Exploring Psychological Underpinnings of Student Engagement in At-Risk Youth Attending An

Alternative High School

by

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN AT-RISK YOUTH ATTENDING AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

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Youth who struggle to succeed in school, often due to substantial social risk factors, poor mental health, learning disabilities, and disruptive behaviour are considered poorly engaged and at risk of not completing school. Educators and researchers are increasingly interested in the concept of student engagement and its relevance to academic outcomes, school completion, and overall well-being. This dissertation focuses on a sample of at-risk high school students attending one alternative high school that employs a strength-based approach to education. A mixed-methods approach is utilized to develop a nuanced understanding of intra-individual characteristics and school environment factors that may underlie the student engagement of these youth.

Using student-reported peak-and-valley experiences on a school timeline graph, factors that contribute to and take away from student engagement across the students’ school experiences were examined. Overall findings suggest that school connection and social and emotional stability contributed to student engagement, whereas school problems and social and emotional difficulties contributed to gradual disengagement. Next, qualitative in-depth student interviews were conducted to explore current student engagement, with youth reporting on their past and current school experiences to identify the school factors in an alternative setting that may facilitate re-engagement. Findings highlight the importance of positive teacher-student relationships, a sense of community, flexible structure, holistic support, and making progress in an alternative setting.

This dissertation also quantitatively assessed intra-individual factors underlying the process of student engagement. Positive schemas were found to mediate the relationship between student life satisfaction and student engagement, as well as the relation between psychological distress and student engagement. Furthermore, longitudinal analyses were performed to determine changes that take place regarding well-being and student engagement following one year in the alternative program. Life satisfaction was found to increase after one year in the alternative setting. Student positive schemas and psychological inflexibility were also found to predict student engagement one year later.

Taken together, these results highlight the importance of considering both contextual (e.g., school practices) and intra-individual (e.g., self-beliefs) factors that impact student engagement. The study also supports the use of strength-based education and alternative programming in promoting positive outcomes for students most at-risk.
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EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN AT-RISK YOUTH ATTENDING AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

Introduction

Most children begin school optimistic and enthusiastic about opportunities to learn and socialize (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horney, 2012). Over time, some youth gradually become disengaged and may eventually leave school early without graduating. The associated costs of non-completion are tremendous, including significantly lower lifetime earnings, lower likelihood of being employed, worse health outcomes (e.g., increased mortality and mental health problems), and increased criminal activity (e.g., Catterall, 2011; Haveman & Wolfe, 1984). There are also associated societal costs of school non-completion, such as greater public costs in healthcare, social assistance, crime, and labour and employment losses (Catterall, 2011).

In Canada, it is encouraging to note that rates of school non-completion (defined as being 20-24 years old without a high school diploma and not in school) have declined from 16.6% in 1990 to 8.5% in 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2010). The reasons for this decline are not well documented, but likely contributors are school reform initiatives that promote student engagement and graduation and ongoing pressure to “stay in school” due to the difficulty of gaining employment without a high school diploma. Nonetheless, student disengagement and dropout, mostly within secondary studies remains a sizeable social problem, signifying room for improvement.

Theoretical models of student engagement view dropping out as a gradual developmental process whereby students disconnect or feel alienated from school over several years, beginning at an early age (Finn, 1989). Disengagement has been conceptualized as “the process of detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement at
school, and withdrawing from a commitment to school and school completion” (Balfanz, Herzog, & Iver, 2007, p. 224). There is a pressing need to better understand factors that promote versus interfere with student engagement, the process by which student disengagement develops, and how students who have been disengaged then become re-engaged with school. Understanding these processes within a sample of youth with a strong disengagement history can help inform effective prevention and intervention strategies to promote best outcomes for those most at-risk of non-completion.

**Introduction Overview**

The major aim of this dissertation is to better understand, from the student perspective, the process of student disengagement and subsequent re-engagement in a sample of youth at-risk of school withdrawal who are attending an alternative school. This research sought to determine both intra-individual and school factors that facilitate engagement in these youth. The scope of literature relevant to student engagement in at-risk youth is extensive, and for the purpose of keeping the literature review manageable and relevant to the empirical research at hand, the introduction focuses on a subset of topics. This includes an overview of the following topics/research areas: alternative education for dropout prevention, student engagement as a multidimensional construct, motivation, individual and school factors that impact student engagement, positive psychology and a strength-based approach to education, life satisfaction, positive schemas, and psychological flexibility. It is important to acknowledge, however, that there are many other perspectives that are not considered in detail. For instance, there are major systemic and structural implications that impact school withdrawal and student engagement, including: social and economic barriers, school pushout, racial discrimination, adverse life experiences such as trauma, and more. While these factors play a critical role in the lives of students, especially those who are marginalized, they are not explicitly considered below.
Students Most at Risk: Alternative Education

Alternative education in its broadest sense refers to different approaches to teaching and learning outside of traditional school systems, and may include special programs for dropout prevention, gifted students, homeschooling, etc. This dissertation focuses on alternative schools designed to support students most at-risk of not completing high school.

Across studies, researchers have described students who attend alternative high schools as a group of marginalized youth, who are mistakenly labelled as “bad,” “damaged,” and “dangerous” (e.g., Becker, 2010; Brown, 2007; Kim & Taylor, 2008). These negative, reductionist labels stigmatize youth attending alternative school settings, ignoring the complexity of their lives and the inherent resources they may possess. In addition, students are further stigmatized when alternative schools embrace a wider definition of success and thus hold a different standard for youth in alternative education (Sagor, 2006), which may be interpreted as schools offering a lower level of education. Therefore, successful alternative schools must overcome these barriers by advocating for their programs and striving to become a meaningful alternative for youth who cannot function in more traditional settings.

For some education boards, alternative schools serve as the primary method to prevent students from school failure and withdrawal. Alternative education encompasses efforts to accommodate individual needs and interests of youth, particularly when those needs exceed what is available in traditional education programs or settings and youth are identified to be at risk of academic failure. Alternative school programs often serve a population of youth faced with disproportionately high individual and environmental risks (e.g., exposure to trauma and chaotic family settings), as well as complex social, emotional, behavioural, and academic needs that cannot be met in a regular classroom (e.g., serious mental health issues, severe learning disabilities). In addition to facing challenging family contexts or life events, students are often
referred to dropout prevention or alternative education programs due to behavioural issues, poor social skills, academic remediation and chronic absenteeism (McCall, 2003).

Successful alternative programs newly adopt a student-centered approach to learning and provide supportive environments that focus on student strengths and interpersonal relationships (as reviewed in Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007). These settings also strive to create individual programming for students so they may build competence in areas that foster their strengths and desired educational or vocational pathways. Effective alternative schools support student autonomy through collaborative decision-making such that students have input into their learning and the pace at which they are able to progress (Gilson, 2006). As such, alternative settings provide an opportunity to apply self-determination theory principles (Deci & Ryan, 1985) by promoting students’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness in their schooling experiences.

Research suggests that students most at-risk of school withdrawal, and therefore those who may be attending alternative programs, are likely to have experienced negative teacher-student relationships (TSRs; Murray & Murray, 2004), which may create further risk for negative youth outcomes. Effective and supportive TSRs have long been considered important for promoting positive student outcomes (e.g., school adjustment) despite exposure to adversity (Baker, 1998; Murray & Murray, 2004). In addition, youth with emotional and behavioural problems are at increased risk of developing poor relationships with their teachers, characterized as negative relationships with high conflict and dependency (Murray & Murray, 2004). A meta-analysis indicated that students who are at-risk (in this case those with low SES) “will be more strongly influenced by the quality of TSR than will normative children” (Roorda & Koomen, 2011, pp. 518). This speaks to the importance of alternative settings sharpening their focus on the cultivation of positive relationships between staff and students.
Academic alternative programs for at-risk youth tend to be smaller with higher teacher-student ratios, allowing for more individual teacher-student interaction (Franklin et al., 2007). Frequent, one-on-one interactions make it easier for teachers to develop close, mentoring relationships with their students, and may potentially foster a student’s psychological need for relatedness and belonging. In addition, caring, supportive TSRs are likely to serve as protective factors for students who require alternative programs and face numerous environmental stressors including low family assets (Sharkey, et al., 2008). Caring relationships highlights the importance of purposeful staffing at alternative schools, to ensure at-risk youth are provided with opportunities to form caring and supportive relationships with teachers and staff, which may ultimately aid in enhancing positive youth outcomes and student engagement. This dissertation will provide insight into which aspects of an alternative school program and environment aid in effectively re-engaging at-risk youth with learning and moving toward school completion.

**Student Engagement: A Multidimensional Construct**

Student engagement is thought to be a driver of learning (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), and has been repeatedly found to predict school success in empirical studies (e.g., Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). It also serves as a protective factor to reduce the likelihood of school failure and eventual dropout (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). As such, there has been a growing interest in better understanding student engagement to enhance student learning and promote positive outcomes for all students, especially those most at-risk for school dropout.

