainstream schools did not recognize the need for human relationships as a foundational principle for learning, developing, and teaching and, yet, it was a key factor for school engagement that the students said would have positively contributed to their graduation.

Students discussed wellbeing in relation to their experiences in mainstream school and stated that they were under a high level of stress and often felt anxious in school. This may have been exacerbated by the feeling that they were perceived as inferior throughout their years in mainstream schools. Anxiety and stress was evident in the descriptions they gave of themselves when they shared the challenges they had with wellbeing. They perceived themselves to have deficits and often took the blame for being "bad" or "troubled"; they felt that they often deserved to be "punished" and suspended from school. Some of the students discussed this disciplinary approach as harsh, however, they stated that they believed that suspension "worked." It appeared to stop a behaviour due to a fear of further "punishment." However, suspension contributed to the students' feeling of inferiority and powerlessness regarding decision making about their education. These experiences excluded students who were already experiencing disengagement and alienation, further pushing them out of school (Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya,& Hughes, 2014; Weisseman, 2015). The oppressive practices and lack of support seemed to result in what Tappan (2006) called *internalized oppression* that was manifested in their acceptance of

their deficits and, in a sense, their acceptance that they deserved to be excluded and that punishment was justified.

The outcome from these experiences was disengagement from the mainstream school at an early age.Students shared that as early as Grade 3, they began to experience a lack of connection with the school. They felt misunderstood, "pushed out," and they stated that they did not think the schools and their teachers could provide them with adequate support. They also noted that their strengths and interests did not appear to be visible and/or a concern for their teachers. Students said that they stopped attending school on a daily basis,othersleft school to remove themselves from situations they thought were hopeless and unbearable, like bullying. All students said that they did not think they would be able to graduate if they had stayed in a mainstream school. Other students experienced life events that put them in a position where they could not attend school for long periods of time.Upon returning to school after an absence, even if it was caused by an illness, there did not appear to be an option for "catching up" on school work, continuing with their classmates, or integrating back into classes and school. The school did not offer supports that helped these students to make up for lost time in school. Lack of options to learn in mainstream schools was, in part, what hindered these students' ability to stay in school and to graduate.

7.1.2 Graduation needs and alternative programs

The students stated that their experiences with alternative programs were different from those of mainstream schools in a number of ways. They discussed the size of the program and class size, teacher-student relationships, the structure of the learning process and the sense of community as some of the factors in the alternative program contributing to their ability to graduate, yet they also experienced the stigma of alternative programs (Vadeboncoeur, 2009; Vadeboncoeur

186

&Luke, 2006). The students in this study attended the alternative programs as a last option for completion of graduation requirements for students who do not "fit in" with mainstream school. They said that the alternative programs were the only option for them to fulfill the graduation requirements; for some of them, this was made clear by their referral to an alternative program. However, while they perceived that the alternative programs had more social supports, emphasized the role of human relationships and fostered a sense of community as key factors to school success, they also lacked the educational resources and learning opportunities available in the mainstream schools. Without access to these resources, even graduating from an alternative program did not prepare the students for post-secondary education.

In the alternative programs, the total number of students and the size of the classes was much smaller than in mainstream schools. There, they had a homeroom and a teacher who worked with them daily and had a chance to get to know students. Students said they felt more comfortable to be in an environment where they knew their peers and their teachers. A consistent homeroom was another factor students described as potentially reducing their stress and anxiety in mainstream school. Students shared that teachers in the alternative programs cared for them and treated them with respect. This was a key factor that contributed to the development of a positive teacher-student relationship and, for some, became a turning point in their interest in learning in school. A positive relationship with their teachers, coupled with the support they offered, contributed to a shift in perceptions about graduation. They said that because they had a teacher who cared about them and knew who they were as an individual, they were able to set and complete their goal for graduation. Graduation was perceived as impossible in the mainstream school. In the alternative program, they began to see graduation as a possibility and

an accomplishment, however, they also seemed most concerned about fulfilling the requirements for graduation, rather than learning the content.

In the alternative program, they spent more time working in groups and in the relaxed setting of a classroom and there was more flexibility in the time frame for completion of their assignments. However, the alternative program had limited resources that were not comparable to those of mainstream schools. The students were aware of this difference and said they were given a "short end of a stick" and felt inferior to the students in the mainstream schools. They stated that their alternative programs were often stigmatized and had a poor reputation among other students, parents, school staff, and the community. This situation perpetuated the inequality of educational opportunities for these students, and placed the students who needed different learning and teaching experiences "at-risk" for poor academic performance.

The alternative program provided two students with an opportunity to enroll in a trades exploration program through which the students said they developed a sense of purpose and meaning for their learning. They perceived participation in the trades program as an opportunity leading to a career. Unfortunately, this was the only program offered by the School District that lead to post-secondary engagement. Students did not have any input into career exploration programs nor were they able to suggest a program that would address their interests and lead them further to post-secondary school. Many of them shared that their interests neither matched nor reflected any learning opportunities offered in the alternative program and they had no access to the electives in the mainstream schools. This situation hindered the students' interests in learning in school.

Progress toward graduation became unattainable in the mainstream school and the alternative program became a last option to fulfill the requirements for graduation, as well as

provided space for those students who did not "fit in" with the mainstream school. The students described the alternative programs as a "daycare," a place where students who "struggle" with different challenges were placed, rather than a place where students can learn and develop based on their needs, strengths and interests through effective and responsive teaching.

7.1.3   Imagined school *for* education

The second research question addressed the students' engagement with the project to build an imagined school model. The process of engagement with the project to create an imagined school was a powerful exercise that provided an opportunity for the students to collaborate with each other and adult collaborators, the Elder, the architects and the researcher. Through this process they engaged with their imagination and moved beyond their known school experiences toward creating a school *for* education that represented them as key stakeholders in building their educational trajectories.

The students re-imagined their learning experiences—their past experiences in mainstream schools and their present experiences in alternative programs—in light of possibilities for a different model of education that they noted would provide them and other students with options for meaningful and equitable educational opportunities, or educative experiences in Dewey's (1932) words. Students said that their model represented positive and enriching human relationships between the students, teachers and mentors, support service providers, and their community. The students emphasized that the importance of relationships between people was a core principle that created a community of learners inclusive of many stakeholders. This relationship was the foundation for the learning environment; if it was equitable then the value of equitable relationships would permeate the learning environment. In

turn, this relationship positioned the students' within the public education system and society as equal participants in decision-making about their education.

