

**SEEKING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS: AN EXPLORATION OF SCHOOL
ENGAGEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF MARGINALIZED YOUTH**

by

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Abstract

Education in British Columbia is intended to be inclusive, however there are students who slip through the cracks. These marginalized students are often found to be struggling with challenges outside of and within school that complicate their educational journeys. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), one possible reason for their disengagement is that these students do not perceive their psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence as met, which may lead to reduced motivation, and therefore reduced engagement. Informed by feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspectives, this study explored what motivated six marginalized youth to attend school, how they experienced school engagement, and how their experiences of school influenced their school engagement.

Six youth enrolled in alternative secondary education programs participated in semi-structured interviews. The data collected from the interviews was analyzed according to SDT, which revealed that in general participants did not perceive schools as meeting their basic psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence. Findings from the study indicate that participants were motivated to attend school due to opportunities to develop employment skills, as well as increased access to social networks, resources and supports. The study found that participants found emotional, cognitive and agentic engagement desirable, while behavioural engagement was more often an inauthentic performance idealized in classrooms. Participants' experiences of school were found to influence their engagement in a variety of ways. This study concluded that in order to increase student motivation to attend, schools might work toward fostering strong student connections, supporting access to employment skills training, reducing barriers to education, and building empathy and understanding for marginalized youth. In order

to increase student engagement, schools might focus on increasing student perceptions of autonomy, belonging and competence in their learning environments, as well as work to reduce barriers such as learning challenges and the effects of outside factors on learning. Finally, viewing school engagement as collection of nested, or ecological, social processes that are influenced by factors beyond school walls, as well as by the bidirectional relationships within schools, may help to increase marginalized student engagement.

Lay Summary

Students who experience multiple oppressions are often marginalized by the education system due to their perceived disengagement. From a critical feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspective, rooted in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study explores the educational experiences of six marginalized youth in one of BC's largest school districts, examining what motivates them to attend school, how they engage in schools, and how their experiences of school impact their engagement in education. The data is examined and framed based on the motivational theory of SDT, providing insight into what motivates marginalized students to attend school, their preferred styles of engagement, and how their negative experiences of school can have negative effects on their school engagement. This study illuminates how the participating marginalized students often perceived themselves to have insufficient autonomy, belonging and competence in schools, which negatively influenced how and why they engaged with/in schools over time.

Preface

This thesis is the original intellectual product of the author, N. L. Curtis. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 3 to 5 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H17-01344.

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Seeking Alternative Pathways: An Exploration of School Engagement from the Perspectives of Marginalized Youth

As a behaviour interventionist and classroom teacher at both elementary and secondary levels, I have witnessed students struggling to balance their needs with the demands of the school system. I have known primary students who, after summoning the willpower and perseverance to get themselves out of bed, care for their siblings and sometimes their parents, get themselves to school, and are then reprimanded for being late. I have watched secondary students walk through the school door with fresh self-inflicted cuts up their forearms, struggling to shake the anxiety and depression that follows them everywhere they go. I see well-meaning adults inadvertently pushing students further out of the system instead of pulling them closer. These struggling students hold a special place in my heart. I admire their resilience, and the strength, courage and bravery it takes for them to show up each day. The admiration I feel for students like these, in combination with a strong passion for social justice, motivates me to keep striving for more effective ways to meet the needs of all learners.

Throughout my professional and academic careers, I have continually found myself gravitating towards the critical analysis of systems and hegemonic ideologies. Over the years, this has evolved and developed into a feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered approach to education which has created opportunities for deep, meaningful connections with a variety of students across a variety of settings. In the research reported here, I continue to build from these theoretical positionings. With these perspectives grounding both my teaching philosophy and research, I have explored a variety of theories related to learning and motivation in order to

better understand how to help my most vulnerable students connect with school in a positive and authentic way. When I first read about Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which suggests that students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence are related to their motivation, it caught my attention. Specifically, reflecting on my work with marginalized students, I have often wondered if their communication (verbal and behavioural) was not misinterpreted. What if their words and actions were reframed, and instead of seeing what they were doing as problematic, it was seen as an attempt to meet some unfulfilled, unnoticed need? With further investigation, it became clear to me that exploring school engagement through the lens of SDT could be an insightful, valuable and crucial endeavor.

In a British Columbian educational context, there is movement towards a more inclusive system, however, as evidenced by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (Manion, Short & Ferguson, 2012), many school districts in BC and across Canada are struggling to provide effective services for their most vulnerable students. Access to physical resources, such as food, shelter and clothing are commonly facilitated by schools and communities, but for those individuals with more complex lives such as students with mental illness or trauma, their needs extend beyond the resources and training of many school staff. Researchers attribute this gap in service to a variety of factors including lack of awareness, lack of funding, poor dissemination of information, lack of coordination between districts, schools and community services, as well as a lack of accountability at municipal, provincial and federal levels (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Manion, Short & Ferguson, 2012).

Unfortunately, when it comes to education, the current default view is one of deficits; complex needs and the associated behaviours are often viewed as a hindrance to classroom management, a drain on school communities, and an obstacle to learning itself. This leaves many

vulnerable children and youth without access to quality support and education (Berliner, 2013; Dutro & Bien, 2014).

Educators recognize that authentic engagement is integral to learning, and most attempt to implement a variety of strategies and tasks intended to foster student engagement. However, when students are not optimally engaged, the problem is often seen as located within the student, without recognition of how motivation and engagement might be affected by their lives and circumstances, outside of or within school. This mindset identifies a substantial flaw in thinking about the experiences of vulnerable learners in today's schools. Without understanding the impact that systemic barriers can have on student motivation and engagement, myths around engagement lend themselves to the perseveration of a sort of value system within the institution of education. The idea that students achieve success merely by working hard creates a paradigm in which students' lack of academic success is often attributed to a lack of effort on the part of themselves or their families (Berliner, 2013; Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). This *myth of meritocracy* can be extremely damaging, preventing marginalized students from accessing the supports that could enable them to be more successful in schools. In fact, research shows that factors such as peer influences, quality of administration and teachers, socioeconomic status, perceived neighbourhood safety, and access to quality medical care have tremendous effects on academic success (Berliner, 2013; Blair & Raver, 2015). Why then, are marginalized students expected to just pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get on with it?

My experiences as both a classroom teacher and behaviour intervention teacher have led me to question how and when intervention is utilized for vulnerable students, as well work towards deconstructing stereotypes and simplistic understandings of marginalized youth. I have observed that students who are actively, purposefully, and visibly engaged in their learning are

celebrated, rewarded, and encouraged in their classrooms. When students demonstrate intermittent school engagement, they are said to have “potential” as learners, as citizens, as “good” persons. When students appear to be consistently passive, disengaged or differently engaged, they are repeatedly labelled as lazy, bad, disruptive, destructive, defiant, unwilling, and difficult (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). For example, a fidgeting student with AD/HD may seem distracted and distracting. From that student’s point of view, they may be attempting to manage their need for movement by playing with an eraser while listening, instead of meeting the requirements for “active listening” by making eye contact, facing the teacher, and having nothing in their hands. As a result of these subtle or overt shifts from the behavioural norm, these seemingly distracted and distracting students are often asked to leave shared learning spaces. This not only effectively physically, emotionally and socially marginalizes them from their peers for their lack of “appropriate” school engagement, but also detracts from healthy developmental needs for positive peer interaction and school connectedness (Blair & Raver, 2015).

Engaging marginalized students in meaningful learning is a challenge that is often further complicated by lack of resources and knowledge relevant to supporting the intensive needs of these learners in schools. Collaborative teams are often unsure of how to actively and proactively prioritize student wellbeing in schools when academics are still identified as paramount to education, regardless of the impact of poverty, stress and/or mental illness on individuals and communities (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Manion, Short & Ferguson, 2012). In addition, it has been well documented that communication between schools, public health representatives, and social service providers is restricted, fragmented, and inconsistent at best, which can create or perpetuate substantial barriers to meeting student needs (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Iwasaki et al.,

2014; Manion, Short & Ferguson, 2012; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Regardless of these barriers, educators and researchers must work to make education attainable and accessible to all.

One approach to making education more inclusive is to re-conceptualize school engagement to encompass the realities and lived experiences of a wider variety of youth, specifically, marginalized students in both mainstream schools and alternative education settings. Asking questions around how and why students engage in learning should not just center around one type of student experience, but should be mindful of the variety of lifestyles, cultures, and social experiences of BC's diverse student body. Undoubtedly, in order to gain meaningful insight that can affect real change, the perspectives and voices of the students themselves should be central in this discussion (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Multiple Study Lenses

This study was grounded in a worldview that had developed based on my prior education and experiences, which is influenced by feminist, trauma-informed, and youth-centered perspectives. At the same time, and consonant with my overall worldview, I drew on two theoretical lenses that held promise in terms of better understanding students' experiences and engagement in education. In this section, I introduce how my worldview and these two theoretical lenses combined to help me understand the experiences of marginalized youth in alternative education contexts (see Figure 1). These theories will be more thoroughly examined in Chapter Two.

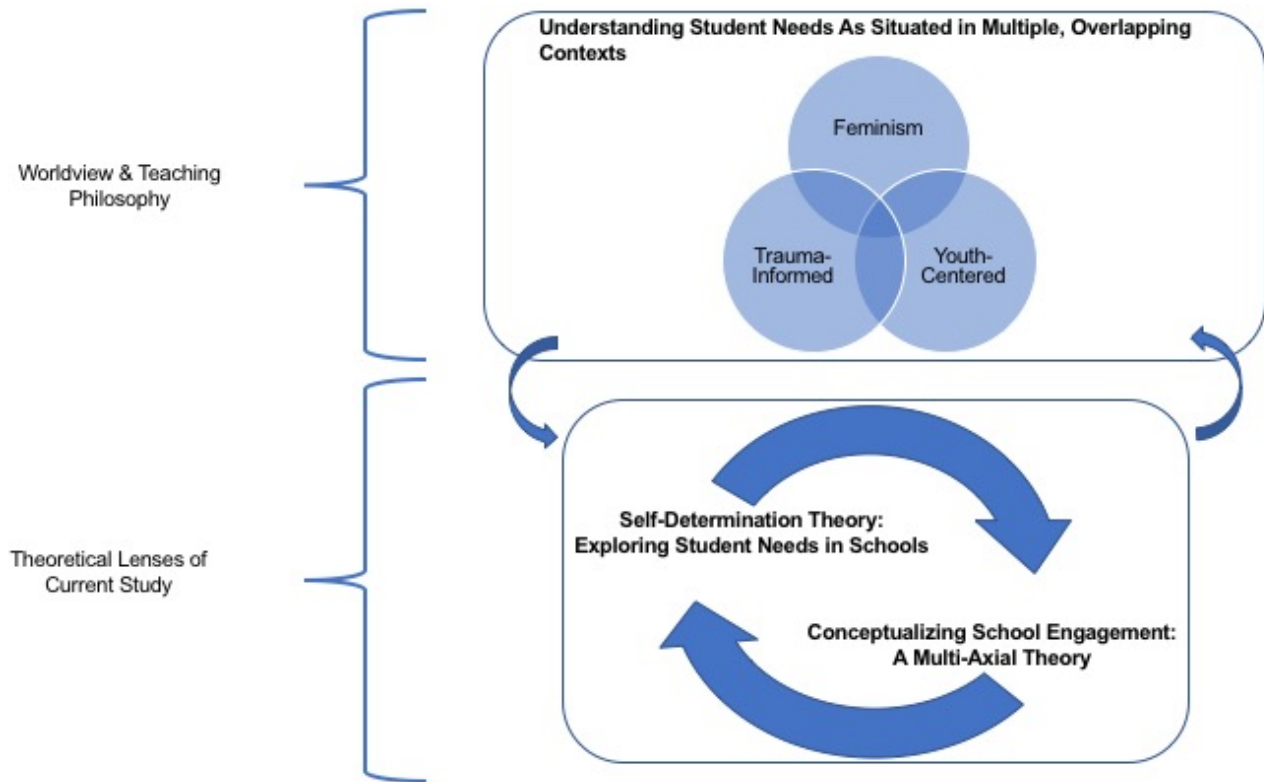


Figure 1: An overview of the multiple lenses grounding this study.

Worldview and Teaching Philosophy

Almost one quarter of BC's Grade 12 students are not able to graduate each year (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). Graduation, by which society judges an individual's perceived success (or lack thereof) in formal schooling, does little to tell us of any given student's personal experiences with learning, their learning environments, or their socio-cultural history and its impact on their schooling, and it certainly does not provide useful insight into any systemic or personal barriers that likely complicated their journey (Berliner, 2013). To better understand the nuances and complexities of sociohistorical influences on marginalized students' experiences of education, this study makes use of feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered lenses.

From a feminist standpoint, power and privilege have incredible influence on our everyday experiences, including access to and experiences of education. Feminist theory also

encourages the use of a critical lens for examining imbalances and disadvantages, as well as promotes the development of agency and action, both individual and collective (Fine, 2007). Feminist theory provides a powerful foundation for critical analysis as it makes clear the bidirectional relationships of individuals and their social environments, and highlights the importance of historical contexts, power dynamics and socially constructed norms in human experiences (Crotty, 1998; Fine, 2007). In a traditional sense, feminism is primarily concerned with inequality between the sexes, however, a more modern, progressive understanding of feminism seeks to understand the experiences of a/gendered bodies within and across systems. This shift in thinking acknowledges gender as a (performed) spectrum that interacts transformatively with a multitude of other aspects of social identity such as race, class and sexuality.

In addition to a feminist perspective, I would like to draw attention to the impact of trauma on development and education. As marginalized students, by the definition used in this study, are individuals operating at the crux of multiple oppressions, and as it has been determined that experiencing the chronic stress resulting from oppressions such as poverty or systemic racism can often be traumatic, it is fair to say that many marginalized students have suffered trauma in their lives (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Dutro & Bien, 2014; te Riele, 2006). Complex trauma is the result of ongoing neglect, chronic stress, and/or abuse on child development, which is often linked to the varying forms of oppression mentioned above (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Malchiodo & Crenshaw, 2015). Various studies have shown that trauma can have significant impacts on development and learning. For example, living in chronic poverty has been shown to negatively impact the development of self-regulation in children, affecting

executive functioning, attention, and emotional regulation, all of which are heavily relied upon in the current school system (Blair & Raver, 2015).

Complex and other varying forms of trauma, may present in internalized or externalized forms, and like many other mental illnesses, can come across as destructive and disruptive in the classroom, not to mention confusing and threatening to other students and teachers (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Malchiodo & Crenshaw, 2015). Children and youth suffering from trauma are some of the most vulnerable learners in our system, yet the symptoms of their emotional and psychological injuries are often the reason these students are marginalized and pushed out of the system (Dutro & Bien, 2014).

In addition to the feminist and trauma-informed lenses utilized in this study, ensuring that youth voices, experiences and needs are central is integral in order to make meaningful change in their lives (Iwasaki et al., 2015). Many researchers echo the need for youth to perceive themselves as supported, heard, and valued in order to engage in a meaningful way, not just in education, but in development and healing, as well (Flower, McKenna, Haring & Pazey, 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wagner, Monson, Hart, 2016). This study intends to provide a platform for youth to speak up and out in a constructive and effective manner that is reflective of their needs and values.

Self Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a motivational theory that posits that all students, regardless of sociocultural factors such as gender and ethnicity, possess innate tendencies towards growth that can be the basis for positive school engagement (Reeve, 2012). Compared to other motivational learning theories, SDT "...is unique in that it emphasizes the instructional task of vitalizing students' inner motivational resources as the key step in facilitating high quality

engagement” (Reeve, 2012, pp. 152). In order to spark motivation, it is necessary to ensure that student psychological needs are met, which Blair and Raver (2015) suggest might be integral in the case of marginalized youth. This also means teachers must do their best to identify and address any barriers to learning as they arise.

SDT highlights the importance of meeting student needs, specifically students’ psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence, in order to facilitate authentic engagement. The key to this approach is the importance of perception. If students do not perceive themselves as having meaningful control in their learning environment, do not feel a sense of relational connection to their peers or school staff, and are not able to regularly experience success in the school setting, SDT suggests that student motivation, and therefore engagement, will likely be negatively affected (Reeve, 2012). In fact, researchers have gone so far as to relate low engagement levels to drop-out risk (Wang & Peck, 2013). If this is the case, perhaps further exploration of how BC schools work to meet the psychological needs of students could illuminate the strengths and challenges of education in BC in a way that directs researchers and educators toward a more effective and inclusive system.

As this study aims to increase understanding of the relationship between motivation and engagement for marginalized youth, I considered how an SDT framework might be useful and even essential in understanding how and why marginalized students engage in learning. Although it is merely a starting point, SDT may offer a lens through which to better understand the experiences of marginalized youth within BC’s current education system, as well as offer some potential pathways forward.

School Engagement

School engagement has been identified as a strong predictor of academic success, and as

such, is of interest to educators and researchers alike (Wang & Peck, 2013). The evolution of defining and theoretically fostering engagement has been ongoing for decades, however, the nuances and complexities of engaging and re-engaging vulnerable youth has yet to be thoroughly explored (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Smith, Newman-Thomas & Stormont, 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014; Wang & Peck, 2013). The current literature around school engagement is limited, fragmented, and fails to take into account the increasing intricacies associated with marginalized students, as well as neglects to explore the impact of systemic marginalization within the education system (Archambault et al., 2009; Lessard, Caine & Clandinin, 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Tilbury et al. 2015). In order to better serve all students, it may be necessary to critically examine underlying assumptions and identify any systemic contributions that might inadvertently perpetuate the marginalization of students.

In its most basic form, school engagement can be understood as a variety of actions that students do in learning contexts to meet learning goals. Most researchers can agree that there are numerous actions associated with learning, and that there are various factors that may impact the depth and style of engagement, such as teacher motivation style, which can impact how and when students engage in learning (Reeve, 2012). Currently, researchers often study school engagement through the use of multidimensional models, which are usually focused on cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Saeki & Quirk, 2015). Reeve (2012) suggests that agentic engagement, where students feel they are able to positively influence their learning environment, is an important fourth component of engagement that should be included. The current study utilizes this multiaxial model of engagement, including the fourth component, agentic engagement.

Wallace and Chhuon (2014) conceptualize engagement as an ecologically-nested social process in which students are active in their interactions with teachers, peers and staff. According to this definition, all participants are making meaning of every interaction, as informed by the social and political structures of their individual lives, schools, and society at large. This understanding of engagement draws attention to the importance of an individual's social, cultural and political environment, including that of school. It informs student beliefs about self-efficacy (one's beliefs about one's abilities), belonging, and agency (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Tilbury et al., 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). This ecological view of engagement is rare in research around school engagement, which tends to decontextualize engagement from its surrounding influences (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

The concept of school engagement has evolved significantly over the decades it has been studied (Archambault et al., 2009; Wang & Peck, 2013). There is, however, a notable lack of research on school engagement and marginalized youth (Tilbury et al., 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Most research on school engagement focusses on typical students in mainstream classrooms as subjects, and relies on observable behaviours and self-reporting to measure engagement (Archambault et al., 2009). This leaves students who are atypical, marginalized, and vulnerable, the students with the most to lose and the most to gain, as not well represented or understood in the literature nor in practice.

It is one goal of this study to critically examine the current understanding of school engagement, with the intent of creating a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to both fostering and researching school engagement. By exploring the relationship between SDT and school engagement from the perspectives of marginalized youth, it may be possible to identify connections between unmet basic psychological needs and reduced engagement (Reeve, 2012).

For example, if a student perceives themselves as not having sufficient autonomy at school, they may be less inclined to engage in school. Likely, there is a complex relationship between students' experiences of school, SDT and the various components of school engagement.

It is the overarching goal of this study to explore how and why marginalized youth engage with/in secondary education in British Columbia. By inviting student participants to discuss their experiences of school and engagement, this study aims to deepen, broaden, and complicate understandings of school engagement, an expansion that may illuminate how to support marginalized students in feeling an increased sense of belonging, competence and autonomy while more successfully engaging with/in the education system. By exploring the experiences and insight of the students themselves, this study intends to help shift the negative stigma associated with being a “disengaged” student from being burdensome and devalued, towards a more a compassionate and inherently valuable understanding of marginalized students as young human beings faced with overlapping and complex challenges that complicate their affective, behavioural, cognitive and agentic engagement in schools.

Marginalized, Not Pathologized

For the purposes of this study, I will primarily be using the term *marginalized* to describe persons that experience multiple axes of oppression. This terminology choice came after great consideration but was based on an argument from te Riele (2006) who reminds her readers that describing individuals as *at-risk* pathologizes students and/or their communities, as opposed to categorizing their relationship with institutions, such as schools. By choosing to primarily use the term *marginalized*, I take the perspective that marginalization is a product of imbalanced social power structures, as te Riele (2006) describes.

Study Site and Context

This study focused attention on the experiences of marginalized youth in secondary-level alternative education programs within one school district in the province of British Columbia. BC's marginalized students are at the mercy of many interactive, overlapping oppressive social and political forces. For example, BC's colonial past has imparted a legacy of generational trauma. In BC, 1 out of every 5 children live under the poverty line, which is higher than the Canadian average. In addition, an average of one in five British Columbians per year suffer the effects of mental illnesses and/or substance ab/use in the home. These factors, in conjunction with the systemic racism and sexism that continues to permeate society and the school system, can have significant effects on the development and wellbeing of BC's children and youth (Iwasaki et al., 2014; First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2016; Ministry of Health Services & Ministry of Children and Families, 2010; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Smith et al., 2015).

When typical school environments fail to meet the needs of vulnerable students, they may be placed in specialized programs and settings with increased support in hopes that a change in environmental fit will provide enough support that students will graduate. In many cases, alternative education programs in BC are indeed successful. McCreary Center Society's review of alternative education programs found that BC offers a variety of programs that for the most part, meet the diverse student population's educational needs (Smith et al., 2007). Researchers found that students attending these programs generally felt positively connected to their school and staff, reported higher levels of health, had more positive feelings about life in general, and were more likely to have post-secondary aspirations. Social supports and resources accessed

through the school were also found to be a significant benefit to alternative education students, although access to these resources varied from program to program (Smith et. al., 2007).

In School District X¹ in which the study takes place, there are multiple options for alternative secondary support. Generally, across BC, high-needs students are labelled with an “H” designation for Severe Behaviour Intervention/Mental Health, and with guardian support or consent, may be placed in an integrated program in a mainstream school. If the placement is not successful, and/or further support is required, students may be enrolled in an off-site, alternative education program. The alternative secondary education programs in this district provide spaces for approximately 200 secondary students through an assortment of programming options.

Some programs in District X function as partnerships between the school district and outside agencies. For example, one of the study sites is a partnership program with the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) that caters to students with substantial MCFD involvement in their family lives. This is a joint program between the school district and a community service provider under the directive of MCFD. The program runs Monday to Friday, and provides students with daily breakfast and lunch. There is space for 30 students to attend, ranging in ages from 12-19. As this program is primarily focused on students who have been or are currently supported by the MCFD, the majority of students have been in temporary government care, long-term foster care, group homes, and/or on independent living plans. Parallel with statistics indicating that Indigenous children and youth are overrepresented in government care, approximately half of the students enrolled at the time of this study are of Indigenous heritage (Vancouver Foundation, 2015).

¹ Names and location of the district and programs have been masked to protect participant privacy.

Alternative secondary education programs provide a variety of contexts in which to engage with marginalized students. The range of programs designed to support students at various stages of engagement provides an excellent arena to explore their experiences and perceptions around education and school engagement. For this study, I interviewed students currently enrolled in two alternative education programs in School District X to gain valuable insight into their experiences of school, and to explore their understandings of how and why they engage with/in education. It is my hope that this study will impart some much-needed understanding around how to support marginalized and vulnerable youth in accessing and obtaining the equitable education to which they are entitled.

Methodological Perspective

To gain meaningful insight into how marginalized youth engage with/in school, I chose to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology informed by feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered theories. PAR is a critical methodology that aims to empower marginalized groups through collaborative processes that shift traditional research power relations (Bertrand, 2016; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009). It can take many forms and have a variety of intentions, from gaining understanding to enabling transformation. Commonly used with disenfranchised, marginalized or misrepresented social groups, PAR, like other forms of action research, aims to empower marginalized groups through collaborative processes that purposefully shift power relations (Bertrand, 2016).

The purpose of choosing PAR was to highlight youth voices in order to gain insight into the lived experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of participants in order to better serve all students in the future (Iwasaki et al., 2015). As a critical analysis, PAR may allow for further illumination of ways to support marginalized youth by shining a light on their various strengths, challenges, and

needs in an empowering and validating way (Iwasaki et al., 2015). I hope that this study will strengthen my practice as an educator, as well as improve the capacities and practices of other educators and researchers.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection, as interviews can generate a richer, more complex data set than surveys or questionnaires. The open-ended format of semi-structured interviews allows for expanded narrative(s) if/when they arise, which was ideal as making space for student voice was one of the goals of this study. The interviews were conducted in the least threatening way possible, for example, in a youth-chosen space with an option of having a friend present for reassurance. Demonstrating that I was willing to power-share with participants may have been encouraging for participants; for instance, meeting off school sites may have helped to shift the balance of perceived power and earn their trust (Iwasaki et al., 2014). As per PAR, participants were invited to create and carry out an action project related to the study, although only one participant took up that offer, to a limited extent.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to better understand how and why marginalized secondary students engage with/in education through exploring the concept of school engagement. Grounded in my worldview and teaching philosophy which is based in a feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspective, this study integrated SDT and school engagement theories to better understand marginalized youths' experiences of school. Semi-structured interviews with six secondary students enrolled in alternative education programs were conducted to investigate the following questions:

1. What value/meaning does education hold for marginalized youth? What do they perceive it adds to their lives? What do they perceive it takes away?

2. How do marginalized youth experience engagement in schools? What does it look? What does it feel like?
3. How and why do marginalized youth feel that their experiences of education influence their school engagement?

Contributions

The exploration of school engagement from a marginalized youth perspective will be a valuable addition to the current fragmented and sparse research body around school engagement for marginalized students. It is my hope that this study offers insight into how to more effectively support the complex learning needs of diverse youth through effective educational practice in a British Columbian context.

Literature specifically focussed on school engagement tends to deconstruct engagement in ways that makes it difficult to take into account how the variety of socio-historical influences on diverse student bodies affect motivation and engagement, or to examine how variances in self-regulation capacities, developmental pathways, or individual student experiences and needs influence engagement (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani 2009; Dhillon, 2011). The incorporation of feminist and trauma-informed theories may assist in capturing the complex realities and perceptions of marginalized youth which may well be a valuable contribution to the research community.

Without the inclusion of feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered lenses, student behaviours may be misinterpreted, not only preventing the inclusion of marginalized students, but damaging their sense of belonging, competence and autonomy. With the increasing levels of complexities associated with marginalization, school engagement for marginalized students may be even more nuanced or perhaps present entirely differently, making it harder for researchers to

identify, let alone measure. Learning more about what engagement looks like from the perspective of marginalized youth may help researchers to identify indicators, develop measurement tools for future research, and provide guidance for educators.

Even more importantly, this study creates space for marginalized students to speak out about their experiences of education, as well as how and why they engage in learning. Creating space for this type of dialogue has many benefits, such as validating youth experiences and perspectives, and providing essential insight into how educators can better support marginalized students (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Smith, Newman-Thomas & Stormont, 2015; Smith et al., 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Approaching youth to share their lived experiences is not only an opportunity to help them guide major decisions around education and alternative programming, create a sense of community and belongingness, and increase youth self-perceptions of competence, but also aligns with the idea that youth perceptions of interactions and experiences carry more meaning for the individuals than the actual interactions or experiences themselves (Archambault et al., 2009; Iwasaki et al., 2014). If we help marginalized youth to feel integral and valuable by including their voices in decision making processes, we may change their perceptions of the system and themselves, supporting the overarching goal of fostering marginalized student engagement.

It is my hope that by providing an opportunity to participate in an exploration of engagement and education from a marginalized youth perspective, that I will have been able to validate their lived experiences, as well as provided a space and place for the development of a dialogue about how to make school more accessible for youth that do not fit easily into the mainstream system. By taking part in this study, youth have had an opportunity to make

themselves heard and to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others. Ideally, these strategies will have simultaneously provided opportunities for marginalized youth to experience an increased sense of agency and empowerment.

Chapter 2: Study Lenses and Literature Review

My experiences as a teacher have led me to question how and why marginalized youth engage with/in education. Based on these experiences and my academic background, my worldview and teaching philosophy have evolved and developed to include a number of integrated critical lenses. Most pertinent and applicable to this study are feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspectives, which I will describe in this chapter before providing an overview of some of the challenges faced by BC's diverse student population including how these factors have been shown to influence student experiences of engagement with/in education. I will then delve into the theoretical lenses taken up in this study more specifically, including Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Basic Psychological Needs mini-theory which posits that in order to engage in learning, student basic psychological needs must be satisfactorily met, as well as a multiaxial model of school engagement that includes affective, behavioural, cognitive and agentic engagement.

Study Lenses

Figure 1 (repeated from Chapter 1 for ease of reference) provides an overview of the theoretical lenses utilized in this study in one integrated model. In the following sections, I will break this model down further to provide clarity on the relationships between these sensitizing theoretical perspectives and how they combined to inform the research reported here.

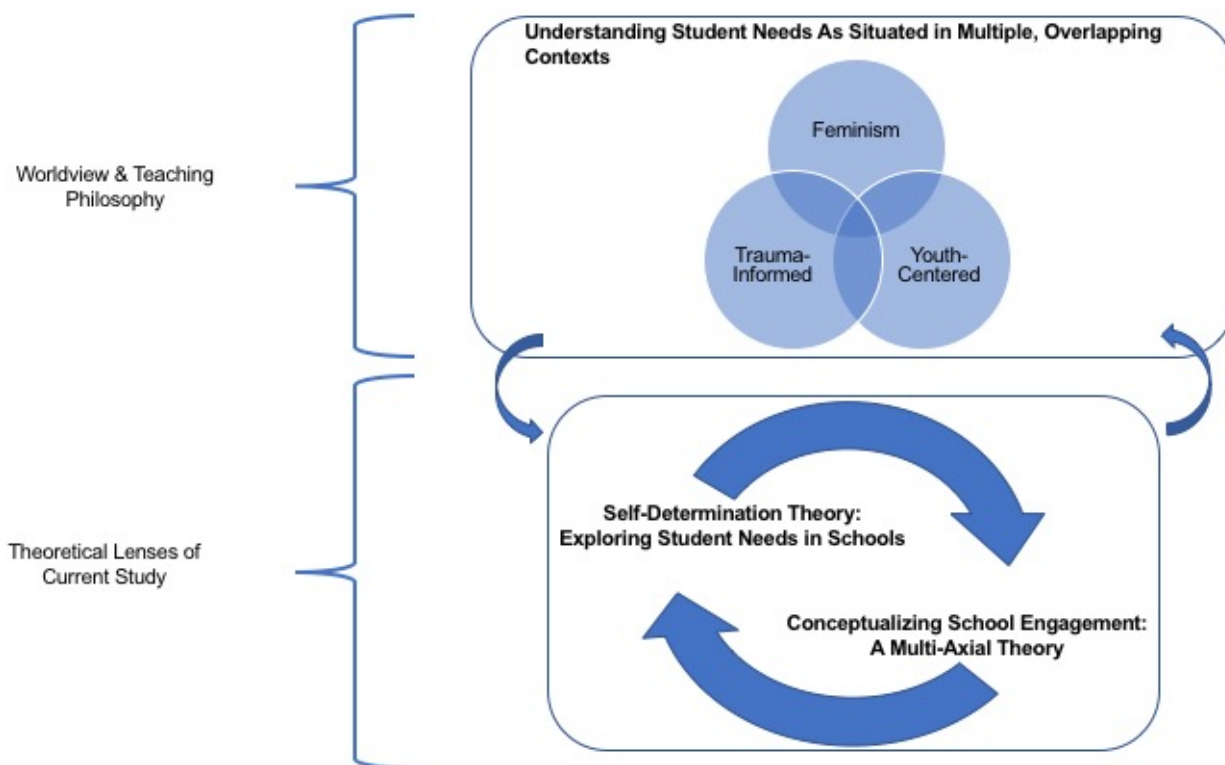


Figure 1: An overview of the multiple lenses grounding this study.