The importance of student engagement for student outcomes is widely appreciated, however the research literature for this construct is overcome with inconsistency in terminology, operationalization, and measurement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). This inconsistency is largely a result of the construct developing and evolving over time, with conceptualization of the term coming from multiple areas of study (e.g., motivation, education, psychology). The
variability with which student engagement is conceptualized and measured makes it difficult to compare research findings across studies, and there is a clear need for definitional clarity in this field. Despite the different conceptualizations of student engagement, Klem and Connell (2004) have argued that student engagement is nevertheless a robust predictor of improved performance in achievement and behaviour in school, across all levels of socio-economic status. Moving forward, researchers have been encouraged to clearly define their conceptualization in each study so that research findings may be interpreted in the context of the type of engagement and how it was measured (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008).

Appleton and colleagues (2008) argued that the term “student engagement” be used over other synonymous terms, including school engagement, bonding, attachment, connectedness, involvement, and commitment. Other researchers have added that the goal of engagement research and intervention is to promote social and academic competence while also making an effort to “develop within youth the capacity to sustain the positive developmental influences of engagement over the life-span” (Furlong et al., 2003, pp. 101). This approach underscores the utility of conceptualizing engagement on a continuum within students and across contexts over time, as opposed to something uniquely influenced by schools without consideration of other influences such as individual differences and family context.

There is consensus among researchers that student engagement is a multidimensional construct that brings together separate lines of research (Fredricks et al., 2004); however, there is little agreement on the number and types of dimensions used to define the construct. Some researchers have supported a two-component model, consisting of a behavioural subtype (e.g., participation in class or extra-curricular activities, positive conduct, attendance) and an emotional subtype (e.g., feelings, interests, and attitudes toward school, identification, relationships) (Appleton et al., 2008; Finn, 1989). This emotional subtype of engagement has also been referred
to as affective or psychological engagement in the literature (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008). More recent research has also included a third dimension of engagement: a cognitive subtype (e.g., self-regulation, psychological investment in learning; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Of the engagement subtypes, behavioural engagement is the most objectively observable factor, whereas emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement are less observable, requiring more inference. Within the school context, educators also have a natural tendency to attend to and intervene with behavioural aspects of student engagement through various classroom and behaviour management strategies (Sharkey et al., 2008). These behavioural aspects of student engagement are more readily quantifiable (and reportable) with metrics such as attendance, credit accumulation, grades, and classroom behaviour. Given this distinction, it is not surprising that more research has emphasized the behavioural and academic outcomes and their indicators.

Beyond the behavioural, there is evidence to suggest that emotional and cognitive indicators of engagement are also important for school performance, including investment in learning and adaptive school behaviours (as discussed in Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). A recent study by Jones (2011) was conducted using qualitative interviews and observations with students and teachers to explore the development of student engagement in the context of an alternative high school. Results from this study identified themes in youth narratives that described emotional engagement (e.g., valuing and identification with the school) as preceding any real behavioural changes for at-risk youth in school (Jones, 2011). Youth also described changes in engagement occurring around a resolution of a personal issue or conflict, and described strong, caring relationships with teachers enabling them to meaningfully engage in the learning process (Jones, 2011). This study demonstrates the importance of examining emotional aspects of engagement, as well as youth perceptions of mental health and well-being within the larger context of their school environment (e.g., degree of support from teachers). Educators may
therefore consider focusing on factors within the school environment that can increase emotional and cognitive engagement, such as classroom structure (e.g., clear teacher expectations) and peer acceptance (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional and cognitive engagement may be particularly important for youth who are withdrawing from school due to negative learning and school experiences and/or as a result of various individual, social, and environmental risks. The careful consideration of the emotional and cognitive aspects of student engagement is likely to be essential for promoting the best outcomes for youth in school, particularly youth most at-risk of non-completion.

In response to the overemphasis on behavioural engagement and academic outcomes in school practice, Appleton and colleagues (2006) created the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI), a psychometrically sound self-report instrument that measures emotional (which they refer to as psychological) and cognitive components of engagement. The emotional and cognitive components of engagement are thought to be best measured through the perspective of the student (e.g., self-report), as opposed to parent or teacher report and observation, to avoid inaccurate inferences about a student’s feelings, beliefs, and desires as they relate to engagement.

Throughout this dissertation, I sought to further illuminate the emotional and cognitive components of student engagement among youth who have experienced withdrawal from traditional schools and are attending an alternative school setting. The current project identifies internal psychological factors that impact emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement, and provides a detailed account of youth reported contextual factors within an alternative school setting that facilitate student engagement. Ultimately, the aim was to develop a greater understanding of student engagement from the youth’s perspective, and inform future prevention and intervention efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes and overall well-being for at-risk youth.
Student Engagement and Motivation

Motivation is thought to be important for improving learning outcomes for all students, and is considered a prerequisite and necessary component for student engagement (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Many researchers have considered student engagement to be an observable indicator of underlying motivation (e.g., Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). However, the relationship between motivation and engagement is sometimes difficult to understand. One way to clarify this relationship, is to consider that motivation answers the “why” for a given behaviour, and consists of an individual’s direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of what is done and expressed (Maehr & Meyer, 1997), while engagement reflects a person’s active involvement and connection with an activity (Reeve et al., 2004). More specifically, motivation has been conceptualized as a type of personal investment in which one chooses a course of action and follows that course with a certain level of intensity, persistence, and quality in how the action is carried out (Maehr & Meyer, 1997). Some researchers conceive motivation as related to underlying inner psychological processes and engagement as the level of involvement (e.g., Ainsley, 2012). As such, this understanding proposes that motivation is a necessary prerequisite for engagement.

Researchers have extensively studied and distinguished between intrinsic (i.e., doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable) and extrinsic (i.e., doing something because it leads to a separate outcome) forms of motivation, and have argued that both type and amount of motivation varies depending on the learning and teaching context (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While intrinsic motivation has been strongly linked to positive academic outcomes (e.g., Wigfield & Eccles, 2002) students cannot always be intrinsically motivated given that many activities prescribed in school are not designed to be inherently interesting. Therefore, understanding how
different types of extrinsic motivation work to promote student engagement is an important area of study, particularly among youth at risk of non-completion.

*Self-determination theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is an approach to motivation, emotion, and development that highlights the importance of people’s inherent tendencies for growth, innate psychological needs, as well as environmental factors that foster and undermine the positive processes of motivation and well-being. Researchers have identified three psychological needs that are considered essential for promoting growth, integration, social development and well-being in individuals: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (as reviewed by Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is relevant to the domain of education and engagement as it conceptualizes students as having natural tendencies to learn, a resource that educators can tap into for the promotion of engagement (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). When the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported in an educational setting, SDT posits that students are more likely to internalize their motivation to learn and therefore become more engaged, leading to better learning outcomes (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Conversely, students whose basic psychological needs are not met may gradually disengage over time. SDT acknowledges that the catalyst for motivation in education is often external to oneself, and proposes that extrinsic motivation can vary greatly to the degree that it is autonomous, and the more autonomous and integrated motivation is, the better the quality of engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Consistent with SDT, students who are referred to alternative programs have likely struggled to have their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness met within traditional school settings. Further research is needed to extend these findings to a population of at-risk youth who persistently struggle to feel motivated and engaged with school, and have accumulated multiple experiences of school failure. Qualitative methods are ideally suited to better
understand how students gradually become disengaged from school, and further identify aspects of
the context and youth experience that may help re-engage youth in an alternative school setting.
Using student interviews, the current study explores which aspects of the participant’s life,
including the alternative school setting, are most salient in motivating them to learn and increasing
their overall level of student engagement.

Student Engagement Frameworks and School Withdrawal

Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model considers school withdrawal as a
developmental process, defining engagement as identification and participation at school.
Successful students are believed to have a sense of identification with school, which is understood
as belongingness and valuing of school (Finn, 1989). Participation encompasses four components:
responsiveness to requirements, decision-making, participation in class-related initiatives, and
participation in extra-curricular activities (as reviewed by Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, &
Pagani, 2009). The model suggests that students will identify more with school (e.g., feel a sense
of belongingness and valuing) as their participation increases. Conversely, the model predicts that
students with low or absent participation will gradually disengage and eventually dropout from
school, suggesting that participation is essential for positive outcomes to be realized (Finn, 1989).
This model sheds light on the importance of both behaviours and attitudes in school completion
and withdrawal. The identification-participation model has also influenced intervention efforts to
focus on functional and malleable factors to facilitate positive outcomes for all students, rather
than demographic characteristics of student risk (Appleton et al., 2008).