The imagined school model crystallized the students' imaginings. They created a flexible learning environment that addressed diverse learning needs, integrated their strengths, and promoted learning and developing. They wanted their school to be open and connected to the outdoors to diversify learning opportunities. Their vision for a number of workshops and career oriented learning options reflected their interests and desire to learn in a school that integrated the interests of all participants. They wanted their school to be a place where they wanted to grow, connect with others, learn skills, support each other and build positive relationships with their teachers. The imagined school model reflected Vygotsky's (1994a, b, 2004) perspective on crystallized imagination. In the imagined school model, imagination had became real; the model represented students' as able and interested participants who—with support of the researcher, the Elder, and the architects—worked together in a collective ZPD to embody a possibility for a school *for* education. Working together as collaborators, students were able to engage their imagination, re-imagine their past experiences with mainstream schools and alternative programs, to offer a new vision of school to the world of adults. Unfortunately, they were not allowed to present the model they created to the School District, or even attend the meeting when the model was presented by the researcher.

7.2   Conclusions and implications

The lived experiences, needs, strengths, and vision of students who are marginalized offer significant insights to discussions regarding schooling and the assessment of both mainstream schools and alternative programs as youth-serving settings (Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008). The inclusion of students in research of this kind shifts the focus from making decisions "about" and

"for" youths, to hearing from and working with students to imagine change in the school system as a whole, including both mainstream schools and alternative programs. Based upon this research, the following five conclusions and implications are articulated.

First, the students learned and developed meanings and purposes for learning, teaching, and education broadly based on their relationships with school environments. When these relationships were shaped by deficit thinking, disregard, and/or disrespect—whether imagined or real—the students came to see themselves as incapable of learning, came to see the teachers as incapable of teaching them, and came to see school as incapable of education.

An implication that follows, then, is that developing positive relationships with school, as well as attending to the meaning of school for each student, is likely to be important to ensuring educational trajectories that support school engagement and students' goals for graduation. Recognizing when the relationships between students and schools are not successful is important so that teachers can intervene and work with students to remediate this relationship. Creating an individual education plan for each student, attending to both their needs and strengths in a collaboration between teachers, parents, and students together, might be one way to create a meaningful connection between them. The on-going evaluation and review of each plan may enable students to develop a sense of purpose for their education, build their education and career path, and imagine a future that can become a reality.

In addition, meaningful learning opportunities that build from students' interests and their lives also, dialectically, connect students with their own learning enabling students to use their interests as potential strengths. This may provide a sense of belonging and a purpose for attending school. Enabling counsellors and teachers with the time to work together to create teaching and learning opportunities that supports their students' interests and contributes to

positive relationships with school is important. Further, developing continuity of care is likely to allow for taking timely steps for intervening and addressing academic or life related challenges experienced by the students and promote school engagement.

Second, the students noted the importance of positive relationships for their school engagement and argued that, while peer relationships and student-teacher relationships were central to their immediate experience of the mainstream school or alternative program, other relationships mattered and shaped the sociocultural context of the mainstream school or alternative program beyond the classroom. Thus, relationships between teachers, between teachers, staff and administration in the school, and between teachers, parents, and community members mattered as well.

An implication that follows is that learning environments, whether in mainstream schools or alternative programs, are shaped by the relationships of all the participants in the learning environment. Thus, care and compassion, academic and personal supports, and life skills and relevant connections to life experiences are some factors that may contribute to creatinga learning environment that facilitates a sense of community and care, contributes to students' learning and development, and supports teachers as they care for students as well. Building connections with diverse community settings for mentorship, career exploration opportunities, programming and enhancing connections outside the immediate school/program environment may help break the stigma of alternative programs and help students to develop life-skills and imagine future opportunities for education and career. Opportunities beyond school and/or program may promote connections with local Aboriginal communities and create a more harmonized teaching and learning environment that consider Indigenous knowledge as part of teaching and learning process.

Third, in hindsight, it should not have been a surprise that the students in this research needed guidance from the Elder, the architects, and researcherto think beyond their experiences in mainstream schools and alternative programs to create an imagined school. Their previous experiences in education did not appear to provide them with opportunities to play a creative role or, perhaps, these opportunities were not memorable or simply too remote to build upon. While the students in this research appeared to need practice when they stepped into this creative role, with dialogue and the introduction of a few cultural tools, their imagination blossomed. What they required was a space that both allowed and valued their creative expression.

An implication that follows highlights the importance of teaching and learning approaches that provide the enabling conditions for student creative expression, as well as valuing what is expressed. Prior to this, however, is the recognition that imagining builds from experience, and that if one purpose of participation in learning environments, whether mainstream schools or alternative programs, is to facilitate the learning and developing of young people who can think beyond the immediate context to innovate and anticipate and address new concerns, then teachers, administrator and community members may want to consider providing ample opportunities to practice imagining and creating over the course of students' educational trajectories.

Building from the laws of imagination (Vygotsky, 2004) may make these opportunities more visible and assessable in the curricula and further enable teachers to create with students embodied educational experiences that provide opportunities for applying and integrating knowledge and skills. Rich experiences promote learning and development among students and create novel opportunities for connection with diverse sources of knowledge. Collaboration promotes the development of the imagination by providing opportunities for self-expression and

sharing of idea that can become a reality. Teachers, administrators and community members may want to consider how to provide opportunities for creative expression and imagination over the course of students' educational trajectories as a method for increasing the likelihood that students will see themselves and be seen by others as making valued contributions to school and/or program communities.

Fourth, while the students' disengagement from mainstream school began long before they left or were moved to the alternative programs, the experience of leaving school, or multiple schools, and arriving at the alternative programs further exacerbated their feelings of alienation. These feelings were also likely reinforced by their recognition that the alternative programs had fewer resources and—while it could be said that at the time what was most important was the opportunity to rebuild relationships with teachers—what was also obvious was that the students interpreted the absence of advanced classes, even science classes more generally, extracurricular activities, a library, and sports as further evidence that they were less valuable than other children and, indeed, inferior, to the other students. The stigma of participation in the alternative programs deeply informed their experiences.