Worldview and teaching philosophy

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, there are a number of overarching critical perspectives that over time have informed my thinking and practice. These worldviews combine to ground this study focussed on the experiences of marginalized youth. Together they help in unpacking the impacts of multiple oppressions, including varying kinds of systemic and individual injuries, and may encourage a more compassionate view of challenging youth. A feminist lens promotes a useful, critical standpoint from which to espy the inclusion and exclusion of social groups, reproduction of hegemonic ideals, and varying forms of misrepresentation. To draw specific attention to the role of trauma for many vulnerable youth, a trauma-informed perspective reminds researchers and teachers that behaviours carry meaning, and in many cases for students struggling with trauma disorders, these behaviours may be survival strategies, coping

mechanisms, and/or ways to express pain. Finally, as this study aims to explore the perspectives of marginalized students in a way that captures the richness and variation in their experiences and voices, it is important that this study is youth-centered. Figure 2 provides some insight into how these three theories relate to each other and inform this study.

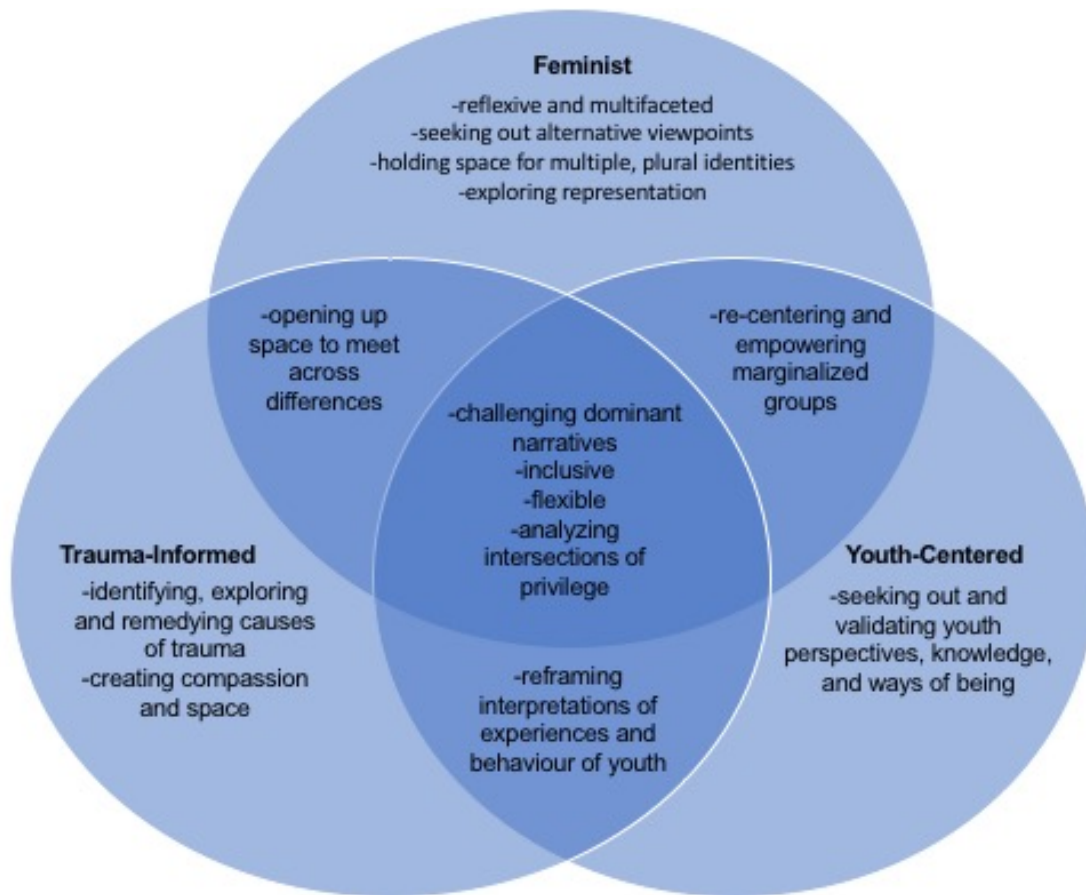


Figure 2: Understanding student needs as situated in multiple, overlapping contexts.

A feminist lens

Feminism encourages readers and researchers alike to challenge dominant narratives, and seek out diverse, different, and perhaps contradictory perspectives (Crotty, 1998). Actively seeking out alternative viewpoints can create a rich and complex tapestry that serves to complicate the idea of a singular Truth. In this way, feminist research seeks to make room for all versions of reality without judgment or discrimination. For example, Fraser and MacDougall

(2016) stress the importance of ensuring that participants are “...given the space and freedom to articulate non-idealized experiences without feeling shame, blame, or inadequacy” (pp. 243).

The creation of this kind of safe space seems invaluable when working with vulnerable youth who can be very distrusting of authority figures, strangers, or just other humans in general.

The inclusion of a feminist lens encourages the researcher to explore a subject as though it is multifaceted, to create and maintain space for participants to share their varied and perhaps contradictory perspectives. In the case of this study, similar to Dhillon (2011), I hope the inclusion of a feminist lens will help to “...unveil the multiple and plural identities of youth in order to produce a more complex account of how lived experience becomes mediated by intersecting patterns of structural violence” (Dhillon, 2011, p. 111). By allowing for more complex interpretations of students’ lives, the need to move away from a one-size-fits-all mentality and towards a more inclusive and adaptive education system becomes increasingly evident. In fact, from a feminist perspective, it would not be far-fetched to argue that many students are marginalized by the system, instead of provided with access to meaningful opportunities for learning, growth and social mobility.

Feminist approaches to research are concerned with opening up space at varying intersections of privilege, and finding ways to meet across difference (Fields, 2016).

Traditionally, feminist researchers have been primarily concerned with the experiences of women across a variety of contexts and spaces; however, over time, feminism has come to include a multiplicity of perspectives (Frisby, Maguire & Reid, 2009). As feminism has evolved and changed, it has become a more inclusive, flexible, and multifaceted framework that can contain conflicting experiences and outlooks. Feminism encourages practicing reflexivity,

challenging patriarchy, honouring intersectionality and difference, exploring representation, and acknowledging many forms of action, all of which are goals of this study.

While this study is not focussed on gendered experiences of engagement, I do acknowledge that development is inherently gendered, and there are many facets that could be taken up in this vein, such as gendered discrepancies in graduation rates, as well as experiences of homelessness and sexual exploitation (Dhillon, 2011; Smith et al., 2015). Specifically, a feminist lens is important for identifying patterns and inconsistencies in representation, the impact of gender norms on education, and socio-historic themes, as well as in exploring how the education system might perpetuate inequalities and hegemonic ideologies (Dhillon, 2011).

A trauma-informed lens

An important perspective to take into consideration when learning with, from and about marginalized youth, is the impact of trauma. Marginalized youth by definition have or are experiencing multiple oppressions, such as abuse/neglect, substance ab/use, homelessness or residential instability, hunger, poverty, and/or exploitation, and may have experienced disconnection from family, school, or community (Smith et al., 2007; te Riele, 2006). Many students identified as having behavioural challenges are likely to have chronic/complex trauma disorders, and/or in some cases, Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD) resulting from significant and ongoing trauma within the relationship(s) between the developing child/youth and primary caregiver(s)². The intensity of symptoms generally increases with the number of traumatic incidents, as well as their severity (Malchiodo & Crenshaw, 2015).

² DTD symptoms include those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, and/or Reactive Attachment Disorder (Teague, 2013).

Dutro and Bien (2014) explored the impact of trauma on child and youth relationships with education in their critical discourse analysis of classroom and school culture. The authors pointed out that trauma does not need to result from a specific incident, but rather can be the result of an individual's social positioning in their community. For example, experiencing ongoing negative interactions of race, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation overtime can be traumatic. That said, the importance of environment during all stages of child development cannot be understated, including during prenatal development. Changes in a child's internal or external environment can alter the developmental trajectory of genetic, cognitive, and/or behavioural functions, and possibly lead to challenges with neurocognitive and social-emotional skills (Blair & Raver, 2015). Chronic trauma can have intergenerational effects, such as in generational cycles of violence, poverty or historical trauma, and has more recently been found to have long-term, heritable, genetic effects through gene imprinting (Blair & Raver, 2015; Goodwill, 2016; Krauss, Wilson, Padron & Samuelson, 2016).

Dutro and Bien (2014) use the metaphor of a “speaking wound” in their discussion of trauma. In an educational setting, this “wound” can appear to be any number of external or internal behaviours that “interfere” with learning, such as inattention, hyperactivity, or defiance. Unfortunately, these trauma-related behaviours are most often seen as “mis-behaviours”, positioning students as problems, as opposed to individuals who have *faced* problems (Dutro & Bien, 2014). If this notion is not addressed and remedied in education communities, it may perpetuate hegemonic ideologies in schools and classrooms, marginalizing students who do not or cannot conform to current systemic expectations.

The importance of understanding the developmental impact of trauma on children and youth cannot be understated. Listening through the anger, the apathy, and at times, the tears, is

necessary and needed when it comes to seeing and hearing the realities of marginalized youth. By utilizing critical feminist and trauma-informed lenses, this study aims to validate the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of youth who have struggled and/or continue to struggle within the system due to factors beyond their control.

A youth-centered lens

Many facets of research echo the need for youth to perceive themselves as supported, heard, and valued in order to engage in a meaningful way, not just in education, but in development and healing as well (Flower, McKenna, Haring & Pazey, 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wagner, Monson, Hart, 2016). Not only is having voice integral for youth engagement, but it is important for researchers to access marginalized youth's lived experiences and perspectives in order to make meaningful change in their lives (Iwasaki et al., 2015). This study intends to provide a platform for youth to speak up and out in a constructive and effective manner that is reflective of their needs and values.

Because student feelings and beliefs are not easily observable, it has been difficult for researchers to gain a clear understanding of the exact relationship between engagement and motivation (Saeki & Quirk, 2015). It is my hope that in this study, student voice may provide access to the missing link between motivation and engagement, offering insight into experiences that are not otherwise measurable. Through this study, I hope to bridge the gap between studies of marginalized youth out of and within school contexts in a way that is empowering and meaningful for all involved. One way to do this is to ensure the subjects' voices are heard through the research. The concept of voice, having one's ideas heard, understood and validated, could be thought of as related to the concept of agency, in that both have the potential to enact meaningful change.

In a literature review focusing on achievement, engagement, motivation and student voice, Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) emphasize student voice as “...one of the most powerful tools schools have [at their disposal]” (p. 30). The authors describe student voice as key for engagement, describing increased opportunities for engagement with increased opportunities for voice, from verbal expression to physical and active participation to leading and guiding others through activities, an idea that compliments agentic engagement. Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) stress that feeling they have a voice is particularly important for youth, as they are developing their sense of identity and increasingly complex thinking, and will benefit from practice in integrating their needs, thoughts and desires with what is being asked of them. Research has demonstrated other benefits specifically for marginalized students, such as increased academic achievements, greater participation, better self-reflective abilities and fewer maladaptive behaviours (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Finally, highlighting youth voice is particularly pertinent from feminist and trauma-informed perspectives which seek to make space for the marginalized, misrepresented and invisible (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Gomez et al., 2015; Pillow & Mayo, 2007).

The Importance of Social Contexts

While this study is exploring the concept of school engagement, it is doing so from a feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspective, one which values persons over systems. Before delving further into the theoretical framework of this study, it is important to take some time to better understand the nested social, political, historical and cultural layers that have significant impacts on individuals within a system.

In order to better understand how a system might adapt to the needs of its participants instead of the other way around, it is necessary to understand who its participants are, what needs

they have, and what potential barriers or protective factors might exist. In the next sections, I have included a brief overview of barriers faced by marginalized students in order for the reader to develop a better understanding of the complex and often overlapping contexts that exist in BC. I hope this will lend itself to a deeper understanding of the participants, as well as how and why marginalized students engage in education, and how the education system could be more accessible to and inclusive of its most vulnerable learners.

Starting from birth, children learn about themselves and the world around them through their relationships with caretakers and their immediate environment. Developmental processes occur as a result of these social interactions, and as such, social context is not just a setting in which development takes place, rather it influences and at times, drives development. As Vadeboncoeur and Collie (2013) point out,

The social environment that shapes each child's experience in homes and early childhood education is not universal but is instead bound to cultural roles, values, norms, and practices. The kind and quality of social relationships and the extent to which children are engaged in talk related to their own internal psychological states, as well as the feeling and thinking of others, matters... (pp. 213).

According to the Vadeboncoeur and Collie (2013), interactions with others are dynamic, relative, and made meaningful by the individuals experiencing them, in bilateral and often transformative social processes. Various factors regarding social, political and cultural contexts can have a variety of influences on child development, including capacities related to school engagement.

Children and youth growing up in negative, stressful, unhealthy or traumatic social contexts may experience severe developmental effects that impact the way they engage in educational opportunities. For example, research has shown that chronic stress can have

devastating effects on executive functioning and emotional regulation (Blair and Raver, 2015). In tandem with temperament, executive functioning and emotional regulation are predictive of how successfully a child will adapt to the expectations of the school environment (Blair and Raver, 2015). As child development is a non-linear, multidimensional, bilateral process, students experiencing trauma and/or living in high stress environments may struggle to adapt to system expectations due to their developmental processes taking alternative pathways.

Many would agree that children and youth suffering from trauma are some of the most vulnerable students in our system, however the symptoms of their injuries commonly prevent them from being welcomed and included in school communities. According to Nel Noddings, “...to care and be cared for are fundamental human needs. We need to care for others in order to live a full and fulfilling life, and we need care from others in order to survive” (quoted in Tappan, 1998, pp. 24). This is especially true for vulnerable students, like those suffering from the effects of various kinds of traumas and/or chronic stress, however, their access to caring relationships both outside of and within the school is often insubstantial and weak (Dhillon, 2011; Dutro & Bien, 2014).

Youth contexts in BC

The standout, most overrepresented group among marginalized youth in British Columbia (as well as in the Canadian Justice System) is that of Indigenous youth. Multiple statistical measurements, such as behaviour designations, graduation rates, levels of gang involvement, and numbers of youth in government care, show Indigenous youth are suffering greatly as a result of colonial and postcolonial processes (BC Ministry of Education, 2015; Goodwill, 2016; Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015). For example, Indigenous students constitute only 5.9% of the student population in BC, yet they comprise 31% of all students

labelled as having a behaviour disorder; graduation rates of Indigenous students is a mere 63%, (less than the graduation rate of students with special needs - 68%), compared the provincial average of 84% (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). Even lower, is the graduation rate of Indigenous male youth in government care, at a staggeringly low 37% (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

Studies of Indigenous youth show that these significant challenges may be compounded by personal/individual, relational, family, health and/or systemic issues, such as social/emotional/mental health, multiple school or community changes, higher rates of school absences, repeating grades or being expelled, graduating with a General Educational Development (GED) opposed to a high school diploma, systemic poverty, lack of adequate housing, decreased access to social and educational services, and increased levels of family conflict (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016)³.

Another factor that influences many marginalized youth is homelessness, or residential instability (lacking a place of long-term stable residence). Among the youth who experience homelessness or residential instability, Indigenous youth, particularly females, are overrepresented, as well as youth identifying as LGBTQ2. In addition, approximately 40% of BC's homeless youth have been or are in government care (Dhillon, 2011; First Call, 2016; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Smith et al., 2015). Research also shows high correlations of youth homelessness with sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse or exploitation, that in some cases actually spurred the choice to leave their homes (Smith et al., 2015). Youth experiencing

³ While this brief overview of Indigenous youth seems grim, there is much that has been reclaimed. It is important to clarify this section is not meant to paint Indigenous youth as passive victims, but merely to clarify the tremendous ongoing impact of colonization on the diverse and various educational experiences of Indigenous children, youth and families.

homelessness are at a higher risk for engaging in substance ab/use, risky sexual behaviours, and illegal activities, as well as are significantly more vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation (Lightfoot, Stein, Tevendale & Preston, 2011).

In the literature, protective factors identified for marginalized youth include positive relationships with school, community, and/or family, however, as Dhillon (2011) points out, these factors are much more difficult to access for youth struggling with homelessness, substance abuse and/or mental illness. According to Dhillon's (2011) poignant study on Canadian girls experiencing homelessness, priorities for surviving on the street may include escaping violence, finding a safe place to stay, and obtaining food and health care, which often come at the expense of school and academic work. In fact, many girls found school and related peer interactions to be an added stressor. To elaborate, some participants found their street lives and sexual histories generated stigma from staff and students; for others, strategies for managing substance ab/use were considered inappropriate for school; and for others still, mental health disorders resulting from trauma interfered with their attendance leading to negative staff interactions (Dhillon, 2011).

According to the literature, mental health concerns are most definitely prominent among youth experiencing homelessness, but studies show that mental health plays a significant role in the daily lives of a majority of British Columbia's marginalized students. In fact, mental illness is listed as one of the most prominent barriers they face (Smith et al., 2015; Vancouver Foundation, 2015). In terms of school engagement, mental health has an interrelated relationship with cognitive function, and so can have diverse and significant effects on student learning and engagement. For example, students with depression often experience slower cognitive processing, and interruptions in short-term memory; PTSD can impact memory and attention;

and varying forms of psychosis can affect overall functioning, executive functioning and processing speed, and are correlated with increased adverse outcomes, such as suicidal ideation and self-harm (Viljoen et al., 2016).

There are notable gender differences in terms of mental health, likely due to differences in socialization, school behavioural expectations, and academic pathway expectations (Kelty Mental Health, 2016, September 26; Viljoen et al., 2016). For example, adolescent females are more likely to develop an internalized disorder (such as depression or anxiety), while adolescent males are more likely to exhibit externalized symptoms. For both groups, poor emotional regulation and increased negative affect was related to adverse outcomes, such as suicide and substance abuse (Viljoen et al., 2016). Sexual minority youth (LGBTQ2) are at higher-risk for developing a mental illness, compared to their sexual majority peers. Females in general are at a higher risk of living in poverty, and experiencing sexual or physical violence, all of which are associated with increased risk for mental illness (Dhillon, 2011; Kelty Mental Health, 2016, September 26).

Poverty itself carries many other major negative implications for youth, including increased rates of: substance ab/use, teenage birth rate, infant and maternal mortality, school dropout, and imprisonment; as well as decreased overall wellbeing, social mobility, and school achievement (Berliner, 2013). As mentioned previously, chronic poverty and other long-term stressors wreak havoc on developmental pathways, affecting student abilities to self-regulate attention, affect and cognition (Blair & Raver, 2015). This is especially pertinent in British Columbia, where roughly 1 in 5 children under the age of seventeen live in poverty (First Call, 2016).

It is imperative to take these contexts into consideration when working with marginalized youth in order to grasp the complexities, challenges, and obstacles they face every day. These factors, and others, overlap, interact, compound, and magnify one another in numerous predictable and unpredictable ways that can all be understood as traumatic in their own right. With these challenging fault lines running along and through their lives, marginalized youth are often living in intensive chronic stress conditions, and unfortunately in most cases, the stress is not confined to their homes or places of residence, but bleeds into the school environment as well.

School contexts

“...Classroom environments for poor children, particularly angry and difficult children, become landscapes of condemnation that reveal shared experiences of exclusion, humiliation and indifference” (V. Polakow, 2003, quoted in Dhillon, 2011, p. 114). It is this same school context that Panofsky (2003) describes as an important setting for the construction of self-concept, formed through “...lived experiences in schooling... ways of acting or forms of agency, and their transformation over time in the cultural process of schooling” (p. 414). Wallace and Chhuon (2014) assert the same, suggesting that the bidirectional relationships between school staff and students inform student identities, as well as their motivation and engagement.

School can be a safe place, full of structure, predictability and consistency. Unfortunately for some, school can also be a place of insecurity, fear, and negative messaging from peers and/or staff. For example, girls of color described feelings of alienation, discrimination and lack of representation in their interviews with Dhillon (2011). The messages received by numerous vulnerable female Canadian students in the study, and I would argue many other marginalized students within the education system, was that “...these particular students are nonessential parts

of the school machinery, and are not worthy of the network of supports granted to students who are in more privileged social positions” (p. 127). As Dhillon (2011) explains,

...education and education processes do not exist in a vacuum; embedded within a larger societal structure marked by unequal distribution of power and resources, educational institutions are intimately connected with the (re)production of the dominant culture through the management, validation, dissemination, and construction of knowledge. As such, schools function as a microcosm of what is happening in larger society and have historically acted as a vehicle for the legitimization of status quo ideas and capitalist state interests, which inevitably extend to the consignment of students to certain classes or social categories. (p. 113)

Classrooms, like any institutional space, come with their own ideologies by which teachers and students alike are expected to abide. These social rules, expectations, and scripts can serve to perpetuate larger societal power structures or to dismantle them, depending on messages exchanged in the learning community, between school staff and students, as well as between peers. Adult staff in the school serve to police, or regulate, the cultural norms and expectations of the school culture, and teach the student population to police each other as well. As a result, power hierarchies among staff and students often replicate the hegemonic ideologies of the dominant culture, and serve to perpetuate the marginalization of certain groups who do not conform easily to the social ideologies inherent within the school community, and society at large (Dhillon 2011).

Dhillon (2011) notes that often the “problem” with marginalized students is seen as inherent within the students themselves, as opposed to a system that is not prepared to meet the needs of its participants. This could be because the domains known to be impacted by trauma

and chronic stress, such as executive functioning, cognitive ability, affect regulation, and behaviour regulation, are heavily relied on in formal schooling (Blair & Raver, 2015). Regardless of their personal contexts, students are expected to rapidly acquire the ability to balance their needs and impulses with the requirements of school. In our current system, it is necessary for a child to adjust to environmental expectations in order to learn and socialize, or risk being seen as a challenge, rather than as an individual who has survived challenging circumstances (Blair & Raver, 2015; Dutro & Bien, 2014).

Some of the difficulties that come with the social-emotional impact of oppression and trauma may incite children and youth to take up strategies for survival that are seen as maladaptive in a school setting (Blair & Raver, 2015). For example, students who are struggling with peer and adult relationships often attempt to gain control by pushing others away or pulling them too close. They may react without reflection, and seem overly rigid in some areas, such as classroom routines, and seemingly lack any control in others, such as the use of aggression (Teague, 2013). These in turn can have negative social repercussions, from staff and students, furthering the original injury.

It is imperative that the “speaking wound” is acknowledged and validated, regardless of “mis-behaviours” (Dutro & Bien, 2014). Students must be treated as human beings with needs and capacities for care, trust and compassion, or we risk leaving them feeling excluded, humiliated, and eventually indifferent.

Theoretical Lenses of the Current Study

As described above, this study has been informed by and grounded in the feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspectives described above. Consistent with those overarching perspectives, two additional theoretical lenses were explored for their potential in

understanding marginalized youths' experiences of school engagement (see Figure 1). The first, SDT, seemed to have promise in terms of understanding youth's experiences of school contexts (i.e., as supportive of their needs or not). The second, a multi-axial theory of engagement, seemed to have promise in providing a more nuanced understanding of how and why marginalized youth engage in schools when paired with SDT, which identifies clear connections between students' perceptions that their basic psychological needs are being met and their school engagement. From this perspective, engagement might be conceptualized as a dynamic, bidirectional process that is mediated by motivation, in which students are active in their interactions with teachers, peers and staff, and all participants are making meaning of every interaction as informed by social and political structures of their individual lives, schools, and society at large.

Figure 3 further illustrates how SDT and school engagement can be interrelated. In the following sections, I review literature related to these two theoretical lenses.

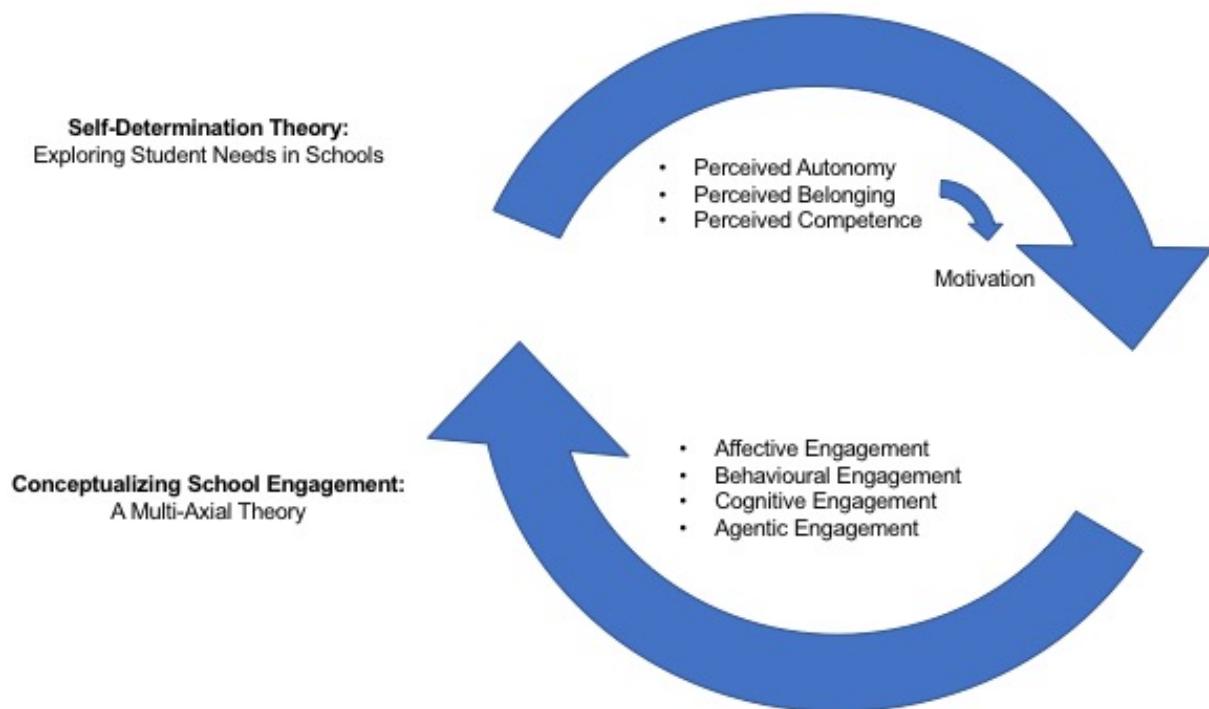


Figure 3: The theoretical lenses of the current study.

Self-Determination Theory

As mentioned, my experiences as a teacher led me to question how and why marginalized youth engage with/in education. From a feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspective, I actively chose to step away from the default, deficit view of marginalized youth, and instead started questioning what else could be done to make it easier for these students to engage in schools. During my graduate studies, I came across SDT which posits that student needs must be met in order for them to be motivated to engage. This student needs-centered theory of motivation and engagement made much sense when I reflected on my experiences, and so became a natural lens through which I could study school engagement of marginalized youth.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has long been considered intrinsic to motivational theories of engagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014; Wang & Peck, 2013). Wang and Peck (2013) succinctly describe how engagement can be understood from the Basic Needs mini-theory of SDT, in that students need to feel a sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence in their learning environment in order to feel motivated to engage.

Saeki and Quirk (2015) expand on this, fielding the idea that motivation (determined by feelings of autonomy, belonging and competence) mediates engagement, which in turn, drives social emotional functioning and behaviours. For example, many researchers suggest that when students feel seen, heard, supported and valued by their teachers and school staff, their motivation and engagement significantly increase (Archambault et al., 2015; Lessard, Caine & Clandinin, 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Wagner, Monson & Hart, 2016; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Based on this finding, Saeki and Quirk (2015) advocate for addressing student psychological needs in order to increase school engagement. The connection between engagement and SDT is echoed in other places throughout the literature on school engagement,

describing increased positive outcomes in, and genuine connection to, school in correlation to meeting student psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). If motivation mediates engagement, it is crucial that educators and researchers take into account the variety of factors that influence motivation, as well as work towards understanding the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, the roles they play in learning, and how to support students in feeling more motivated and engaged in school.

Autonomy

Autonomy, in a school setting, can be described as having a meaningful sense of choice or control over learning contexts (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004). Researchers have noted correlations between student perceptions of autonomy with increased grades, mastery goal setting, self-efficacy, perceived confidence, self-esteem, and feelings of enjoyment and interest, as well as behavioural and emotional engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). Importantly, increased feelings of autonomy are associated with increased intrinsic motivation, which is associated with increased engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015). Autonomy can be supported in a variety of ways, including in limit setting, assignment structure, minimizing any sense of coercion, and encouraging student voice and choice. In addition, helping students understand the importance and/or relevance of curriculum to their lives can foster internalization processes (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Belonging

In this context, belonging can be described as the need to feel respected, valued and secure within the social relationships of school (Stefanou et al. 2004). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) assert that feelings of belonging are integral to internalizing extrinsic motivation:

People tend to internalize and accept as their own the values and practices of those to whom they feel, or want to feel, connected, and from contexts in which they experience a sense of belonging. In the classroom, relatedness is deeply associated with a student feeling that the teacher genuinely likes, respects, and values him or her.

(pp. 139)

Students who experience feelings of belongingness tend to have higher levels of internalized extrinsic motivation, while students who experience feeling alienated or disconnected are more likely to rely on external regulation for motivation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Fostering student sense of belongingness has also been positively linked to increased academic readiness, positive attitudes towards school, self-directed learning, and strengthened emotional engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013).

Competence

Competence in the classroom refers to the need of individuals to feel a sense of understanding and success while learning (Stefanou et al. 2004). Supporting a sense of competence has been positively correlated to prosocial behaviours, valuing of academics, and increased behavioural and cognitive engagement of students (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) encourage educators to provide optimally challenging work, appropriate tools, and feedback focussed on student efficacy and skill-building, in order to foster success and feelings of competence. Again, an increased sense of competence has been correlated with increased intrinsic motivation, which has been found to increase feelings of engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015).

SDT and Marginalized Youth

When it comes to studying marginalized youth, there seems to be a gap in terms of the role of motivation in education. Studies are often broad which compromises their ability to take into account individual contexts, or are focussed on students with more typical experiences of social and school contexts.

Interestingly, in a provincial analysis of BC alternative secondary education programs, Smith et al. (2007) explored marginalized students' experiences of alternative schools. While the study did not mention SDT, it did reference the importance of belonging in its findings. For example, peers were an important factor influencing the attendance of more than a third of students in alternative programs. The importance of belonging recurs in their finding that with increased feelings of connection to school, students are more likely to report feeling positively about life, have goals and aspirations, as well as report good physical health. Also, 17% of youth who had dropped out of school reported doing so because they felt they did not fit in (Smith et al., 2007).

Alternatively, research around engaging marginalized youth programming outside of school does offer some insight into how SDT could lend itself to understanding how and why marginalized youth engage in education. Interestingly, in studies that ask vulnerable youth for recommendations on how to increase engagement, many, if not all of their recommendations align with the need for a sense of competence, belonging and autonomy (Flower et al., 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2015; Tilbury et al., 2014).

Researchers that access youth for their perspectives and knowledge have come up with some common themes to help foster positive connections, which is particularly critical as many youth already carry many negative perceptions of themselves and their abilities, and are

distrusting of others (Smith, Newman-Thomas & Stormont, 2015). Across a variety of studies, themes for fostering positive connections with marginalized youth include positive, consistent social supports, opportunities for co-learning and teamwork, and creating a safe, comfortable and fun space, all of which could be linked to the SDT concept of belonging. They also requested opportunities for youth voice to be expressed and validated, and adult staff that are flexible, adaptable, and have a strengths-based practice, which could be seen as related to having a sense of autonomy. And finally, youth emphasized the development of employment capacities, directly delineating the relevance of program curriculum to employment, and the development of social skills, all of which can be linked to a need for a sense of competency (Flower et al., 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2015; Tilbury et al., 2014).