Finn and Rock (1997) conducted a longitudinal study in a sample of 1,803 minority
students in grades 8 to 12 from low-income homes. The authors classified the sample into three
groups: (1) so called “resilient” students who completed school and were academically successful,
(2) “non-resilient” students who completed school with poorer academic performance, and (3)
“non-completers” who dropped out of school. Teacher ratings and self-reports indicated substantial differences in “resilient” student *behavioural* engagement, including working harder, attending classes more regularly, and seeming more engaged in learning, compared to the other peer groups. In addition, “non-resilient” students who remained in school exhibited more positive attendance and compliance *behaviours* compared to the “non-completers”. Self-esteem and a sense of control over one’s life were greater in students who succeeded in school, and distinguished poor achieving students who remained in school from “non-completers”. Overall, the authors concluded that behavioural student engagement is a malleable factor that is significantly related to academic success and school completion.

Engagement behaviours encompass everyday tasks that are needed for learning, such as attending school and classes, following teacher directions, completing assignments and school work, and having a positive attitude toward subjects and school in general. Research has found that certain behavioural indicators reliably predict a student’s growing disengagement from school and thus school dropout, including poor attendance, misbehaviour, low effort, and experiencing course failure in the middle grades (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Balfanz, Herzog, MacIver, 2007).

Finn (1989) has argued that academic failure is one driving force behind student disengagement and eventual school dropout. The *frustration-self-esteem model* (Finn, 1989) posits that poor school performance causes frustration or embarrassment which leads to an impaired self-view (e.g., poor self-concept), and in turn the student engages in behaviour to oppose the context that is seen as responsible (e.g., skipping class, disrupting instruction, delinquent acts). This model could in part explain how students begin to gradually disengage from school as a result of poor school performance, which can be prompted for various reasons (e.g., learning problems, lack of support for learning, household stress).
Eccles and Roeser (2009) argued that as a student’s emotional, cognitive, and social needs and personal goals change over time, so should schools change in developmentally appropriate ways to continue to motivate and engage students as they mature and move through the school system. Drawing on ideas related to SDT (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985), Eccles and colleagues (1993) proposed a *stage-environment fit theory* to suggest that student motivation and well-being are greatest when the school context meets their psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The model also suggests that when there is a poor fit between the student’s changing psychological needs and their learning environment, they will experience declines in interest, participation, and performance in learning (Eccles et al., 1993). This framework is particularly relevant for the current project, as the study sample consists of at-risk youth who have not succeeded in traditional school settings perhaps due to not having their unique needs met throughout their educational careers.

Factors That Impact Student Engagement

A multitude of non-school (e.g., individual differences, family systems) and school factors (e.g., school practices, classroom instruction, teacher-student relationships) have the potential to impact student engagement. Some of these factors are considered more stable and difficult to alter (e.g., chronic poverty) while others are thought to be more amenable to change (e.g., beliefs and attitudes) and therefore ideal targets for programs aimed at improving student outcomes, including successful school completion and student well-being. Student engagement itself is thought of as a malleable construct that results from an interaction of the individual and the environment, and is responsive to changes in one’s context (Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Non-school factors. One review study identified several non-school risk factors of school withdrawal: lower SES, racial or ethnic minority status, being male, living in urban and poorer communities, having higher household stress (financial or health problems, parental substance
abuse, physical or sexual abuse of children, etc.), assuming adult roles early (e.g., employment or caretaking), having family or peers not value education, lacking parental monitoring and involvement, having poor relationships with parents, lower educational aspirations, more misbehaviour, less interest in education, less social conformity and greater need for autonomy/independence, higher social deviancy and associations with delinquent peers, and exhibiting lower self-esteem, interpersonal communication problems, impulsivity, and hopelessness (Rosenthal, 1998). Despite this myriad of relevant non-school factors, historically the focus has typically been on school-related factors, due to viewing student disengagement and dropout primarily as an educational problem as opposed to a societal one.

**Family factors.** The existing literature indicates that family factors such as parenting style (e.g., Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter, 1997), parental support of student’s education (Woolley & Bowen, 2007), and family management practices (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006) have a direct relationship with student engagement and school completion (as reviewed by Sharkey et al., 2008). An authoritative parenting style (i.e., warm but firm and fair) has been found to associate with improved behavioural and emotional aspects of student engagement in a longitudinal study (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). In this study, authoritative parenting practices incorporated high levels of acceptance, consistency in discipline, appropriate supervision, and a democratic style with the youth who showed improvements.

Researchers have acknowledged that family context (e.g., family support for learning, neighbourhood factors) and individual assets (IQ, athleticism), while contributing to engagement, can be more difficult or resistant to change (Doll & Hess, 2001). As such, there is a growing focus on identifying more malleable, intra-individual variables related to student engagement (e.g., student perceptions and attitudes) that might be easier targets to improve school completion (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). Supporting the focus on student perceptions and
attitudes, some research has found that family relationships may have an indirect effect on student engagement through the student’s perception of internal qualities (e.g., self-worth and competence; Bohnert, Martin, & Garber, 2007). This suggests that one’s family factors may shape individual views of self, which in turn affect student engagement. For instance, youth individual factors such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and perceived relationship quality with others have been shown to influence behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects of engagement (e.g., Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). A better understanding of the intra-individual factors that impact student engagement, regardless of whether or not they are influenced by family factors, could support efforts to improve educational outcomes for youth.

**School factors.** Children and adolescents spend more time in school than any other place outside their homes. As such, it is expected that school factors would contribute greatly to a youth’s engagement and successful completion of school. Some of the school factors associated with engagement that have been examined in the literature include: transition into high school, teacher-student relationships, and classroom practices such as method of instruction (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

**School transitions.** Understanding student engagement is considered particularly important in adolescence because of the many social, emotional, and cognitive transitions that take place during this developmental period. Even adolescent students who complete their required schooling (and do not withdraw from school) can exhibit high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection from schooling (Larson & Richards, 1991). High school students in particular may disengage from the learning process most often (Wang & Eccles, 2012). In addition, steady declines in student engagement and academic motivation during adolescence and transitions to middle and secondary school have been documented (e.g., Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). A recent study (Wang & Eccles, 2012) supports this view. Researchers
measured longitudinal effects of school compliance and participation in extracurricular activities (behavioural engagement), school identification (emotional engagement), and subjective valuing of learning (cognitive engagement) across grades 7 to 11. The average growth trajectory for these measures of engagement decline from grade 7 to 11, putting older students at greater risk for academic failure and school withdrawal.

Researchers have argued that adolescents’ student engagement declines over the course of their academic careers due to changes in social and academic environments as they transition from elementary to middle school, and then again into high school (e.g., Wang & Eccles, 2012). School transitions serve as a good example of how the education system interacts to affect child and adolescent development. School transitions typically include a move to a new and often larger building, larger class sizes, departmentalization of instruction, less student-teacher interaction, and a greater focus on self-evaluation and performance goals rather than mastery, resulting in fewer opportunities to develop strong relationships with teachers and increased social comparison with other students (summarized in Eccles & Roeser, 2009). In addition to typical declines in engagement during adolescence, youth with longstanding family problems, mental health difficulties, exposure to trauma, and involvement with protection and/or juvenile detention services may be at increased risk of becoming disengaged from school.

Consistent with SDT and stage-environment fit theory, Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff (1998) proposed possible areas that may lead to a poor fit between the changing developmental needs of adolescents and high-school environments, including “limited opportunities for student autonomy and decision-making, less supportive and caring teacher-student relationships, and increases in teacher control, social comparison, and competition” (Wang & Eccles, 2012, pp. 32). These changes in an adolescents’ school and social context would lower their autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging, which have been found to be important contributors to
adolescent achievement and development (e.g., Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). In addition, these changes may be especially harmful for early adolescent development, as they reduce competence and encourage comparison at a time of increased self-focus, reduce autonomy when the desire for control is growing, and they disrupt relatedness at a time when youth may be in most need of connection and close adult relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

Roeser and colleagues (1998) conducted a study showing that adolescents who reported positive academic motivation and well-being also perceived their school environment as having practices, norms, and teacher-student interactions that were developmentally appropriate. For example, when adolescents perceived aspects of their school environment as supportive of their competence (positive teacher regard, students are challenged to do their best, effort is important, and self-improvement and task mastery are emphasized), positive changes were seen in student motivation and achievement over time (Roeser et al., 1998). Teachers play a crucial role in the lives of students, especially with regard to providing opportunities for youth to develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the classroom and larger school environment. Conceptually, teachers may serve as malleable components of the school environment that may facilitate engagement through positive teacher-student relationships.

**Teacher-student relationships.** Effective teacher-student relationships (TSRs) have long been considered important for positive student adjustment (Roorda & Koomen, 2011). Supportive teacher-student relationships are thought to act as buffers or protective factors that promote positive student outcomes, even in the context of exposure to adversity (Baker, 1998; Murray & Murray, 2004). Birch and Ladd (1997) proposed three distinct but related factors that contribute to the quality of the teacher-student relationship and are related to student adjustment: closeness, conflict, and dependency. Closeness refers to the degree of warmth and open communication that exists within the teacher-student relationship, which is hypothesized to foster positive attitudes and
engagement in school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Conflict in the teacher-student relationship is characterized as discordant interactions and is thought to cause stress, anxiety, and anger in youth. Relationship conflict may cause students to feel alienated from school, leading to negative school attitudes and withdrawal (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Lastly, dependency in the teacher-student relationship refers to students relying too heavily on teachers through clingy, possessive behaviours, which are thought to hinder a student’s school adjustment.