An implication that follows emphasizes the importance of working with students, clarifying the options, ensuring students and families understand what is required of participation in school and why administrators are suggesting the move to an alternative program, and perhaps even following up after students transition out of school and into alternative programs. Rather than looking to move students on to the next school or the next program, what is likely to benefit students and increase graduate rates is enabling and supporting students as they make these decisions, ensuring they have support and understand what these decisions may mean for their futures. Ideally, students would already be collaborating with educators to design and plan their

educational trajectories by sharing their needs, and having their strengths and interests recognized by teachers to create meaningful and purposeful learning experiences. If the location of learning and developing needs to shift, for whatever reasons, supporting students in this transition seems the most likely way to ensure that the transition itself does not do harm. The alternative programs should be assessed to ensure that they offer equitable learning and teaching opportunities (e.g., access to libraries and science classes).

Fifth, for the students the structure of the imagined school *for* education was permeable and transparent. Rather than four walls, it was connected to the landscape around it, the trees, the farm, and the animals. Building created for learning and teaching environments should have easy access to the outdoors to create a sense of transparency and connectedness to the wide variety of possibilities for teaching and learning opportunities.

An implication that clarifies that creating varied learning settings will promote students' engagement in imagining and experiencing different learning opportunities that potentially promote their interest in learning and contribute to their development. Creating "transparent" and enriched teaching and learning environments may promote learning and developing of students who can think beyond their immediate contexts to innovate and create new possibilities that address human conditions and concerns. Based on students' advice, it is important for mainstream schools to address characteristics in school organization and structure that push students out of schools. Access to diverse learning environments and settings is likely to address students' diverse learning needs, and consider their interests and strengths in their educational trajectories

7.3 Limitations

This qualitative study explored the experiences of students attending alternative programs with the goal of both learning about their experiences in mainstream schools and alternative programs and working together on a project to create an imagined school *for* education. This approach required a long process of preparation that included time spent by the researcher to build relationships with the school district administration, as well as the students and teachers of the two alternative programs where this research took place. The process of research was three-fold and included: interviews, sharing circles, and the project to create and imagined school that, in combination, took a year and two months to complete. Planning for this extra time for this type of research might not be available to some researchers. However, when planning qualitative research that involves a number of stakeholders, the process cannot be rushed.

Thus, the length of time required by this research may be a limitation, however, for me as a researcher I realize that I could have spent even more time in the two alternative programs learning from and with the students. It was important for me as a researcher to work together with the participants in the sociocultural context where this study was conducted. This was important because I was an "outsider." When approaching an established organization for the purpose of conducting research, it is the aim of a qualitative researcher to observe and become familiar with its dynamics, and participate, as possible, in social practices. A limitation of this study is that I did not have more time to spend with these students; more time may have enabled me to learn more and supported them to continue to imagine their school.

The number of participants might seem to be a limitation of this study. However, qualitative research contributes to the depth of knowledge on the subject of the study, and it is not the aim of qualitative inquiry to derive generalizable results. The focus of this research was

to broaden the knowledge on the students' experiences within mainstream schools and alternative programs and their vision for an imagined school *for* education. The eleven participants that took part in this research was representative of the alternative school population in the district and according to research on other alternative programs have common demographic characteristics (Morrissette, 2011). This research sits alongside research in the field and contributes the perspectives of the students and their creative imagination.

Another limitation in this research was that not all participantswere available to attend every sharing circle and were not able to contribute as much as they could have if they had been able to attend more consistently. The students ideas for their imaginedschool may have been more evenly representative and, perhaps, the school model would have been more representative given further discussion. Having said this, and having a sense of what the students were experiencing at the time of this study, however, I am grateful for the time we had together and for their participation. In addition, while the Elder attended only two sharing circles, which mayhave shaped on the dynamics of the group work, every contribution was valuable. In future, it would be helpful to have more time to interact with and build closer relationships with the Elders in the community so that other Elders may participate and contribute to the sharing circles if desired.

Although the students created the model for their imagined school *for* education, they were not invited to present their ideas to the school board, whilethe researcher was, and their hopes for building the school they imagined might notbe realized. As a researcher, I could only listen and provide the space for them to reflect on their experiences and imagination. Alone, I cannot act directly on their advice and wishes.

7.4 Future research

As future research, I will explore the students' lives and educational trajectories during and after they graduate from alternative programs. One research question I will ask is: What are the life, education, and career trajectories of students after graduating from alternative programs? To explore this question, I will engage in multi-sited ethnography, which allows me to follow a small number students as they move between various sites, to observe and learn from their experiences. I will interview students who are expected to graduate about their plans and goals after graduation, and then move with them into their different life contexts. The data collection will include observations, interviews, and informal conversations with the participants. I will connect with them weekly for two years to map their life and education trajectories.

Another study could be conducted to explore the needs for meaningful and purposeful educational options among students attending mainstream and alternative programs. What educational experiences in high school do they think would be both meaningful to them and purposeful for pursuing their career interests after graduation? I would interview students from middle and high schools and middle and alternative programs.

Further, research could be done on the relation between school policies on discipline and attendance and/or the policies that link to suspension from school and the outcomes for particular students. While research has been conducted on the demographics of students who are likely to be suspended, it would be interesting to include a comparison that takes into account school policies, as well as specific outcomes and demographics. The research question would ask: What is the relationship between the school attendance policies, suspension from school, and early school leaving? Critical discourse analysis of school policy on attendance will include interviews with principals, interviews with student about their experiences with suspension and re-

integration into the classroom. Perhaps learning from the students' experiences and analysis of school policy will help to create new alternative programs to establish a different form of education that goes beyond the stigma of "dumping grounds" and opens up the doors for innovation and freedom of thought available to all children.

7.5 Concluding thoughts

The students in this study experienced difficulties in mainstream schools—from illness, to family concerns, to bullying—and these experiences shaped how they came to see themselves as students. They were aware that the alternative programs were under-resourced as well. Regardless of these experiences in schools and alternative programs, their interest in learning and their desire for particular kinds of futures, for example attending post-secondary institutions, remained. They wanted to be successful in their efforts to learn and contribute to the world. The students' experiences also illustrated a potential need for different educational options inclusive of their learning needs and strengths.