School Engagement in Research

In order to explore how marginalized youth engage with/in education, and how their experiences impact their engagement, a youth-centered approach, as opposed to a systems-centered approach, could provide insight into how to increase academic success rates, as well as produce increasingly healthy and well-adapted citizens.

Most current research on engagement has moved beyond the unidimensional models of the past which relied primarily on student production as measurement. The concept of school engagement is beginning to gain clarity and complexity when it comes to the intricacies of the multifaceted, multidimensional processes engagement entails, and how these processes can vary incredibly from person to person (Archambault et al., 2009; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014; Wang & Peck, 2013). While literature around school engagement has become increasingly comprehensive, there remains room for growth. Expanding research on engagement to include the depth, breadth, and detail required to truly capture the overlapping influences of the dynamic

and fluid social contexts, power structures, and personal histories that might impact a marginalized student's engagement in academic learning, could allow researchers and educators to move towards a more inclusive and effective model of education.

Definition and model

Wang and Peck (2013) define school engagement as "...energized, directed, and continued action, or the discernable qualities of students' interactions with learning activities or environments" (p. 1266). While this definition, similar to definitions used by many other current researchers, acknowledges that engagement has to do with an ongoing interaction with/in a given environment, it is ambiguous and vague in terms of what engagement might look like for individuals with varying needs and abilities. This definition also indicates that engagement is an isolated and visible action that is largely a function of a student's desire to engage with/in their particular environment, independent of the social contexts of the individual, classroom, and community (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). While not ideal, the basic concept of engagement as directed actions with/in learning environments provides a starting point from which to build a more inclusive understanding.

From this perspective, engagement is conceptualized to have three components: behavioural, cognitive, and affective. Students who are affectively engaged are emotionally invested in learning, for example, they express interest, joy, or curiosity about what they are learning. Students who are behaviourally engaged will complete expected tasks to their perceived ability level, as well as be visibly participating in prescribed activities. Finally, cognitive engagement indicates that students are actively thinking about the task(s) at hand, and are able and willing to express that they are doing so (Archambault et al., 2009; Wang & Peck, 2013). Researchers might add measurable dimensions to the model, for example, affective

engagement might be measured by self-reports about whether or not students enjoy school and learning; behavioural engagement might be seen as aligned on a spectrum of positive (staying on task) to negative (being rude to the teacher) actions; and cognitive engagement might be indicated by the presence or absence of the willingness to do work, as well as the use of self-regulation strategies (Archambault et al., 2009).

This construct is problematic for marginalized students for a number of reasons. Affective engagement requires that students feel joy or interest in learning, which may be particularly difficult for students struggling with mental illnesses, where negative affect is prominent and unlikely to change without extensive intervention (Viljoen et al., 2016). Behaviourally engaged students are expected to behave as social protocol dictates, which begs the question, for marginalized students, is compliance conflated with engagement? For students dealing with chronic stress and adversity, cognitive engagement may be difficult due the negative effects on self-regulation and executive functioning (Blair & Diamond, 2008).

While flawed, the above definition of school engagement provides a starting point. The following sections intend to illustrate how the concept of engagement might be expanded to be more comprehensive and inclusive of all learners.

Engagement in social contexts

From a critical perspective, many of the frameworks used to study school engagement might be viewed as aligning with an unspoken social value system, consonant with perceptions that “good” students stay on task, produce work when asked, enjoy learning, and as a result, are welcomed and celebrated in educational settings. Contrastingly, students who refuse to do work, demonstrate disrespect, and do not appear to be engaged in expected ways are often dismissed as “bad” students and are consequently intentionally or unintentionally punished for their refusal or

inability to adapt to system expectations (Archambault et al., 2015; Dhillon, 2011; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

Instead of engaging with “bad” students on their terms and meeting students where they are at, systems that build from these unspoken values tend to marginalize struggling students, further damaging their sense of self, and possibly their willingness to engage in future learning (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Archambault et al. (2015) briefly describe this as a type of feedback loop which can be created when behavioural disengagement (not completing expected actions) leads to further marginalization within an education setting. Many strands of literature across various educational research have identified this as a problem and are working to rectify it.

Personally, I have seen this cycle in action. A young student I worked with who experienced high levels of anxiety would attempt to escape the attention of his peers by causing an uproar in the classroom. As a result of his disruptive behaviour, he would be sent away from the classroom, escaping the source of his anxiety. This grade one student was often chastised for his actions by his teacher, who was a very kind and well-meaning person. The intention assigned to his behaviours was one of disruption and disrespect to his classmates and teacher, as opposed to a maladaptive strategy employed to avoid feeling anxious. The punitive response to his actions was meant to correct the behaviour, as opposed to uncovering its function. When rebuked for his actions, the student would withdraw and be even less willing to engage with teacher and support staff, which would make it even more difficult to teach him in any kind of meaningful way. In addition, he would become increasingly anxious upon his next return to class, which would often incite another uproar, and the pattern continued. Typically, this might be viewed as a “bad” (disruptive, destructive, loud) student, however I would challenge that narrative, and suggest that he was experiencing unmet needs and attempting to satisfy him using the only way he knew.

Similarly, Dhillon (2011) identified the problematic nature of how the concept of behavioural engagement is interpreted and applied in schools. Dhillon (2011) described how consistent student punctuality and attendance, good hygiene, and even paying school fees are actions that are often interpreted and reinforced as desirable student engagement, actions which are sometimes not priorities or even possibilities for vulnerable students. When students fail to meet these expectations, they may experience marginalization, ostracism, judgment, and even harassment from both students and staff. In her study of female Canadian students experiencing homelessness (and the coinciding components of assault, exploitation and abuse), Dhillon (2011) further described how student private lives may become negatively intertwined with school, creating tension and in some cases social, emotional and behavioural disengagement. According to the students in this study, some had experienced social repercussions at school for leaving home and subsequently living on the streets. In one instance, a student was refused access to school due to her lack of stable housing, as she did not have an address with which to register.

Behavioural engagement, or perceived lack thereof, seems to be one of the most commonly identified and discussed types of engagement, possibly because it can be the most disruptive to the school system. Other types of (dis)engagement seem to be less prevalent in discussions, but this does not mean they occur less often or that they carry less negative implications. Wang and Peck (2013) completed a study of engagement profiles of approximately 1000 secondary students in the United States. The study indicated that for most participants, levels of engagement were consistent across the behavioural, cognitive and affective components, meaning that for any given student, generally, all three components tended to be high, medium, or low, suggesting to researchers that the three are most likely dynamically interconnected.

Interestingly, Wang and Peck (2013) also identified two additional profiles, emotionally disengaged students and cognitively disengaged students. Emotionally, or affectively, disengaged students accounted for approximately 10% of the school population in their study, and were typically highly behaviourally and cognitively engaged, "...likely to be considered high performing students by their teachers," and yet were at the highest risk for mental illness across all five profiles (pp. 1271). Cognitively disengaged students, students who demonstrated relatively high levels of behavioural and affective engagement but were not achieving academically, comprised 13% of the school population. While these student are academically at-risk, they may be overlooked because they generally do not cause disturbances or require discipline. The authors note that behavioural disengagement tends to draw the most attention, but suggest that low cognitive and affective engagement combined with behavioural disengagement are more troublesome, in that they are likely to be indicative of dropout when co-occurring (Wang & Peck, 2013).

While a multiaxial model of school engagement accounts for some nuance and variation across students, it may still be aligned with social, historical, political and cultural values that are firmly rooted in the institution's hegemonic power structures which expect that students will adapt to the system's demands over their own (Archambault et al., 2009; Dhillon, 2011; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). A critical examination of how the concept of engagement is studied and applied could help to center school engagement on students, taking into account their individual circumstances and needs in order to better support their motivation and engagement.

Engagement as a social process within social systems

Wallace and Chhuon (2014) suggest approaching engagement from a more process-oriented, ecological-type model that recognizes the bidirectional, dynamic, and transactional

nature of school engagement within a wider socio-cultural landscape. Researchers like Reeve (2012) also refer to a fourth dimension of engagement beyond affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement – that of agentic engagement, which can be understood as the extent to which students feel they are capable of constructively contributing to their learning processes and environment. By including agentic engagement, the authors highlight the role of bidirectionality, which, according to Wallace and Chhuon (2014), is an essential component of student engagement that is too often missing from the dialogue.

There is much evidence that social factors have great significance within school settings and educational processes. For example, Dhillon (2011) argues that social positionality has major impact in educational experiences; specifically that race, gender, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation and citizenship can be directly linked to social, political, cultural and economic exclusion. Dhillon (2011) describes school as “...dependent on a normalized middle-class conception of the white student” which inherently stigmatizes those living in poverty, and provides little-to-no space for validating the deeply layered experiences of poverty, or overlapping and interrelated issues such as sexism and racism (pp. 124).

Lessard, Caine and Clandinin (2015) provide another example of the impact of sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts in their study of Indigenous youth. The authors describe the importance of recognizing and honouring that students live in multiple “meaning-making worlds” beyond that of school, indicating that teachers must recognize school and academics may not be the only space and place where knowledge is created and made meaningful by youth. The authors share a case study of a student who described experiencing his culture clashing with his school curriculum, creating friction between his worlds. In addition to the discomfort he was experiencing as a result of the clash, the student felt he was invisible to

teachers and peers. He reported that both of these factors negatively shaped his experiences of school. Lessard, Caine and Clandinin (2015) assert that too often Indigenous youth are constructed, and construct themselves, in limiting and damaging ways as a result of these kinds of experiences, which has significant negative impacts on school engagement.

When researchers and educators are aware of their own positionalities, as well as those of their students and/or subjects of study, engagement becomes more complex than merely whether or not students follow rules, complete work and treat others with respect. Social, historical, political and cultural values and experiences impact the way all individuals interact with the system, as well as with one another.

Describing engagement as a bidirectional process also positions students as agentic actors in a social context, interacting with other agentic actors, as opposed to passive recipients. For example, Lessard, Caine, and Clandinin (2015) describe student disengagement as a strategy for self-preservation for the Indigenous students in their study. The researchers found that the youth would return to their core values and priorities in order to strengthen themselves before re-engaging in the prescribed, and at times damaging, school environment.

Tilbury et al. (2014) also point out the bidirectional processes that can occur in schools, specifically that the “[s]tereotypes, beliefs and expectations of [school] professionals may adversely influence children’s educational aspirations” (pp. 456). Tilbury et al. (2014) go on:

These attitudes may directly or indirectly be communicated to children, which can influence their aspirations, sense of self-efficacy and educational competence.

Supportive, encouraging adults and processes that celebrate progress and achievement can be critical for the educational success of children...

(pp. 456)

This article focusses on youth in care, however the message may be applicable to all vulnerable youth, who often have shared negative and sometimes traumatizing emotional and psychological experiences, such as residential instability, attachment trauma, and mental illness (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

SDT and School Engagement

It seems the importance of social interactions both in and out of school cannot be understated. If students are receiving subtle or overt negative messaging that informs their sense of autonomy, belonging and competence, this messaging may impact their motivation and engagement, resulting in decreased engagement over time (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Tilbury et al., 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

While this is troubling news, the opposite is also thought to be true. Agentic engagement, when students perceive themselves to be intentionally, proactively and constructively contributing to their learning, is considered to be a fourth and relatively newly identified component of engagement (Reeve, 2012). Arising out of high-quality motivation, which requires students' sense of autonomy, belonging and competence to be sufficiently met, agentic engagement could look like offering an opinion or preference, asking for clarification, or contributing meaningfully to an activity or discussion, all actions that potentially create change in the learning environment.

Reeve (2012) suggests agentic engagement adds depth and breadth to studies of engagement by increasingly accounting for the bidirectional relationships between teachers and students. Instead of focusing on whether or not students complete prescribed learning activities, including agentic engagement draws attention to how meaningful learning requires high-levels of motivation. This shift in engagement theory creates a direct connection with SDT, which

suggests that engagement requires having one's basic psychological needs met in the learning environment. Reeve (2012) also points out that not only does an increased sense of agency correlate with increased positive student outcomes, but it can affect the future quality of the learning environment and the teacher's motivational style. Additionally, Reeve (2012) suggests that an increased sense of agency spurs increased motivation, which in turn also fosters the student's sense of agency.

These dynamic interactions, positive and negative, transformatively influence student affect, cognition, behaviours and agency. Therefore, researchers might consider conceptualizing engagement as a bidirectional, transformational and dynamic process, during which a student's perception of social interactions within the learning environment influence their motivation, for better or worse, which in turn may increase or decrease student engagement (Wagner, Monson & Hart, 2016; Wallace and Chhuon, 2014). From this perspective, engagement is influenced by social contexts, social interactions, and both student and teacher perceptions; therefore, school engagement is not solely a function of the individual learner.

Given the importance of understanding engagement from a youth perspective, a more productive understanding of engagement could include an acknowledgement of the dynamic, transformative and bidirectional nature of engagement, and include the impact of social, cultural and political environments. Taking into account that individuals make meaning based on their experiences and perceptions may be pivotal for research into school engagement. This is especially true when it comes to conceptualizing the role of SDT and student perceptions of autonomy, belonging and competence in increasing motivation and engagement. From this perspective, studying engagement in marginalized youth demands that researchers expand their

understanding of engagement in order to capture the individual and systemic complexities of marginalized youth in BC's education system.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

This study was designed to gather insight into how marginalized youth experience school and school engagement. By providing an opportunity for youth to voice their perspectives and experiences around school engagement, this study intended to provide a safe space and place to start a dialogue about how to make school more effective and accessible for marginalized secondary students enrolled in alternative education programs.

This research study addressed the following questions:

1. What value/meaning does education hold for marginalized youth? What do they perceive it adds to their lives? What do they perceive it takes away?
2. How do marginalized youth experience engagement in schools? What does it look like? What does it feel like?
3. How and why do marginalized youth feel their experiences of education influence their school engagement?

PAR Design

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a critical methodology that is primarily concerned with empowering disenfranchised and misrepresented peoples through active and inclusive participation in knowledge production processes, access to the resulting outcomes through appropriate dissemination of information, and enhanced capacity to take some sort of productive and positive action. For the purposes of this study, I found myself both as an active participant of the educational community, as well as a researcher seeking to better understand the complexities of education within the context(s) of working with vulnerable youth. As the participant researcher, I hoped to enhance my capacities as an educator to better meet the needs of my students, as well as offer meaningful contributions to the academic community. More

importantly, youth knowledge, experience, and voices were central in my research in hopes of providing access to outcomes and increase the participants' sense of empowerment and agency (Bertrand, 2016; Gomez & Ryan, 2016).

Participatory action research provides a space where cultural and community knowledge and traditions are seen as valued, significant, and authentic forms of information. The research focus is on gaining insight as opposed to proving something to be true or untrue (Janes, 2016). As such, PAR can be understood to be concerned with the decolonization of knowledge, a stepping away from post-positivist notions of Truth, and towards a multifaceted, socially-informed reality (Fields, 2016; Janes, 2016). This re-centering or de-centering of power and knowledge production is what can make PAR a powerful methodology for change-making.

From a youth perspective, there can be many benefits to participating in PAR, including: increased self-efficacy, competence, voice, group voice, community efficacy, and critical consciousness; as well as opportunities to make meaningful decisions, challenge power structures, strengthen civic, academic and teamwork skills, develop positive identities, and experience an increased sense of agency (Bertrand, 2016; Gomez & Ryan, 2016). In one PAR study, youth expressed a sense of empowerment in being able to challenge the system:

One person can make a difference. Not on their own. I know that... but, one person can start the ball rolling. And when you ask questions, you get the answers... When people want to know why you get the answers, then people [are] asking you the questions, then you tell them. And you got more people. And so, it's a snowball effect. If one person starts saying something then it just falls on down the road until it becomes a huge freaking avalanche. And that's pretty freaking cool. I think it's really cool.

(peer researcher quoted in Gomez & Ryan, 2016, p. 191)

Feminist, Trauma-Informed and Youth-Centered PAR

In order to explore how and why marginalized youth engage in education, and how their experiences impact their engagement, it is necessary to push beyond the established boundaries of what researchers know, and expand the knowledge and skills that are necessary to meet youth where they are at, share power, and listen without judgment (Iwasaki et al., 2015). Placing youth cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and ways of being at the center, participant action research can be a tool which helps draw attention to youth priorities, needs and challenges while highlighting their strengths and increasing their sense of autonomy, belonging and competence. From a feminist perspective, making space for youth to engage in the discourse around their lives is a valuable and meaningful goal, one which is beneficial from a trauma-informed, “speaking wound” lens as well.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a critical methodology that is primarily concerned with empowering disenfranchised, marginalized, colonized and misrepresented peoples through active and inclusive participation in knowledge production processes, providing access to the resulting outcomes through appropriate dissemination of information, and enhancing participant capacity to take some sort of productive, positive action (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009). Research participants may be groups that are widely acknowledged as marginalized, such Indigenous peoples, or may belong to a smaller, more obscure group, such as in Field’s (2016) study where she focusses specifically on imprisoned queer women of colour.

PAR, as a methodology, is often focussed on issues of social power (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009). This makes it a wonderful framework to bridge with feminist research approaches, as both promote many of the same values, such as being a reflexive practitioner. In addition to be

reflexive, feminist action researchers make a point of being visible in the research process in order to clarify their positionality for themselves, their participants and the reader (Janes, 2016).

The use of a trauma-informed lens can extend and complement PAR as well, as they both share a similar focus on creating space for individual experiences, voice, and ways of knowing, while encouraging a critical examination (and disruption of oppressive) power structures (Bertrand, 2016). As Dutro and Bien (2014) state, “If wounds are not welcome, children will correctly sense that what school wishes to hear is the banal, the safe, the bland, and they will leave what matters most muted beneath a sterile, clean bandage” (p. 18). In the context of this study, I seek what matters most, beyond the bland, sterile surface.

The strategic inclusion of feminist and trauma-informed lenses to inform a participatory action research framework will allow this study to push past the current knowledge boundaries surrounding marginalized student education and engagement by asking for youth to authentically share their experiences, knowledge and ways of being without censorship. As a critical analysis, PAR could allow further insight into ways that educators might be able to better support marginalized youth by shining a light on their various strengths, challenges, and needs in an empowering and validating way. As highlighted in the research by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), youth are entitled to and benefit from having a voice in the decisions made around their education and lives. Inviting youth to share their insight and lived experiences in a participatory action research project is not only an opportunity to help them inform decisions around alternative education programming, create a sense of community and belongingness, and increase youth’s sense of competence, but also creates a space for dialogue around how to make education equitable and more accessible for all of BC’s students.

The Current PAR Study

This PAR study offered an opportunity for youth attending alternative secondary education programs in one of B.C.'s largest school districts to share their insights, perspectives and cultural knowledge around their experiences of formal schooling. Through semi-structured interviews, youth were able to identify meaningful moments, exchanges, influences, and/or events that impacted their willingness and abilities to engage in education. Youth voices and knowledge were validated as authentic and meaningful, and youth had the opportunity to drive the direction of the discussions, culminating in increased insight into marginalized youths' experiences of schooling in British Columbia. The study also provided youth an opportunity to guide and potentially participate in dissemination of knowledge following interview completion, however this opportunity was only partially taken up by one participant.

Positionality

According to Kapoor and Jordan (2009), all research and inquiry begins from a political and/or social location, initiated by those with, and from, power. In order to produce valid results in a participatory action research study, researchers should practice constant reflexivity in terms of their power and privilege. They must make their positions and privileges clear to themselves, as well as evident throughout the research process. Without paying careful attention to their biases through consistent critical reflection, researchers may unintentionally redirect the study, reproducing the hegemonic power structures they were attempting to disrupt.

With this in mind, it is imperative that I locate myself and my role in the teaching community, as well as practice consistent reflexivity throughout this study. As a researcher, my background in Women's Studies has enabled me to develop a strongly grounded, critical, feminist perspective, as well as an intense interest in social justice. Working in education from

this perspective means I am constantly questioning why and how decisions are made, who is benefitting and who is left out, which is integral to critical research. The open-mindedness and constant quest for understanding that underlies my interactions with the world at large and with my students in particular, has enabled me to build strong rapport with a diverse variety of students throughout my teaching career.

After substitute teaching for eight months, my first permanent teaching position was in a behavioural support program in an elementary school setting. Here, I was responsible for behaviour intervention and academic support for 10 students who were also integrated into mainstream classrooms. These students were all labeled with the Ministry of Education's Special Education behaviour designation "H" indicating that the students required severe behaviour intervention and/or suffered from severe mental illness (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). This position allowed me to work closely with families and outside agencies, such as pediatricians, psychologists and social workers, in order to create wraparound supports for struggling students. It was during the three years I held this position that I became sorely aware of the varying systemic issues at play, and the substantial impact of social and political oppressions on students.

After a brief foray into the mainstream system, I began teaching at a secondary alternative education program in September 2016. As teacher and case manager for 10 students, I was responsible for providing all academic coursework, creating and managing Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and holding integrated case management meetings, as well as supporting students in connecting with community resources, on top of a typical day-to-day teaching role.

Teaching behaviour intervention and alternative education have been an experience that has deeply impacted me both as a teacher and as a human being. In the alternative education context, the strength and resilience my students have shown repeatedly over the two years I have

spent getting to know them is astounding, and I have had the privilege of gaining invaluable insight into their lived experiences and perspectives as a result of the trust and relationships that have developed. As I continue to learn about marginalized youth culture(s), I have been able to compare it with my experiences teaching in elementary, where I supported students with similar challenges in a different age range. The troubling insight into *what is not being done* to support these students throughout their education has intensified my motivation to find proactive and effective solutions for meeting the needs of a diverse and complex student body.

Participants

One alternative secondary program in District X was canvassed for participants, however ultimately six youth from two alternative secondary programs took part in the study. The participants will be introduced in-depth in Chapter Four; however, Table 1 provides some basic demographic information about each participant.

Participant	Age at Time of Interview	Ethnicity	Experiences with Residential Instability	Mental Health Challenges	Other Considerations
Shevaya	14	NM, visible minority	NM	Y	Raised by grandmother
Ryden	16	Caucasian	Y	Y	Family history of substance abuse
Skye	18	Indigenous, Caucasian	Y	Y	Transgender
Rose	17	Black	Y	Y	NM
Nova	19	Caucasian	NM	Y	NM
Jessica	19	Caucasian	Y	Y	Aging out of ministry care

*NM = Not Mentioned

Table 1: Personal considerations disclosed by participants.

All of the alternative programs in School District X offer flexible learning environments, altered schedules, increased staff to student ratio, and wraparound support including outside agencies such as the Ministry for Children and Family Development. The initial site of this study was a humanities, career education, and outdoor focussed alternative education program. The secondary, and ultimately, main program site was a partnership program run by School District X, and a community service provider funded by the Ministry for Children and Family Development. Many students attending both programs struggle with challenges such as substance ab/use, family conflict and residential instability⁴. Students enrolled in these programs attend Monday to Thursday at sites located in a fairly central locations in the district.

Students eligible for these programs have received Ministry of Education designations: D - Chronic Health Impairment (which interferes with student education) or H - Requiring Severe Behaviour Intervention/Mental Illness, as well as in many cases, Q - Learning Disability (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Examples of student needs for a youth with a D designation might be a student with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; H designations are often indicative of students with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from ongoing traumas throughout their lives, as well as a variety of other mental health concerns; students with Q designations display a significant gap between their performance and abilities in one or two particular areas and require intensive academic support as a result.

The six students who ultimately ended up participating had designations aligning with the above description and were enrolled in two of the 17 district programs. These six participants provide a great overall representation of the challenges faced by marginalized youth in BC's alternative education programs, as they are a diverse group who share many commonalities.

⁴ Socioeconomic factors and relevant demographics will be further explored as necessary throughout the project.

Recruitment

In order to reduce the effects of power differentials, given my positionality as a teacher in the alternative education program in District X, a colleague from district who was not in a teaching position supported recruitment as a third-party recruiter. We also started by recruiting participants from one of the alternative education programs where I was not a teacher. Initially, I was interested in interviewing my own students as I imagined trust would be important for marginalized youth to share their stories; however, concerns over ethics and power imbalances led me to shift my recruitment process and focus on students with which I had no relationship.

Due to site space availability, we had to adjust our initial plan. First, we held an information and invitation meeting, including myself, the third-party recruiter, the program teachers, and the program students who volunteered to attend. The third-party recruiter and I shared information about the study, checked for questions and provided any necessary clarification. Program teachers were asked to leave the room so as to not influence student decisions regarding participation. Students were then invited by the third-party recruiter to provide their contact information on the contact forms if they were interested, and if not, to leave the forms blank.

All students were provided with contact forms, as well as assent and consent forms, which they could choose to review with their parents and/or guardians or leave behind. Flyers (Appendix A) were posted at the program site in case students that were not in attendance were interested, or a student decided later on that they would like to participate. Three students of the ten meeting attendees indicated interest and provided their contact information. Of those three students that had indicated interest, one chose to follow through with interviews.

Of the six final participants, five were ultimately students enrolled in the program where I was teaching at the time. As part of my teaching philosophy, I am relatively open with my students about my interests and passions. Students attending my program knew I was planning to conduct research because they would ask me about my plans after school or on the weekends, and I would share that I was working on my thesis proposal. The day I invited students to the recruitment meeting, a couple of students from my program inquired where I was going and why I was going there. When I told them I was going to share information about my study to find interested participants, they asked if they could also participate. Word spread and after a few days, other students asked to participate.

The participants from my program were provided with a verbal overview of the study and expectations. These participants were also given the informational flyer, and assent and consent forms to review, complete and return. I ensured they understood participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time without consequence, and that their choice to participate (or not) in the study would in no way influence their grades.

Ethical considerations

There were a number of ethical concerns to take into consideration for this PAR project. In this section, I will detail my approaches to youth participation, sensitive contexts, privacy and confidentiality, and ethical requirements.

Voluntary participation

From an ethical standpoint, there are many concerns of which researchers must be wary, especially when working with youth. Ethics committees might question participating youths' emotional and social maturity, regarding their ability to accurately and honestly engage in research processes. I would argue, having worked with marginalized youth for a number of

years, that when it comes to identifying needs and priorities for themselves, many youth have been taking care of themselves and sometimes of their immediate family for years, and deserve an opportunity to demonstrate their competence and abilities in a meaningful arena. However, this is a significant area of concern. In order to attend to this, I took every opportunity to ensure participants fully understood their role in the study, and to surface the costs and benefits of participation for them.

In order to build trust and avoid damaging self-esteem, I followed the lead of participants when it came to any kind of interaction. For example, there was a student who initially demonstrated interest, and asked that I contact her sister who was her guardian with more information. She provided her own phone number and that of her sister. When I did not receive a response after a text and a phone call to each number, I ceased contact as it seemed clear that the student was no longer interested. In addition, one student who did participate seemed quite wary of me at the start. I kept lots of physical space between us, let her dictate how and when we met up, how long we stayed, and did not push for information when she was not openly willing to share. I was careful to respond neutrally to her stories to avoid any sense of judgment, and made sure to express gratitude for her time and trust. I noted how the importance of trust in research was reflected in how my own students sought out opportunities to participate with me in the study, while students in other alternative programs were less likely to agree to participate.

Still, particularly for my own students, I took every opportunity to ensure participants understood the voluntary nature of their participation, including having a third-party canvas for participants, and having verbal and written reminders for youth. I made every effort throughout the data collection and ensuing stages to ensure that students understood that participation was

entirely voluntary, and that they could choose to withdraw at any time without consequence or judgment.

Youth in sensitive contexts

Feminist research theory emphasizes the importance of narratives, active listening, and leveling power inequalities with participants (DeVault & Gross, 2014). These three aspects speak to me as a researcher because I seek authentic stories of individuals' experiences with and in the education system, which I would only have access to if participants felt comfortable, agentic and heard. I aspired to be open, honest and transparent throughout data collection and during any contact with the participants, as these youth were likely to be not only wary of authority figures, but also have experienced much trauma and may have felt some discomfort while sharing stories of instances in which they felt vulnerable.

All students enrolled in alternative programs could be categorized as marginalized, marking them as extremely vulnerable to exploitation. It was necessary to remain sensitive to their needs and preferences, as well as ensure they felt safe at all times. Having students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, insights and experiences with me was important, as their personal stories have provided incredible insight and valuable information that could make a difference in the way future researchers and educators shape education. Being privy to these inside stories was heavily reliant on a mutually respectful relationship between myself and participants, as many youth are distrusting of formalized support systems (Iwasaki et al., 2015).

As students were able to choose to share what they felt comfortable with, they were in charge of what information would be presented in the study. I communicated that I would not be filling in any gaps for them in terms of their experiences, perspectives or knowledge. It was important to be aware, sensitive and reflexive around my boundaries as a researcher and as a

teacher, especially for participants with which I had already established relationships. In order to counter possible biases, I made sure to question my conclusions, complete member checks, and seek valid justifications for any decisions made in the study. I checked with participants to ensure that my interpretations were accurate, and reinforced the importance of the accuracy of the representations of their experiences, as is expected in all PAR studies. In such a small and vulnerable community, it is important that this experience was a positive one that benefitted the marginalized group(s) (TCPS 2, 2014).

Risks and benefits

It was my duty as the researcher to surface the possible benefits and costs for the youth so they could make an informed decision about participation in the study. As mentioned previously, there are numerous possible benefits for youth who choose to participate in PAR studies, including having an opportunity and/or platform for expressing their concerns, experiences and ideas/voices, connecting with others over shared experiences, and developing problem solving skills, communication skills, positive identity, and critical consciousness (Bertrand, 2016; Gomez & Ryan, 2016). By definition, PAR designs aim to redistribute power through offering opportunities for leadership, increased voice, and having personal experiences and knowledge validated in a safe, nonjudgmental setting. It is possible that these benefits may outweigh any risks of participation, however this is entirely individual.

Possible risks to participants included minimal psychological harm (stress, feelings of guilt or shame) from discussions around educational experiences, or minimal social harm from feelings of embarrassment. These risks, however, may be higher for individuals with differing experiences. To address possible negative repercussions from risks, I provided participants with

a comprehensive list of contact information for local community counselling and mental health resources (Appendix B).

Assent and consent

The inclusion and collaborative participation of youth in this study required revisiting and renegotiating voluntary participation throughout the research process. Youth were supported to recognize that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without personal or academic repercussions. I achieved this by communicating from the invitation process onward that participation was voluntary, having students read and sign an assent form (Appendix C), as well as opening the interviews with a reminder statement about their rights to withdraw. When I checked in with students about data collection and analysis, I reminded them that they could choose to withdraw at any time.

For the consent process, I provided a consent form (Appendix D) informing parents and guardians of my intentions and ask them for their permission for their child to participate in the study. I described the voluntary nature of the study, and reassured guardians that the youth would not be penalized if they did not participate. I shared that consent or assent may be withdrawn at any time, that all information would be safeguarded, and that students are anonymous in the study. I had the youth obtain permission from their guardians but offered my support if required.

Privacy and confidentiality

All participants have the right to confidentiality and privacy. All efforts have been made to uphold this right. Youth were offered the opportunity to develop their own pseudonym, or to use their own name if they preferred and if guardians consented. Program and district information have been masked to preserve privacy, however it should be noted that someone who is familiar with School District X and its alternative education programs may be able to

identify the participating students. In addition, for the duration of data collection and analysis, all data was stored under passcode on a personal storage device. Post-study, data will be stored on a passcode protected storage device in a secure location at UBC.