TSRs are thought to influence student engagement to varying degrees, depending on certain student characteristics acting as moderators such as age, gender, and level of risk. Conceptually, it is expected that younger children may be more strongly influenced by TSRs, as older children and adolescents are thought to place heavier emphasis on peer relationships (e.g., Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). However, empirical studies do not support this premise (Baker, 2006), and some studies have even found a stronger association between relatedness at school and behavioural engagement for older students (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Interestingly, Roorda and colleagues (2011) also found that positive aspects of TSRs had stronger effects within secondary school studies only, while negative aspects of TSRs were more influential for primary school studies. These findings suggest that while adolescent students are at higher risk of school dropout, they may also benefit greatly from positive TSRs. Unfortunately, secondary school students tend to have less positive relationships with teachers overall (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Alternatively, older students may be more sensitive to the support they receive because of the difficulty in building better TSRs in secondary school settings with increased class sizes, multiple teachers, and greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline strategies as compared to elementary schools.

Youth with emotional and behavioural problems are at greater risk of developing poor relationships with their teachers, characterized as negative relationships with high conflict and
dependency (C. Murray & Murray, 2004). Some researchers have suggested that while TSRs influence student engagement, student engagement might also influence TSRs through a reciprocal process (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008). Teachers are likely to find it easier to create supportive, caring relationships with youth who are already showing greater levels of student engagement and academic performance.

**Classroom practices.** Classroom practices provide an opportunity for educators to support students’ needs. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) provide an overview of how to apply SDT to educational practices. They suggest that strategies to enhance autonomy (i.e., the experience of behaviour as volitional), include providing students with choice and meaningful rationale when presenting learning activities, acknowledging how students feel about the topics being presented in class, and making an effort to minimize pressure to do well and increase control over their learning. Strategies to enhance competence (i.e., the experience of behaviour as effectively enacted) include providing feedback that supports understanding and mastery over evaluation and comparison, and providing students with tasks that are optimally challenging (e.g., not too difficult or too easy). Strategies to enhance relatedness (i.e., a sense of security and connection) include teachers and school personnel conveying warmth, care, and respect to students.

The relevance and form of instruction is also an important consideration for student engagement. When students participate in meaningful inquiry to solve real life problems that extend beyond the classroom, they are more likely to feel and be engaged (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). Allowing students to have more control over their learning activities (e.g., through small group, individual instruction) as opposed to teacher-controlled learning activities (e.g., lecture recitation, whole group instruction) is another important way in which students can be more engaged in their learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Lastly, classroom practices that
encourage teachers to evaluate learning through exams or involve social comparison have been found a negative impact on student interest in learning (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003).

Flink, Boggiano, and Berrett (1990) conducted a study to examine how teacher practices and pressures influenced student performance. Teachers were assigned a non-pressure condition (i.e., instructed to “facilitate children’s learning”) or a pressure condition (i.e., instructed that it was their responsibility that children performed up to standards). Results indicated that when teachers were pressured to increase students’ performance level and used controlling teaching strategies (e.g., directives communicated in a controlling manner, absence of choice), student performance was impaired. The authors suggested that controlling teaching practices reduce feelings of self-determination (e.g., a sense of control over initiation and regulation of activities) may undermine both intrinsic motivation and performance (Flink et al., 1990). In the current research, learning takes place in an alternative school that supports individual programming and self-paced instruction within the context of the teacher-student relationship. It is thought that these aspects of the alternative school may support less controlling and more student-centered approaches to learning, which may partially underlie student engagement in this context.

Contextual Models of Student Engagement

Sharkey and colleagues (2008) examined the relation between school assets (characterized by teacher-student relationships; TSRs), individual resilience (defined here as a six-factor model of cooperation, empathy, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and goals and aspirations), and psychological aspects of student engagement such as school connectedness, among students with high and low family assets. Results indicated that youth with more family risk factors also reported lower levels of emotional engagement. The authors tested a mediation model whereby school assets were assumed to predict student engagement (the outcome) through the mediation of internal resilience. Results indicated that different aspects of internal resilience
partially mediated the relationship between TSRs and student engagement for the family asset groups. Self-concept was a partial mediator for the family risk group, whereas interpersonal skills partially mediated the relationship for the group with family strength (Sharkey et al., 2008). One limitation of this study was the measurement of self-concept and interpersonal skills, as these complex internal constructs were assessed using only seven items each from a larger self-report instrument mean to examine external and internal aspects of resilience. In addition, it is unclear how these intra-individual factors influence student engagement in a population of youth at risk of school withdrawal specifically (as opposed to a broad ‘family risk’ group). This dissertation addresses this gap in the literature by further exploring the interplay between malleable (i.e., responsive to variations in the environment) intra-individual and school factors that may improve student engagement for youth who are most at risk of not completing school. Furthermore, this dissertation attempts to broaden this area of research by incorporating a positive psychology perspective into this often deficit-oriented area of research.

**Student Engagement and Positive Psychology**

Within education, the positive psychology paradigm seeks to move beyond the preoccupation with remediation of personal deficits and negative outcomes (e.g., noncompliance and school failure) and to include the development of positive qualities, such as identifying and nurturing strengths within individuals and institutions to better understand how people flourish at school (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). With respect to student engagement, rather than an exclusive focus on the *barriers* to engagement, research could be enhanced by also considering *facilitators* of student engagement for at-risk youth including both systemic supports (e.g., strength-based education) and intra-individual youth characteristics (e.g., personal strengths, positive self-concept or other positive psychological resources).
One prominent area of positive psychology is the study of positive emotion. According to the broaden-and-build perspective (Fredrickson, 2001) the positive emotions that students experience are hypothesized to “broaden” their thoughts and behaviours to facilitate more adaptive responses to their environment, which may help create better learning opportunities, gather more external resources and promote future well-being (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antarmian, 2008). Application of this theory in educational settings would suggest that a student’s positive experience at school should trigger positive thinking and acting, which could in turn enhance student engagement.

Reschly and colleagues (2008) examined the broaden-and-build theory through a mediation model in which seeking social support and problem-solving mediated the association between emotion and student engagement. Results provide preliminary support for the broaden-and-build theory in school settings, such that experiencing frequent, positive emotions at school was associated with increased student engagement, and this relationship was partially mediated through adaptive coping (defined as seeking social support and self-reliance/problem solving; Reschly et al., 2008). One implication of this study is that school interventions seeking to promote engagement should target factors that lead students to experience more positive emotions and life satisfaction.

Although researchers are beginning to focus on positive individual qualities and strengths in students as well as optimal environments to nurture well-being (Elmore & Huebner, 2010; Scott Huebner & Hills, 2011), research to date has rarely considered such variables as they relate to student engagement in particular, let alone in a sample considered to be at high risk of complete withdrawal from school. Research with youth who are disengaged from a traditional school has predominantly stemmed from deficit models and thus has focused on how various risk factors (e.g., learning issues, mental health challenges) negatively influence school success. The current
dissertation aims to contribute to this research field by broadening consideration of youth assets including concepts related to youth life satisfaction, positive schemas, and psychological flexibility.

**Life Satisfaction**

The prominence of deficits-oriented models and associated empirical research has emphasized the systemic and individual problems affecting at-risk youth who struggle with student engagement, often neglecting to report on their resources and strengths. This dissertation strives to embrace a more holistic view of these youth and the factors that relate to student engagement. A positive psychology approach emphasizes the importance of considering positive well-being constructs, including life satisfaction. Life satisfaction has been defined as “a cognitive appraisal of individuals’ overall quality of life based on their own standards” and may also impact engagement with school (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011, p. 250). Research suggests that adults with greater satisfaction in life also show greater success in their interpersonal relationships, their occupations, as well as better mental and physical health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Along these lines, school satisfaction is believed to contribute to a student’s overall life satisfaction (Huebner, 2004), and has been associated with psychological variables such as effective interpersonal behaviour, positive affect, and self-esteem (as reviewed by Elmore & Huebner, 2010), and environmental characteristics, such as parent and peer support (DeSantis-King, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2007).

Adolescents’ life satisfaction may mediate the link between stressful life events and internalizing behaviours (Suldo & Huebner, 2004), and moderate the relationships between stressful life events and externalizing behaviour (McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002). In addition, a higher level of life satisfaction among students is related to more positive attitudes toward teachers and school as a whole (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Elmore and Huebner (2010) found that
students’ school satisfaction mattered to adolescents above and beyond their relationships with parents and peers in determining their school-related behavior (e.g., behavioural engagement). This research begins to identify the connection between life satisfaction and concepts related to emotional and cognitive aspects of student engagement (e.g., relationships, attitudes toward school). Currently very little is known about intra-individual mechanisms that might relate student well-being (including life satisfaction) to student engagement. Understanding these relations might be fruitful, as well-being is a malleable factor that can be targeted in preventative and/or therapeutic interventions for youth in school settings. Therefore, further exploration of how life satisfaction relates to student engagement in an at-risk sample of students is warranted.