The students emphasized that inequities were present in both the mainstream schools and in the alternative programs. The mainstream schools had more educational resources, but were rigid and inflexible, expecting the students' to fit in with the organization of learning and structure of school; they seemed to show little care or compassion toward the students' needs. Alternative programs were under-resourced, and at times felt more like day care centres, or places for young people to stay while adults waited for them to "grow up." Yet, schooling is not a voluntary activity in British Columbia and in Canada; it is compulsory and students are compelled to attend. Furthermore, exclusion from participation in the decision making about their own education and placement into alternative programs perpetuated an oppressive approach to schooling.

The lack of care reported by these students, in particular with regard to their wellbeing and learning in mainstream school, raises questions about the purpose of the school as a social institution and the divide between schools and education more broadly. If schools are the primary social institution beyond families given a responsibility by society—and in particular by parents and guardians—to offer caring, teaching, and learning experiences equitably to all children, then this research puts in stark contrast the experiences of these students in relation to those goals. Withholding learning opportunities from these students was not an equitable approach to educate all children. Although, a placement in the alternative programs provided the students with more support and they felt the teachers and other support staff cared for their wellbeing and learning, they were excluded from the rich learning experiences offered at the mainstream school.

All the students wanted to learn and had diverse interests in many different areas of learning. However, students perceived that their interestswere not included in their educational trajectories, and had a negative impact on their connection with mainstream school. The students said that as early as elementary school they felt disconnected from school and could not "fit in" with the mainstream school. Further, in high school, they often felt lost and misunderstood; already carrying many labels that reinforced their perception of their own deficits. This finding is an indication that the mainstream school system is not flexible enough and seems to struggle to fully embrace diverse populations through inclusive educational practices at least for some students.

Re-imagining schooling experiences provided an opportunity for moving beyond what was known and toward a new vision for an imagined school *for* education for the student participants. This research explored and presented ideas that will contribute to learning

environmentsthat are flexible enough to understand, value, and build from students' life trajectories, their learning needs, and strengths. The students in this research demonstrated that it is possible to re-imagine schooling to achieve education as liberation from the constraints of the existing public school system.

Epilogue

Although the data collection for this research was completed more than a year ago, there is a sense of anticipation thatcontinues with this project. It is in relation tothedissemination of the results to a wider audience such as an additional visit with the school board, teachers and support staff beyond these two programs, and further connections with the students, parents, Aboriginal Education Committee, and the Elders. Ultimately, dissemination of this research will likely include presentationswithcommunity members and publications for the academic community.

In recent weeks, I contacted the assistant superintendent to inform him about the completion of my research and my interest to re-connect with the students and the wider school community to set up meetings and presentations for sharing the outcomes from this research. I will be contacting the Elders' committee and the Aboriginal Education Committee to also set up time for discussion of the outcomes from this research.

I will be seeking opportunities to meet with the students who are still attending the alternative programs and those who graduated by phone or e-mail to share the final results. I would like to create an opportunity for at least some of them to attend a conference and share their experiences in creating their imagined school. There some potential opportunities to participate in conferences locally, including the BC Alternative Education Association Conference, a conference by the Association for Learning Environments, and UBC Faculty of Education teacher conference. These are some of the possibilities for engaging students in sharing research outcomes. These opportunities are likely to be important experiences for students, especially if they are not able to present directly to the school board in future.

The imagined school *for* education model is an ideal representation of students' vision for a learning environment that meets their needs and considers their strengths. At the time of this study, there was a plan for allocating a parcel of land for creating a new alternative program that would be built based on this and other research findings. I hope that this is still the case. While it is likely that this model might not be realized in its entirety, at least not in a public education system, and not in time for these particular students to benefit, learning what these students need and working with them to create a model school *for* education opens up further conversation and possibilities for implementing some of the main concepts from this model into some of the existing facilities. Further, allowing the students in this study to lead us, enables adults to expand our thinking, feeling, and imagining to take action to create environments for students that foreground learning from students' experiences and the meanings made from these experiences and, further, to assess these environments in relation to the needs and interests of the students and teachers who inhabit them.

I believe this research had an impact on all those involved. The engagement in interviews, sharing circles and building the model was an imaginative and emotional experience. Listening to the students' sharing their experiences with schooling, I observed how, through imagination and group work, they lived through an imaginary experience of "what if." "What if" we went to this amazing school we built? This experience creates a shift in how one may see future possibilities, perhaps, in a more positive light. All children deserve and have a right for educational opportunities that include them fully in the process of teaching and learning. Challenging the mainstream approach to school organization and structure of learning by including the students' lived experiences contributes to change and new possibilities for equitable and just education.

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209

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216

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AppendixA:adult participant informed consent
University of British Columbia
Youths's Vision for Education
Adult Participant Informed Consent

I.   Who is conducting a study?
Principal Investigator: Natalia Panina-Beard, B.Sc., B.A. M.A. Ph.D.Candidate, UBC, Human Development Culture and DiversityProgram.
Research Supervisor: Jennifer Vadeboncoeur, PhD. Associate Professor, UBC, Human Development Learning and Culture Program.

II.   Who is funding this study?
The study is being funded by the SSHRC doctoral award

III.   Why should you take part in this study? Why are we doing this study?

I invite you to be part of a research project that will contribute to the completion of my doctoral dissertation. I am interestedto learn about theeducational experiences of youths attending alternative educational programs. Your participation and your guidance in sharing circles will help youthsto develop a new vision for a school in their school district that will support other children and youths with their graduation and their future educational and vocational aspirations.

For this project, I am looking for an Indigenous Elder from the local community and a designer of learning spaces who will take part in sharing circles together with youths.

Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the project at any time if you no longer wish to participate.

IV.   How is the study done? What happens if you say "Yes, I want to participate in the study?"

If you want to be involved, I will ask you to do be part of the sharing circles:

1. **Sharing circles**–I would like to invite you to take part in 2 to 5 sharing circles that will take place during regular school hours. Estimated time for each sharing circle is 1-2 hours in duration and will be audio-recorded. I will set the date and timetogether with you and the school administration to accommodate both youths and your availability for participation. We will gather in a group of 5-7youths, yourself (Elder /School designer), and myself (the researcher). Prior to conducting sharing circles I will speak with you in-person or via e-mail/skype about the project and your role in it as we both see it unfold. In the sharing circles we will discuss and create a vision for a school or a learning space the way youthssee it helping them to graduate from high school and develop further educational and vocational goals.