Ethical approval

Finally, there were a number of permissions that were granted in order for this research to occur. First, a Behavioural Human Ethics Application was completed and submitted online to the University of British Columbia (UBC) Behavioural Research Ethics Board for review. Second, permission was required from School District X Research and Evaluation Department. An application was submitted, along with a proposal copy and relevant materials that have been signed off by this researcher's supervisor and committee. Permission was successfully obtained from both UBC and School District X. Lastly, any student that participated had to provide assent, as well as have the approval of their guardians if they are under the age of majority.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews and data collection

For the purposes of this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were ideal for a number of reasons. Interviews allowed participants to narrate and mediate their experiences, as well as to engage in and lead discourse with the researcher around their concerns, observations and experiences (DeVault & Gross, 2014). Particularly from a feminist standpoint, open-ended semi-structured interviews have been traditionally favored as a way to draw attention to marginalized voices.

Interview questions (Appendix D) were developed based on my preliminary literature review, which primarily focussed on school engagement. Table 2 (below) provides an in-text version for reference. Interviews were offered at a time and place that was convenient for the

students. In some cases, participants requested support in transportation to and from interview locations. The majority of participants attended the program at which I taught and chose to complete their interviews in my classroom after school.

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. What value/meaning does education hold for you? What do you perceive it adds to or takes away from your life?	Can you tell me about your daily routine on a school day?
	Why do you attend school? What kinds of things do you get by going to school?
	Do you think overall that school has had a positive or negative impact on you? Why?
	Can you tell me about a time that you really enjoyed being at school?
	Can you tell me about a time that you really did not enjoy being at school?
2. What does school engagement mean to you? What does it look like? Feel like?	Can you tell me about a time you were really enjoying learning about something?
	Can you tell me about a time you felt completely disconnected from learning?
	What does learning look like? Feel like? Sound like?
	What does it mean to be engaged in learning? How can someone tell if you are trying to learn or not?
	How do you see yourself as a learner compared what you think you "should" be?
3. To what extent do you feel your experiences impact your education?	Can you tell me about a time that you felt like you belonged at school? A time you felt like you didn't belong?
	What kinds of things make a school better? Worse?
	Can you think of an important event that happened to you that changed the way you feel at school?
	Can you think of a time when you needed help and your school didn't help you? A time when your school did help you?
	How can schools better support students?

Table 2: Interview questions.

Participants were offered a choice around interview context. For example, the participant and I could have the interview while also creating art, walking in a park or playing games. The reason I offered these sideline activities was so shift the focus from the traditional power structure of a formal interview to a more casual, conversational-type dialogue in order to help participants feel more at ease. Interestingly, most participants were generally focussed on sharing their experiences and were not interested in taking part in other activities. However, food was a major focus and sometimes a motivating feature for participants.

On average interviews were about one hour with breaks as needed. Many participants chose to meet more than once, up to three times. As mentioned, youth were able to shape the

interview, for example, choosing an activity they would like to during the interview, as well as if they would like another person to be present (two participants chose to interview together). Students could choose whether or not to be audio-recorded (four did not want to be recorded). Participants were invited to bring an artifact to share and discuss, such as a toy, or piece of artwork, media, or writing they have created, in order to foster dialogue and understanding, however no participants chose to bring an artifact. When I asked one student if she was interested in bringing something, she responded that she did not know where she might find something relevant like a piece of art she had created, an interesting response in itself.

Interview questions were used as a starting point for dialogue, as opposed to a rigid interview framework. Youth were encouraged to bring their own concerns, priorities and values to the conversation. In general, interviews began with some informal conversation as participants settled into the space and the intention of the interview. The interview questions were used a starting point for participant led conversation, and the next question was asked when it seemed the participant had exhausted a train of thought, and was ready to move on.

I took field notes by hand during the interviews, and typed out the notes with further detail as soon as possible after each session. In the case of audio-recorded interviews, they were transcribed manually as soon as possible, and included any meaningful pauses or changes in intonation. At the end of the interview sessions, each participant was asked if they were interested in participating in an art-based action project that would disseminate the accumulated data to the community. In general, participants expressed interest in this part of the research process, however only one participant began the action project without bringing it to completion.

Analysis

Data analysis began with data collection. DeVault and Gross (2014) argue that “...interview researchers need to recognize that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the retelling” (p. 10). The importance of not placing personal priorities and assumptions onto others’ narratives is essential for truly hearing participants and authentically exploring the issues at hand, which is what I strived to do. As a feminist researcher, negotiating space, meaning, and representation are integral to the process, and this meant taking time to check with participants that their perspectives and interpretations are accurately represented in the data, which I took care to do (Braun & Clark, 2006; DeVault & Gross, 2014).

As mentioned, four participants did not want to be audio-recorded so I took field notes during interviews, and typed out the field notes with elaborations post-interview. Audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. This is an important step in analysis, and I used this opportunity to familiarize myself with the data. After transcription, students were invited to create an art project based on their transcripts. The one project that was partially created was included in data analysis.

I have used thematic analysis to explore and analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a flexible method of analysis that is compatible with social constructionist epistemology, and provides a rich, detailed, complex analysis of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis fits nicely with PAR, as it lets the data drive the research process through inductive analysis, and provides opportunities to push beyond semantic themes to the underlying, latent themes.

In order to perform a thematic analysis, I actively read and re-read the transcriptions and reviewed the art project, seeking repeated patterns of meaning that may be indicative of a theme

or subtheme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, each data point was categorized according to which research question it seemed to address. For example, if a participant mentioned appreciating being provided with a meal at school, I would categorize it with the research question about why students value school, as opposed to how students experience engagement, as it seems to be more of a motivational factor than one related directly to engagement. However, this data point might also be related to how student experiences of school influence their engagement, as the student may find it easier to learn once they have been nourished, and so it may then be included in both categories depending on the context. Based on these initial categories, the data was then organized into themes which were developed both concurrently and after data collection. When it became apparent that aspects of SDT could be mapped onto the data, the dataset came into its current form.

Retaining flexibility is important in identifying themes and their prevalence, but it is also imperative to remain consistent across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While analyzing data, I searched for both common and diverse themes across participants, as it was possible that some students had particularly unique but important experiences which may have been rare but very impactful. Then I reviewed the themes and checked for accurate representation of the whole data set. By working from a data-driven framework, I feel I was able to more fairly represent themes that were present in the data set, compared to working from a predetermined theme.

Once I was satisfied with the organization of the data and its connections to SDT, I refined the themes and their meanings in relation to one another and the whole data set. I examined for any counter evidence that may have served to complicate or disconfirm my conclusions. After I was able to clearly define each theme, I began the process of writing the analysis, including vivid, relevant examples from the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Credibility

It is imperative to ensure the accuracy and precision of all research studies. Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is important to note that all data is relative, and bound to context and circumstance (Marriam & Tisdell, 2016). Particularly in feminist research, credibility and objectivity are foregrounded due to the importance of interpretation and representation:

[I]n addition to the routine ethical and pragmatic considerations researchers confront, the feminist researcher must also think about negotiating her political project, her activist intentions, her epistemological commitments, her desire to unearth and make available subjugated knowledge, and her obligation to empower, not oppress.

(Hesse-Biber, 2011, pp. 343)

As this passage denotes, this study required that I, the feminist researcher, balance my personal biases (which led me to undertake this study) with providing the space for participants to share their perspectives, and to be heard, valued and validated in response. In some instances, it was difficult to put my ideological goals aside and focus on what could be achieved by taking an alternative approach. In the end, I think it was well worth the effort.

As in any qualitative study, knowledge was co-constructed throughout the research process by both the participants and myself (Butler, 2006). While this means that the findings of this study are inherently subjective, there were a number of ways that this study addressed issues of credibility.

As the researcher, I intentionally surfaced my positioning and intentions for this study. I practiced consistent reflection, introspection and self-monitoring through internal dialogue, discussion with peers, and the maintenance of a research journal (Denscombe, 2010). Throughout the research process, I used this same journal and sometimes memos, as well as

regular check-ins with my research supervisor, about decisions that were made regarding data collection, analysis and interpretation. While writing this study, I endeavored to be transparent about decisions made in terms of these same aspects.

During analysis, I determined that the data were broadly consistent across the interviews, which provided the converging evidence on which the findings were based. During analysis and interpretation, it was clear that the findings for this study were broadly corroborated by previously established empirical literature (Butler, 2006; Denscombe, 2010). The one exception that deviated from the literature, regarding how participants in this study did not always find school a safe and secure place, was included and addressed within the report.

Over the course of the study, two member-checks were completed to ensure accuracy of both the data and findings (Butler, 2006; Denscombe, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2011; Marriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, transcripts were provided for all participants to review and provide feedback on if they had any, which they did not. The second member-check was completed through the use of an online survey which requested participants to select the findings they agreed with and provided an option for further feedback. This member-check demonstrated that participants generally agreed with the findings, and appreciated the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences.

Dependability

As mentioned, this study by nature is inherently subjective for a number of reasons (Butler, 2006; Denscombe, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2011; Marriam & Tisdell, 2016). Primarily, I, the participant researcher, am the tool of both data collection and analysis, as well as an integral part of the iterative cycle of action research, and so must be particularly careful to surface the biases and decision-making processes in my work.

While strategies that would address dependability have previously been mentioned, I will take some time to quickly review them for increased transparency. Through the use of a research journal and research memos, I attempted to be accountable for decisions made regarding data collection, categorization and interpretation. In order to visualize and organize the data, the transcripts were printed out, colour-coded by participant, and then cut into thematic units. Using a poster-sized chart for each research question, I taped each data point according to which question it seemed to address. If the data seemed to fit more than one category, it was photocopied and included in both (or all three) categories. As the posters were hung on the wall in my home, they were visible on a daily basis. This meant I could reflect on the data and adjust its organization throughout data collection and analysis. I used memos and my research journal to record thoughts and questions that arose during this process.

Transferability

This study was intended as an exploration of individuals' experiences and perspectives in a particular setting. As such, it is limited in its potential transferability, however that does not lessen its potential value, as rigour is more valuable than study size or scale (Denscombe, 2010).

In order to maintain rigour, I drew on existing theories to ground my work, applied suitable methods for data collection and analysis, and ensured there were consistent connections between my findings and the established literature (Denscombe, 2010). I included thick, rich descriptions throughout the study so that the reader may accurately contrast and compare the contexts of this study to any potential study sites (Marriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, it should be mentioned that while this study made use of a purposeful convenience sample, the participants experience many of the same challenges that are encountered by marginalized youth in BC.

Chapter Four: Results and Thematic Analysis

For the purposes of this study, I interviewed six marginalized youth attending alternative secondary education programs in School District X in order to investigate their experiences of engagement in education. In this chapter, I will introduce the interview participants and summarize the findings of the interviews. Findings are organized by research questions, but also include references to SDT and the psychological need for autonomy, belonging and competence, as well as connections to behavioural, emotional, cognitive and agentic engagement.

Participant Portraits

As mentioned, all participants were enrolled in alternative secondary education programs. They range from ages fourteen to nineteen at the time of the study. Participants were offered the option of using pseudonym of their choice, or if they had their parent or guardian's permission, they could choose to use their real name.

Shevaya

Shevaya was a fourteen-year-old visible minority female. She attended the same school district for her entire academic career. Shevaya was enrolled in alternative education the year previous to the interview. Shevaya and I met twice for interviews, both times over food.

According to Shevaya, she did not have any friends in elementary school, and she had experienced severe bullying beginning in grade four. She reported that the bullying she experienced caused her to develop an eating disorder, engage in self-harm, and to attempt suicide before dropping out of school at the beginning of grade seven. Shevaya felt that her teachers and school staff did not do enough when she asked for support. In fact, she says they “did nothing” to help her even when her Grandma approached the school for intervention. At the start of high

school, Shevaya said she fell in with the wrong crowd, and started smoking cigarettes and marijuana, getting in stolen cars, and not attending classes.

Shevaya found her alternate program to be a much better fit for her due to the increased flexibility and staff support. She feels that peers at the program are similar to her so it is easier to fit in. Shevaya has specific ideas about how she learns best, and seems to have a sense of herself as a capable student in the right setting.

Skye

Skye was an eighteen-year-old transgender male who identified as Indigenous. He attended the same school district for his entire academic career, and was enrolled in alternative education for three years. Skye and I met once to interview, in a local park with my dog.

Skye described feeling invalidated and underappreciated by students and staff throughout school, which he says was overall quite a negative experience for him. Skye was bullied severely in high school, culminating in him being physically beaten in a park, a story that was subsequently aired on the local news. His social and personal life were complicated due to transitioning from female to male, which ultimately resulted in Skye living independently due to unsafe living conditions at home.

Skye shared his experiences of feeling like a disappointment to his teachers when he could not understand what was asked of him in class. He describes himself as a “slow-learner” who asks too many questions. He felt that when it came to learning, he never had enough support to feel successful in mainstream. Skye mentioned one teacher at his alternate program that was finally able to explain math to him in a way that he could understand, and now math is his favourite subject because he feels that he is good at it.

Rose and Nova

Rose was a seventeen-year-old Black female. She attended the same school district for her entire academic career, and was in alternative education for two years at the time of the interview. Rose wished to interview with Nova, a nineteen-year-old, Caucasian, genderfluid person who preferred the pronouns “they/them”. Nova attended one school district previous to their current one. They attended alternate education programs in both districts, for a total of four years. I met with both participants at their program site after school one day.

Both students shared that they have severe anxiety that interferes with their day to day lives. Often this takes the form of social anxiety, though Rose described herself as being argumentative and defensive when anxious, whereas Nova described more internalizing behaviours such as withdrawal. Both students remember being repeatedly told in their mainstream schools that they were not trying hard enough, but both were adamant that they had been doing their best to manage their personal and school lives. Both students had experienced tumultuous childhoods with massive upheavals throughout, and both identify as having depression as well as anxiety. For Rose, the shift to alternative education came when she became physical with another student and was expelled from her mainstream high school. For Nova, enrollment in alternative education was a result of ongoing attendance issues. Rose and Nova feel that alternative programs have been a better fit for them. They feel that staff are more likely to listen, and there are fewer students and so everyone gets more support.

Rose chose to engage in the post-interview action project. Unfortunately, our timeline did not allow for her to complete her project, but she did share further insight into her experiences and perspectives during that extra time together.

Jessica

Jessica was a nineteen-year-old Caucasian female who had struggled with drug addiction in the past. Due to an unsafe home environment, Jessica had been living independently at the time of the interview. Previous to that, she had been in government care. She attended the same school district for her entire academic career, and had been enrolled in alternative education for four years. Jessica and I met once in the presence of her boyfriend and a friend, over coffee at Starbucks.

Jessica was a critical thinker who was not afraid to say what she was thinking. Jessica said she only attended school because she had to and wondered why there is so much pressure to graduate high school. She recounted stories of her family members who did not complete high school but are intelligent and have been successfully employed. Jessica had struggled with mental health and addiction, both of which made it difficult for her to attend school regularly. She found that her alternative education program worked better for her because attendance and hours were more flexible, and staff were more available for support when needed.

Ryden

Ryden was a sixteen-year-old Caucasian genderfluid person who preferred the pronouns “they/them”. Ryden attended a number of different school districts in BC and across the country. At the time of the interview, it was Ryden’s second year in alternative education. Ryden and I met three times, both before and after school at their program site.

Ryden had experienced tremendous residential instability. They were moved across provinces, between family members, and in and out of government care. As a result, their schooling was often interrupted, and Ryden felt they missed a lot of learning opportunities. Ryden describes feeling lost and confused during learning, to the point that they stopped

attending their mainstream high school classes and would just sit in the cafeteria all day. Ryden also engaged in a lot of risk-taking behaviours in the past, such as heavy drug use, sex work, and criminal activity. Ryden says they have recently experienced a shift in their thinking; they realized that they do not want to live their life like their family members, and needed to make better, more productive choices.

Results

In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews with these six youth, each of whom was enrolled in an alternative education program in School District X. The interviews were meant to collect data related to the following research questions: (1) What value/meaning does education hold for marginalized youth? What do they perceive it adds to their lives? What do they perceive it takes away?; (2) How do marginalized youth experience engagement in schools? What does it look and feel like?; and (3) How and why do marginalized youth feel their experiences of education influence their engagement? In the sections to follow, I present themes that I have discerned from an analysis of participants' responses organized by research question.

Research Question 1: The value of education

In their descriptions, participants had multidimensional views about the value of education, and what it might add or take away from their lives. Some participants focussed on school as legally required, while others identified when and why education was important for their current and future lives, for example, school as a means to employment, and school as a social catalyst in the development of social support networks. Participants also noted the value in having increased access to a variety of resources through school, mentioned that their perspectives on the value of school have changed over time, and identified barriers to school.

Reasons for attending

In a general sense, participants expressed that they felt that had to attend school to appease parents or guardians, and in some cases, stated that they would not be attending if it were not legally required. For example, Skye felt he had to attend school or he would be kicked out of his family home. Now that he is financially supported by the government to live independently, attending school is part of the requirements to maintain his financial support. Shevaya noted that by law she is required to attend school until she is sixteen, at which time she may choose to drop out.

While this obligatory view of school was common, most participants did indicate that they felt there was value in education, primarily as a pathway to employment and independence. Both Rose and Nova viewed elementary education as foundational, and high school as essential, for gaining employment. Rose and Nova suggested that the level of effort a student puts in or what direction they take might depend on their goals for their future. For instance, Rose shared that she primarily attended school in order to build skills to help her find a job above an entry level position. She put heavy significance on finding employment that could provide her with the financial stability necessary for supporting herself without a partner, and with an abundance of pets.

Shevaya had a more utilitarian view of school, as she felt education was only necessary in order to gain access to employment. According to Shevaya, she already had a job lined up through a family friend, therefore and her school plan was to attend to the age of sixteen, at which time she would be legally allowed to drop out and work instead. In her opinion, she would not need to attend school anymore because she already had the end in the place, and school was only a means to that end.

Jessica also viewed school as somewhat redundant for her career plan, although through the conversation it became more evident that this might have been because she felt that school had not provided her with what she saw as necessary preparation for a life in the trades, her chosen career path. Jessica related her critical view of education in her interview:

The government tells you that you need a grade twelve education to do all these things, when in reality it's pretty common sense... I can walk into a job and be like, ok teach me this, and boom, I learn it in ten minutes... Everyone's like no, you need that Dogwood.

You need that little piece of fucking paper that says, no, this kid is fucking smart.

She went on to talk about her grandfather who had a grade five education, and questioned the social construction of what it means to be successful.

[My grandpa] was a semi-truck driver and worked for his whole life, he stopped working probably like ten years ago because he was in an accident, but he made it through life. He owns his own home, he owns a trailer, he owns his own car, he owns multiple things, and he has a grade five education. Yet he's smarter than me. And it's like, so why now is it suddenly like this? You HAVE to, you HAVE to have [a diploma], you can't even get a fucking job at Starbucks without your diploma. You know, and that's what I don't understand, I get [that it's] to make people more successful, and [I get] wanting an education and wanting to be successful, but... who is to say that THAT is what makes someone specifically successful?

While Jessica was critical about the value of education, Ryden was noticeably more positive in their outlook, and made a succinct comment about education and what value it could hold for them in the future.

Well, being a teenager, I think, of course, no teenager wants to be at school all the time, but I think that what it adds to my life is that... I'm in grade 11 – two years from now, I'll be in college, I'll have an education and I'll have a great job, and that's what education gives to my life.

Social interactions and belonging

Social interactions and belonging were a common topic that participants discussed during the interviews. For many, school was the primary location for meeting and connecting with other youth and building social networks. For these participants, there was value in school as a setting and structure for social interactions and experiencing belonging with both peers and adults, which for many marginalized youth may be particularly valuable, as Ryden describes:

I have a lot of fun, and like, I laugh a lot, and I like being around the people that are here, some of them... I don't know what I would do without school, because I think I would be very down without human interaction...

Throughout the interviews, there were two notable categories of meaningful social interactions: adults and peers. For example, Jessica described the importance of having caring adults at her program.

They actually have the time of day to care and to know you, and sure they piss us right the fuck off, but like they do [it] for our wellbeing, and honestly at the end of the day, I swear these teachers know me better than my own parents.

At a later point in the interview, Ryden touched again on the importance of school as a social catalyst and in the development of social support networks.

If I would have never gone to school or whatever, I wouldn't know like half the people I know today, which low key makes me really depressed because... I don't know what I

would have done without [Friend], because like when I met [her], I was so down, I was in the peak of my depression... I was an extreme self-harmer, I had like no friends, everyone would stare at me and make fun of me... I wore wristbands and I had scars all over my arms and I had open wounds too, they were bloody... I always wore short sleeve shirts and I would try to cover them with my wrist bands and people would stare at me, and I was just the odd one out and [Friend] came talked to me one day and was like, “So like, what’s your story” you know, I was like, “Wow, a person talked to me” and then she introduced me to [another friend]... I don’t know what I would have done without them, because like honestly, I don’t think I would be living right now, because I was like really, really, really low, and I think that friends and family and people save you from those kinds of things.

Rose and Nova also felt that positive peer interactions at school were very important, especially when they perceived it as extending out into the community. Rose shared an example of a time when she was in public and was aggressively approached by an unknown youth, and a school peer stepped in to help. At times, Rose and Nova described, it can feel like family, a term the two participants did not use lightly.

Resources and supports

The participants reported valuing access to resources and considered increased access to resources an advantage of attending school, although this might be more specific to their experiences of alternative education programs. During the interviews, students noted the importance of increased access to resources like medical care and mental health support when staff would make appointments and support students in attending them, supplied meals and snacks, and even just the significance of having access to supportive adults that have and take the time to get to know students.

In her interview, Jessica described the value of the personal connections she could access in her alternative education program which is set in a social services center, and highlighted how those connections provided her with supports and access resources that wouldn't be possible otherwise:

You gain relationships with friends and teachers, and even other people that come into the resource center, so if you do need help, you don't just have the people you see every day at school to reach out to, you have other people in the resource center that don't necessarily have that personal connection with you, but still have a good enough connection that you can actually have a [personal] conversation with them...

Similarly, Nova said that their current program has done a lot to help them by providing one to one support with academics, addressing their anxiety by talking them through whatever is causing the anxiety in the moment, attending various appointments with them, connecting them with mental health support, and supporting with transportation to and from school.

On the other hand, the value of having skilled support workers and school staff was repeatedly highlighted throughout the interviews. For example, when Jessica's sister told her that she was struggling with suicidal ideation, Jessica was blown away by her sister's report of the school's response:

And look at my little sister for instance, she's in a fucking mainstream school, what half the population is in, and she sits there and tells me that her counsellor tells her "Oh, this better not be a recurring fucking problem"? Like, why would that make any student want to continue going to school? That's no support, the counsellors are supposed to be there when you need someone, you can go to them, and they're not. They're there for fucking course selections, they're there for prerequisites, and that's it. They're there for the grade

elevens and twelves and ((pfft)) that's it. Everyone else, they don't give a shit about, and then you sit there, and when you actually need them, like "They're gonna kill themselves," [and they're] like "Oh, okay, well let's kind of take into consideration that this might actually happen, but like oh, whatever, this just better not happen again".

At a different point in the interview, Jessica discussed the importance of having skilled and experienced staff, especially when it comes to addressing the marginalizing experiences of youth such as substance use and addiction.

When I was a drug addict, my mom could sit there and be like, "Oh I understand what you're going through" "Oh I understand this" "Oh I understand that" but like, do you? Like sure, you watched my aunt go through it, but you never went through it yourself specifically. And you know, that's what I get pissed off about when I have counsellors trying to talk to me..., and I'm just like, ok but have you been through it? ...like are you telling me this from, you know, your own experience? Or are you telling me this based on a book that you read? You know, and that's what pisses me off. And then if they're like "Uhhh..." You know, then, shut the fuck up. And I don't necessarily have respect for people like that...

Changing perspectives over time

A few participants indicated that their view of education had changed over their years at school. Specifically, the pressure to be successful in school increased for participants as they approached their senior years of high school and encroaching independence.

In their interview, Ryden discussed how their perspective on the importance of school had changed over time:

But like I get it, we all need to grow up and get an education... but how I looked at it, was like, grade eight, grade nine and grade ten, they don't really count. Like you know what I mean? The only things that really count towards college and university and shit are grade ten, eleven and twelve, those are really the only years you need to pay attention to the shit you're doing, and I did that. I just kind of screwed off in grade eight and grade nine and grade seven, and I just kind of did my own fucking thing, and you know like, when grade ten hit, I was like holy fuck, what I am doing, like holy fuck, I gotta go, like "old lady with the math in front of her" meme!⁵

Ryden went into further detail, outlining how they had realized school could be a path to a different kind of life than their family members had lead, and how that realization had impacted their approach to education.

I think throughout Grade 8 and Grade 9... I feel like most kids just don't really give a fuck, like they think, "Oh fuck school" you know? And I think that I started to really notice that if that I keep going on the track that I'm going on with like drugs and sex and all of the things that I was doing with my life, I kind of thought to myself on how what my mom is, and what my dad is, and what my family is, and how none of them is successful, and I don't want that. Like that kind of changed my perspective on school, because I find that once you're out of school, you miss it, and that if you don't enjoy school, you won't get anywhere in life... I think it was just kind of a switch that went off in my mind, I was just kind of like, what am I doing, you know? I think that's kind of what it was, you know, I just don't wanna be like my mom and live in a basement... literally don't leave my house for three days straight, like I don't want that, I don't wanna be like my dad and be a drunk,

⁵ See Appendix G for image and citation.

I don't wanna be like my brother, never go to school and be a meth-head, I'm not interested in that lifestyle, you know, it's not me. You know, yea I may smoke pot and I may drink but I think most normal people outside of work do that as well.

Jessica also experienced a shifting view of the importance of education. In her interview, Jessica shared that her favourite years of education were in early high school, as she felt there was less pressure to be successful:

I think just when it wasn't so serious, you know what I mean? Like grade eight, grade nine, grade ten when like school really didn't matter, when your grades didn't really matter, like you were just kind of getting by kind of thing... mostly when it wasn't so serious, and you got to do things and fieldtrips, and sure, [at our program] you get to go on a lot of fieldtrips but like, I don't know, I think the earliest years of high school are the funnest, less pressure, just less bullshit.

Barriers to education

When participants described their experiences of school, it was generally framed in terms of challenges that needed to be overcome in order to access school and learning. Some barriers included lifestyle choices, such as heavy drug or alcohol use on school nights, while others were more about unmet needs. For example, Ryden shared their experience of attending school with a variety of disorders and disabilities, including learning disabilities:

I think like in my younger years... I really didn't think people understood what was wrong with my brain, or why I couldn't learn this properly, and instead of trying to get me extra help, they just kind of went, "Oh okay, let's just put you over there and we'll leave you there and you know, you do your thing," and you know, that set me back, a lot,

and it didn't help me in the long run, because here I am in grade ten, grade eleven, whatever, not even knowing basic adding, and that's hard.

Jessica, who described herself as having complex mental health challenges, a sleep disorder, and having struggled with addiction earlier in her teens, shared her frustrations about school schedules and the lack of flexible attendance in a mainstream high school.

...emotionally, physically, mentally, it destroys you, like it takes a fucking beating on you. Like who the fuck wakes up every day at seven in the morning? Like to wake up every day at seven in the morning, not gonna happen... especially for me, main person, like I cannot do it, I've tried! Tried! For fucking years! Years, my whole life! No! Like, I was the kid that skipped grade seven, I tried to skip grade seven, who the fuck tries to skip elementary school? Me!

In direct contrast to discussions about the important role that “belonging” played in how and why the participants valued school, participants indicated that negative peer interactions were a significant school deterrent and a potential barrier to school engagement. For instance, Shevaya detailed her struggles with bullying throughout elementary school. According to Shevaya, two boys in her grade bullied her regularly beginning in Grade Four. She reported that they kicked her and insulted her regularly, and that this behaviour continued through her elementary years. Shevaya reported that at one point she had been moved to a different class mid-year to be separated from the boys, but the following year they were placed in the same class again. Shevaya blames this ongoing experience for the development of an eating disorder, self-harming behaviour, a suicide attempt, and her decision to drop out of grade seven.

Skye, who is transgender, experienced bullying and social ostracism during his time in mainstream as well. According to Skye, the only time he felt a sense of belonging was when he

attended the afterschool LGBTQ clubs. The bullying that Skye experienced culminated into physical violence when Skye was attacked in a local park. Skye disliked mainstream school so much that he removed himself against his parents' wishes, and enrolled himself in the alternative education program a friend was attending, which he found a much better fit socially.

Nova and Rose also had ongoing negative social experiences at school. For Nova, bullying was a problem for them in their mainstream school, whereas Rose had always felt like an outsider at all of her schools. In fact, Rose shared that she had not once felt that she truly belonged in a school, including in her current alternative program.

Rose and Nova, after discussing their experiences with each other and with me, came to the conclusion that while their alternative education program was not ideal socially, it was better than mainstream school for them. They described the social struggles in their program as being primarily about peer conflict that sometimes extended beyond the school (through online interactions), or that peers were sometimes not as sensitive or kind towards others as might be ideal. Together, Rose and Nova decided that perhaps these experiences could be seen as learning opportunities for future social interactions in life beyond school, for example, in the workplace.

Unfortunately, it was not just peers that were mentioned as deterrents. Negative teacher interactions also seemed to have a strong influence on the participants' experiences of school. For example, Skye felt that his mainstream teachers did not take time to get to know him or what he needed in order to learn effectively. At school, Skye felt he was not valid, that he was actively invalidated, underappreciated, and that he was a disappointment, or that his teachers just did not care about him or their jobs, which contributed to his decision to leave mainstream school.

Nova, who described themselves as having ADD and a learning disability which made it hard to focus and follow along in class, shared that they felt their grade eight science teacher was

“awful” and a “huge fucking cunt” who picked on Nova daily in front of the class for not understanding what they were learning. Nova said this experience was embarrassing and hurtful, and combined with the bullying they had experienced outside of class, led them to skipping a substantial amount of school.

In their interview, Ryden described their experience of feeling invisible to both staff and students at their last mainstream school:

[W]hen I first started there, I would never see myself graduating [from] there, I just had this gut feeling, it's a very negative school. I just felt like every time I walked in, it was just extremely negative, I just got that feeling, just going there, no one ever paid attention to me, my first year there I had an EA and I actually got really good grades because I had an EA but no one ever helped me right? So like when I had an EA it was great, but the next year they didn't have enough funding to provide me with an EA, so I never went to any of my classes, I just sat in the caf and played on my phone for hours until twelve o'clock, and nobody ever noticed I was there.

Summary: Value of education

The majority of participants described school overall as a relatively negative experience for them, although most did recognize some benefits in attending, such as access to social networks, resources and supports, and the development of skills necessary for employment and eventually, independence. Barriers such as mental health and negative social interactions at school were identified as potentially contributing factors in disengagement, as these negative social experiences might have outweighed the benefits of attending school. For many marginalized youth, it is possible that while they view school as meaningful, they have a hard time accessing its value due to a variety of barriers and unmet needs.

Research Question 2: Experiences of school engagement

In speaking with participants about how they experience engagement and what it looks like and feels like for them, a number of themes arose. Participants' responses generally indicated that they did not feel authentically engaged very often, but they were interested in being emotionally and agentically engaged in their learning. Some participants' comments suggested that they had learned to mimic or perform behavioural engagement, which may be indicative of the need for engagement indicators that are not reliant on assessing behavioural engagement. Participants shared examples which indicated that they enjoyed being cognitively engaged in learning, but noted that in order to be cognitively engaged, they had to be able to self-regulate, which was not always possible for them due to a variety of factors. In addition, participants identified some barriers to engagement they had experienced, including difficult life circumstances and learning challenges.

Emotional engagement

In general, participants described the experience of being engaged in learning as involving emotion, namely curiosity, excitement, interest, and at times, frustration. Skye felt that learning should be interesting, fun, challenging, and maybe exasperating at times, and Jessica also identified feeling interested as pertinent to learning. Other participants made similar suggestions that alluded to the central importance of emotional engagement for meaningful learning. For example, when she was asked to describe what learning might look like, Rose referred to a learner's facial expression, specifically, looking at someone's eyes where you might see the "Learner's Glimmer," a term she came up with in the interview. Rose described the "Learner's Glimmer" as the facial expression of a student who is interested, excited, and happy

about their learning, as if they are having an experience that is akin to “getting a new puppy, but you know, not as exciting as an actual new puppy”.