**Resilience**

The concept of resilience is an important one in the field of positive psychology and has great relevance for students facing considerable challenge. Resilience captures the phenomenon of individuals continuing on the path of positive development and adaptive responding, despite having experienced significant adversity. Richardson (2002, p. 308) defined resilience as “the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors”. Taking a more systemic approach, Masten (2011) defined resilience as the capacity of a system (e.g., child, family, community, etc.) to adapt successfully to threats that could harm or destroy the life, function of development of the system. From this perspective, Masten argues that resilience is dynamic, and the capacity for adaptation to adversity is distributed across systems, such that individual resilience depends on the resilience of other systems. Individual resilience generally reflects concepts such as inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility, and the ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity (Wagnild, 2009). Goldstein and Brooks (2002) suggest that normal development in resilient youth is often fostered by experiences of unconditional acceptance.
within an important social relationship (e.g., a parent or teacher). In addition, research indicates that resilience is derived from three sources: (1) intra-individual factors (e.g., self-concept), (2) factors within the home (e.g., secure attachment), and (3) factors outside of the home (e.g., school environment; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). As such, the development of resilience may conceptually resemble the process of engagement in youth who are considered to be at risk of not completing their education. Factors outside of the home that may promote resilience among youth include relevant classroom instruction and caring teacher-student relationships, motivation to succeed, self-efficacy, problem solving and self-regulation skills, to name a few (Masten, 2014). Factors within the home that may promote educational resilience include authoritative parenting styles, secure attachment, and parental support of education. Some intra-individual factors that may promote resilience in an educational context include positive self-concept (such as positive schemas), and the ability to respond to the present environment flexibly (i.e., psychological flexibility).

**Positive Schemas**

Cognitive schemas, or mental frameworks that are used to interpret, categorize, and evaluate one’s experiences (James, Reichelt, Freeston, & Barton, 2007), are often examined in the context of psychopathology and therapeutic interventions (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapies). Cognitive schemas are theorized to develop through interactions with the environment, with core schemas developing in childhood and then further articulated throughout development (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). In line with the positive psychology field, researchers are exploring the importance of positive cognitive schemas in the development of well-being in children and adolescents. A recent study among adolescents attending a traditional high school highlighted how positive schemas are associated with indicators of well-being such as life satisfaction and happiness, even after accounting for negative schemas, age, and gender (Tomlinson, Keyfitz,
Rawana, & Lumley, 2016). Furthermore, research has found that positive schema content was associated with depression, anxiety, and resilience in a cross-sectional study of early adolescents recruited from elementary schools (Keyfitz, Lumley, Hennig, & Dozois, 2013). More specifically, of the five positive core schema themes examined in the study (i.e., worthiness, self-efficacy, optimism, success, and interpersonal trust) self-efficacy was most strongly associated with resilience and anxiety, whereas worthiness was most strongly associated with depression (Keyfitz et al., 2013).

Schemas influence how one perceives the world, and for students this may naturally apply and extend to perceptions and self-beliefs about their school experiences. A student’s self-beliefs may impact their ability to engage with their learning and school experiences. For example, a student with the positive schema of interpersonal trust (e.g., the core belief that others can be trusted) may be more likely to be receptive to co-creating positive teacher-student relationships thus gaining the associated benefits to their student engagement. Further research is needed to determine the interplay between cognitive and motivational models to examine whether positive self-schemas have an impact on student engagement. Student positive schemas may serve as targets for intervention for improving student engagement and promoting school completion. There is a longstanding precedence for targeting cognitive schemas through various evidence-based cognitive behavioural therapies as a way to enhance well-being. Adapting these approaches for application in school settings for the purpose of bolstering positive self-beliefs among youth may be one potential avenue for promoting student engagement.

**Psychological Flexibility**

Psychological flexibility refers to a number of dynamic processes that unfold over time. Kashdan (2011, p. 866) defines psychological flexibility as “how a person (1) adapts to fluctuating situational demands, (2) reconfigures mental resources, (3) shifts perspective, and (4) balances
competing desires, needs, and life domains.” In contrast, psychological inflexibility refers to the extreme end point of the flexibility continuum, where the individual presents with rigidity to fluctuating demands, and has difficulty reconfiguring mental resources, shifting perspectives, and balancing competing needs. Extant literature has demonstrated the pervasiveness of inflexibility in psychopathology, including depression and anxiety disorders (Kashdan, 2011).

Greater psychological flexibility has the potential to positively impact student engagement. While positive psychology concepts such as subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction), positive self-concept (e.g., positive schemas), and the satisfaction of the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important, some researchers have argued that they “fail to capture the dynamic, fluctuating, and contextually-specific behaviors that people deploy when navigating the challenges of daily life” (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010, pp. 866). Individuals who are psychologically flexible adjust to their environment with greater ease, as they are able to respond to their current situation effectively (Bond et al., 2011). Individuals with greater psychological flexibility are thought to be better able to act in service of their long-term goals and values instead of short-term urges and impulses. Most importantly, psychological flexibility incorporates a repeated transaction between the individual and their environmental context.

While psychological flexibility contributes to well-being and psychological health, it is not often discussed in the positive psychology literature, and to this researcher’s knowledge has not been examined in relation to school experiences or student engagement, particularly of youth at-risk for non-completion. For students, augmenting their psychological flexibility could potentially allow them to be in the present moment and therefore better able to learn, while also responding flexibly to their environment and acting according to longer-term goals and values (e.g., school completion). Psychological flexibility might set the stage for student engagement by enabling youth to respond more effectively to challenges they face in school, resulting in a greater
likelihood for success and therefore an accumulation of positive emotions and school experiences. Psychological flexibility is another malleable individual factor, and if a pathway to greater student engagement, may be a potential target for intervention.

Taken together, theoretical and empirical research within the broad umbrella of positive psychology on life satisfaction, resilience, positive schemas and psychological flexibility may provide a novel and comparatively hopeful way of better documenting the resources and strengths within students who have been disengaged and may become re-engaged at school. Broadening the focus to better include individual assets of these youth within this research area may also provide direction for enhancing intervention to better promote their engagement at school.

**Strength-Based Education**

Strength-based education has been proposed as an approach to working with students who are at-risk or disengaged from school (Rawana, Franks, Brownlee, Rawana, & Neckoway, 2011). This approach begins with educators understanding and developing their own strengths as they help students do the same. A foundational assumption is that potential exists in all students and one role of the educator is to help students realize this potential through educational practices and learning experiences. Frederickson (2001) recommended that educational planning identify and include student personal and environmental strengths on an individual basis. For example, one concrete way to promote strengths in education is to assess each student’s strengths and develop a “strengths wall” to display and remind students of their top strengths, and then individualize the learning experience of each student by helping them set personalized goals and apply their strengths.

This strength-based approach to education aims to enhance well-being and positive outcomes by providing an optimal fit between the student and his or her environment. This might be of particular importance within a population of at-risk youth who have accrued negative school
experiences and not succeeded in traditional education settings, as their emotional and educational needs likely surpassed the supports available in traditional schools. In addition, merely focusing on removing barriers and reducing negative symptoms may not be sufficient in supporting the most at-risk youth to succeed. Considering how to bolster their personal strengths, resilience, and positive qualities/outcomes is equally important. A strength-based approach to education is consistent with the positive psychology paradigm (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), as it emphasizes the positive aspects of student efforts and achievement, as well as human strengths and assets (Lopez & Louis, 2009). A strength-based approach to education may also align well with the goals and structure of alternative education and settings. The alternative school setting in which the current study takes place employs a strength-based approach to education as a way to re-engage youth who are at risk of school dropout. The current study examines both individual and contextual factors that detract from and contribute to student engagement, therefore making a significant contribution toward a more holistic understanding of student engagement.

The Current Study

The overarching goal of the present study was to better understand the process of student engagement from the perspective of adolescents at risk of dropping out of school who are currently attending a strength-based alternative school. More specifically, I aimed to examine the intra-individual and contextual experiences of these youth towards contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how youth become re-engaged in an alternative education setting that supports learning through building relationships and emphasizing student strengths. To achieve this goal, a pragmatic mixed-method approach using both qualitative (S1) and quantitative (S2) methods was employed.

In Study 1, the development and process of student engagement were explored through in-depth qualitative interviews geared toward a more nuanced understanding of how at-risk youth
(defined as youth at risk of school withdrawal) become gradually disengaged and then subsequently re-engaged with learning and their school. Interviews focused on previous and current school experiences, the alternative school environment, the different aspects of student engagement (i.e., emotional, cognitive, behavioural) and academic progress.