   An Elder – You will share the traditional knowledge about sharing circles, initiate, and guide us in our journey through discussions and sharing of experiences.

> **A School Designer** – You will share your expertise with the youths and guide them in the process of exploration of their ideas that will help them to create a new vision for a school and learning they fell will make a positive difference in their ability to graduate, set and accomplish their future educational and vocational goals.

> 2. **Debriefing**– After we complete sharing circles I will have a brief talk with you in person, or via e-mail/skype to get feedback from you about your experience in this project and answer your questions about research. This is an informal follow-up and will last approximately 20-30 minutes.

Sharing circles will take time during the regular school hours and I will discuss with you availability ahead of time to set the most convenient time. For your participation in the sharing circles you will be provided with a token of appreciation in the amount of $30 and gifted with a blanket as a local traditionalIndigenousway of saying thank you for the time and knowledge you share.

V.   Study results

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate doctoral thesis and may also be published in articles and books.

If you want to receive the results of this study, please provide your contact information below so I can send the information to you.

VI.   Is there any way being in this study could negatively affect you?

You can ask questions before, during and after we engage in sharing circles. You can take a break during a sharing circle at any time.

Sharing circles will be audio-recorded and I will transcribe what all participants will be saying and might use some words that you say to make a point in my final report and potential future publications. I will use your made up name. After I have finished transcribing your interview I will ask you to look at the interview written on paper and you can make sure all I wrote is what you said and if there is anything you want to take out I will erase it.

If anything about this project makes you feel uncomfortable, please tell me right away and I will try to address the issues that might arise. Throughout the duration of the sharing circles we will talk about the consent and see if anything needs to change or added to make your participation more enjoyable, confidential and safe. You can quit at any time,your participation is voluntary.

VII.   What are the benefits of participating in this study?

Your participation in this study can help teachers and school principles to create a better school for youthswho are facing challenges with the traditional school system.

Your role of a mentor and a guide in the sharing circles might be of interest to you as you become engaged with the process of talking, sharing, learning about and creating new ideas with the youths and other adult participants. Your knowledge shared with the youths can have positive

emotional experience for all participants including yourself and can have many ways of having diverse positive impact on our lives and future development of a new educational system.

VIII.   How will your identity be protected?

Your confidentiality will be respected. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent unless required by law.All that you say insharing circles will be identified only by code. You can also choose an alias for me to use as I transcribe the interviews. I will also assign a number for all the transcribed sharing circle information you share. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. The information on my computer will be encrypted and password protected. If you say something in a sharing circle that you do not want me to include in research, I will take this information out when I transcribe the information recorded in sharing circles. The list that tells your real name will be kept in a fire proofed, locked filing cabinet apart from the transcribed information you give.The information sheets without names and the written copy of the interview will be also kept in a fire proofed, locked cabinet, and the electronic data will be encrypted and password protected and available only to me.When you take part in sharing circles we encourage participants not to discuss the content of the group to people outside the group; however, we can't control what participants do with the information discussed.
At any point in the study, if you reveal that there has been an incident that involves abuse and/or neglect of a child or an elderly person (or that there is a risk of such occurring) please be advised that the researcher must, by law, report this information to the appropriate authorities. At the end of the research, the audio recordings will be erased completely. The transcripts will be kept for future use, with all identifying information removed. I will only use what you say for research and educational purposes.

IX.   Will you be paid for taking part in this research study?

We will not pay you for the study, however, as a token of appreciation for your participation a $30 will be provided for your participation in sharing circlesat the completion of the study.

X.   Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact me or my research supervisor. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

XI.   Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

XII. Participant consent and signature

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on your school or community life.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Participant Consent:

_____

Participant's Signature   Date

_____

Printed Name of the Participant signing above   Date

Appendix B: youth participants informed consent
University of British Columbia
Youths's Vision for Education
Youths and Parent/Guarditan Informed Consent

I.   Who is conducting a study?

Principal Investigator: Natalia Panina-Beard, B.Sc., B.A. M.A. Ph.D.Candidate, UBC, Human Development Culture and Diversity Program.

Research Supervisor: Jennifer Vadeboncoeur, PhD. Associate Professor, UBC, Human Development Learning and Culture Program.

II.   Who is funding this study?

The study is being funded by the SSHRC doctoral award

III.   Why should you take part in this study? Why are we doing this study?

I invite you to be part of a research project that will contribute to the completion of my doctoral dissertation. I am interestedto learn about your experiences with regular and alternative education. Your participation and your ideas will help to develop a new vision for a school in your school district that will support other children and youths with their graduation by creating a positive experience with education.

I also want to learn about what you think school should be like to support youths in alternative programs to complete high school and be prepared for college, university or any other post-secondary programs that require a Dogwood certificate.

For this project, I am looking for young men and women from non-indigenousand Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, IndigenousAncestry) backgrounds, between the ages of 15 to 19 years old, attending an alternative program in your school district for at least one year.

Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from any part of the project at any time if you no longer wish to participate. If you participate fully in a project, your efforts will be considered as an additional credit toward your graduation.

IV.   How is the study done? What happens if you say "Yes, I want to participate in the study?"

If you want to be involved, I will ask you to do be part of the following activities:

1. **Interview** – I will set up time to do a one-on-one interview with you. This interview is likely to last from 1 to 2 hours and will happen during your school hours. I will ask you questions about your school experiences and your ideas about "what should school look like?" The interview will be audio recorded.

   These are some of the questions I would ask you: What was it like to attend a regular school? What is it like to be at the alternative program? If you can imagine an ideal school that you would love to be part of, what would it look like? What kind of learning opportunities should the school have to support your goals for graduation? What other

supports should be part of your school that will support your learning and high-school completion?

2. **Sharing circles** – I would like to invite you to take part in 3 to 5 sharing circles that will also take place during your school hours. I will set the date and time and we will gather in a group of 5-7 youths, myself, an Elder and a school designer (2-3 times). Based on the ideas you and others share with me in an interview, together we will create a vision for a school the way you see it helping you and other youths like you to graduate from high school with a Dogwood certificate. Each circle will last from about an hour to two hours and will be audio recorded.