Every participant mentioned a variety of emotions in their respective interviews, indicating that emotional engagement was implicit in meaningful learning tasks. It seems that for participants, emotions were integral to engagement, which in terms of this study, might be interpreted to indicate that these students found emotional engagement to be an important aspect of overall school engagement. It was, however, unclear from the results whether emotional engagement was an outcome of or precursor for motivation, however, participants were very clear that emotions were an integral part of their meaningful learning experiences.

Agentic engagement

During the interviews, participants provided anecdotes which could be interpreted as indicative of how having a sense of control in learning helped them to feel more engaged in their work. In other words, participants indicated that agentic engagement was important in school.

Rose, whose professed least favourite subject is social studies, described an activity her social studies teacher had created where students were learning about a war. Students were asked to pretend they were a monarch leading the army and to develop strategies for invasion. These plans were then compared and the class chose the best strategy. Rose felt this made a topic that was otherwise irrelevant to her experiences, plans, or interests (or even the current time period), relevant by placing her into the context and thereby giving her agency in her learning.

Arguably related to agentic engagement might be the decision to use personal devices during learning activities. Interactions between learning and personal devices were mentioned specifically by three students. There are debates in the public as well as in academic literature about how technology and personal devices might support or hinder learning; in this study,

participants' perspectives were also mixed. Jessica stated that teachers should not be worried if she is on her phone during class time, as she is able to text and listen. In contrast, Rose said that when students want to or need to engage, they should "...just put down the phone." Shevaya had a different perspective, saying she liked to have her phone to listen to music while she worked because it helped her focus by tuning out distractions. This variation in participant responses could be seen as indicative of the need for multiple pathways in learning, as one approach does not often work for all students. A discussion around technology in the classroom could also be a great opportunity for students to engage in dialogue around their needs and goals in learning as part of agentic engagement processes.

In analyzing the data for evidence related to agentic engagement, it was interesting to note that while the participating students had many opinions and preferences about their learning contexts and experiences, they did not feel that their thoughts and ideas were heard or regarded in general. For example, Jessica recounted feeling physically unsafe in her school program and feeling powerless to do anything about it, even after approaching staff with her concerns.

...[Y]ou speak up and you're an advocate for yourself, and then no one listens to you. Like they tell you to speak up and tell them how you feel, and then you're like what the fuck, nothing comes of it.

Other students shared similar anecdotes of asking for help, offering input, or attempting to influence their environment; most of their stories involved feeling that they were not being taken seriously or not given enough support. In other words, it was clear that these students wished to have increased agency, or to be more agentially engaged in their learning environments.

Behavioural engagement

When asked to describe what learning looks like, participants easily rambled off lists of the types of body language and behaviours that are typically expected in a learning environment, for example, eyes forward watching the speaker, sitting still with body facing the speaker, not talking to others, body, hands and feet still. These kinds of behaviours could be interpreted as evidence of behavioural engagement, which according to the literature, is the most commonly discerned by teachers and researchers as indicative of overall engagement.

When participants were questioned further about whether the actions they identified were actions they regularly performed while learning, most participants said no. Rather, they shared that they had been taught that these were desirable behaviours in a learning environment. Interestingly, a few participants reported going so far as to executing the expected actions for a learning task, such as holding and looking at an assignment, but not actually engaging with the material by reading it, thinking about the content, or completing the assignment. These same participants shared strategies for what could be interpreted as performing behavioural engagement, such as hiding headphones in sweaters or hair so they could listen to music while working in classrooms where music was not allowed.

Rose and Nova discussed ways of pretending to complete their tasks, such as imitating body language, directing eyes to the supposed point of focus, or making motions as if they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Rose suggested that there are levels of skill involved, as some students are more obvious when they fake doing their work while others are more adept; for instance, pretending to read a book by turning your whole head is obvious, whereas using false facial cues, such as pretending to seem interested in the book, is more realistic and skillful.

In terms of what authentic behavioural engagement might look like for these learners, and the specific actions that might indicate behavioural engagement, participants had some vague ideas about what an observer might see. Ryden described how someone might know if a student is engaged in learning:

If you're using correct technique, if you are following directions, things like that? Like I walk into [a classroom] and I see [the teacher] teaching [a student] an angle on the board, I would be like, "Oh yea, [he] is teaching [the student] an angle, oh yea, [the student] is engaged in learning" or if [the student]'s on his computer with his paper beside [him], I'd be like "Oh yea, he's engaged in learning" you know what I mean, that's how I would portray it.

In general, participants were more interested in discussing their emotional, agentic and cognitive engagement than the behaviours associated with learning. However, participants listed off a variety of activity styles they prefer, most of which were social in nature. All but one participant preferred a more hands-on, interactive learning context that allowed freedom of movement and promoted discussion. Activities that encouraged learners to interact with one another around content, and involved hands-on learning such as math with manipulatives were common preferences. For instance, Jessica spoke about her preferred learning style:

Yea, it's a lot more interactive, one-on-one, hands on. Like I can kind of learn in a group, well I can't really learn in a big group, I learn in smaller groups or like one-on-one, because sometimes I have to have things processed to me more than once. It's almost like I can have someone read it, then I have to say it out loud, then you know like, do it, so like I have to do it in like multiple steps so I don't forget it.

The idea that learning is not an individual activity, but a social process, was touched on by all participants but one. In addition, the participants' responses seemed to suggest that teachers might check in with student learning processes as opposed to a set of prescribed behavioural indicators when assessing student engagement.

Cognitive engagement

Rose and Nova described being engaged in school as being ready to learn. They noted that learning requires being able to temporarily separate oneself from anything going on outside of school in order to be actively involved in the classroom, for example, not worrying about an argument with peer and focusing on the task at hand in order to cognitively engage with learning.

Participant responses indicated that these students wanted to be and enjoyed being cognitively engaged in their work. Jessica, for example, described her experiences using math manipulatives in elementary school: "I love doing that, because you're doing something hands on, you've got your brain fucking thinking...". Participants gave plenty of examples of activities they find engaging, such as field trips, experiential learning, and discussion-based learning, but expressed wanting more access to these types of activities. Providing opportunities for students to become actively and interactively involved in interesting and meaningful learning tasks, according to participants' responses, would increase their motivation to engage in learning.

During the interviews, some participants mentioned assignments that were too easy or too hard for them, and how it was much easier to engage in learning when the tasks assigned were appropriate to their skill and ability level, and especially if they had access to staff/teacher support when they needed it. The need to feel optimally challenged in learning was evident across all of the interviews.

Barriers to engagement

A number of barriers to engagement were identified throughout the interviews. As these experiences are not easily disentangled, I have grouped them loosely into two categories, life circumstances and learning challenges.

Life circumstances

During their interviews, participants shared with me a small portion of their life experiences, most of which had been riddled with challenging circumstances. For instance, Jessica discussed how the most difficult time she had had at school related to her experience of aging out of government care, and how it was impacting her ability to engage with school:

Now. Like grade eleven and twelve. Like the pressure comes on, and that's the downfall of slacking off in grade nine - ten, once the pressure comes on of grade eleven - twelve, like you're like what the fuck. Yea and like especially... when your [care] team just stops helping... Like, you don't know what to do? You're just gonna leave me hanging? And unfortunately, any teen that has lost their life because of that, I don't blame 'em, honestly, like I panicked, the day before my birthday, I was like crying and hyperventilating because no one knew what to do. And even now that I'm nineteen, ok, I'm packing my house up right now, don't know where I'm going, ok? Don't know where I'm moving to, but I'm packing my house! Do you know what kind of feeling that is? That's a fucking horrible feeling. I'm packing and I don't know where I'm going...

These kinds of emotional stressors and life complexities were common barriers for participants, who described a variety of challenges, such as suicidal ideation, self-harm, family dynamics, mental health challenges, and residential instability, which they generally did not have the adequate resources or skills to manage effectively.

In some cases, life circumstances made attending school difficult, for example prolonged hospital visits for assessments, and mental health challenges such as depression which seriously impact motivation. Ryden, who moved across the country a few times, and was in and out of the hospital for various assessments, shared how their frequent absences impacted their experience of education:

I spent a lot of the time in the hospital, and like, it affected my learning too, just like, not being in a school, learning things that were like ten times lower than my grade level, people looking at me like I'm stupid, and that definitely affected my learning, you know, being in that kind of environment, and not being shown what I should do...

Skye provided another example of difficult life circumstances. During his time at mainstream high school, Skye was transitioning his gender identity from female to male. His friends outside of school knew, but peers and staff at school did not, which was difficult to navigate for him. According to Skye, he felt as though he was living two separate lives. At school, Skye was experiencing severe bullying, and at home, his parents were resistant and often antagonistic about his gender transition. Skye began engaging in self-harm, attempted suicide a number of times, and has experienced ongoing mental health fallout. It is not difficult to see why Skye would struggle to stay engaged with his learning environment when his needs were so clearly not being met across multiple environments.

Learning challenges

As mentioned, a major theme that arose out of the interviews was the importance of developmentally-appropriate learning opportunities in motivating students to engage in meaningful learning. About half of the students described themselves as having trouble learning the same way or at the same pace as their classmates. Some discussed having had support from

an education assistant, or having altered assignments, but in these cases, students felt these supports were not helpful, enough, or consistently available to them. In some instances, participants felt that tasks were too easy or overly adapted, which encouraged them to not try as hard.

Ryden, who had previously mentioned having learning difficulties and slow processing speed, described their experiences in a mainstream Social Studies class:

Well, I've always kind of been given the easy way out, I think because in a sense I think people have always thought that I was quote unquote (finger quotations) "stupid," like, in my last mainstream school, I was in socials class, and colouring a map, filling in – it's a map of Canada, it's not hard, you do that in like grade 6... They filled in all the names of [the provinces] and the cities and the rivers and I just coloured it in, that just made me feel like I was stupid... you know, and I feel like it's not hard for me to open up a textbook and look at an atlas and write the names down... I think that a certain amount of challenge for my brain is great, but if it's too much challenge, I get overwhelmed... I get frustrated, and I don't want to do anything.

Jessica also shared her thoughts about the importance of adaptations and appropriate supports during her interview:

It's like, when things didn't work out for you, and the class or the teacher couldn't adapt the work to how it worked for you, and I feel like, the only way they did that was if you were absolutely fucking retarded, like if you were autistic, or needed [an EA]... then you got [adaptations], but like, I didn't need [an EA]. Sometimes I needed the help, but I wasn't fucking retarded. Like I didn't have no learning disability that I knew of, or that I know of... So, it's like, to not have [proper support], to sit there and feel like you're just

fucking retarded your whole life, and just get mad at yourself, just like why the fuck am I not normal, why can't I grasp this? When it's like actually, not everyone learns that way. And you know, once you get to high school, you know grade eight, grade nine, then they teach you about learning disabilities, and you're like, what? And yea, so that's like one of the biggest barriers, not having the stuff adapted for you... But it's like, if they aren't willing to adapt... then they're just gonna push [students] through school, you know what I mean, like they're not actually gonna learn anything, they're just gonna sail through school a little bit, and then when they get to college, they're gonna shit themselves because they have no idea what they're doing.

Jessica also discussed her experience of high school as reliant on textbook learning:

Ya. I'm just gonna read this and think that my brain is gonna absorb it, but literally I'm reading, and I've already forgotten the last sentence that I just read... That's useless. How do you, like, "The membrane, something, something..." What the fuck, I'm not gonna remember shit.

Participants often alluded to not being able to understand what they were being taught or what they were supposed to do. For example, both Nova and Skye said they felt dumb for asking questions and not understanding what was expected of them or what they were learning.

Findings from the interviews suggest that providing multiple access points to curriculum is imperative for these students. Findings also suggest that when students were able to successfully engage in learning, it held value for them.

Skye spoke about a math teacher at his alternative program who was able to explain math to him in a way that he could understand for the first time. Now, Skye feels that math is his favourite subject. Even though the teacher was very strict, he was able to help Skye understand

what he was doing in math, and so Skye liked the teacher and the subject as a result. Shevaya also identified one of the teachers at her program as being particularly helpful in supporting her in accessing curricular content that she had not previously understood.

In their interview, Ryden described a time that a teacher helped them feel successful:

We had a sub and she was like really cool, and she was explaining things so good, like good enough for my brain to process it, and I was over here, handing in all these papers, making it rain all these sheets, I was like, “Yeah!”

On the other end of the spectrum, Shevaya shared that she felt her assignments in math were not challenging enough, and when she had asked for more challenging work, she was brushed off. She also described herself as having been an A student in math previous to dropping out of mainstream school, and expressed frustration that she was not given the opportunity to work at a more challenging level. With the lack of response to her request, whether real or perceived, Shevaya seemed to have taken on a resigned attitude towards math, saying that it was boring to her now and she did not want to do it anymore.

The impact that these small moments have had on participants is important to note. According to participants, having meaningful learning tasks that are accessible to them, that is, developmentally-appropriate and adapted according to their learning needs, is an integral factor for their engagement in learning.

Summary: Engagement in learning

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their experiences of engagement in learning. They expressed a desire to be emotionally, agentic and cognitively engaged in learning, and indicated that behavioural engagement might not be a useful indicator of authentic engagement. Participants also identified barriers to engagement, which could be loosely

categorized as life circumstances and learning challenges, both of which require significant adaption and support to overcome.

Research Question 3: How experiences of school influence school engagement

In exploring how marginalized youth felt their experiences of education influenced their engagement in education, there were a variety of themes that emerged from the data. For example, students emphasized the importance of perceived relevance of learning content, opportunities to engage with preferred learning styles, and having a sense of control over their learning environment, all of which combined to suggest the importance of autonomy for student engagement. Participants also discussed how bullying, negative social interactions, and generally feeling isolated or ostracized had a negative impact on their learning experiences, all evidence of the important role that belonging plays in school engagement. The participating students also described how their experiences of learning, and whether they felt successful or unsuccessful in their learning tasks, influenced how they felt about themselves as learners and mediated their motivation for engagement. In other words, the level of competence they felt (or did not feel) influenced how and why they engaged in subsequent learning activities. Overall, participants' descriptions could be interpreted to indicate that, when marginalized students do not experience sufficient autonomy, belonging and competence in the schools, they are more inclined to disengage from school.

Autonomy and engagement

Throughout the interviews, participants described situations where they wished they had had more control, specifically over what they learned, how they learned, and where they learned. The general message was that if they had more autonomy, they would be more motivated to engage in learning. Additionally, for some participants, feeling that they did not have the ability

to influence or impact their learning environment, or to be heard, led to making decisions and taking actions that might not be considered appropriate for school.

Learning and perceived relevance

One common thread throughout the interviews was that often the participants did not view the learning content as relevant to them or their lives, and as a result, they found it hard to motivate themselves to engage in learning. Whether or not students perceive learning to be relevant has been shown to be an influential factor in motivation, and these participants highlighted the importance of taking relevance into consideration when planning for instruction. Participants suggested that teachers take the time to help students see the relevance in their learning so that they can manage their energy, attention and motivation accordingly.

In his interview, Skye specifically mentioned the importance of relevance. When he was describing his preferred learning activities, he specified that they should be hands-on, interactive, and relevant to real life. For example, he had loved going to the Planetarium because he felt it was fun, interesting, relevant to life and existence. Jessica also referenced that learning should be relevant to student lives, and especially to a career of interest:

...If they had that, a specific course, like “You want to be a carpenter when you’re older? Here you fucking go, you’ll be good till you’re in college,” or whatever, and then by college you’re ready for your foundations and ready for your apprenticeship. Boom. Why couldn’t they do that? ...Because if they did that, I’m sure there would be a lot more kids that weren’t high school dropouts.

While programs, including carpentry programs, do exist in the district, they are not typically adapted for students with varying levels of need, which unfortunately left students like Jessica,

that might be interested in them and experience some level of success, taking other classes that she felt were less relevant to her career goals.

Nova and Rose provided some perspective in their interview when they described themselves as having a limited amount of energy, most of which was used to manage their lives outside of school, as well as to regulate themselves well enough to attend school. When learning did not seem to hold meaning for survival, life skills, or job skills, they were more likely to disengage to preserve their remaining energy and focus. Nova suggested that teachers should avoid teaching “filler crap,” and help students identify things that might be necessary life skills, so that students struggling with motivation and attention could try to manage themselves accordingly. Nova felt that if students were able to identify things that were relevant to their current or future needs, they might be more motivated and able to regulate their attention and energy to engage in learning. In other words, if students perceived learning tasks as relevant, and felt they had more autonomy over what they learned, they might find it easier to engage.

How they learn

As previously discussed, the participants had many ideas about what kinds of learning activities they preferred and would be most engaged in, but at the same time, they shared their preferences in a way that indicated they did not feel they were able to choose how they learned or that they were given meaningful options in learning tasks often enough.

Rose, who again was adamant that she disliked social studies (but throughout the interview demonstrated clear interest in social justice) described how she did not care about the Parliament Buildings until a field trip to Victoria in Grade Five when they were physically right in front of her and all of sudden held meaning. Rose shared that she had enjoyed debating as a learning activity, but unfortunately, she had often been told that she was being too

argumentative, “arguing everything”, which left a bitter taste in her mouth. Rose said she really enjoyed hands-on, experiential learning activities, for example, visiting the fish hatchery where students were able to hold full-grown frozen salmon, feed live trout, tour the hatchery, and release the fry they had raised into the creek.

Nova described themselves as a visual learner; they do not enjoy reading, and have a hard time learning through reading activities. Nova likes to watch videos and documentaries, as well as doing interactive and hands-on activities. Rose and Nova mentioned a few documentaries they had watched in class the previous year. Even though I (as their teacher at the time) had forgotten all about the documentaries, the students were describing the people in them and their interactions, as well as reviewing the content in detail. Accessing content in this way had obviously had a great impact on their learning.

Shevaya preferred working on paper over hands-on activities; she described her favourite subjects as “Math, English, anything where I’m writing on a piece of paper really, because then I can sort it out in my head easier.” In the past, Shevaya did not enjoyed learning environments where she was not allowed to listen to music, where desks were in rows and students were required to raise their hands if they had a question. Like other participants, she preferred a more casual and relaxed environment where she could move about when she wanted, and listen to music while she worked. Shevaya felt that she was sufficiently self-motivated to complete her work and did not require or want teachers managing her. Shevaya mentioned that she did appreciate when teachers were available to her for help when needed, especially if they were able to support her in successfully accessing the course content.

In terms of preferred learning styles and interactive activities, math manipulatives in particular came up a couple of times. Jessica and Ryden mentioned having used manipulatives in

elementary school, and how this kind of interactive activity had been helpful and engaging for them at the time. Both participants lamented the discontinued use of math manipulatives in secondary classrooms. Jessica described what she liked about manipulatives:

Yea, using them for addition, multiplication, I love doing that, because you're doing something hands on, you've got your brain fucking thinking, or like you know when you did finger painting or shit like that, like going way younger, but, those were fun because you did things hands[-on], that's what I fucking hate, is when you were a kid, you got to do hands-on things, because you know, your brain is learning, because you know, your brain is a sponge, they want you to grasp it. Well, why is it, as soon as you hit like grade seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, they're like "Nope, your brain's not a sponge anymore! No more hands -on! You're an adult now!"

Ryden described how they had used manipulatives (or tactiles) in the past:

I went to a Montessori school, so a lot of the stuff, like a lot of the [tactiles] that I used to explain my learning really helped me, but once I got pulled out of that school, I didn't understand anything else that anyone else was teaching me, because I didn't have the manipulatives or any of the [tactiles] that I had used in the past, so I didn't get anything that they were teaching me, which didn't help me at all.

Overall, the participants identified a variety of activities and approaches to learning that they felt were most engaging for them. The participants must have experienced these at different points in their schooling, and described feeling competent and engaged in them. The students participating in this study described what could be interpreted as a desire for increased autonomy over how they learn, which could potentially improve their overall engagement.

Learning environments

In the interviews, every participant indicated that they felt they had little to no control, or autonomy, over/in their learning environments. Specifically, participants provided numerous examples of incidents where they did not feel heard or taken seriously by teachers and support staff when reporting incidents of bullying and harassment, and requesting information that was pertinent to their sense of safety.

In her interview, Jessica described feeling powerless and vulnerable when new students started at her program. She had experienced an incident where someone who had physically beaten her previously started attending her program and no one had let her know or checked in with her previous to their arrival.

...[T]hey used to try and give us warnings, back when I first started at (the program), be like “Ok, do any of you guys have issues with this person? Yes? No? Ok we’ll try and solve it”. Literally, we would have to solve the beef before they could even sign the papers to come to the school. But now, people don’t give a fuck... Now, people just show up, you don’t know who the fuck they are, you didn’t even know anybody was coming, and you could have beef with them, you could even, like me, I’ve had people come in where like you know, you’ve had issues with the law with them and like you’re scared of them and you speak up and you’re an advocate for yourself, and then no one listens to you.

It is troubling that this student, who had heard and internalized suggestions that they advocate for their needs and so spoke up, did not feel heard, especially when it comes to basic human rights such as safety and security.

Ryden also expressed that they felt schools should be a safe and secure place: “Your brain needs to develop, and I feel like when you’re in an environment, you know, like a safe,

happy, respectful environment, where you feel wanted and loved, that's a great environment for your brain to learn and grow." Later in the interview, Ryden described a time they took it upon themselves to maintain that safety and security for others, specifically a student with special needs:

Science class was the shittiest class, because there were so many guys in that class that were just complete dicks, just like so rude. There was a [student] that had special needs and I think he had a sort of autism... he walked up to the class without his EA which was odd because he always had his EA... [the student] had come up to the door and he was lost, he didn't know if this was his classroom or not, and the teacher's like "Yah, this is your class," and he had come in... there were some boys behind me and they were making fun of him... I looked at [one of the boys] and I said, "Do you have something fucking to say?" He looked at me and he was like "Whoa," and I was like, "No, what you're doing right now is extremely rude," and that had happened on more than one occasion, and I had to stand up for myself and other people, because they were being completely, utterly shitheads, and it was not okay, and that's why I really hated that school, because there was a lot of negative people that just didn't give a fuck, and I just didn't like it there.

This excerpt from Ryden is a great example of the issues that can arise when students feel that they are not supported in ways that make them feel safe and secure by the adults at school. At times, taking issues into their own hands, even with good intentions, has less than positive outcomes in the big picture.

Rose also related a time when she felt staff were not doing enough to protect student safety at one of the most recent mainstream schools she attended. She described this school as being determinedly progressive and supportive of LGBTQ persons, however Rose perceived this

school to be too extreme, to the point that a male student told staff he identified as female, and was reportedly allowed access to the girls change room. Rose says that he had merely done this to gain access to their private space and that his alleged transgender identity was a fallacy, which made her and her peers feel angry and vulnerable. Staff did “nothing” to help, so Rose took it upon herself to take a number of girls into the boys’ change room and announcing that they now identified as male. She felt that the gender and sexuality boundaries were imbalanced and unfair, and that she was not protected or safe in the school space as a result. Rose was very clear that she does support LGBTQ initiatives, but explained they should be implemented in a way that ensures everyone still feels safe.

While Ryden’s language and Rose’s approach may not be ideal, they could be interpreted as ways that students attempt to gain a sense of autonomy in their learning environments. These examples provide insight into how participants seem to prefer an increased sense of autonomy over what, how and where they learn, and how this increased sense of autonomy could improve their overall school engagement.

Belonging and engagement

As mentioned previously, participants had experienced many negative social interactions that interfered with their learning experiences. School staff, teachers and peers were perceived to be bullying, ostracizing, and/or harassing participants to the point that participants felt unsafe and/or unwelcome in their schools, and therefore they had a difficult time learning. In reflecting on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that students need to feel autonomy, belonging and competence in order to be motivated to engage, it is entirely possible that these negative social experiences interfered with student needs being met, especially when students felt the adults around them were perpetuating or even instigating the problems.

Skye described feeling disconnected from his learning when group projects were assigned, because he felt that no one wanted to partner with him. He said that he could not complete the projects as well by himself, and often failed them as a result. Skye attended LST blocks, and was given a computer with speech to text technology to help with his learning disability, which he found embarrassing to use in the classroom, adding to the negative social pressures he felt. This example suggests that Skye did not feel a sense of belonging (or competence) at school. If these needs were not being met, it is not surprising that Skye disengaged from his mainstream school by dropping out. It is, however, particularly impressive that he then sought out a different school setting, and enrolled himself in an alternative education program.

This negative social impact is also apparent in Nova's discussion of their grade eight science class, where they felt ashamed and embarrassed as a result of their teacher perpetually calling them out in front their peers. Nova, who disclosed having a learning disability and ADD, had a hard time following along with the class and understanding the course content. If Nova was already feeling incompetent, and then felt that they were not secure in their social relationships with both their teacher and peers, it is again, unsurprising that Nova became distressed to the point that their attendance substantially decreased. In other words, Nova did not experience a sense of belonging at school which contributed to their decreased school engagement. Perhaps, choosing whether to attend class or not gave Nova the sense of autonomy over their learning that they were not experiencing otherwise.

In her interview, Shevaya described how peer relationships influenced her throughout elementary and high school. Shevaya emphasized her troubling experiences with bullying in elementary school, to which she ascribed much of her complex mental health struggles.

According to Shevaya, her negative social experiences in elementary school made her eager to experience belonging to a peer group. When she started mainstream high school, Shevaya said she “fell in with the wrong crowd,” and in order to impress them, she started skipping class, using drugs, and engaging in dangerous, reckless, and sometimes illegal, behaviours.

There were numerous and diverse examples of times these students did not feel they belonged at school. For instance, Rose ascertained that she had never truly felt a sense of belonging at school, and as previously mentioned, Ryden felt that no one even noticed whether or not they were in class. However, in most cases, participants were able to share a few positive social interactions that took place at school. For example, Ryden described how meaningful a simple, positive social interaction at school was for them.

I really enjoyed Capture the Flag because like we all like worked together, and it wasn't because I was a girl or I was a boy, or whatever it was, it was just like you know, we wanna win this game, and that was like what mattered and that was fun, and it was good, we all connected, and we all talked, and we all were this like, circle of teamwork, and that made me feel really happy, and you know, when it would end, it would be like “No! One more game! Let's play one more time!” You know, and we would play a couple of games but it was fun... But like, those were some of the best times I remember.

In some cases, like this last example from Ryden, those moments were quite powerful experiences of belonging, something that seemed to be relatively rare for these students.

In general, these examples of (dis)connection and positive relationships in schools underline the integral role that belonging plays in student motivation and engagement. It was clear throughout the interviews that these students value social connection and belonging, and that it may have mediated how and why they engaged in schools.

Competence and engagement

Participants described a variety of trying experiences that they had at schools, many of which could be interpreted as obstacles to feeling competent, including poor student-teacher relationships, the impact of mental health on learning, and their unmet learning needs.

Jessica, who struggled with challenging family dynamics and mental health issues, as well as substance abuse, described herself as incapable of learning French, and blamed her supposed incompetence for why she was never enrolled in secondary French classes:

Yea, see, I remember being in elementary and thinking elementary was hard. I failed Grade Seven French. And then never got put in another French class again, because I was dumb and I couldn't comprehend, like my brain? Like I look at people, and I'm like, "You know another fucking language? Fucking bless you!"

Ryden, who moved between provinces a few times, had a few lengthy hospital stays, and struggled with severe mental health challenges throughout elementary and high school, provided an example of how these factors interfered with feeling successful in their learning:

...I had a lot of issues with being left behind in grades and stuff, and I think that... the teachers didn't really pay attention to me or really help me out with my schooling, [that] really frustrated me and took a lot away from my life. I didn't learn a lot, I didn't learn a lot, I didn't learn as much as I could have if I was learning from when I should have been...

At a different point in the interview, Ryden directly linked the impact of not feeling successful to their choice to not attend classes:

I couldn't function in class. The only things I would go to were Art and Sewing, but sometimes I wouldn't even go to Sewing, because sometimes I would miss two classes

and wouldn't know what the fuck we were doing so then it just made no sense for me to go anymore, so the only thing I would attend was Art.

These examples illustrate the importance of students experiencing success in their learning in order to sustain authentic engagement. Feeling less than competent at school influenced both how Jessica perceived herself as a learner which impacted her course selection, and how and why Ryden engaged in learning. Unfortunately, for these students, the inability of the system to adapt to their needs and provide them access to education that allowed them to experience success in learning has resulted in their perceptions of themselves as learners as less competent and less capable than their peers, and influenced the way they engaged with/in school.

One very prominent theme that emerged through the interviews was the necessity of having highly-skilled teachers and support staff working with student that experience challenges in areas of learning disabilities, mental health, residential instability, substance ab/use, and other barriers to education in both mainstream and alternative education programs. Many participants self-identified as having a variety of disorders, such as anxiety, depression, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, and ADHD, as well as learning disabilities, however, not one participant felt that these needs had been sufficiently addressed or supported by the school system. In fact, during the interview, Jessica asked for clarification on teacher training in addressing mental health in schools.

The importance of having skilled and appropriately resourced staff working with vulnerable students is apparent in listening to the participants talk about how they see themselves as learners. Most participants described themselves as being slower than the average learner, needing things explained to them multiple times, and even used descriptors such as “dumb,” “like a five-year-old,” and “stupid”. When Skye reflected on himself as a learner, he shared that

he perceived his teachers to be frequently annoyed with him when he asked “too many” questions, and that his teachers looked at him like, “You should get this by now.”

In describing themselves as learners, some students contradicted themselves, for example, Jessica flipped back and forth between saying she was quite smart and referencing herself as dumb.

I’m dumb, well I’m not dumb, I’m pretty fucking smart, but I can’t sit there and read a book and you tell me to do something? No! Like the other day, for instance, I was looking at how to build a rabbit hutch, and I looked at the diagrams like a thousand fucking times, looked at the blueprints, like they made sense, I even had to draw them out for myself. But like, even that, I probably, when I decide to go build it, it’s probably gonna take me a thousand fucking times to do it, because like, A – I have no one there to help me, B – it’s, I’ve never done it before.

One interpretation of her contradictory self-description might be that she is struggling to understand who she is as a learner and as a person as a result of the messages she received about herself. Trying to integrate the negative messaging she has received from school about her identity as a learner with her own self-perception seemed to result in conflicting ideas, one possible outcome of not meeting the needs of such diverse learners.

During their interview, Ryden described themselves as a struggling learner with specific but complex needs in the classroom:

I like to know what people are doing, but it needs to be explained in a long form, so it really registers in my brain, because I have like a slow time kind of like with math or science or socials, I’m pretty good with science, I mean I can register it pretty fast, but

something like socials, I like socials to be completely thoroughly explained for me to get it. And if it's not thoroughly explained, I won't know what the fuck I'm doing.

In discussing how she viewed herself as a learner, Rose shared that the messages she consistently heard from teachers was that she was not trying as hard as she could in school and she should make more of an effort. With lots of stress at home, Rose felt her energy was limited and she did what she could, but that it did not translate as "good enough" to her teachers. Rose found this very discouraging. At the time of the interview, Rose shared that she still carried this perception of herself with her.

Finally, Nova shared that the regular message they received in mainstream school was that they were not engaged enough in classroom learning. Nova said "I tried my hardest" but felt it was not interpreted as such by their teachers. Specifically, Nova's experiences in Science 8, where they perceived the teacher to be disrespectful and unkind, had negative repercussions when Nova found it was better to just not attend class, as they felt that maintaining and protecting their mental health was more valuable than any learning that might occur.

As mentioned, participants expressed a clear desire to feel successful in their learning. When these students experienced feeling competent in learning, it held significant meaning for them. Skye discussed how receiving a laptop from his alternative program was very significant for him because he was then able to explore and create digital art, an area in which he felt he had skill. Because of this gift, he was able to be more creative, access the digital art world, and was accepted to Emily Carr University as part of a summer high school program. Ryden's example of feeling successful in science class when they had learned about cells from a substitute teacher demonstrates the importance of perceived competence: "And they were all right, too, and I just felt so good about myself, and I really enjoyed doing it."