Study 2 employed a quantitative approach to explore the association among life satisfaction, psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement in a sample of at-risk youth attending the alternative school. A regression analysis was employed to explore potential psychological underpinnings of student engagement (i.e., whether positive schema themes predict student engagement after accounting for sex effects). In addition, multiple mediation analyses were conducted to examine how psychological distress (defined here as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress) and well-being (defined here as general life satisfaction) related to student engagement through the mediation of positive schemas and psychological inflexibility. Additionally, a smaller sample of students were followed longitudinally following a one-year period to determine whether additional time in the alternative setting would be associated with improvements in life satisfaction, psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement over time.

Overview: Study 1

The overall purpose of this study was to better understand the process of how youth become disengaged from learning and their schools and subsequently re-engaged in an alternative school setting. This study also documented the students’ perspectives on the alternative school mandate and program and how these relate to their own engagement with school and broader well-being. First, an open-ended school timeline interview was conducted to better understand the participants’ historical school experiences as well as focusing on their experience within the alternative school. This activity also served as a ‘warm-up’ and alliance builder prior to engaging
in the in-depth interview that followed. Second, a set of interview questions was asked to explore how students report their school experiences and learning since attending the alternative school, and more specifically examine participants’ perceptions of what may be contributing to any improvements. In addition, the interviews aimed to expand understanding of students’ perceptions of what may be supporting their learning, including the individuals they interact with, the school environment, and the methods by which they are learning. This research aims to provide insight into students’ perceptions of how this particular alternative school differs from more traditional school settings, and how these differences may relate to their student engagement and learning. Such research is important to inform effective interventions for youth at risk of school dropout, and to inform future programs aimed at improving student engagement.

Methods: Study 1

Research Site

The alternative school in which these studies were conducted is located in a mid-sized city in Ontario within a Catholic School Board. The school’s overarching goal is to provide an educational environment for students whose needs were not being met in a traditional high school. The school’s mission statement is as follows:

*We are a school that supports learning through relationship where students are valued and able to meet their goals in an environment that cultivates trust, competence, and hope.*

Ultimately, the strategic goal of the alternative school is that:

*Graduates will have developed the knowledge, academic skills, life skills, social-emotional maturity required to become productive members of the community by participating in post-secondary education and/or finding employment.*

The school building consists of five classrooms, a gymnasium, common areas, group meeting rooms, small meeting rooms for individual counseling with the social worker, and office space for
the front desk, principal and staff. At the time of this research, the staff consisted of the principal, an alternative learning coordinator, a social worker, a part-time receptionist, three educational assistants, a special education and resource teacher, and five teachers. In addition, the school was supported by volunteers, as well as undergraduate and graduate student placements.

The alternative high school is largely informed by strength-based and individualized education (Rawana et al., 2011), wherein great emphasis is placed on building strong teacher-student relationships. As such, purposeful staffing is an important aspect of the school, as staff are to incorporate strength-based learning and be willing to engage with students emotionally in order to build trusting relationships with them. Staff attend workshops in strength-based concepts and strategies in education, and students complete the Strengths Assessment Inventory (SAI; Brazeau, Teatero, Rawana, Brownlee, & Blanchette, 2012) as a way to build awareness of their strengths and to incorporate them in their individual programming and curriculum. Classroom displays consist of strength-based concepts and positive affirmations about resilience.

**Student Experience**

All the youth attending the alternative school have faced barriers to educational services due to various factors such as family context, mental health and addiction, learning challenges, and other social and/or emotional factors. Students may attend the school by referral only from the three traditional high schools within the school board or one of the school’s community partners (e.g., Family and Children’s Services). For students to attend the school, all other available supports and resources in the school board and community must have been employed with little success. In addition, students require appropriate assessments to have been conducted with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in place.

Once admitted, a program planning conference is scheduled with the student, their caregivers, school personnel, and relevant outside agency staff (e.g., Family and Children
Services, mental health practitioners). The aim of the meeting is to develop an intervention plan that highlights the student’s strengths and addresses their specific challenges. At this meeting, the student’s timetable, schedule, and specific program is collaboratively developed as well as any other transition planning considerations. Student conferences occur regularly and as needed, using a systems approach to collaborate with the student, family, school, and community partners.

Students at the alternative school require individual and specific programming due to complex academic, social, and emotional needs. This is accomplished through various academic interventions, including: individualized programming, credit recovery, direct instruction, staged instruction/learning, dual credit opportunities, supervised alternative learning (SAL), and cooperative education. Students learn in small classes, using self-paced instruction and flexible scheduling. The school communicates regularly with other community agencies to provide multi-agency services to youth at the school. The school facilitates coordinated social-emotional interventions including individual, group, and family therapy, life skills programming, health education, crisis response, and other interventions. The school also runs a *Food and Friends* program, which aims to eliminate barriers to education by providing breakfast, snacks, and lunch to students daily.

**Researcher Role**

The current study aims to better understand the experiences of students attending an alternative high school. The researcher sought to understand how these students think and feel about themselves and their schooling experiences. During the researcher’s graduate training in a clinical psychology program, she was involved with the school in various roles, including: assisting in the development of a school-wide program logic model, assisting in obtaining grants and conducting research for the Ministry of Education regarding student engagement, engaging in clinical work in the form of co-leading a brief therapy group on mindfulness and emotion.
regulation with the school social worker, and attending social events such as holiday lunches and graduation. The researcher also collected data for this dissertation over three consecutive years and personally conducted all of the interviews with students for this study.

Trust in relationships was an important consideration for this population of students. Rapport was developed between the researcher and students at the alternative school over time. The researcher was visible to some of the students for several years, through her involvement with other research projects and school events noted above. Informal interactions during breaks and lunch hour helped establish rapport, along with the researcher’s positive working relationships with staff at the alternative school.

Participants

A larger study was conducted with 31 participants who completed self-report questionnaires, 22 of whom agreed to continue with the qualitative interview portion. Of the 22 participants in the qualitative component, there were 16 female and 6 male participants, ranging in age from 16 to 19 years old ($M$ age = 17.8 years old), with 19 students (86%) in grade 12. Of the 22 participants, 17 self-identified as being White or of European descent, while the remaining 5 participants reported belonging to various ethnicities, including African American, Hispanic, Indigenous, and mixed ethnic backgrounds. Of the 22 participants, 8 students had been involved with Family & Children’s Services (i.e., have had agency involvement due to child protection concerns and/or have been in foster care) and 3 students had been in custody. All students had attended at least one other high school (on average 2 to 3 schools) prior to arriving at the alternative school.

Procedure

The current study received ethics clearance from the school board as well as the Research Ethics Board of the University of Guelph. There were two groups of participants at the school and
each required a different consent procedure. The first group consisted of students that required 
parental/guardian consent to participate in research. This group was comprised of youth under the 
age of 18 years who were living with parents/guardians and all youth who were under the age 16. 
For this first group, their parents/guardians were sent a letter from the principal, along with a 
parent information sheet and consent form, indicating that they would be contacted to ask consent 
for their child to participate in the study. The principal investigator of this dissertation then 
obtained parent/guardian consent over the phone. Once parental/guardian consent was provided, 
youth assent was obtained in person. Please refer to the forms in the Appendices for further details. 

The second group did not require parent/guardian consent to participate in research. This 
group was comprised of youth who were 16 or 17 years and living on their own (and thus 
considered their own agent and decision-maker by the Education Act) and also any youth at the 
school over 18 years. 

All students were recruited in person at the alternative school about an opportunity to 
participate in a study in which they would be asked to share their school experiences. The 
investigator of this dissertation verbally presented the study information and consent procedures 
and was available to answer any questions about the research. Students were provided with an oral 
and written description of the study purpose, procedure, consent process, and confidentiality. 
Students then had the option to indicate their willingness to participate by signing their name on 
the youth consent/assent forms. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants had the 
option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were assured that there would 
be no negative consequences from the school or University should they choose to not participate 
or withdraw from the study. All students were provided with a $10 gift card for their participation. 
Please refer to the forms in the Appendices for more information. Interviews were conducted in a 
private room at the school throughout the day. The school timeline and semi-structured interviews
were audio-recorded.

Data collection

School timeline interviews. First, an open-ended school timeline interview was conducted in which students were provided with a graph and asked to rate how generally positive or negative their school experiences had been each year. The purpose of these summative ratings was to set the stage for discussion about potential peaks and valleys in the students’ engagement at school over time. Participants were asked to rate their experiences beginning in grade one up to their present grade, by creating a mark on the graph along y-axis to rate their overall impression of the year (see Figure 1 for the school timeline graph). Participants were prompted to share experiences that stood out to them over the years (e.g., “What happened during this year?”). They were further prompted to explain their most positive and negative ratings (e.g., “What made this year more positive?”), as well as the transition to their current alternative high school (e.g., “What was it like to change schools?”). The school timeline interviews took an average of 7 minutes 40 seconds (ranging from 3 minutes to 20 minutes 12 seconds).