3. **Group time for creating artwork** - After we complete our talks in sharing circles, we will also get together 3-4 times for an hour or two each time to create and make your ideas visible so we can share them with parents, teachers, administration and community. The new vision for a school we create will become a part of the school district program that supports youths in many different ways, to support them in their learning toward graduation, and for post-secondary education.

4. **Permission for inclusion of an artwork photo** - I would like to include a photograph of the final artwork in my dissertation and future potential publications. If you agree now you can always re-visit your decision later and review this consent on on-going basis.

5. **Debriefing / Follow up Interview** – After we finish with our project I will have a brief talk with you in person to get feedback from you about your experience in this project. This is an informal follow-up will last approximately 20-30 minutes.

All the activities will take time during your school hours and a credit will be given toward your graduation requirements. For your participation in the whole project you will be provided with a token of appreciation in the amount of $15.

V. Study results

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in articles and books.

If you want to receive the results of this study, please provide your contact information below so I can send the information to you.

VI. Is there any way being in this study could be bad for you?

Being in a research study may be new, so it might make you feel a little worried because you have not done it before. Please tell me if you are feeling worried. I will try and help you feel safe and comfortable while we are together.You can ask questions or take a break from the interview or a sharing circle at any time.

After the interviews are over and I begin to write down what you say in the interview, I might use some words that you say to make a point. I will use your made up name. After I have finished transcribing your interview I will ask you to look at the interview written on paper and

you can make sure all I wrote is what you said and if there is anything you want to take out I will erase it.

I will really try hard to not ask questions that will create high level of emotional stress. If a question bothers you or is hard to answer, you do not have to answer it. If you feel uncomfortable, please tell me right away and I will help you relax and feel safe before we move on. Throughout the project we will talk about the consent and see if anything needs to change or added to make your participation more enjoyable, confidential and safe. You can quit at any time your participation is voluntary.

VII.   What are the benefits of participating in this study?

Your participation in this study can help teachers and school principles to create a better school for youths like yourself.

It also might be interesting for you to learn what others think about what school should look like. In sharing circles you might learn from an Elder about traditional ceremonies and enjoy being part of the group and get to know some of your school mates and make more friends.

Creating an artwork together with other youths also might be an interesting activity for you where you can use your imagination to create a vision of a school you want to see being created in real life.

VIII.   How will your identity be protected?

Your confidentiality will be respected. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent unless required by law. All that you say in the interviews and sharing circles will be identified only by code. You can also choose a made up name for the interview. I will also assign a number for all the transcribed interview and sharing circle information you share with me. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. The information on my computer will be encrypted and password protected. If you say something in the interview or in a sharing circle that you do not want me to include in research, I will take this information out when I transcribe the interview and sharing circles. The list that tells your real name will be kept in a fire proofed, locked filing cabinet apart from the answers you give.The information sheets without names and the written copy of the interview will be also kept in a fire proofed, locked cabinet, and the electronic data will be encrypted and password protected and available only to me. When you take part in sharing circles we encourage participants not to discuss the content of the group to people outside the group; however, we can't control what participants do with the information discussed.
At any point in the study, if you reveal that there has been an incident that involves abuse and/or neglect of a child or an elderly person (or that there is a risk of such occurring) please be advised that the researcher must, by law, report this information to the appropriate authorities". At the end of the research, the audio recordings will be erased completely. The transcripts will be kept for future use, with all identifying information removed. I will only use what you say for research and education purposes.

IX.   Will you be paid for taking part in this research study?

We will not pay you for the study, however, as a token of appreciation for your participation a $15 will be provided for your full participation (interviews, sharing circles, group work and debriefing interview) to you at the completion of the study. In agreement with the school district superintended and your principal you will be granted a credit toward your high school graduation requirement.

X. Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact me or my research supervisor. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

XI. Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.caor call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

XII. Youths Participant and Parent/Guardian consent and signature

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on your school or community life.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.
    - You consent to participate in the individual interview   yes / no (circle one)
    - You consent to participate in the sharing circles   yes / no (circle one)
    - You consent to participate in the group to create artwork   yes / no (circle one)
    - You consent for the researcher to include a photo of the artwork in her dissertation and future potential publications   yes / no (circle one)

YouthsParticipant Consent:

_____

Printed Name of the Participant

_____

Signature of the Participant   Date

Parent Consent:

I consent/I do not consent (circle one) to my child's participation in the study

_____

Printed Name of the Parent or Guardian

_____

Printed Name of the Parent or Guardian   Date

AppendixC: interview guide

1. I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences with school before you came to an alternative program and about your experiences since you came here. You can tell me as much as you want to share. You can also stop any time and if you said something you do not want me to use in my project, please let me know and I will not use that information. I will also change all the names of people and locations you will mention to keep it confidential and protect your privacy.

2. Do you have any questions before we begin?

3. Please tell me about your experiences with school before you came to the alternative program.

   - What did you think school should be like when you first started school?

   - What was going on in your life while you were at a regular school?

   - What were you thinking and feeling when you were in school?

   - What were your goals and expectations for your school?

   - Did you change schools? How were they different from each other?

4. How did going to a regular school made you feel about yourself and your ability to graduate?

   - What happened when you went to school?

   - What was going on for you in your life and life of your family, friends, community, when you were at a regular school?

   - Did you ever thought about dropping out (changing school, working, etc.?)

   - What did it mean to you to have these experiences?

5. What happened that you are now at the alternative program?

   - What are your goals and expectations now that you are in a different program?

   - How is this program different from the regular school?

   - What do you think about this program? What is different?

- What kind of supports are available to you now?

- What are the support that you need that relate to doing well in school?

- What are the supports that you need to support you in non-academic ways?

6. If you can imagine a perfect school, what would yourschoolbe like and look like so that your get the education you need to graduate and meet your goals for what you want to do in life?

- What do you want to be and do in life?

- What kind of school will help you to accomplish your goals?

- What would teachers do at your school?

- Who would be teaching you?

- Would there be any other people at your school that can help with learning?

- What would students do to learn things they want and need to learn?

- What supports outside of learning do you think schools should have?

- Would you like parents participate in your school? What would they do?

- What kind of classrooms would you have? What would classrooms look like?