Interestingly, Rose's post-interview action project was focussed on competence (Appendix F). "Bobby The Anti-Math Banana" was created by Rose to address feelings of incompetence she had experienced. While incomplete, the comic shows Bobby feeling sad in math class, saying "Some things even bananas don't understand" while his teacher is demonstrating math on the board. The comic includes a conversation between Bobby and his mother after school, where she asks him what is bothering him. She suggests that he asks for help, but he is adamant that bananas do not ask for help. Unfortunately, there was not enough time for Rose to complete the comic, but the choice of topic and the approach were insightful nonetheless.

According to the interview data, not having opportunities to feel competent negatively influenced how these marginalized students felt about themselves and how they engaged in school. Conversely, providing students opportunities to experience success, or feel competent, in their learning had a positive impact on how they felt about themselves and how they engaged in school.

Impact on post-secondary aspirations and engagement

A logical but unexpected theme that arose from the data was the impact of participants' experiences on their post-secondary aspirations. Ryden and Jessica were the only participants to mention post-secondary school specifically, but they suggested some important points.

Ryden brought up post-secondary school a number of times throughout the interview, indicating that they planned to attend some sort of college or university after graduating high school to pursue a career. In the following statement, Ryden summarized the last year of their life, and alluded to their plans for the future:

I think I've created a lot of concrete plans for myself and I don't see them changing any time soon... like going college and that kind of stuff, name another sixteen-year-old person that has already picked out a college... I think I have come extremely far in the last six to eight months, like nobody could fucking believe... from last summer versus now? Holy shit. Last summer I was popping molly every day, I was snorting coke, I was doing everything in the book, I was selling myself, I was on a different part of the world that not everybody experiences in their lifetime, especially at fifteen... and then now, here I am, picking out a college, going to school full-time, at WorkBC, I work, I smoke pot regularly, and you know, I'm mature as fuck...

This casual commenting about attending post-secondary school illustrates how even in the face of so many obstacles and challenges, marginalized students may still aspire to attain a post-secondary education. In listening to their interview responses, it is clear that this student understands that there is value in a higher education.

Jessica also repeatedly referred to post-secondary school, generally questioning secondary schools' preparation strategies (or lack thereof) for marginalized students, and lamenting her journey through education. Interestingly, she suggested a connection between the negative experiences that some students have at elementary and high school with a reluctance to engage in a post-secondary education:

You're pretty much told your whole life to go to school, from kindergarten to grade twelve, that you're forced to go to school, and then they're like, "Oh here's college, you gotta go back to school, too" and then like, people already have that shitty experience of those fucking nineteen years of growing up and going to school... you've been forced to and you hate it so much, so like why would you wanna go back to college?

This perspective draws attention to the bigger picture. The way schools and school staff interact with students not only affects them in the here and now, but extends beyond the school walls and into the potentially life-changing decisions these students make for themselves.

Summary: Key Findings

In summary, data from interviews with six marginalized students enrolled in secondary alternative education programs in District X was analyzed to determine why participants value education, how they experience engagement, and finally, how their experiences might positively or negatively influence their overall school engagement.

Aspects of school that participants found valuable included opportunities to develop employment skills, and to access social networks, resources, and supports such as counselling. Participants described how and why a student values school may change over time, specifically as they grow closer to graduation and independence. One further finding relating to participants' valuation of school was that for some students, barriers to education may not reduce the value that students see in education, however costs of attending may eventually outweigh the benefits, which may lead to disengagement.

In exploring participants' experiences of school engagement, it became evident that the participants expected and wanted to be cognitively, emotionally and agentially engaged in learning, but unfortunately did not seem to experience these forms of engagement very often. Some participants had learned to perform behavioural engagement in school, such as looking at a speaker but not truly listening. For some participants, challenges outside of school acted as barriers to learning, but in some instances could be mediated with effective supports.

Findings related to how participants' experiences of school influenced their school engagement indicated participants felt that if they had more autonomy in how, what and where

they learned, they would be more inclined to engage. Participants highlighted the importance of feeling safe and secure in their social relationships with both peers and teachers; in other words, belonging was important for engagement for these students. Participants also felt that if learning tasks were adapted to help them feel successful and competent, they would be more inclined to engage. Finally, participants expressed that negative experiences in elementary and high school influenced their desire to maintain school engagement through to post-secondary studies.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this study, six secondary students enrolled in alternative education programs participated in interviews to explore how marginalized students engage with/in education. Participants were interviewed over a period of three months in order to gather data related to the following research questions: (1) What value/meaning does education hold for marginalized youth? What do they perceive it adds to their lives? What do they perceive it takes away? (2) How do marginalized youth experience engagement? What does it look like? What does it feel like? (3) How and why do marginalized youth feel their experiences of education influence their engagement? In this chapter, I will share my overall interpretation of the data and review SDT, before reviewing the research questions in relation to the data and literature and outlining the overall implications of the findings.

Before I begin, I feel it is important to acknowledge and thank the individuals who participated in this study, as the goal of this study was access their knowledge and insights, as well as to provide an opportunity for empowerment. I am grateful to the participants for their time, insight, knowledge, passion, humour and trust. They rose to the occasion, understood the need, and took the time to give back to a system that has been less than caring in their experiences. It is my hope that through this platform, their voices, resilience, compassion, and strengths shine. Thank you to Ryden, Skye, Rose, Nova, Jessica and Shevaya. I hope you felt seen, heard, and valued throughout this process.

Overall Finding: SDT, Unmet Needs and Marginalized Youth School Engagement

During this study, one standout message repeatedly came through in all of the interviews. As participants shared their stories of struggle, chaos and sometimes triumph, it became abundantly clear that, through an SDT lens, the current school system was unable to effectively

and consistently meet the needs of the participants in this study, which negatively influenced their school engagement.

To review, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that individuals have a psychological need to feel autonomous, to feel a sense of belonging, and to feel competent in their actions in order to be motivated to engage. In a learning environment, this means that in order to engage, students need to believe that they have some meaningful control over how they learn, that they are accepted and safe in their social relationships, and that they understand the content and are able to experience some success. The underlying piece here is that students must perceive that they are experiencing these things; if students do not perceive themselves as having their needs for autonomy, competence and belonging met, then their needs are not being met, which negatively impacts their motivation and engagement (Archambault et al., 2009).

The data from this study indicates that the participating marginalized students did not seem to perceive themselves as autonomous, belonging, or competent in schools, which according to the literature on SDT, likely influenced their varying and dynamic levels of engagement. Underlying the anger, frustration and confusion the participants expressed, seemed to be a desire for increased autonomy, belonging, and competence, as well as increased overall engagement. This suggests that marginalized students may not experience sufficient autonomy, belonging and competence in schools to effectively mediate the level of engagement typically expected of students, unfortunately adding to the already complicated landscapes of their lives and experiences.

In order to support the reader in making sense of the data in relation to SDT and the multiple axes of school engagement, Table 3 provides a snapshot of participants' reported experiences in relation to SDT Basic Psychological Needs. The table indicates whether the

participants mentioned one or more experiences that might indicate their needs for autonomy, belonging or competence were either met or unmet in that instance. Across the interviews, all participants shared examples that could be interpreted to indicate that their needs for autonomy, belonging and competence were not being met. The table also reveals that only one participant reported an experience that was interpreted as meeting their need for autonomy.

Participant Name	Autonomy		Belonging		Competence	
	Met	Not Met	Met	Not Met	Met	Not Met
Shevaya		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ryden		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Skye		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rose		✓		✓	✓	✓
Nova		✓	✓	✓		✓
Jessica	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

Met: One or more experiences of having this need met
Not Met: One or more experiences of having this need not met

Table 3: Linking participant experiences of mainstream and alternative schools with SDT.

Autonomy

The data collected in this study suggested that marginalized students may experience a reduced sense of autonomy at school. For example, students may feel that they have to learn the way things are set out for them or risk being seen as incompetent or defiant, such as Rose when she was told that she took her debating activities too far and “argued everything,” or when Skye and Nova described feeling that they appeared incompetent for asking repeatedly for support

with their assignments. Overall, the participants provided an abundance of data centering around feeling a lack of control around how and why they engage with education.

In a school setting, autonomy can be described as having a meaningful sense of choice or control over learning contexts (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004). There is much research on the benefit of teaching with student autonomy in mind, as it has been shown to improve cognitive and behavioural engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). Autonomy can be supported in a variety of ways, including in limit setting, assignment structure, minimizing any sense of coercion, and encouraging student voice and choice. Unfortunately, there is also research that shows when teachers feel stressed or challenged, they tend to fall back on more controlling style of teaching, which does little to authentically motivate students to engage in learning (Reeve, 2012).

Researchers have explored how and why teachers increase or reduce student autonomy in classrooms, and have found that teachers will often reduce student autonomy and increase teacher control in response to student displays of disengagement (Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Wallace and Chhuon (2014) go so far as to suggest that the marginalized students in their study experienced classrooms that were “...more often focussed on issues of teacher control and custodial perspectives of classroom management rather than proactively attending to fostering student initiative and thinking” (pp. 952). It is likely that the participants in this study similarly experienced less autonomy than a typical student might, due to teachers interpreting their behaviours as disengaged.

In Dhillon’s (2011) study, her participants felt stigmatized by staff and students due to their personal experiences, strategies for managing substance ab/use, and for mental health disorders that interfered with attendance. Even when marginalized students are able to advocate

for their needs, their requests and concerns may not be heard, or not taken as seriously as they might be. Bullying and various kinds of harassment from staff and students are real issues for many students, who at times feel as though they are at the mercy of noncommittal school staff (Dhillon, 2011).

Brown (1998) explored the disconnection between marginalized students and school staff in her study of urban female students. According to Brown (1998), specifically for marginalized peoples, the expression of emotion is often labeled irrational or hysterical, as a way to police attempts to gain agency within the system. Particularly in the case of female students, when they express unwelcome emotions, such as anger, they are seen as resisting convention; they are stepping outside of the hegemonic expectations of what it means to be female in a binary system and redefining their reality, as well as creating discomfort in those around them (Brown 1998).

In this sense, the act of expressing emotion, such as concern or anger that they are unsafe in school, could be interpreted as an act of insubordination, which serves to further marginalize the individual. According to Brown (1998), silencing the marginalized person, which is a common response, communicates to tell them that they have no right to self-expression, or capacity to initiate change. For some, this leads to students taking matters into their own hands, which can result in less than ideal outcomes such as noncompliance, aggression, or disengagement (Brown, 1998). Brown's (1998) analysis reminds me of Rose's experiences in her mainstream school when she felt that a male student was taking advantage of the school's progressive LGBTQ protocols, as well as her plea for help when she was groped by a male student in the hallway. If marginalized students are not given the space to speak up and speak out, it may impact their perception of autonomy in school, carrying negative repercussions which can influence their engagement.

In some sense, students have a (limited) choice to attend school or not, but generally they feel they have to attend to meet the demands of others, though as Jessica said, "...no one is holding a gun to your head and telling you to go to school." Students like Shevaya demonstrated a strategy for gaining a sense of control over her life when she chose to fully disengage from school in grade seven and eventually re-engage in secondary school. Shevaya described feeling unheard and unsafe at school, and when she could no longer bear to attend (as demonstrated by her concurrent attempted suicide), she removed herself. This grasp for control could be viewed in part as a result of schools being unable to meet the needs of vulnerable and marginalized students like Shevaya.

Marginalized students may be living quite autonomously outside of school, and so may experience a reduction in autonomy when they attend school which could cause friction. One example from this study comes from Ryden, who, while experiencing a plethora of complex family dynamics and mental health challenges, was expected to get themselves and sometimes a younger neighbor to school without an adult. Students may also be expected to independently make choices that are in line with keeping school a priority, even over their own wellbeing, such as attending and learning regardless of mental health issues, trauma, or other concerns. For example, Jessica described that she was expected to attend school regularly regardless of having a sleep disorder and a myriad of other life stressors that made it difficult for her to fall asleep at an appropriate time to wake up for school.

As previously mentioned, some of the challenges that come with the impact of oppression and trauma may result in youth taking up strategies for survival that are seen as maladaptive in a school setting (Blair & Raver, 2015). For instance, students may react without reflection, seem overly rigid in some areas, such as classroom routines, and may seemingly lack any control in

other areas, such as self-regulation or the use of aggression (Teague, 2013). These in turn can have negative social repercussions, for example staff responses to a student that seems out of control is to reduce student autonomy by increasing teacher control (Reeve, 2012). Unfortunately for students who have experienced trauma, this can further the original injury leading to increased behaviour problems (Dutro & Bien, 2014). Finally, when students feel they have no other choice, the data from this study suggests that marginalized students may withdraw or disengage from school as a result of their need for autonomy not being sufficiently met.

Belonging

Belonging, a perceived sense of being respected, valued and secure in social relationships related to the student's learning environment, is associated with increased emotional engagement, increased sense of wellbeing, positive attitudes toward school, and increased internal motivation (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Smith et al., 2007; Wang & Peck, 2013). Previous research regarding belonging has made clear links between a strong sense of belonging and increased school engagement for both typical and marginalized students, indicating the importance of facilitating connections between students and school (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Tilbury et al., 2014; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

Participants in this study felt that school presented opportunities to experience belonging, by meeting people that share interests or lifestyles through clubs or school activities, as well as in classrooms. Some participants found positive connections in the more informal aspects of schooling, like in the smoke pit. For some marginalized youth, school may be the only place they find a sense of belonging. According to the participants, youth with unmet needs for belonging may go looking for connections anywhere they can find them, for example, succumbing to peer pressure to use substances, commit crimes, or skip school in order to initiate or maintain social

connections. Additionally, participants reported substantial negative peer interactions that over time led to poor self-esteem, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies.

Unfortunately, alongside the opportunities for connection comes the possibility of conflict, which can be intense, take place over long periods of time, and have lasting, devastating effects. Social issues like bullying, harassment, and social ostracism can leave students feeling physically and emotionally unsafe at school. Particularly concerning are the stories of teachers' actions and words impacting students so negatively, as in Dhillon (2011). Adults in the school are responsible for creating, maintaining and influencing school culture through modeling values and behaviours (Hargreaves, 2000). Negative messaging from teachers, whether purposeful or accidental, has been shown to influence student aspirations, sense of self-efficacy and educational competence, so transgressions should be taken quite seriously (Tilbury et al., 2014).

Not only are these negative social experiences not conducive to belonging, they can act as barriers to engagement, and for some students, like Nova, force students to choose between their wellbeing and school expectations. Nova, who at the time was living in an unpredictable and unsafe home environment, experienced bullying at their mainstream high school. While this was stressful and unpleasant, it did not appear to be as impactful as their experience with their Science 8 teacher. Nova, who has now been diagnosed with a learning disability, recalled feeling confused often in the class, and when they asked for support from the teacher, Nova reported being made to feel stupid and dumb, being regularly called out in front of their peers for their confusion. When Nova discussed this experience of school, they described the impact that the teacher-student relationship had on their self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as their poor sense of belonging in the classroom. Nova was already feeling disconnected from their peers due to bullying, but then also began to feel disconnected from the school staff as well. Eventually, as

Nova described, they stopped attending Science 8, then most classes, as it was too stressful and overwhelming, and attending would require Nova to put school ahead of their own wellbeing.

Nova provided a great example of how marginalized students' need for belonging may not be met in schools. Nova was a student experiencing chronic stress at home, struggling with an undiagnosed learning disability and undiagnosed mental health challenges, and being bullied by peers. Instead of attempting to engage with Nova on their terms and finding them appropriate supports, Nova's Science 8 teacher actively criticized them, on an ongoing basis and in front of peers, leading to Nova choosing to disengage from not just that course, but from school in general.

As with Nova, the presence of supportive, encouraging adults can be critical for marginalized students. For vulnerable youth in particular, positive relationships can function as protective factors, however are much more difficult to access for youth struggling with homelessness, substance abuse and/or mental illness, for whom access to caring relationships, both outside of and within the school, is often insubstantial and weak (Dhillon, 2011; Dutro & Bien, 2014; Smith et al., 2007; Tilbury et al, 2014).

Because interactions with others are dynamic, relative, and made meaningful by the individuals experiencing them in bilateral and often transformative social processes, students must be treated as human beings with needs and capacities for care, trust and compassion, or schools risk leaving them feeling excluded, humiliated, and eventually indifferent. If marginalized students like Nova do not have their needs for belonging met in schools, they may have little motivation to stay engaged.

Competence

The joy and passion with which participants spoke about their moments of academic success led me to believe that experiences of feeling competent were meaningful, impactful, and valuable to marginalized students. Unfortunately, it also seemed that those moments were few and far between. At varying points, participants described themselves as dumb or less able than their peers, and they had few examples of times that they felt successful in learning compared to the times that they felt less than successful. There was a sense of shame, sometimes covered up by bravado, when participants described themselves as struggling learners who asked “too many” questions, were often frustrated and confused about materials and tasks, and were anxious about asking for help.

According to SDT literature, competence can be understood as the need of individuals to feel a sense of understanding and success while learning (Stefanou et al. 2004). Competence has been positively correlated with increased intrinsic motivation, and in turn, increased behavioural and cognitive engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). Teachers can support competence in the classroom by providing optimally challenging work, appropriate tools for learning tasks, and feedback focussed on student efficacy and skill-building as opposed to outcomes (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). As was indicated by participants in this study, previous research suggests that marginalized students may not view themselves as academically successful or capable, and may hold lower aspirations for themselves (Tilbury et al., 2014).

As students with a variety of learning difficulties, mental health issues, and challenging life circumstances, it is not surprising that academics were a challenge for participants, as these factors can heavily impact classroom learning. Mental health and chronic stress have been proven to have interrelated relationships with cognitive function, and so can have diverse and

significant effects on student learning, executive function, self-regulation, and engagement (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Blair & Raver, 2015; Viljoen et al., 2016). For example, students with depression, like Nova and Shevaya, often experience slower cognitive processing and interruptions in short-term memory, while PTSD, from traumatic events in their personal lives, can affect memory and attention (Viljoen et al., 2016). So, as Nova shared, feeling confusion around learning tasks and requiring extra support to understand material, could be expected as a result of their personal challenges.

Throughout the study, participants gave the impression that feeling a sense of competence while learning was not a common experience for them. According to Nova and Rose, despite whatever tumultuous events were happening at any given time, they were expected to put aside their troubles and focus on the learning tasks at hand. Failure to do so reflected poorly on them, and characterized them as lazy, incompetent or careless. Despite the barriers these participants were experiencing, the messaging they received from their teachers and school staff was that they were not trying hard enough, and that was why they were not successful. In the literature, this is often referred to as the *myth of meritocracy*, whereby one is successful if they try hard enough (Vadaboncoeur & Portes, 2002). Skye and Nova described how this was hurtful, shameful and damaging to their self-concept, prevented them from accessing the supports that could enable them to be successful in school, and instead prompted them to disengage from learning, and eventually from school.

According to SDT, if students are not able to regularly experience feeling competent in schools, then their psychological needs for competence are not being met, and it is not surprising that they would then tend to disengage. Tilbury et al. (2014) state, “Children should be able to enjoy school even if the results are not strong” (pp. 456). If students are not provided with the

tools and materials required to meet their learning needs by experiencing joy, interest and a sense of success, then they are less likely to experience a sense of competence, which leads to an increased chance of disengagement.

Implications of unmet needs

In this study, the standout message that participants shared was that they were not satisfied in their experiences of school, and that they wished to be more engaged but were not able to, for a variety of reasons, some of which were external to the school system and some internal. While the school system is not meant to ameliorate students' individual life circumstances, it can alter its approaches to meeting student needs. It is well within the realm of possibility to negate some of the issues identified by the participants in this study, and it is definitely possible to better meet the psychological needs of all students so that they may experience a sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence at school.

From the perspective of this study, school engagement is influenced by social contexts, social interactions, and both student and teacher perceptions; therefore, school engagement is not solely a function of the individual learner. As the participants indicated, and many researchers agree, when students feel seen, heard, supported and valued by their teachers and school staff, their motivation and engagement significantly increase (Archambault et al., 2015; Lessard, Caine & Clandinin, 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Wagner, Monson & Hart, 2016; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). If motivation mediates engagement, it is crucial that educators and researchers take into account the variety of factors that influence motivation, as well as work towards understanding the roles they play in learning, and learn how to better support students in feeling more authentically motivated and engaged in schools.

Moving into the next section of this chapter, I will explore how participants' responses align with literature around school engagement, as well as link back to SDT and student needs for autonomy, belonging and competence.

Research Question 1: How and why do marginalized students value education?

This question sought to explore the motivation behind student attendance, a necessary factor in school engagement. I was curious as to why students in duress attempted to engage in school, even if superficially. Most students initially responded with a comment about attending school to meet an external requirement, familial, legal or ministerial, however, during the interviews most participants eventually identified factors they found valuable in education. Some participants discussed attendance as variable dependent on their needs at any given time.

Primarily, attending school provided students with the opportunity to develop employment skills, as well as access social networks, resources, and supports. Participants also described their valuing of school as changing over time, specifically, school increased in value as participants drew closer to graduation and financial independence. Finally, the students in this study expressed a sort of impending stress related to becoming independent, sometimes related to aging out of government care.

It was quickly apparent that these students were not attending in order to understand themselves, others or the world better. No one mentioned that they enjoyed learning for learning's sake, that they wanted to know more about a particular topic, or that they enjoyed challenging themselves. To me, this speaks of the external motivation that seems central to these marginalized students' school engagement. Possibly, the participants' motivation was primarily external because their priorities were focussed more on daily survival, or possibly, because their psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence were not sufficiently met, making

it difficult for them to identify or access the internal motivation that is necessary for meaningful engagement (Reeve, 2012).

Job skills

Participants in this study frequently mentioned school as an access point for the development of job skills, a finding backed by Flower, McKenna, Haring and Pazey (2015) in their study of marginalized youth close to graduating secondary school in the United States. Their study found that post-secondary employment was a point of focus for participants, and they viewed school as a way to train for job skills such as job etiquette, socializing, discipline, attendance, punctuality, and sometimes knowledge that is directly related to career choice. Rutman and Hubberstey's (2016) study also supports this finding when they state that their participants were "...well aware of the importance of completing Grade 12 in terms of their future employment, training, and post-secondary education" (pp. 43). Finally, Smith et al. (2007) listed "wanting a job" as one of the most common reasons disengaged students returned to school. Participants from this study, such as Jessica, Rose and Ryden, identified post-secondary employment as one of their motivating reasons for attending school. Jessica was focussed on building skills to get into a trades program, while Rose expressed her desire to be financially independent by attaining a job higher than entry level. Ryden also planned to attend postsecondary school and attain employment.

Social networks

The students participating in this study listed accessing social networks at school as valuable, explaining that some of their friends had had incredibly meaningful, and sometimes life-saving, effects on them. Similarly, Smith et al. (2007) reported that having friends attending the same school was motivating, with 39% of respondents (n = 339) identifying the presence of

friends as factor in their school attendance. Relatedly, Flower, McKenna, Haring and Pazey (2015) discuss the importance of social support systems for marginalized students transitioning out of secondary. While their study did not specify whether the participants' friends attended the same school or not, they listed a number of positive influences friends can have on marginalized students, such as encouraging the completion of coursework and school in general. In the current study, it was clear that social connection and social networking, or belonging, held great meaning for participants. Every participant mentioned that school was an important place to meet people, make connections, and stay connected to peers. Ryden seemed particularly aware of this, as they discussed a variety of social situations and peer interactions that were possible because of school. For example:

We would all meet out in the smoke pit at lunch, and those were times that I really cherish, because we would all screw off or like skip school, they're not good things, but they're really great memories, because if I would have never gone to school or whatever, I wouldn't know like half the people I know today...

Interestingly, Lightfoot, Stein, Tevendale and Preston (2011) listed social support as a potential protective factor for marginalized youth. In their study of homeless American youth, the authors found that increased social support, in combination with bolstered self-esteem may help youth in developing the problem-solving and planning skills associated with reduced risk-behaviours. Ryden spoke to this in the interviews when they expressed that they would not know if they would still be alive were it not for some friends made at school.

Resources

Some participants in the current study discussed the value of having access to resources in their decision to attend school, a finding that is supported by Rutman and Hubberstey (2016).

Specifically, Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) listed the participant-identified differences between mainstream secondary schools and alternative secondary schools. Three of the six positive differences were about increased availability of resources such as access to a youth worker for support, as well as access to food and wraparound supports. Smith et al. (2007) also identified non-academic trainings, such as First Aid or Food Safe as motivating resources marginalized students can and do access through schools. Participants in the current study listed similar resources, in addition to increased supports in accessing community resources. For example, in the interview with Jessica, there was a discussion about how helpful it is for support workers to help students access appropriate sexual health medical care.

Family influences

A theme that arose during some discussions around the value of education was the impact of family perspectives and messaging. In the literature regarding school engagement, family is identified as having potentially both positive and negative influence. Flower, McKenna, Haring and Paze (2015) discuss family as "...a significant source of support or encouragement regarding school completion and preparation for postsecondary life" (pp. 222). In their study of marginalized students in mainstream schools, the participants described how their families had positively influenced their decisions and provided positive role models. Rutman and Hubberstey (2016), who interviewed youth-in-care, also identified families' wishes or expectations as a motivating factor in attending school.

Alternately, Tilbury et al. (2014) offer insight into a different familial experience. Tilbury et al. (2014) also studied youth-in-care, but on a much larger scale (n =202) in Australia. In their article, Tilbury et al. (2014) review some educational barriers that are specific to youth-in-care, including general family circumstance, and being raised in environments that do not support

education. In their exploration of alternative education in BC, Smith et al. (2007) also discussed the possible negative influences families can have on youth, including difficult situations like family members attempting suicide, experiencing abuse, or abusing substances; family members having had negative experiences with education "...making them reluctant to facilitate attendance, engage with or even visit their children's school" (pp. 18).

In the current study, both perspectives were present, as participants described their home lives and family matters as affecting their school engagement, for better or worse. If a family member had a negative experience at school, this perspective often influenced the family narrative around education. For example, Jessica described her parent's negative views of the school system, which were passed down to her, and which seemed to add to the overall distrust she expressed about the system. In general, according to participants, it was requirement of most families that the students attend and graduate school, but there was variation in how this was expressed and carried out.

Priorities

The results from this study also suggest that while participants experienced barriers to education such as residential instability or hunger, these experiences did not reduce the value that these students saw in education. Rather the costs of attending school, such as experiencing negative emotions associated with school or even just the expenditure of energy needed to manage their attention on learning, sometimes seemed to outweigh the benefits, depending on individual circumstances. This finding is supported by Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) in their study of marginalized youth in BC, specifically youth-in-care, who found that for about one third of their participants (n=12), attendance was variable and not always a priority. Smith et al. (2007), who also studied marginalized youth in BC, listed competing responsibilities as a reason

that student attendance might not be a priority, such as working to financially support their families or themselves, or caring for younger siblings. Participants in this study, such as Nova and Shevaya, provided other examples when they shared their experiences. In both cases, the students reportedly disengaged with school due to mental health challenges that were compounded by school events. For Nova, dealing with depression and anxiety in general, combined with negative peer and teacher relationships became too overwhelming for them, so they withdrew. For Shevaya, complicated family situations and negative peer relations resulted in self-harming and suicidal behaviours, as well as an eating disorder, and school became less important than self-preservation.

Value of school changing over time

According to the results from this study, participants experienced a shift over time in how they valued school, specifically valuing school more as they came closer to graduation and independence. This finding was also reflected in Rutman and Hubberstey's (2016) report in an interview with one participant in particular, who mentioned they had become more motivated to attend school as they grew closer to completing their General Education Development (GED). In the current study, Jessica and Ryden both specifically mentioned that the level of importance they ascribed to school shifted over time. Both participants described feeling more carefree and less focussed on school when they were younger. Ryden provided some insight: "...how I looked at it, was like, grade eight, grade nine and grade ten, they don't really count. You know what I mean? The only things that really count towards college and university and shit are grade ten, eleven and twelve..."

Increased stress with time

Relatedly, participants in the current study cited increased stress as they grew closer to graduation and independence. This observation is supported by Rutman and Hubberstey (2016), who note that when youth-in-care age out of care at 19 years old, they lose most, if not all, of the supports that they once had, for example, support workers and financial support for food, clothing and shelter. In addition, research indicates that youth are often ill prepared for independent living, lacking skills in financial literacy, cooking and general household care (Smith et al., 2007). In the current study, this is touched on by Jessica, who at the time, had just aged out of government care: “And unfortunately, any teen that has lost their life because of that, I don’t blame ‘em, honestly, like I panicked, the day before my birthday, I was crying and hyperventilating because no one knew what to do.”

Valuing School: Implications

This study illustrated the complexity of factors that impact students’ motivation to attend school including the development of employment skills, access to social networks, and access to resources and the influences of family and peers. Participants also discussed how their priorities shifted over time. Building on the findings in this study, combined with previous literature, several implications can be identified. These include the importance of fostering strong connections with marginalized youth, supporting access to employment skills training, working to reduce barriers to education, and building empathy and understanding for marginalized youth in the school system.

Increased access to job skills training or career preparation options through schools has been suggested in previous literature (Smith et al., 2007; Tilbury et al., 2014). Because social networks, including friends, peers and family, play an important role in school attendance for

marginalized youth, both positively and negatively, strategies such as employing empathic listening, facilitating positive peer connections and providing wraparound supports may mitigate some negative aspects (Lightfoot, Stein, Tevendale & Preston, 2011; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

This study found that marginalized youth were often motivated to attend school to access resources such as employment skills, resources such as food, and various supports such as social systems or increased access to medical care. An implication drawn from this finding include that marginalized youth attendance may increase with increased access to job skill development, tangible resources such as transit passes, and various social support systems.

Another implication from this study is that marginalized youth benefit from having access to resources and supports that mediate barriers to education, such as residential instability, hunger and transportation. Despite having been well documented by a variety of researchers, including Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) and Smith et al. (2007), marginalized youth in BC continue to struggle to overcome these barriers. Schools can support by providing and supporting access to resources such as housing supports, food banks, medical care and transportation. Providing meals at school, holding clothing swaps, or finding other ways to reduce barriers such as having laundering facilities on site can also support marginalized youth in attending school.

This study also found that how and why marginalized youth value education may be the result of their life experiences and contexts, including family and peer influences. As supported by previous literature, the influences of family and peers can have positive or negative effects (Flower, McKenna, Haring & Pazey, 2015; Tilbury et al., 2014; Rutman and Hubberstey, 2016; Smith et al., 2007). As a result, educators and school staff may find it effective to avoid placing blame, and instead attempt to work to build strong connections with marginalized youth.

This study found that marginalized youth may shift their priorities according to need and life circumstance at any given time, which is in line with previous research (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). An implication that can be drawn from this is that when mental health, family responsibilities, or other needs arise and shift priorities for students, school staff may find it helpful to be mindful of school engagement as a dynamic and fluid concept.

Research Question 2: How Marginalized Youth Experience Engagement

Throughout the interviews, participants described their experiences of successful learning, as well as many more moments of feeling misunderstood, targeted by teachers and peers, and incapable of learning in typical ways. Interpreting their descriptions using an SDT lens, it seemed that the participants did not view behavioural engagement as necessarily relevant to overall engagement. However, participants repeatedly expressed expectations of and a desire for opportunities to be increasingly cognitively, emotionally and agentially engaged in their learning environments.

Table 4 (below) provides an overview of participants' reported experiences with the various components of school engagement. The table indicates whether each participant reported one or more positive or negative experience that could be interpreted in relation to affective, behavioural, cognitive or affective engagement. Table 4 also demonstrates whether the participant indicated that they would be interested in having increased opportunities for affective, behavioural, cognitive or agentic engagement. Interestingly, the components with the least number of (interpreted) positive experiences are behavioural and agentic, however there is a clear desire for increased agency according to participants, but not for behavioural engagement.