Figure 1. School timeline graph
Semi-structured student interviews (Appendix B). Second, a semi-structured interview was conducted in which students were asked to discuss barriers and motivation for attending school, how they perceived themselves to be doing academically, to compare their schooling experiences at this alternative school with their previous schools, identify things that helped or hindered their learning, and discuss stigma related to the school and its student body. The purpose of the interview was to better understand the experiences of students with complex challenges, and their perspective on education. The researcher was also interested in understanding what aspects of the alternative school supported student engagement – from the student perspective. Interview questions aimed at answering these questions were developed by the researcher based on previous interactions with the students and staff at the alternative school, as well as her own familiarity with academic literature on the subjects of student engagement and alternative education. The researcher shared the interview questions with fellow graduate students and her supervisor to review and obtain feedback. The interview consisted of open-ended questions to encourage participants to describe their experiences with schooling in their own words. In addition, probes were used throughout the interview to further explore and understand the students’ responses. The semi-structured interviews lasted an average time of 12 minutes 49 seconds (ranging from 7 minutes 46 seconds to 20 minutes).

Analytic approach

This study was designed to understand participants’ past and current school experiences and the process of student engagement and learning, including what students identified as barriers and facilitators along the way. Of particular interest were aspects of the alternative high school that participants identified as contributing to their student engagement as well as indicators of progress that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods.
A pragmatic mixed-methods approach (Greene & Caracelli, 1997) guided the analysis of this research, in which both qualitative and quantitative research are viewed as important and useful. To adopt a pragmatic epistemological position is to focus on the problem being researched (i.e., in this case how to increase student engagement among at-risk youth in an alternative school setting) and the consequences of the research (i.e., in this case informing educational practices in other alternative settings); this position thus provides an alternative worldview to those of positivism/post-positivism and constructivism (Feilzer, 2010). As a research paradigm, pragmatism orients itself toward solving practical problems in the “real world”, and circumvents the contentious issues of “truth” and “reality” by arguing that the focus of research should be utility as opposed to accurately representing reality (Feilzer, 2010). The mixed-method used in this study was a concurrent transformative design (Creswell, 2003), such that qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed separately. Transformative designs are driven by the theoretical perspective of the researcher to guide the research questions of the study. The qualitative method used to analyze the interview data in this study was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The researcher aimed to employ a non-expert and curious stance in conducting and analyzing the interviews, based in the belief that each participant was the expert in the realm of their own experiences. Nonetheless, the researcher’s extensive experience with student engagement literature and with the students and school staff did influence the researcher’s pragmatic lens through the analysis. For example, the researcher may have been especially tuned to better understanding factors that promoted positive outcomes for these youth considering her immersion in the strengths-based and positive psychology literatures. An inductive approach was taken in analyzing the interviews, whereby the categories and themes are strongly linked to the data and not the interview questions or any pre-existing coding schemes.
Data analysis

Transcription. Data from the school timeline and student interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and an undergraduate research assistant. The researcher checked all transcripts for accuracy and content using the original audio recordings.

Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted for each school timeline and student interview segment in accordance with the guidelines presented by Braun and Clarke (2013). The school timeline and student interview analyses were conducted separately, using similar steps.

(1) The researcher familiarized herself with the interview transcripts through extensive engagement with the data, reading the transcripts multiple times prior to generating codes. The researcher’s thoughts (e.g., about what was being discussed, how the content was related to student engagement) were recorded directly onto the Microsoft Word transcription document.

(2) Initial codes were defined during data analysis, and derived from the data. Initial codes were identified by systematically going through the entire data set, line by line, which consisted of the full interview transcripts. During these initial read-throughs, initial codes and memos were compiled in Microsoft Word, using the ‘highlight’ and ‘comment’ tools to identify portions of the interviews that seemed relevant, interesting, or important. Initial codes were collated into potential themes and sub-themes. Extended notes, or memos, were taken throughout the data analysis process where the researcher wrote down in a journal the ideas and connections that were being made while reading the transcripts and generating codes. A new document was created with the initial codes in order to assist with generating themes.

(3) Next, initial codes were collated into potential themes based on similarities and overall relation to the research questions. Diagramming was used to visually organize potential themes and sub-themes. Potential data extracts that could later be used to convey the themes were also flagged at this time.
(4) Themes were reviewed and reorganized by comparing them to the initial codes and re-reading the entire data set. The raw data (e.g., audio files) as well as the interview transcripts were listened to and read over again during theme development, in order to determine referential adequacy (i.e., which data would not be included in the thematic analysis). Discussions took place over the course of several meetings between the researcher and her doctoral supervisor regarding potential themes.

(5) Themes were named, reviewed and refined, ensuring that there were sufficient data to support each meaningful theme and that themes were distinct from one another. At this stage, the thematic maps were generated to reflect the themes and outline how they relate to one another. The thematic map was shared with the researcher’s doctoral supervisor and one advisory committee member for further review and feedback about theme development was incorporated into the thematic maps.

(6) The written results were produced over the course of several revisions, which consisted of repeating the above process several times until a clear story of the data was established with refined themes. Several revisions to the thematic maps occurred over the course of writing the report. Lastly, further revisions to the analysis and thematic maps occurred after consulting with the researcher’s doctoral supervisor and one committee member, and incorporating their feedback into the final report.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is established through adequate demonstration that data analysis has been conducted “in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible.” (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p.1). In qualitative studies, the researcher becomes the instrument with which data are analyzed,
and it is therefore their responsibility to demonstrate and assure rigor and trustworthiness through their description of the data analysis (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Nowell and colleagues discuss four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in thematic analysis:

(1) Credibility (i.e., the fit between the participant’s views and the researcher’s representation of them). The rapport developed between the researcher and the participants in the study positively impacted the credibility of the work. The researcher’s prolonged engagement with the interviews and writing also strengthened the credibility of these results. Member checking to test the findings at the conclusion of the study was not possible due to the amount of time that lapsed between data collection and data analysis.

(2) Transferability (i.e., generalizability of inquiry). There is great potential for this work to be transferable to other alternative school programs, due to the abundant descriptions provided about the alternative school setting’s values and theoretical orientation, program structure, and the participants’ excerpts, along with a context of historical educational experiences of the at-risk youth in the sample who may benefit from this approach. However, many factors influence whether or not these methods and results are transferrable to other populations (e.g., more culturally diverse, younger, or adult populations) and settings (e.g., urban environments with more poverty). The descriptions provided in this study should aid others in determining how generalizable this study of inquiry is to their work.

(3) Dependability (i.e., research process assures to be logical, traceable and clearly documented). Thorough notes were taken over the course of the analysis, including all the codes that contributed to the development of themes, the researcher’s notes and ideas over the course of this process, along with old versions of the thematic maps. The methodology book by Braun and Clark (2013) on conducting thematic analysis was read thoroughly and the researcher gave her best effort to follow the advice and proper steps. While this study was not audited, it was
supervised closely and therefore many discussions between the researcher and one committee member shaped the final product of this writing. These discussions and supervision meetings were documented by the researcher in notebooks, and therefore an audit trail to outline the decisions made over the course of the study.

(4) Confirmability (i.e., that the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions are clearly derived from the data). In the current study, confirmability is demonstrated through the many excerpts provided from students, and the balance between excerpts and writing in the results. In addition, confirmability is established when the other measures of trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, and dependability) have been reached.

School Timeline

The purpose of the school timeline interview was to better understand from the student perspective, the process of student engagement including the kinds of experiences that contribute to or take away from engagement and learning at school over the entire course of their education. This study contributes to the limited research conducted with at-risk youth in alternative settings. In addition to the sample, what is unique about this study is the setting of an alternative high school which employs a strength-based approach with a large focus on building strong relationships.

Another aim of the school timeline was to create some context and understanding of this particular study sample, including the participants’ prior experiences that led to their eventual withdrawal from traditional school followed by their enrollment in the alternative school. Previous work (e.g., Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) has described a host of causal factors that lead to student disengagement and withdrawal from school consisting of academic, social, and personal concerns (e.g., irrelevant curriculum, involvement in foster care, adverse life experiences). This study examined experiences leading to both withdrawal and engagement in this particular sample,
exemplifying a dual-factor model of understanding student engagement. Merely focusing on the negative experiences that detract from engagement would only tell one side of the story. Understanding how students flourish in school is equally important in supporting their well-being and level of student engagement. In addition, having insight into the historical experiences of this sample assisted in the interpretation and transferability of the student interview results in the subsequent section.

**Results: School Timeline Peaks**

The categories derived from the school timeline peaks are as follows: School Connection and Social and Emotional Stability (see Figure 2 for a summary of categories and sub-themes). There was some overlap across the themes and sub-themes in the analysis. Together, these themes provide an overview of topics discussed by participants in this study, which contributed to positive experiences at school and student engagement over time.

*Figure 2. Thematic map of school timeline “peaks”*
School Connection

School Connection was identified as a theme in examining the content shared by participants during recognized “peaks” on the school timeline. This theme refers to the connections to the people, activities, learning that takes place in school. Connection refers to a sense that students have of being a part of something, whether it be finding comfort in a relationship, being involved with extra-curricular activities, or feeling connected with their learning and achievements. The theme of connection encompasses three sub-themes: relationships at school, school involvement, and learning and achievement.