- What kind ofother things must be changed or be different in schools that more kids can enjoy their school experiences and get the education they need?

7. Is there anything else you want to share with me that you can add to your ideas about a school as you see it?

AppendixD: debriefing protocol (youth)

Natasha Panina-Beard, B.Sc., B.A. M.A. – Principal Investigator
PhD student, UBC, Faculty of Education, Human Development Learning and Culture Program
Dr. Jennifer Vadeboncoeur – Research Supervisor
Associate Professor, UBC, Human Development Learning and Culture Program

I am thankful for your time and encouraged by your desire to help other young people who have challenging time in regular school programs by being part of this project where we explored and created a new vision for education that will have a positive influence on yours and other young peoples' educational and vocational goals. What you have shared with me in the interviews, sharing circles, and space for expressionwill be added to what other participants say in order to better understand your experiences with education and how you envision a school that will create positive and meaningful learning experiences for youths to provide an opportunity to complete high-school and make choices for future education and career.

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

If you experience distressful feelings after being interviewed, please call me as soon as you can and I will do as much as I can to help you cope with the distress. If you need help and cannot reach me, please contact the emergency numbers below:

Vancouver 24-Hour Crisis Line(604) 872-3311

Vancouver Emergency Response Service911

If you want the study results mailed or e-mailed to you, please write your address or e-mail address at the bottom of this page.

I wish you all the best as you continue your journey.

Sincerely,

Natalia Panina-Beard

Name and Address to send research results

_____

AppendixE: debriefing protocol (adult)

Natasha Panina-Beard, B.Sc., B.A. M.A. – Principal Investigator
PhD student, UBC, Faculty of Education, Human Development Learning and Culture Program
Dr. Jennifer Vadeboncoeur – Research Supervisor
Associate Professor, UBC, Human Development Learning and Culture Program

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I am thankful for your time and encouraged by your desire to help young people who have challenging time in regular school programs to explore and create a new vision for education that will have a positive influence on meeting their educational and vocational goals. What you have shared in the sharing circles will be added to the ideas and visions of other participants in order to better understand the youths' experiences with education and how they with support of adultsenvision a school that will create positive and meaningful learning experiences for them to provide an opportunity to complete high-school and make choices for future education and career.

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

If you experience distressful feelings after being interviewed, please call me as soon as you can and I will do as much as I can to help you cope with the distress. If you need help and cannot reach me, please contact the emergency numbers below:

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I wish you all the best as you continue the journey.

Sincerely,

Natalia Panina-Beard

Appendix F: set of conventions for transcription of data (Schieffelin)

Convention	Description	Ex ample
Pseudonym:	Speakers are presented in the order they first speak by indicating their pseudonym. The speaker ID is given at the beginning of each turn.	Natasha: Richard: Elder:
Period.	Words spoken with falling intonation are followed by a full stop "."	Tatiana: I finished grade nine there then I came here.
Question mark?	Words spoken with rising intonation are followed by a question mark "?"	Natasha: Your sister is older than you right ?you said?
Exclamation mark!	Words spoken with excitement and louder than usual followed by an exclamation mark "!"	Richard: I've noticed there's not very many actual teachers and staff that are quite useful, until I came here!
Comma ,	Every brief pause in speech such as breath, natural break in an utterance is marked with a comma.	Tatiana: Partly yeah, but I don't know.
Three dots …	An utterance representing an unfinished utterance is marked with three dots at the end.	Natasha: So not just being stuck in one building but doing...
Words underlined	If a speaker gives a syllable, word or phrase increase in intensity, this is underlined.	Richard: I had underlined really, really bad ADHD going.
Double square brackets [[	When two or more utterances overlap at the same time, the overlaps are marked with double square brackets for each speaker. The parentheses are aligned underneath each other for each speaker.	Natasha: So, maybe some other areas where [[people can have a private, quiet time? Robert: [[Yeah like, yeah…
Equal sign =	When a speaker continues, completes, interrupts or supports another speaker's turn immediately (i.e., without a pause), this is marked by =.	Natasha: So again that personal connection is very important = Miranda: = The personal connection.

Convention	Description	Example
Double parentheses ((pause))	Extended pause in everyone's speech is marked with a word pause in double parentheses.	Miranda: this is how you figure out what the depth of this is going to be ((pause)) I guess with me it all comes back to hands on learning, the connections.
Researcher's comment ((*inaudible*))	Any information added by the researcher is placed in italics inside double parentheses.	Miranda: I am like: "no, ((*laughter*)) I do not understand it, and I do not need it." Robert: My expectations for them were basically on the ((*inaudible*)) some were nice, some were bad.

Appendix G: sample qualitativedata preparation and transcription protocol

TEXT FORMATTING

General Instructions

The **transcriber**shall transcribe all individual and focus group interviews using the following formatting:

1. Times New Roman 12-point face-font

2. One-inch top, bottom, right, and left margins

3. All text shall begin at the left-hand margin (no indents)

4. Entire document shall be left justified

Labeling for Individual Interview Transcripts

Individual interview transcript shall include the following labeling informationleft justified at the top of the document:

Example:

Participant ID:

Interview Name:

Interviewee Category/Subgroup:

Site/Location:

Date of Interview:

Interviewer ID:

Transcriber:

The transcriber shall insert a single blank line between the file labeling informationand the actual interview transcription. A double pound sign (##) shall **precedeand follow** each participant identification label (i.e., **Source ID**).A single hard return shall be inserted immediately after the Source ID. The individual'scomment/response shall begin on the next line.

Example:

Participant ID: C071

Interview Name: Vaccine Interview

Interviewee Subgroup #: Trial Participant

Site: UIC

Date of Interview: 11/14/91

Interviewer ID: IC003

Transcriber: John Smith

##IC003##

OK, before we begin the interview itself, I'd like to confirm that you have readand signed the informed consent form, that you understand that your participationin this study is entirely voluntary, that you may refuse to answer any questions,and that you may withdraw from the study at anytime.

##C071##

Yes, I had read it and understand this.

##IC003##

Do you have questions before we proceed?

Labelling for Focus Group Transcripts

Focus group transcripts shall include the following labeling information:

Example:

Site:

#Participants:

Focus Group Sample: (e.g., Men or Women)

Focus Group Interview No.