Participant Name	Affective			Behavioural			Cognitive			Agentic		
	Neg	Pos	Opp	Neg	Pos	Opp	Neg	Pos	Opp	Neg	Pos	Opp
Shevaya	×		✓	×	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	×		✓
Ryden	×	✓	✓	×	✓		×	✓	✓	×	✓	✓
Skye	×	✓	✓	×			×	✓	✓	×		✓
Rose	×	✓	✓	×			×	✓	✓	×		✓
Nova	×	✓	✓	×			×		✓	×		✓
Jessica	×		✓	×			×		✓	×	✓	✓

Reported Negative Experience = Neg
Reported Positive Experience = Pos
Indicated Desire for Increased Opportunity = Opp

Table 4: Linking participant experiences with school engagement.

Successful experiences of engagement

Participants in the current study shared moments of feeling successfully and meaningfully engaged at school. In general, these experiences were most often moments in learning that could be interpreted as being emotionally and cognitively engaging, and in which students felt successful. Wallace and Chhuon (2014) discuss the importance of emotional and cognitive engagement for marginalized students in their study of urban youth of colour in the US. Youth identified discussion-based learning, asking and sharing opinions as meaningful, and the authors described how this type of learning creates opportunities for students to be heard, allowing for emotional and cognitive engagement, and I would argue, agentic engagement as well.

Participants in the current study shared specific examples of the types of learning activities in which they felt most engaged. For example, Rose described a socials project

requiring her to plan an imperialist invasion into France. According to Rose, she found this project engaging because it became relevant and interesting to her when she felt that she was in charge of the army, as well as challenging because she had to decide on invasion strategies then compare them with those of her peers. Skye described his favourite types of learning activities as hands-on, interactive, and connected to everyday life. One of his favourite learning experiences was attending a field trip to the Planetarium in Vancouver. He felt it was interesting and relevant to his interests, which through an SDT lens could be interpreted as allowing for emotionally and cognitively engagement.

Experiences of disengagement

Throughout this study, participants provided numerous examples of times they found it difficult to be engaged in their learning tasks. Primarily, feeling misunderstood by teachers, targeted by teachers or peers, and being unable to learn in “typical” ways, were identified as barriers to school engagement for these students.

Throughout research into marginalized youth, there are plenty of examples of how students may be misunderstood by teachers and school staff. As previously mentioned, Dhillon (2011) describes how the participants in her study of homeless female youth in Canada were often thought to be behaviourally disengaged, when instead they were lacking in adequate resources such as money to pay fees, an address with which to register, or faced other barriers to behaving as expected. Brooks and Goldstein (2008) provide further insight into students being misunderstood when they describe John, an American high school student with a learning disability attending a mainstream school. In meeting with John’s teachers, one of the authors asked them to describe John. One teacher used descriptors such as defiant, oppositional, unmotivated, lazy and irresponsible, while the other described him as struggling with learning

and requiring increased support. Participants in this study such as Skye and Nova similarly described feeling misunderstood. Both students have significant learning disabilities, and both described expressing confusion in class, asking frequently for clarification, and receiving regular feedback that indicated they were frustrating and annoying their teachers.

Some participants in this study described feeling targeted, or picked on, by teachers and peers in their mainstream schools. According to the literature, this is a common concern for marginalized students (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Dhillon, 2011; Tilbury et al., 2016; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Dhillon (2011), for example, detailed how her participants' street lives often followed them into schools, resulting in teachers and students ostracizing or harassing them for their lived experiences. Wallace and Chhuon (2014) describe how pervasive it is for students of colour that "... the absence of classroom engagement is often misconstrued as students' lack of care for their education and their futures" (pp. 957). In Tilbury et al.'s (2016) study of youth-in-care in Australia, participants described their school experiences of being targeted by teachers and peers for their life circumstances: "I got picked on by other kids and sometimes teachers... like victimizing us... [saying] things like, 'Foster kids think they can get away with everything, like not having a uniform,'" and "They'd make smart remarks like 'At least my mum loves me'" (pp. 462 - 463). In the current study, Nova shared their challenges in attending Science 8 class in their mainstream school. According to Nova, the teacher was often rude and short with them. Nova felt picked on daily in front of their peers for not understanding class content, which was embarrassing and hurtful, and eventually led to Nova not attending class.

Additionally, participants described feeling frustrated that they were not able to learn in typical ways. Teachers would give them tasks that were not adapted for them, which made it difficult for them to cognitively engage. The participants also spoke of barriers to cognitive

engagement, such as mental illnesses that impeded their ability to think about learning. Tilbury et al. (2016) also argued that appropriately adapted learning tasks are necessary for meaningful student engagement, in addition to timely assessments of student learning needs, including setting. Without these, Tilbury et al. (2016) argue that students are more likely to disengage. In terms of how mental illness can impact learning, Viljoen et al. (2016) outline how mental health has a complex interrelated relationship with cognitive function, memory and attention, and therefore can have diverse and significant effects on student learning and engagement. According to Smith et al. (2007), many marginalized BC students experience mental health challenges, symptoms and disorders resulting from stressful or traumatic life experiences which impact their cognition, abilities and behaviours.

Regardless of learning disabilities or mental health challenges, according to the current study, participants felt they were still expected to act in ways that communicated engagement as defined by teachers. For example, when Nova was younger, they were struggling with a tumultuous home-life and complex mental health challenges, as well as an undiagnosed learning disability. Yet, according to Nova, they were regularly shamed in class in front of peers for their inability to grasp curricular concepts. When it comes to adapting for student needs, Jessica and Ryden discussed their experiences of having unmet learning needs in their mainstream schools. In her interview, Jessica expressed feeling that only students with severe and formally recognized needs had learning supports, while Ryden felt that they were not properly supported because the professionals working with him did not have an understanding of his needs:

...I really didn't think people understood what was wrong with my brain, or why I couldn't learn this properly, and instead of trying to get me extra help, they just kind of

went, “Oh okay, let’s just put you over there and we’ll leave you there and you know you do your thing...”

Behavioural engagement

Behavioural engagement is often used as a visual indicator of student engagement; a student appears to be on task and is not causing issues for others, therefore they are engaged in their learning task (Archambault et al., 2009). Participants in this study, however, suggested that monitoring behavioural engagement might not be the best indicator of authentic student engagement. The literature around behavioural engagement suggests that researchers are aware that behavioural engagement is often the focus of teachers and school staff, likely because it is the most disruptive to learning (Wang & Peck, 2013). It is important to note, however, indicators of behavioural engagement may offer an incomplete picture. For example, in the study by Wang and Peck (2013) of student engagement profiles, behavioural disengagement was often an indicator of pre-existing emotional discomfort and cognitive disengagement, suggesting that behavioural disengagement arose after students were cognitively disengaged and emotionally distressed. Additionally, students with low emotional engagement or cognitive engagement were at risk for mental health or academic failure respectively, however were often overlooked by teachers as being at risk.

When participants in this study described being engaged in learning, they connected these experiences of engagement to emotions such as interest, joy and curiosity, but the behavioural actions associated with engagement were harder to identify or define from the interview data. In fact, during the interviews for the current study, Shevaya and Rose detailed the ways that they had feigned being behaviourally engaged in learning tasks, even if they were not emotionally or cognitively engaged, in order to escape teacher attention. Rose described how she would pretend

to read textbooks while on her phone, or just thinking of other things, and Shevaya described ways she would secretly listen to music while pretending to focus solely on her work.

Desire for increased engagement

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed what could be interpreted as a desire for increased cognitive, affective and agentic engagement. Requests for relevant learning content and tasks came from every participant, as well as suggestions that school staff take the time to really listen to students and get to know them and their learning needs.

In this study, participants suggested teachers should try to include content that is interesting and relevant to students to pique their interest or affect, and engage their cognitive skills in order to better engage marginalized students. Similarly, in the study by Flower, McKenna, Haring and Pazey (2015), participants outlined the importance of content relevance, such as finding ways to connect learning to students' current or future lives or interests in order to increase cognitive and emotional engagement. This sentiment was echoed in the current study by participants such as Jessica and Nova. Jessica discussed how she would have been more motivated to engage in school if she had been able to do tasks related to her career goals, and Nova suggested that teachers could increase engagement by helping struggling students to identify the relevance in what they were learning.

Agentic engagement, having a sense of influence over one's learning environment, though extremely valued by participants, did not seem to be a common experience for these students. The participants seemed to share two things. Within their learning environments, participants wanted to be authentically heard. They wanted the teachers and staff to understand what they were asking for and sharing without being bogged down by tone of voice and word choice. Participants also wanted to be authentically represented in their learning environments,

meaning they wanted to see themselves reflected in their schools and classrooms, to be able to see how they have had an impact on or influenced their learning environments.

Wallace and Chhuon (2014) discuss the important role that agentic engagement can have in classrooms, and how bidirectional social processes in classrooms can form student identities as learners. Consistent with their descriptions, participants in the current study had clear suggestions for and interest in being agentially engaged, for example, they described requesting clarification, seeking understanding in regard to why content was taught, and negotiating spaces and tasks with school staff. Shevaya placed great importance on how schools respond to bullying. When asked what kinds of things make schools better, her focus was primarily on how staff could improve through empathic listening, taking student concerns seriously, and taking meaningful action when students have concerns. Her secondary thought, when prompted, was around letting students learn in ways that make sense to them, for example, letting them listen to music if it helps. Interestingly, all of Shevaya's suggestions are examples that can be found in the research on agentic engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Tilbury et al., 2016; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

How Marginalized Youth Experience Engagement: Implications

Youth that participated in this study felt that they had not had many opportunities for success, however the times they had felt engaged and successful shared attributes with research-based suggestions for increasing student engagement, such as providing opportunities for students to feel successful, supporting the development of social skills within learning contexts, and cultivating students' inner motivational resources (Tilbury et al., 2014). In the interviews, participants contributed a variety of ideas about the styles of learning styles and tasks they found the most engaging. One suggested resource for creating more of these opportunities in

classrooms is *Universal Designs for Learning* (Novak, 2016). The narrative that Universal Designs for Learning (UDL) relies most heavily on, is that teachers can deliberately and proactively develop learning tasks that eliminate barriers for all students. By providing varied and flexible access points to learning, teachers are encouraged to shift away from “fixing” students, to meeting their needs and supporting them in reaching meaningful success in learning.

The participants in this study described feeling unsuccessful in the majority of their learning tasks. They reported feeling misunderstood, targeted, and incompetent. As previously mentioned, Dhillon (2011) notes that often the “problem” with marginalized students is seen as inherent within the students themselves, as opposed to the system that is not prepared to meet the needs of its participants. I would agree, as the domains known to be impacted by trauma and mental illness, such as executive functioning, cognitive ability, affect regulation, and behaviour regulation, are heavily relied on for many learning tasks. Regardless of their personal contexts, students are expected to rapidly acquire the ability to balance their needs and impulses with the requirements of their classrooms. Some important implications to take into consideration include the need for teachers and school staff to be trained to recognize and support students with mental health challenges and/or trauma disorders (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

A pattern noted in this study was that students with stronger connections to school seemed to be more inclined to attend and engage. This is reflected in the literature as well, which suggests that students with strong connections to school are more likely to attend (Smith et al., 2007). An implication that can be drawn from this may be about the importance of facilitating connections between marginalized youths and schools. Studies about fostering connections with typical youth suggest teachers and school staff build empathy for students; reduce or eliminate shame, embarrassment and humiliation when possible; and focus with strengths-based models

(Brooks & Goldstein, 2008). Unfortunately, literature that discusses how to foster connections with marginalized youths is limited and not situated in schools, but it suggested building positive, consistent social supports, opportunities for co-learning and teamwork, and creating a safe, comfortable and fun space to engage (Smith, Newman-Thomas & Stormont, 2015). In these studies, marginalized youth specifically outlined the importance of having opportunities for youth voice to be expressed and validated, as well as the need to have access to adult staff that are flexible, adaptable, and have a strengths-based practice.

These suggestions are not only in line with SDT Basic Needs Theory which suggests individuals need to feel a sense of autonomy, belonging and competence in order to be motivated to engage, but were also reflected in the interviews for this study. As such, one implication of this study is that researchers and educators work towards developing a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to both fostering and researching school engagement for marginalized students. In addition, incorporating feminist and trauma-informed theories to more thoroughly and accurately capture the complex realities and perceptions of marginalized youth may well be a valuable contribution to research into school engagement. More traditional views of school engagement may lead to a misinterpretation of student behaviours, not only preventing the inclusion of marginalized students, but damaging their sense of belonging, competence and autonomy, both within the school walls and beyond.

Wang and Peck (2013) speak to this when they note that behavioural disengagement tends to draw the most attention, but suggest that low cognitive and affective engagement combined with behavioural disengagement are more troublesome, in that they are more likely to be indicative of dropout. As Shevaya and Rose indicated, just because students are performing specific actions, it does not necessarily mean they are authentically engaged. Perhaps

behavioural engagement could be viewed as a starting point for direct-teaching strategies of attention management for typical students, but students with more complex needs may benefit from an adjustment of expectations.

Participants' responses seemed to suggest that teachers might check in with student learning processes in a social context, such as having a verbal discussion about how the student is approaching their learning, identifying any barriers they have encountered, and providing support to attempt to remedy complexities, as opposed to focusing restrictively on behavioural indicators when assessing for student engagement. As Skye shared, when group projects were assigned, no one wanted to partner with him, so he couldn't complete the projects as well and often failed them. Skye in particular identified social interactions as an important strategy for his learning; if he was unable to do this for his learning, was it indicative of his lack of engagement or barriers that could be identified and remedied? Checking in with students to assess for engagement as opposed to observing their behaviours alone aligns nicely with Wallace and Chhuon's (2014) conceptualization of engagement as a social process in which students are active in their interactions with teachers, peers and staff, and where learners are constantly making meaning of interactions.

In this study, participants provided statements that could be interpreted as representative of their desire to be engaged cognitively, emotionally, and agentially in their learning. The idea that learning environments should provide opportunities for students to be cognitively, emotionally and agentially engaged is supported by Blair and Diamond (2008), who state that "...the ideal school environment should foster an emerging balance between emotion and cognition that supports active engagement in, and motivation for, learning and a sense of agency and a capability in the school environment" (pp. 904). By making adjustments that allow for

marginalized students to engage at their ability level and capacity, educators could provide marginalized students with easier access not only to their learning tasks, but also to their internal motivational resources.

Instead of focusing on how students react to prescribed learning activities, teachers may find it effective to focus on agentic engagement, which draws attention to how meaningful learning requires high-levels of motivation, requiring having one's basic psychological needs for autonomy, belonging and competence met in the learning environment. Arising out of high-quality motivation, agentic engagement could look like offering an opinion or preference, asking for clarification, or contributing meaningfully to an activity or discussion, all actions that potentially create change in the learning environment. Reeve (2012) also points out that not only does an increased sense of agency correlate with increased positive student outcomes, but it can affect the future quality of the learning environment and the teacher's motivational style. Additionally, Reeve (2012) suggests that an increased sense of agency spurs increased motivation, which in turn fosters the student's sense of agency.

Simply put, findings regarding how marginalized youth experience engagement suggests that these youth may experience more barriers to engagement than typical students; instead of expecting youth to adjust their behaviours to fit systemic expectations, educators and researchers may find it more effective to reflect on their own perspectives and approaches to ensure that they are doing their best to meet the needs of all students.

Research Question 3: How Do Experiences of Education Influence Engagement?

The final research question explored how the participants' experiences of education influenced their school engagement. Throughout the interviews, participants related stories that indicated they often felt little to no sense of autonomy, belonging or competence in schools. In

addition, participants discussed how challenges outside of school, such as mental health concerns or family conflict, often acted as barriers to school engagement, as they distracted students from learning. While this is an issue in itself, these barriers can also contribute to negative feedback loops regarding student perceptions of their autonomy, belonging and competence.

Overall negative experience

Most participants in this study, when asked directly if their experiences of school had been more positive or more negative, felt that their overall their experiences had been more negative than positive. This finding is in contrast to the majority of research that was reviewed for this study, which found in general, various groups of marginalized students felt relatively positive about school, often citing it as a place of stability (Tilbury et al., 2014; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Smith et al., 2007). This contrast in findings may be the result of a differing level of connectivity to school; possibly the participants in this study were less connected to school than participants in the studies reviewed. When participants in other studies did describe negative experiences, they tended to be in line with what was described by participants in this study, such as ineffective decision-making and disciplinary processes, problematic peer and teacher relationships, and learning difficulties as the primary contributors to their negative views. Together, these contextual factors are integral to school climate, and according to Wallace and Chhuon (2014), have direct impacts on how and why students engage. In this study, participants like Shevaya described feeling like they had few avenues of action when times were tough, as though they were not seen or understood for who they were, and that they were not able to adeptly attend to their learning, which created an overall negative perception of schooling for these participants.

Barriers outside of school

This study indicated that for marginalized students, barriers outside of school such as mental health and residential instability, can get in the way of meaningful learning. There is little research exploring the impact of the nested socio-cultural contexts that influence student lives and engagement, such as experiences of discrimination, family conflict, and socioeconomic status, however, the research that has been completed regarding marginalized students and sociocultural influences on engagement indicates that increased adversity contributes to reduced school engagement (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). For instance, in their study of Australian youth-in-care, Tilbury et al. (2014) found that being in care had a variety of negative impacts on school engagement, namely changes in placements during the school year could disrupt attendance, learning, and peer relationships, while peer stereotypes of youth-in-care could lead to social ostracism and discrimination. Dhillon's (2011) study of Canadian female youth experiencing homelessness highlighted their struggles with peers, staff, and the system as they attempted to escape violence, find adequate and safe shelter, and access food and health care while attending school. Participants in this study, like Jessica, who at the time of her interview had just aged out of government care and was attempting to support her younger sister through severe mental health challenges while working towards graduation, were clear that it was incredibly difficult to compartmentalize the various contexts of their lives in order to consistently attend to their learning as expected.

Negative feedback loops and bidirectional relationships

This study found that marginalized students may experience negative feedback loops as a result of negative messaging they receive at school. This finding is in line with research about

engagement, which suggests that student identities are formed in part by messaging students receive from their surroundings. For example, Tilbury et al. (2014) describe how “Stereotypes, beliefs, and expectations of professionals may adversely influence children’s educational aspirations... These attitudes may be directly or indirectly communicated to children, which can influence their aspirations, sense of self-efficacy and educational competence” (pp. 456).

This kind of negative messaging is also discussed by Dhillon (2011) in her study of homeless female youth in Canada, as well as by a number of other researchers, who point out how the bidirectional relationships between students and staff can impact negatively student self-efficacy and sense of competence, as well their overall motivation and engagement, resulting in decreased engagement over time (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Tilbury et al., 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). In particular, feeling misunderstood by teachers and school staff, as a result of misinterpretation of intentions, or adults’ lack of knowledge regarding typical adolescent development which includes experimentation and risk-taking, can have significant adverse effects if not remedied. As Wallace and Chhuon (2014) observed in their study, “Teachers who were unwilling or unable to view their adolescent students as evolving young people with complex lives ultimately frustrated participants, leading to students’ disaffection” (pp. 959).

This trend of misinterpretation was noted by all participants across data collection in this study. Nova, for instance, shared that they felt their Grade 8 Science teacher thought they were purposefully not paying attention, not trying to understand the content, and as a result, ridiculed Nova in front of the class. Rose, as mentioned, recalled being told she “argued everything” even when she was seeking clarification. Skye detailed how he felt his teachers were annoyed and frustrated by him. It was clear that these students had taken on these negative messages

about themselves as students, adding to the already complex and challenging relationships they had with school.

How Experiences of Education Influence Engagement: Implications

Findings from this study highlight some important implications for schools regarding school climate, meeting student needs for autonomy, belonging and competence, expanding understandings of engagement to include factors beyond the walls of schools, and the impact of bidirectional relationships on marginalized students' school engagement.

The participants in this study held a more negative than positive view of school overall, which was found to be contradictory to the literature. One implication of this finding is the need for increased understanding of the sociocultural contextual factors that influence engagement. For example, Ungar and Liebenberg (2013) found that gender interacts with other factors to influence engagement, a factor that was not commonly discussed across the literature. Increasing educator awareness and understanding that school engagement is more complex than previously thought may help educators in supporting marginalized students effectively. Further, teachers and school staff should work to increase their awareness about how what they say and do influences classroom and school dynamics which can affect student perceptions of school.

This study found that the participants perceived themselves as having less autonomy than they would prefer at school, which was in line with the literature. As autonomy is related to increased intrinsic motivation which is known to mediate engagement, the implication for teachers is that working to build student autonomy into classrooms and school communities would be of great benefit to all students. Teachers can increase autonomy in their classrooms by increasing their willingness to listen to student feedback including critiques, working to meet students' needs based on what they hear from students, and answering questions about the

purposes of various learning activities (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). For marginalized students, this may mean working to understand the message students are trying to share, as opposed to merely interpreting the way it is delivered.

Participants in this study indicated that they did not often feel a strong sense of belonging at school, which was contradictory to most literature regarding marginalized youth and schools. One implication related to this finding is the importance of fostering safe and positive peer social networks, and addressing issues such as bullying and ostracism in an effective and timely manner. A second implication of this finding is schools and school staff may find it beneficial to work towards building stronger connections with marginalized youth in order to increase school engagement. Some suggestions for building connections with marginalized youth include supporting positive peer and staff connections, providing opportunities to explore interests, talents and aspirations, and using consistent, compassionate discipline measures (Tilbury et al., 2014). Additionally, both the previous literature and the participants from this study highlight the importance of having high-quality, skilled, flexible, resourceful and resourced staff as it can make a world of difference for marginalized students.

This study found that participants did not often experience a sense of competence at school. Previous research indicates that this is often the case for marginalized youth, and often leads to lower levels of aspirations and attainment (Tilbury et al., 2014). It was unmistakable throughout this study that participants felt that their engagement would be improved if their learning tasks were made more accessible to them, which in turn would increase their sense of competence and willingness to engage. Implications of this finding include that in order to increase engagement of marginalized youth, teachers should work towards consistently adapting tasks for optimal challenge, providing a variety of access points for learners that make use of

different learning styles, providing informal learning opportunities such as small group discussions with an adult facilitator, and ensuring that all learners feel some level of competence and success in learning by taking the time to check in with them.

Throughout this study, participants described their school engagement as impacted by factors outside of school such as mental health or family violence. This finding parallels previous research. The implications of this finding include the importance of schools becoming trauma-aware and mental health literate, so that they may be better able to support students with complex behaviours and disorders in the classroom. For example, learning how to avoid power struggles with students and learning how to effectively share power with students can reduce behavioural disengagement and increase emotional and affective engagement.

Further, because schools exist as part of a larger social structure, marginalized students benefit when institutions work together to provide support instead of working in isolation (Dhillon, 2011). Tilbury et al. (2014) recount the positive impact that out-of-school support teams have on marginalized student engagement when they work as wraparound supports with school, indicating that “education cannot be left [solely] to schools” (pp. 464). Viewing schools as one layer in complex and nested social communities is an important step in increasing marginalized student engagement.

Finally, as participants shared and previous research supported, the impact of bidirectional relationships, social and political settings, and individual life circumstances coalesce together to create complex and often stressful realities which require support for marginalized students to overcome. Not only are student perceptions of autonomy, belonging and competence impacted by every day experiences at school, but according to this study and the literature on school engagement, identities are built and life choices are made based partially on

these experiences of school. One example of this from the study was Shevaya's decision to attempt suicide, followed by dropping out of school in Grade 7, when her needs for safety and wellbeing were not being met at her elementary school. Getting to know students, including their intentions and needs, has important implications on development and learning (Wallace & Chhuon, 20114). When teachers take the time to really get to know students, research shows an increase in students' sense of autonomy and belonging, which may even mitigate some negative school experiences.

Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusions

This study was intended as an exploration of marginalized students' experiences of school and school engagement. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, data was collected regarding participants' perspectives and experiences. From a feminist, trauma-informed and youth-centered perspective, this data was analyzed and interpreted in relation to SDT Basic Psychological Needs mini-theory and a multi-axial theory of school engagement. This chapter provides an overview of data-driven recommendations for schools, as well as discusses limitations of the study, future directions and conclusions.

Recommendations: What do the results of this study mean for schools?

A number of themes emerged regarding what vulnerable learners might benefit from and need that schools could theoretically provide, for example, skilled and caring staff with sufficient resources, safe learning environment, flexible scheduling, and increased targeted support for the development of employment skills for marginalized youth.

Caring, skilled staff with resources and time to address student needs

In every interview, participants mentioned the need for skilled staff and teachers that genuinely care about students, listen and take concerns seriously, and that treat students like people with thoughts and feelings, as opposed to children who do not know any better. Taking concerns seriously, helping students identify resources, and in some cases, helping them to access resources by attending with them or arranging a trusted adult to take them, were all identified as ways school could engage with marginalized students.

In their interviews, Shevaya, Skye, Nova and Rose expressed that they felt schools could do a better job of responding to bullying and harassment. Jessica felt that schools should be better prepared to support students with severe mental health concerns, like her sister who was

struggling with suicidal ideation. At a different point in her interview, Jessica discussed the importance of having skilled and experienced staff, especially when it comes to addressing the marginalizing experiences of youth such as substance use and addiction. While most teachers and school staff have good intentions and the basic skills necessary for working with children and youth, marginalized students may require specialists who have more or broader experiences that enable them to connect with, relate to, and support these students as they navigate their challenging life circumstances. As Jessica said, "...if you haven't been through some sort of life experience to do with that, then you have no right to be in this field to tell somebody anything different."

A number of participants noted the transition from elementary to high school as being particularly difficult, and also described this shift as resulting in reduced access to caring adults with the time and resources to meet their social, emotional, and academic needs. Nova says elementary school did not present any problems for them in terms of academics or peers, but high school had both, which she attributed to the shift in staff to student ratio.

Additionally, having teachers that are skilled at identifying diverse student learning needs and also have access to the necessary resources to meet them in a way that enables students to feel competent and autonomous. Skye and Shevaya both pointedly brought up teachers that could explain things in ways they could understand, telling perhaps of how rare this occurrence was for these students. As previously discussed, the importance of having developmentally-appropriate and properly adapted learning tasks for students is integral to having them experiences a sense of competence in learning, however this is a skill that requires training, time and resources to learn.

There is an abundance of literature around the significance of caring adults in school settings, so I will review just a few. In order to meet the diverse and challenging needs of

marginalized youth, Brown (1998) recommends that school staff work to create space for students to express themselves authentically, and to develop relationships that are inherently flexible, that is, the adult is able to put aside their beliefs and values in order to allow space for the exploration of their students' beliefs and convictions through humour and play. Developing this kind of relationship leads to what Brown (1998) refers to as "hardiness zones," or

...spaces of real engagement that allows [students] to experience control, commitment, and challenge. Hardiness zones move the focus from the individual [student] to the network of relationships with caring adults that create [students'] social worlds and environments, giving [students] access to skills, relationships, and possibilities that enable them to experience power and meaning." (pp. 217)

Allowing space for students to grapple with their beliefs and emotions provides a kind of scaffolding for critical thinking, and political and cultural resistance. It affirms for marginalized youth that they do not have to modulate themselves to hold value, that there is indeed hypocrisy within the system. It provides a foundation for who they feel they should or could be in all of their relationships with others, and a way for them to confirm their reality is authentic (Brown 1998).

The theme of need for the "caring adult" is also carried through Dhillon's (2011) work as well, where relationships with school staff seemed to be a determining factor in perceptions of school. Not only is there a lack of space for strong emotions like anger, but Dhillon (2011) argues that there is a lack of display of authentic caring about students, especially struggling students, which frames schools as "...exclusionary social institutions that operate more as sites of social (re)production than spaces of teaching, learning, and respect" (pp. 128). Dhillon (2011) calls for increasing collaboration between schools and community resources in order to address

student and community needs, whether they are social, material, or emotional. These strengthened relationships would be instrumental in developing practice that addresses systemic causes of inequality in education, as well as promote a more cohesive, community-based framework with which to approach historical and cultural exclusion.

In addition, teachers can foster resilience in students by being aware of their own mindsets, questioning how they can adapt to their students' needs, finding ways to relate to students, and understanding discipline is a teaching process, not a method of process of intimidation or humiliation (Brooks & Goldstein 2008). In the case of marginalized students, this means making space for authentic, meaningful emotion in education, and meaningful attachments with between students and teachers (Hargreaves, 2000).

Safe environment

The rights of students to feel physically and emotionally safe at school was touched upon quite a few times during the interviews. According to the participants, this includes ensuring students feel the school is a safe space, as well as ensuring the school takes timely, effective and meaningful action against bullying and harassment.

Unfortunately for the participants in this study, they had all experienced feeling physically unsafe in their schools. Shevaya, for instance, placed great importance on how schools respond to bullying. As mentioned, her experiences were ongoing for quite some time and severely affected her wellbeing. According to Shevaya, even when her grandmother (and guardian) contacted the school to bring attention to the issue, it was not resolved. Shevaya said that one of the boys even brought a pocket knife to school one day, which made her feel extremely unsafe. When asked what kinds of things makes schools better, Shevaya's primary focus during the interview sessions was on how staff should improve their responses to student

concerns through empathic listening, taking student concerns seriously, and taking meaningful action against bullying.

All participants demonstrated concern about their safety and wellbeing at school. Jessica described her experiences and concerns around feeling like she does not have autonomy when it comes to her physical safety at her school program. Ryden spoke about the aftermath of a fight that broke out at their alternative program during the school day, and how they perceived that others were feeling unsafe afterward. Rose shared a story about experiencing sexual harassment in the hallways of her last mainstream school, when a male peer grabbed her buttocks, which she reported to a school counsellor. The counsellor's response was to tell her that that kind of thing happens regularly and there was not much to do about it.

This was an important point for many of the participants, however it was not easily found in the literature on school engagement, or across the research on the various and varied social identities of marginalized youth.

In their study of BC youth-in-care, Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) found that the majority of their participants felt safe at school, especially in comparison to how safe and secure they felt in their homes. This finding is in contrast to this study, which found that the majority of participants felt unsafe at school, which is particularly interesting as the majority of the participants had been in government care at some point.

Steck and Perry (2018) published a study focussed on safe and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ youth in the US. In their study, they expressed concern that for the 12% of secondary students that identify as LGBTQ, over half who had disclosed their sexual orientation had experienced rejection by a school peer or staff member. Steck and Perry (2018) report that victimization of LGBTQ persons include exposure to homophobic graffiti, slurs,

verbal harassment, threats of harm, physical abuse and others. Concerningly, based on an included study from 2013, more than half of LGBTQ participants had heard homophobic comments from their school teachers or staff. Similarly, Saewye, Smith, Poon, Koleva and Tourand (2016) completed a literature review of LGBTQ youth attending BC secondary schools with a focus on the health outcomes of LGBTQ students related to school environments. Specifically, their review found that in general, LGBTQ youth in Canada face increased levels of discrimination, harassment, bullying and sexual violence compared to their sexual majority peers, as well as decreased levels of family, peer and school support, school connectedness, and school safety.

According to researchers Steck and Perry (2018), the inaction of school staff sustains this type of violence in schools, whereas when school leaders step up by implementing school policy and practices that legitimize sexual diversity and reduce marginalization, they can disrupt this kind of school culture. Steck and Perry (2018) go so far as to argue, in line with this study, “A non-hostile and inclusive environment provides for the belonging and safety needs of students, facilitates increased motivation for learning, and promotes improved academic performance (pp. 230).

One of the recommendations to address these concerns is whole school training to teach staff about the lived experiences of LGBTQ students, as well as the development of staff capacity to create and maintain an inclusive school culture (Steck & Perry, 2018). Similarly, Saewye et al. (2016) found evidence supporting interventions such as Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) and LGBTQ inclusive school policies, which have been shown to have positive impacts on individual students (both LGBTQ and heteronormative) and school culture, including reduced substance use and suicide attempts.

While the current study did not specifically explore the relationship between identifying as LGBTQ and feeling safe at school, the majority of participants did identify as LGBTQ and did report feeling unsafe at school, in some cases, like that of Skye, directly related to their sexual identity. Beyond the studies described above, it was difficult to find research that directly linked marginalized students' school engagement with perceived safety, suggesting this might be an area for more study.

Flexible and developmentally suitable schedules

A number of students mentioned finding it difficult to attend full days of school, or even every day. Shevaya, for example, said she attends approximately half of the time, and then only because she is rewarded for attending. She described herself as having a hard time getting up in the mornings, and if she was not able to get up in time to attend for a few hours, then she did not see a point in going at all. As previously mentioned, Jessica described herself as having a variety of mental health challenges and a sleep disorder that made it difficult for her to fall asleep at night. In Jessica's interview, she and the friend that attended with her had some dialogue around school scheduling, expressing a desire for a later start, or even night classes.

While night school options exist in District X, they are not able to accommodate students with diverse and complex learning needs in a way that would enable marginalized students to experience success. Alternative education programs in this district are able to offer a slightly altered schedule that include fewer hours, and generally run student programs four days a week instead of five. Even with this variation, the participants raise a valid point.

The literature around flexible scheduling for marginalized students is limited in the research around engagement, however it is mentioned by the participants in Rutman and Hubberstey's (2016) study of BC youth-in-care, who mention it is a positive aspect of alternative

education programs, as well as is the focal point for a literature review by Marx et al. (2017). Marx et al. (2017) suggest that because sleep deprivation has been linked to a variety of concerns, such as impaired learning, aggression, memory loss and poor self-esteem, exploring later start times for school is a worthwhile endeavor. While they were not able to confidently assert the overall effects of a later start time, they do identify the potential benefits, namely better academic and psychosocial outcomes.

Similar to Marx et al. (2017), the current study suggests that further research into this topic could be meaningful for marginalized students and school engagement.

Represent, accommodate, and support differences

Participants felt that schools could do better at accommodating and supporting differences, related to both learning and ways of being. While this was discussed previously, I would like to draw attention to it in terms of school culture and attitudes toward differences.

With regards to learning, participants suggested that schools should do more to support people that learn in different ways, at different paces, and need varying levels of support. For instance, Skye feels that schools can better support students by understanding that everyone is different and learns differently. Even though he knows schools are working on this, he thinks it should be done better. Shevaya described the expectation that students would learn a certain way is like expecting “a fish to climb a tree”. The need to accommodate and support differences in learning styles and abilities is well documented across research on engagement. For instance, Tilbury et al. (2014) urges schools to assess student learning needs in a timely and effective manner, so as to best support their differences.

Participants also felt that schools should do better at understanding that people are different, and that schools should teach and support diversity. Ryden explains:

I think schools should function with a diverse community... of students and teachers, whether you're gay, straight, bi, trans, whatever, LGBTQ, your ethnicity, I think that diversity, that really needs to be explained to students and staff a lot clearer, because I don't think people actually get what the meaning of diversity is... People always talk about diversity in high school and I'm like, "Do you really know what the word diversity means?"

This point, that diversity and difference need to be represented, accepted, and supported, not just tolerated in schools, is a valuable and insightful one. Students need to see themselves represented among staff members and in school culture, need to feel that it is okay to be different, and need to know that staff are there to support them in spite of any differences. School culture seems to have a major impact on how students experience belonging. It is unfortunate then, that the representation, and of accommodating and supporting differences was not more visible in the experiences of the participants in this study.

While diversity and difference are not generally prioritized in engagement research, they have long been a hot topic in other related areas of research. Dhillon (2011) for example, highlights the importance of representation for students of colour, specifically in her study, for young Indigenous women in feeling a sense of belonging at school. Smith, Newman-Thomas and Stormont (2015) explore the idea of supportive acceptance, whereby in a mentor role, adults demonstrate unconditional acceptance which provides a safe space for reflection and growth. Steck and Perry (2018) are advocates for supporting sexual diversity in schools, as well as creating and maintain safe spaces for all students. Finally, as discussed, Universal Designs for Learning is focussed on creating and maintaining space for diverse learners (Novak, 2016).

In a step beyond schools taking action to embrace differences, Holden and Kitchen (2018) suggest that teacher training programs should work towards ensuring their teachers-in-training more accurately represent the student populations in schools. Their study, which examined universities in Ontario, demonstrated the low levels of a variety of marginalized groups in teacher candidate programs. Specifically, according to this study, students of Indigenous heritage, visible minority students, students from low-income families, as well as other marginalized groups, have lower application rates than their representative population in the province. For example, Indigenous people in Ontario represent 2.3% of the overall Ontario population, yet make up only 0.5% of all teachers in the province, and even less than that at the post-secondary level (Holden & Kitchen, 2018). The authors refer to a statement by the Ontario Human Rights Commission which asserts that “...the lack of representativeness as a possible contributing factor to the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of racialized students and students with disabilities” (Childs et al., 2011, pp. 4, cited in Holden & Kitchen, 2018, pp. 45). The authors argue that students should see themselves represented in the teacher population, and ultimately, teacher diversity promotes student outcomes and teacher retention.

Targeted and supported paths to employment and independence

While many participants indicated that they felt that school was a means to employment, Jessica was quite clear that she felt her education was lacking in terms of preparing her for the career she wants. There is much research indicating that marginalized students wish for increased access to employment skills and training (Flower et al., 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Tilbury et al., 2014).

Having worked in one of the district’s secondary alternative education programs, I am aware that there is increased interest in supporting marginalized students in experiencing and

learning about a variety of trades, however, due to behavioural challenges and attendance issues, it is hard to find resources and staff that are able and willing to be as flexible as is needed in working with these students. Short term, learning intensive programs are not suitable, but unfortunately, this is the current standard. Perhaps moving forward, this is another area of growth that could be explored.

Limitations and Considerations

This study contains a number of limitations for consideration. First, the small sample size of six students from two alternative education programs may seem limiting. However, it is important to note that the participants in this study comprise a diverse cross-section of BC's student population as they represent a number of oppressed groups, such as Indigenous peoples, sexual minorities, females living in poverty, survivors of varying kinds of abuse, ethnic minorities, and youth in government care.

Second, the interviews took place over a relatively short time period of three months, during which the participants could have held a different view of their experiences pending their current life circumstances. For example, Jessica was having an incredibly stressful time while aging out of care, and this could have biased her overall view of school as she felt unsupported and alone at the time. This does not mean these experiences and perspectives are not authentic, but rather it is important to note that human beings are not static, and their perspectives may shift and vary over time.

Third, the interviews were based on individual experiences of school, except in the case of Rose and Nova who interviewed together, leading them to do some negotiation and co-construction of their experiences and interpretations. In other cases, participants were free to say whatever they felt without anyone to question their assumptions and interpretations. As such, the

data collected might be interpreted as the participants' best representation of their experiences at the time of the interviews.

Finally, this study was limited to interviewing individuals who had been enrolled in alternative education programs due to their lack of success in mainstream schools. While this helped to illuminate some of the challenges within the system, particularly with the most vulnerable learners, it cannot provide insight into school experiences overall.

Future directions

When it comes to studying marginalized youth, there seems to be a gap in terms of literature on fostering school engagement. Studies that take into account individual contexts, including complex and overlapping oppressions, could help to identify meaningful and effective ways to foster engagement for marginalized youth. Research around engaging marginalized youth in programming outside of school does offer some insight into how SDT could lend itself to understanding how and why marginalized youth engage in education, however these studies are few and far between. Exploring the strengths and limitations of these programs' approaches could help in the development of stronger school engagement practices based in SDT.

As discussed, an individual's social, cultural and political environment plays an important role in development trajectories, including regulation and cognition, as well as in the formation of beliefs about self-efficacy, belonging, and agency (Blair & Raver, 2015; Archambault et al., 2009). Further exploration of these factors and their effects on engagement would be beneficial.

Feminist researchers, such as Dhillon (2011), posit that exploring ways in which students are marginalized can provide better insight into the multifaceted identities of youth, and ultimately illuminate the patterns of structural violence that will need to be dismantled as

education moves away from a one-size-fits-all mentality, and towards a more inclusive and adaptive system. In depth case studies that deeply explore the experiences of marginalized youth in schools could provide in-depth insight into how to better support vulnerable learners.

In addition to teasing apart the influence of social and political interactions and structures, researchers must gain a better understanding of the impact of various kinds of trauma on developmental trajectories in order to design effective targeted interventions for students at-risk (Wang & Peck, 2013). One way that has been proven to be effective in working with marginalized groups are studies based in participant action. Finding ways for marginalized youths' experiences, insights and knowledge to be central, validated and heard could be imperative to moving research into marginalized youth school engagement forward. Learning more about what engagement looks like from the perspective of marginalized youth will help researchers to more accurately identify indicators, develop measurement tools for future research, and provide guidance for educators. Even more importantly, this study creates space for marginalized students to speak out about their experiences of education, as well as how and why they engage in learning, providing essential insight into how educators can better support marginalized youth (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Smith, Newman-Thomas & Stormont, 2015; Smith et al., 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Other directions that might be taken up included longitudinal studies of marginalized youths' engagement styles and profiles in both mainstream and alternative education schools, youth-centered research that seeks authentic answers as opposed to imposing expectations on marginalized people, seeking models of schools that are able to meet the complex needs of diverse learners in schools, exploring effective ways of improving marginalized students experiences of school through increasing their sense of autonomy, belonging and competence,

proactively identifying marginalized students and effectively intervening with supports before the transition to high school, and finally, exploring how schools can ease the transition from elementary school to high school for all students, but especially for marginalized students.

Conclusions

In employing SDT as a framework in this study, I aimed to bridge the gap between studies of marginalized youth out of and within school contexts in a way that is both empowering and meaningful for all involved. One way to do this was to ensure the subjects' voices were heard through the research. The concept of voice, having your ideas heard, understood and validated, could be thought of as related to the concept of agency, in that both have the potential to enact change. Highlighting youth voice is particularly salient from feminist and trauma-informed perspectives which seek to make space for the marginalized, misrepresented and invisible (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Gomez et al., 2015; Pillow & Mayo, 2007). It is my hope that by exploring the experiences and insight of the students themselves, the negative stigma associated with being an “disengaged” student will begin to shift from being burdensome and devalued, towards a more a compassionate and inherently valuable understanding of marginalized students as young human beings faced with overlapping and complex challenges that can complicate their behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement in schools.

As I have mentioned, the concept of *school engagement* has evolved significantly over the decades, however students who are atypical, marginalized, and vulnerable are not well represented or understood in the literature or practice. The literature around school engagement continues to lack the sufficient depth, breadth, and detail required to truly capture the overlapping influences of the dynamic and fluid social contexts, power structures, and personal histories that might impact a student's willingness and ability to engage in academic learning, let

alone adapt their behaviour to the demands of the system. Research specifically focussed on school engagement generally fails to take into account the variety of sociohistorical influences on diverse student bodies, identifying a small number of indicators that supposedly identify whether a student is engaged in learning or not, with little thought given to why or how some students may be more or less engaged than others (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani 2009; Dhillon, 2011).

It is imperative to take these contexts into consideration when working with marginalized youth in order to grasp the complexities, challenges, and obstacles they face every day. These factors, and others, overlap, interact, compound, and magnify one another in numerous predictable and unpredictable ways that can all be understood as traumatic in their own right. With these challenging fault lines running along and through their lives, marginalized youth are often living in intensive chronic stress conditions, and unfortunately in most cases, the stress is not confined to their homes or places of residence, but bleeds into the school environment as well. As such, it is necessary that researchers and educators develop a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to both fostering and researching school engagement.

Finally, given the importance of understanding engagement from a youth perspective, a more productive understanding of engagement could include an acknowledgement of the dynamic, transformative and bidirectional nature of engagement, and include the impact of social, cultural and political environments. Youth are the experts of their own lives, and it is to them that researchers must turn to gain insight and knowledge about how to best support marginalized students. In the case of school engagement, which includes components that are not easily observable, it is especially pertinent that researchers and teachers explore the thoughts,

feelings, beliefs, and emotions related to school in order to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of engagement for marginalized youth. As Dhillon (2011) suggests,

...pay heed to the importance of placing [youths'] experiences at the center of the production of knowledge about the social, economic, and cultural forces that mediate the issue of access [to education], as they are the best narrators of their own lives.

(pp. 128)

Taking into account that individuals make meaning based on their experiences and perceptions may be pivotal for research into school engagement, especially when it comes to the importance of student perceptions of autonomy, belonging and competence in increasing motivation and engagement. From this perspective, a comprehensive study of school engagement demands that researchers expand their understanding of engagement in order to capture the individual and systemic complexities of marginalized youth in BC's education system.

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Appendix A – Study Flyer



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Faculty of Education

Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education

ATTENTION TREK STUDENTS!

WE WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

Do you have opinions on how schools work? How teachers teach? Come share your thoughts, experiences and perspectives, and make a difference in your community!

PLEASE JOIN US! MARCH 2018

You choose how the interviews work! Do you want to have a chat over ice cream sundaes? Meet for coffee? Create an art project? It's up to you!

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED, CONTACT NICOLE!

Seeking Alternative Pathways: An Exploration of School Engagement from the Perspectives of Youth in an Alternative School Context

Principal Investigator: Dr. Deborah L. Butler | Professor
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia |

V. Feb 2018

Appendix B – Additional Resources



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Additional Resource List

Below is a collection of confidential counselling and support services that are available for youth in Surrey. If you are experiencing an emergency, please call 9-1-1 for the appropriate emergency service.

- BC211.ca – online list of support services available across BC, including housing, counselling, and mental health supports.
- **START** – call **1-844-782-7811 (1-844-START11)** to speak with a local clinician who can help immediately if you are feeling suicidal. The clinician will walk you through next steps in accessing medical and mental health supports.
- **Crisis Center** – If you are having thoughts of suicide, call **1-800-784-2433 (1-800-SUICIDE)** 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. For general mental health support, call **604-310-6789**. For online chat (from noon to 1am), visit www.YouthInBC.com
- **Child and Youth Mental Health** – various locations throughout Surrey. You must go through an intake meeting (90 minutes) to access services. Intake meetings are available on Wednesdays only. Contact **604-951-5844** to find out which office you should attend.
- **Kids Help Phone** – call **1-800-668-6868** 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to talk about anything that might be bothering you. Online chat is also available at KidsHelpPhone.ca
- **Pacific Community Resources Society** – Community Counselling is a free service. Call **604-592-6200** to do a 10 minute intake survey over the phone. Substance use and addictions counselling is also available. Fill out the intake form on the bottom of the page at pcrs.ca/our-services/astra/ to access services.
- **DiverCity** - Child and Youth Mental Health Counselling is available for youth from immigrant and/or refugee families. They offer services in a variety of languages. For intake, call **604-547-1202**, email counsellingservices@dcrs.ca, or find the intake form at www.dcrs.ca/services/family-services/child-youth-mental-health/
- **Moving Forward Family Services** – low cost and/or free counselling is available. Call **778-321-3054**, or email counsellor@movingforwardfamilyservices.com to book an appointment.
- **Simon Fraser University Surrey Counselling Center** – call **604-587-7320** to make an appointment. A clinician will speak with you over the phone before your first appointment to make sure the services are right for you.

If you have questions about accessing resources, please feel free to ask Nicole. If you live in a different city and require access to similar resources, check out BC211.ca or **call or text 211** to speak to someone who can help you locate what you need in your city. Please remember, these supports are in addition to what is available through the school district. If you are interested in accessing school district resources, either tell your school staff, or let Nicole know and she will help connect you. Nicole can be reached at

Appendix C – Youth Assent Form



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INFORMATION AND ASSENT FORM FOR YOUTH

Seeking Alternative Pathways: An Exploration of School Engagement from the Perspectives of Youth in an Alternative School Context

Who is in charge of the study?

The investigator in charge of the study is Dr. Deborah L. Butler. She is being helped by Nicole Curtis. They will answer any questions I have about the study. I can call or email Dr. Butler at

I can email Nicole : or call

If I have concerns about my rights as a participant, I can contact the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Invitation

I am being invited to participate in this research study because I attend an alternative education program which is of interest to the researchers. I can choose whether I want to participate in this study or not, and I may choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences, even if I have already signed the assent form. A parent or guardian must give permission for me to participate in this study. I will be provided with a consent form. I can ask Nicole for help getting permission if required.

The Study

This study intends to focus on the perspectives and experiences of alternative education students in the school system. The researchers are interested in how students have felt in schools, how they think about learning, and if their experiences change the way they engage in school.

I will be asked to participate in an interview with Nicole. I can choose to do it alone, with a peer or a trusted adult. I may want to bring an artifact (a picture, a piece of writing or art, or something else entirely) to talk about during interviews. I can choose where and when to hold the interview. Interviews can be short (30 minutes) or may go on as long as I am interested (up to an hour). If I have more to share, I am able to set up another interview to continue the conversation on a different day. I can also choose whether the interview will be recorded or not.

After my interview is complete, I will be invited to participate in an art-based activity on a different day. This is entirely voluntary as well. This activity is also a part of the study.

I will have access to my own data, including transcriptions of interviews, throughout the study. Nicole will check in with me at different stages to make sure I agree with what she has interpreted. I will also have access to the final report when it complete, which may take up to six months.

During the study, data including recordings, transcripts and pictures of artifacts, will be stored on a passcode protected, encrypted hard drive to which only Nicole has access. Once transcripts are complete, audio files will be deleted. After the study, all data will be moved on to a separate passcode protected, encrypted hard drive to which only Nicole and Dr. Butler will have access.



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This hard drive will be stored for a minimum of 5 years in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Butler's UBC office. After this 5 year period, data may be destroyed.

Risks and Benefits

I understand there are minimal risks involved in participating in this study. Talking about experiences which may have been stressful or unpleasant may be upsetting. I will have access to a school district counsellor should I become very upset, and Nicole will supply all students with a list of support services outside of the school district.

There is a chance that someone close to Education Services School might be able to identify me from the information in the study. Nicole will do everything reasonable to protect my privacy. I will be able to choose a fake name to use for the study, or if I would prefer, I can choose to use my own first name, however, my guardian can ultimately decide this for me.

There are also benefits to participating. Having discussions around my experiences of school may help me feel more understood and cared for, as well as help me feel more connected to my community. There will also be an opportunity for me to further share my thoughts and perspectives with my community through an art-based project towards the end of the study. In addition, by sharing my experiences and perspectives, I am helping researchers better understand how the education system might be improved.

In Conclusion - It is up to me if, how, and when I participate in this study.

Note: If Nicole has a safety concern for me, she has a duty to report. In this instance, a safety concern may include statements of intention to harm self or others, or if I disclose on-going or current abuse. This may include contacting authorities, guardians, counsellors or other supports.



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**YOUTH ASSENT FORM: Seeking Alternative Pathways: An Exploration of School
Engagement from the Perspectives of Youth in an Alternative School Context**

My signature on this assent form means:

- *I have read and understood the information.
- *I know I have the right to withdraw at any point without consequences.
- *I may choose to share artifacts or school work I have completed in the past.
- *I have had the opportunity to ask questions, consider my participation, and feel comfortable asking any questions that come up.
- *I understand that all information will be kept secure.
- *I understand that all efforts will be made to protect my privacy but there may be a chance someone might identify me as a participant in this study.
- *I will receive a copy of this signed assent form for my own records.

Please check the boxes you agree with:

- ☐ I agree to be in this study.
- ☐ I agree to use a pseudonym (fake name) unless my guardian has given me permission to use my own first name.
- ☐ I agree to be audio-recorded for this study.

Youth Name

Youth Signature

Date

Appendix D – Guardian Consent Form



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CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

Seeking Alternative Pathways: An Exploration of School Engagement from the Perspectives of
Youth in an Alternative School Context

Who is conducting the study?

Principal Investigator: Dr. Deborah L. Butler | Professor
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia

Co-Investigator

Nicole L. Curtis | Graduate Student
Department of Human Development, Learning and Culture
University of British Columbia

Why are we doing this study?

Nicole is completing graduate research exploring student perspectives and experiences of school engagement. We wish to learn more about the experiences and insights of youth in alternate education in order to better understand how the education system might be adjusted to meet their needs. We are inviting students from Surrey School District's Education Services School to participate in the study.

How is the study done?

If you choose to provide consent for your child to participate in this study, they will choose between an individual or partnered interview, which will take place at their school program site, or another public location specified by the student (for example, a public library or coffee shop). Youth will be invited to bring an artifact to talk about during the interview. The length of the interview will be up to your child, and may range from 30 minutes to an hour. Youth will have the option of continuing the interview at another time if they wish to continue the conversation.

The interview will be audiotaped as long as the student is comfortable with being recorded. If not, Nicole will keep written notes. There will be multiple opportunities for students to check in with Nicole about the process, participation, and data that has been collected, as well as to participate in a community-sharing project towards the end of the study.

Overall, the study may take a couple of months to complete, however it is up to your child and yourself to what level they are willing to participate. If they are only interested in meeting once for an interview, or they are interested in being more involved in the creation of the project after their interview, they are in charge of how and when they participate.



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During the study, data including recordings, transcripts and pictures of artifacts, will be stored on a passcode protected, encrypted hard drive to which only Nicole has access. Once transcripts are complete, audio files will be deleted. After the study, all data will be moved on to a separate passcode protected, encrypted hard drive to which only Nicole and Dr. Butler will have access. This hard drive will be stored for a minimum of 5 years in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Butler's UBC office. After this 5 year period, data may be destroyed.

The complete study involves the transcription and analysis of the interviews and projects, as well as the final write up, and may take up to 6 months to complete. Participants will have access to the final report.

Are there risks to participating?

Risks to your child are likely to be minimal. Your child will be asked to reflect on their experiences of school, which may be stressful or upsetting for them. Every effort will be made to be respectful and sensitive, and youth will always have the option of passing on a question or withdrawing from the study altogether. Your child will be given a list of counselling and support resources available in Surrey, in case they are interested in seeking confidential supports outside of the school district.

The interview will not interfere with learning times, but will be set around the youth's schedule and at their convenience. Your child will not in any way be penalized for not participating in, or choosing to withdraw from, the study.

Are there benefits to participating?

There a variety of possible benefits which may include having a platform for expressing their concerns, experiences, and ideas; opportunities for leadership in their community; and having personal experiences and knowledge validated in a safe setting. In addition, data collected from the interviews may help to develop a better understanding of how the education system might better meet the needs of its students.

What will be done with the information?

Students will have the opportunity to create a community project around school engagement towards the end of the study, if there is interest. This will likely take the form of an art or poetry piece created by individuals, and compiled to create a collection, however, it is open to alternative ideas suggested by the participants. After interviews and the completion of the project, data will be analyzed for use as a written report as part of Nicole's graduate thesis. Pieces of the final study may be submitted for publication in academic journals.

What rights does your child have in this study?

Your child has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, just as you have the right to withdraw them.



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Your child has the right to privacy. Students will be offered the opportunity to use a pseudonym to maintain their privacy. Students may choose to use their own first name, but only if parental permission is provided (see checkbox on consent form).

Due to the structure of the school and programs, there is a possibility that someone close to the district may be able to identify your child as a participant, but all measures to protect your child's anonymity will be taken, including masking the district, school and program names. All data will be encrypted, and stored under passcode on secure devices.

Your child has the right to safety and security. If there are concerns for a child's welfare, it is my duty to report to the appropriate authorities. For example, statements of intention to harm self or others, or disclosing current/ongoing abuse and/or neglect, would require a report to the appropriate authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about your child's rights as a research participant and/or their experiences while participating in this study, please 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.



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Permission to Participate: Seeking Alternative Pathways

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study about school engagement

*Participation is entirely voluntary. There will be no penalties or consequences if students do not or cannot participate. Students may choose to withdraw or be withdrawn at any time during the research process. Sessions will be audiotaped unless otherwise requested by youth or guardian.

I, _____ (please print your name), give permission for my child, _____ (please print your child's name), to participate in the study "Seeking Alternative Pathways: An Exploration of School Engagement from the Perspectives of Youth in an Alternative School Context". By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have read and understand voluntary nature of this study, as well as the risks and benefits.

☐ I give permission for my child to use their own first name in the study, if they so choose.

Guardian Signature

Date

Appendix E – Interview Questions



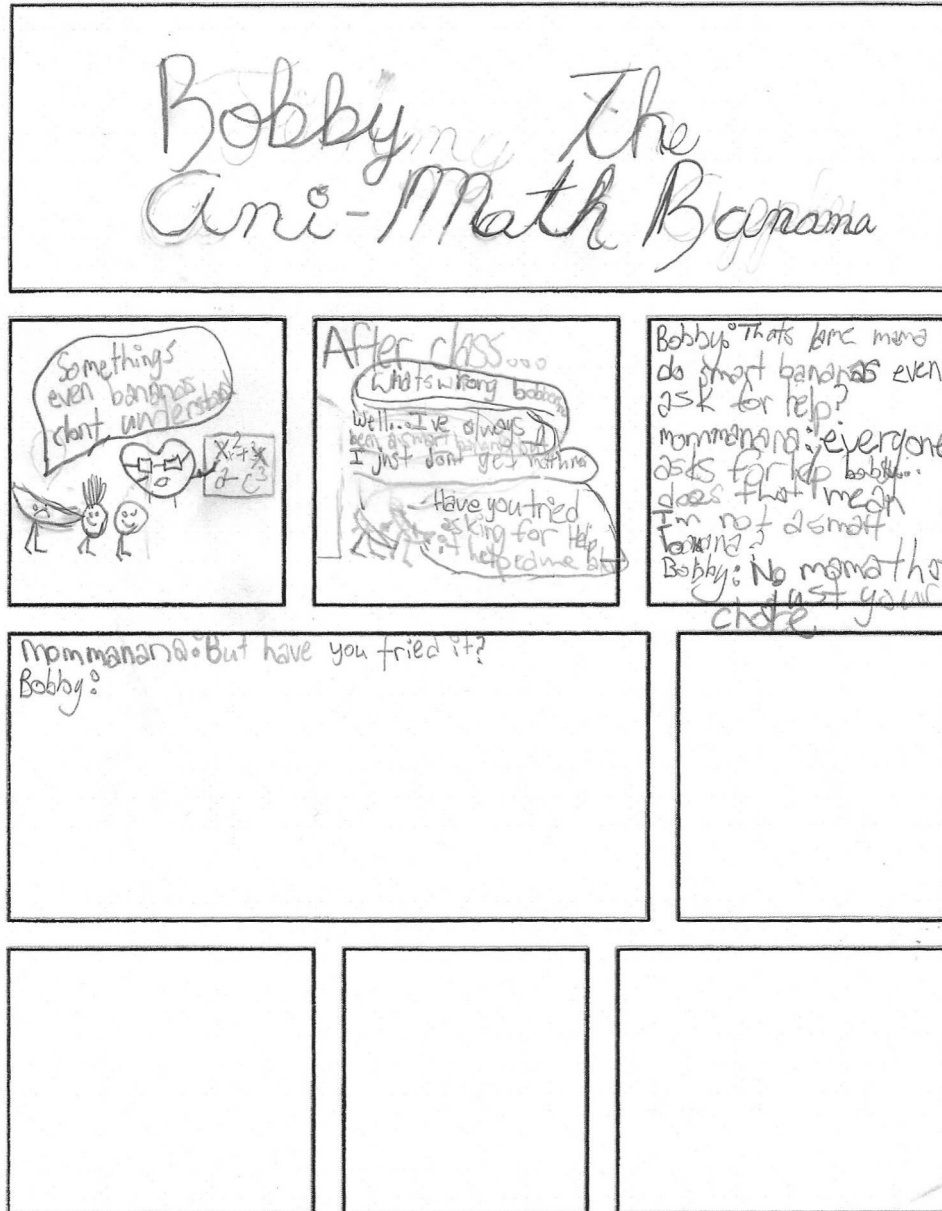
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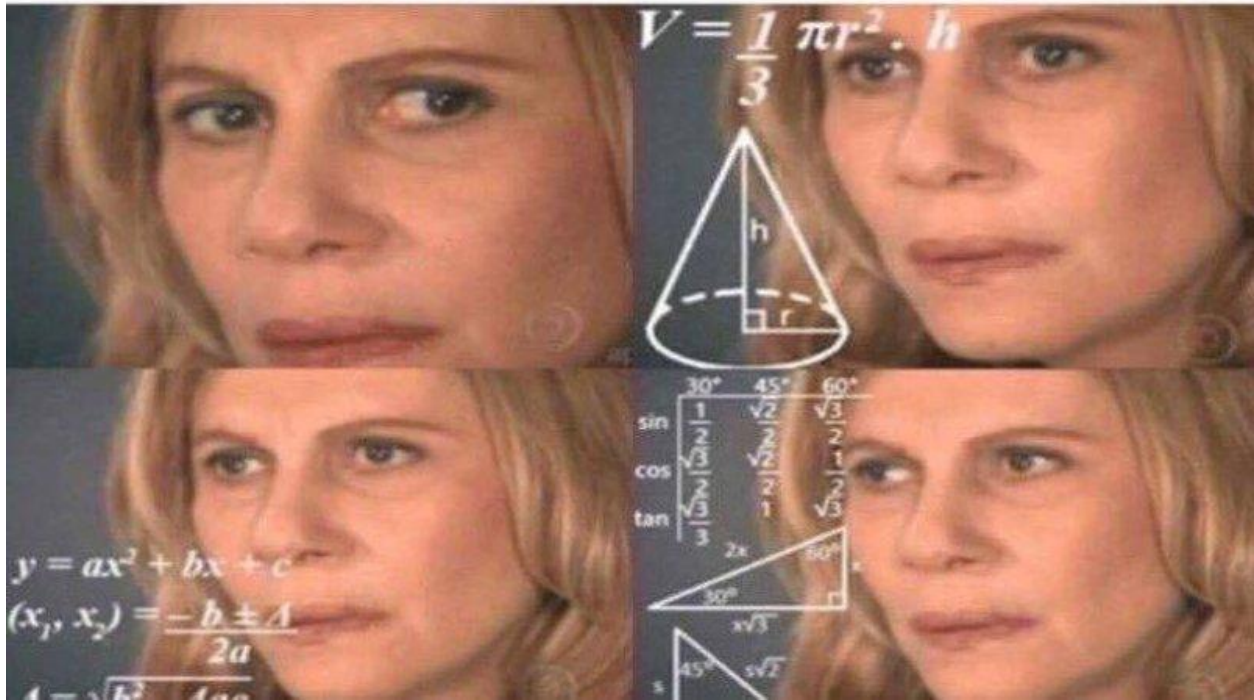
Alternative Pathways: Guiding Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. <i>What value/meaning does education hold to you? What do you perceive it adds to or takes away from your life?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about your daily routine on a school day? • Why do you attend school? What kinds of things do you get by going to school? • Do you think overall that school has had a positive or negative impact on you? Why? • Can you tell me about a time that you really enjoyed being at school? • Can you tell me about a time that you really did not enjoy being at school?
2. <i>What does school engagement mean to you? What does it look like?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about a time you were really enjoying learning about something? • Can you tell me about a time you felt completely disconnected from learning? • What does learning look like? Feel like? Sound like? • What does it mean to be engaged in learning? How can someone tell if you are trying to learn or not? • How do you see yourself as a learner compared what you think you “should” be?
3. <i>To what extent do you feel your experiences impact your education?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about a time that you felt like you belonged at school? A time you felt like you didn’t belong? • What kinds of things make a school better? Worse? • Can you think of an important event that happened to you that changed the way you feel at school? • Can you think of a time when you needed help and your school didn’t help you? A time when your school did help you? • How can schools better support students?

Appendix F – Rose's Post-Interview Project



Appendix G – Math Lady Meme and Citation



Math Lady/Confused Lady, 9GAG <https://9gag.com> (2016). Retrieved February 10, 2019 from <https://knowyourmeme.com>, Literally Media, Ltd.