Date of Interview:

Facilitator ID:

Recorder ID:

Transcriber:

[Digital Recording]

The transcriber shall indicate when the interview [recording begins]. [The beginning of the interview should be typed in all capital letters on the first line of the transcript]

Example:

START OF INTERIVEW

End of Interview

In addition, the transcriber shall indicate when the interview session has reachedcompletion by typing END OF INTERVIEW in uppercase letters on the last line ofthe transcript. Adouble space should precede this information.

Example:

##IC003##

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

##C071##

Nope, I think that about covers it.

##IC003##

Well, thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

SOURCE LABELING

Individual Interviews

Source IDs shall begin with the alpha character that designates the data collectionsite/location followed by the individual's three-digit identification number (e.g.,

FI00 =

Fenway interviewee #100).

Example:

Site designators for individual interviews are:

C = UIC interviews

F = FCHC interviews

H = HBHC interviews

All interviewer Source IDs shall begin with the alpha character **I** followed by the appropriate site/location designator and three-digit interviewer identification number(e.g., IF002 = Fenway interviewer #002).

[Sharing Circles Interviews]

All focus group participants and facilitators shall be assigned a unique Source ID.The transcriber shall be provided with a list of [sharing circles] participants and recordernotes with each set of [sharing circles] recordings.

Example:

R500 = Rhode Island [sharing circle] participant #500

The group facilitator Source IDs shall begin with the alpha character **F** followed bythe appropriate site/location designator and a three-digit facilitator identificationnumber.

Example:

FR101 = Rhode Island [sharing circle] facilitator #101

The [sharing circle] recorder (note taker) Source ID shall begin with the alpha character

Rfollowed by the appropriate site/location designator and a three-digit recorder identificationnumber.

Example:

RR002 = Rhode Island [sharing circle] recorder #002

The transcriber shall be provided a list of data collection sites/locations and one tothree alpha character prefix for each site/location.For [sharing circles] participants who cannot be readily identified, the transcriber shalltype the alpha character that designates in which site the [sharing circle] was conducted,the [sharing circle] number for that site, and -*UNKNOWN* (e.g., RI-UNKNOWN =Rhode Island unidentifiable participant for [sharing circle] #1). *UNKNOWN* is not to beused in the individual interviews.

CONTENT

[Digital recordings] shall be transcribed verbatim (i.e., recorded word for word, exactly assaid), including any nonverbal or background sounds (e.g., laughter, sighs, coughs,claps, snaps fingers, pen clicking, and car horn).

• Nonverbal sounds shall be typed in parentheses, for example, (short sharplaugh), (group laughter), (police siren in background).

• If interviewers or interviewees mispronounce words, these words shall be transcribedas the individual said them. The transcript shall not be "cleaned up" byremoving foul language, slang, grammatical errors, or misuse of words or concepts.If an incorrect or unexpected pronunciation results in difficulties withcomprehension of the text, the correct word shall be typed in square brackets.Aforward slash shall be placed immediately behind the open square bracket andanother in front of the closed square bracket.

Example:

I thought that was pretty pacific [/specific/], but they disagreed.

• The spelling of key words, blended or compound words, common phrases, andidentifiers shall be standardized across all individual and focus group transcripts.Enunciated reductions (e.g., *betcha*, *cuz*, *'em*, *gimme*, *gotta*, *hafta*,*kinda*, *lotta*, *oughta*, *sorta*, *wanna*, *coulda*, *could've*, *couldn't*, *coudn've*,*couldna*, *woulda*, *would've*, *wouldn't*, *wouldn've*, *wouldna*, *shoulda*,*should've*, *shouldn't*, *shouldn've*, *shouldna*) plus standard contractions of *is*,*am*, *are*, *had*, *have*, *would*, and *not* shall be used.

• Filler words such as *hm*, *huh*, *mm*, *mhm*, *uh huh*, *um*, *mkay*, *yeah*, *yuhuh*, *nahhuh*, *ugh*, *whoa*, *uh oh*, *ah*, and *ahah* shall be transcribed.

• Word or phrase repetitions shall be transcribed. If a word is cut off or truncated,a hyphen shall be inserted at the end of the last letter or audible sound (e.g., hewen- he went and did what I told him he shouldn've).

Inaudible Information

The transcriber shall identify portions of the [recording] that are inaudible or difficultto decipher. If a relatively small segment of the [recording] (a word or short sentence) ispartially

unintelligible, the transcriber shall type the phrase "inaudible segment." Thisinformation shall appear in square brackets.

Example:

The process of identifying missing words in an audio-taped interview of poorquality is [inaudible segment].If a lengthy segment of the [recording] is inaudible, unintelligible, or is "dead air" whereon one is speaking, the transcriber shall record this information in square brackets. Inaddition, the transcriber shall provide a time estimate for information that could not betranscribed.

Example:

[Inaudible: 2 minutes of interview missing]

Overlapping Speech

If individuals are speaking at the same time (i.e., overlapping speech) and it is notpossible to distinguish what each person is saying, the transcriber shall place thephrase "cross talk" in square brackets immediately after the last identifiable speaker'stext and pick up with the next audible speaker.

Example:

Turn taking may not always occur. People may simultaneously contribute tothe conversation; hence, making it difficult to differentiate between one person'sstatement [cross talk]. This results in loss of some information.

Pauses

If an individual pauses briefly between statements or trails off at the end of a statement,the transcriber shall use three ellipses.Abrief pause is defined as a two- to fivesecondbreak in speech.

Example:

Sometimes, a participant briefly loses . . . a train of thought or . . . pauses aftermaking a poignant remark. Other times, they end their statements with a clausesuch as but then ….

If a substantial speech delay occurs at either beginning or the continuing a statementoccurs (more than two or three seconds), the transcriber shall use "long pause"in parentheses.

Example:

Sometimes the individual may require additional time to construct a response.(Long pause) other times, he or she is waiting for additional instructions orprobes.

Questionable Text

If the transcriber is unsure of the accuracy of a statement made by a speaker, thisstatement shall be placed inside parentheses and a question mark is placed in front ofthe open parenthesis and behind the close parenthesis.

Example:

##B3003##

I went over to the?(club on Avalon)? to meet with the street outreach team totalk about joining up for the study.