Relationships at school. Participants described that feeling comfortable with their teachers and peers contributed greatly to their sense of connection to school, and subsequently, peaks on the school timeline. Throughout the timeline, teacher qualities associated with fond memories were usually reported as “good” and “nice”. When asked to elaborate, participants spoke about their favourite teachers being understanding, positive, good listeners, and able to make them feel comfortable. These interpersonal qualities of teachers helped students have more positive experiences at school. For example, participant 4 expressed some of these qualities about her favourite teacher: “Grade 7 was good, probably one of my most favourite teachers […] She just, she listened to students, and she like understood more than other teachers in the past.”

In addition to these the interpersonal qualities, one participant described how her favourite teacher contributed to her best year by leading fun activities and doing thoughtful things for the students:

Grade 1, I had my favourite teacher […] and she was just sooo nice, it was probably my favourite year. She just— I was really quiet when I was younger, so I don’t know, she just made me feel really comfortable like answering questions and stuff, and she was always
really positive and stuff… and she like did so many fun crafts with us, like we got to make play-doh and like just a bunch of fun things, and every now and then she would bake a cake and you know, just write, you know, like cool designs on it for us just randomly. So it was like, it was like a fun year. (P19)

Some participants mentioned how their favourite teachers were ones who reciprocated positive feelings. This participant highlighted how she remembered feeling liked by her two favourite teachers:

“Grade 3 I had an awesome teacher… she was super cool and she liked me. That was the first time I ever really got along with one of my teachers.” (P5)

“Grade 7 I had like, my favourite teacher ever, she was really nice and I was like her favourite student so it was a good year.” (P5)

Many participants associated the peaks in their graphs with memories of friendship. For many students, this was related to having and maintaining good friendships, and having friends in their class they could be with. For example, Participant 14 rated a peak on his timeline due to making lasting friendships that year: “Oh, things were good… I’m still really good friends with the people I was friends with in grade 8, one of them is my best friend.”

As a result of having steady friendships at school, some participants described feeling comfortable in the school environment which served as a protective factor. Participants reported that the consistency of being at the same school and having familiar faces around allowed them to feel comfortable with the setting, which helped protect them against other stressors taking place in their personal lives. One participant described feeling comfortable as a result of being familiar with the people as well as the physical space of the school:

Grade 8 was pretty fun I’d have to say. Because by that point I knew everybody, I had like my group of friends and everything, I got the feel for it, like still the same stuff with my
parents and all like that bad stuff was still going on but like, it was better because I was more comfortable in the school, because I knew where I was going. Like if I was going to the library I knew where it was. (P10)

**School involvement.** Several participants spoke about how being involved with the school community and events or activities that were taking place contributed to their peak experiences at school. One participant remembered a very positive year due to her school involvement as a lunch helper for younger students, and being on an extracurricular sports team:

> When I was in grade 8, I’d say up here [referring to a very positive rating] because I was a really big part of the school community, right? I’d work with the students and with kindergarteners and do lunch helpers and I was a quarterback on the male football team. (P13)

Several participants shared how their involvement with various aspects of the school contributed greatly to the peaks on their graph. This participant spoke about how being involved with school initiatives and a memorable school trip contributed to her overall student engagement:

> I’d say it’s like way up here. Like way up there because like I’ve been so involved with the school, with videos, with presentations to the ministry of education. The weekend that just passed we went to national We Day up in Ottawa, and I dunno last year and this year I’ve just been so proud to be in [the alternative] school because it’s just worked so well, like halfway through grade 10 I accepted the fact that I wasn’t graduating. You know what I’ll find like a crappy job at Tim Hortons or whatever, I’ll get by you know? And now I’m graduating next semester. (P10)

This participant also shared feeling proud of being a part of the alternative school community, and in turn expressing that the school played a major role in her ability to turn her life around and be able to finally graduate.
Learning and achievement. Participants described feeling connected to their schooling when they recalled experiences of learning something new and achieving, which was associated with feelings of pride and peaks on the school timeline. For example, some participants shared fond memories when they learned a new skill (e.g., learning how to play guitar) or a specific subject (e.g., doing well in math). Participant 12 spoke about learning “a lot” one year from a specific teacher: “Grade 4 was really good. I learned a lot in Grade 4 […] I learned how to play chess and stuff because my teacher was a chess teacher, and he helped me a lot with my math and stuff.”

Specific instances of achievement were also found to coincide with peaks on the school timeline. Participant 13 remembered receiving various awards from her school: “Grade 6 was up here [referring to a large peak]… Because I had a lot of– I went to [school name], so they had like awards, they’d do it every month, and I got so many of those. I still have them actually, they’re at home.”

Another participant spoke about how he surprised himself after passing the literacy test, and he also conveyed a sense of accomplishment surrounding the achievement:

I did my literacy test. I was kind of surprised I passed, that was pretty funny. I know it’s a literacy test and it’s all common sense and whatnot, cause it’s like a literacy test. But like, I don’t know, I remember going there and I just really didn’t give a shit […] I was just like “whatever, as long as I get it done I can go home afterwards. I don’t really care if I do good or not, as long as it’s done”. So I didn’t really, you know what I mean, in a sense like expect to pass. (P7)

Social and Emotional Stability

Social and Emotional Stability was identified as a theme while examining the content shared by participants during recognized “peaks” on the school timeline. Stability refers to
steadiness and consistency, both within the individual (e.g., emotions and urges perceived as regulated) and in the social environment (e.g., stable family relationships, stable home and school environment). The theme of stability is comprised of two sub-themes: emotional well-being and simpler early years.

**Emotional well-being.** The reported emotional well-being of participants was found to contribute to peaks on the school timelines. Emotional well-being in this context refers to students having a sense of their emotions being relatively stable or under control. The circumstances contributing to more emotional well-being mostly involved recovering from addictive substance use, having better overall mental health and experiencing more stability in their relationships.

Many participants talked about how overcoming their substance use or addiction contributed greatly to more peak ratings in their school experiences. One particular student talked about the chronic nature of her drug use, and how overcoming drug addiction made it easier for her to be engaged with school:

> So now I’m finally clean and it’s easier to do stuff […] Drugs have been in my life and have been overwhelming my life since grade 8. So for the past 4 years I’m guessing, now that I’m looking at the chart…it’s been pretty crazy. (P22)

Several participants spoke about the positive impact that managing their mental illness and stabilizing their emotions had on their school experiences. For one participant, this entailed managing her drug addiction, doing counselling, and taking psychotropic medication:

> I quit doing drugs, I just cut cold turkey and I’ve been clean for 4 months which is a good thing […] and I took anger management classes and I started doing counseling and talking to [social worker] and actually coming to school and showing up and I’ve got 5 credits this year so far and I just kind of told myself “okay you have to stop being such a dumb ass” and like I’m on meds now that are controlling everything and I seem fine now. (P8)
One participant shared how after a long period of conflict with her family, one year was remembered as very positive due to past issues being resolved and as a result having better relationships with her parents and siblings. She explained how this led to feeling more emotionally stable, and therefore being better able to be friendly at school and develop long lasting friendships with peers as well as attain good grades:

Grade 8 was awesome, I don’t even know what it was about grade 8, I think it was just like the most badass year ever, so that was good […] the people, I made awesome friends that year, I’m still friends with them to this day. I don’t know what it was, my grades were good, I think it was just like, I was in a better emotional place, like I was finally… like had those good relationships with my parents, with my siblings, all that. All the past issues were resolved, so that made it easier for me to be more friendly with my friends. (P3)

Several participants shared experiences of being in foster care placements throughout their schooling. While most participants experienced and rated the years they were in foster care negatively, participant 17 shared how his foster family provided a more stable environment than his parents could, which allowed him to do actually do better in school. “I think that’s when I went into foster care […] I think I was better in school because I wasn’t living with my dad and I actually had like a stable family.”

**Simpler early years.** Some participants rated their early elementary years as having more frequent, consecutive stable peaks. These participants shared their impressions of these early years as having simpler social interactions, fewer problems overall, and more applied learning experiences. These experiences contributed to participants reporting their early school years as a stable and consistent period in their lives. In reflecting on these earlier years, many participants were comparing their experiences to the later, more challenging high school years which were rife with problems in various aspects of their lives.
Some students remembered their early elementary years as being “better” than their high school years due to the simplicity of the social interactions during this time. Participants made reference to the lack of “drama” in those earlier years, which contributed to more peak ratings overall. Participant 8’s school timeline had stable peaks across her early elementary years, and the reasons she provided were related to simpler and kinder interactions with teachers and peers. These interactions contributed to greater perceived stability in relationships and her overall social environment. She compared her early school experiences to later ones where she was involved in peer “drama” and called explicit names:

Just my teachers were really good and I had really good friends and like when you are younger you don’t really have drama, so I didn’t have to really worry about like “oh she said this to me she called me a whore”. (P8)

For other students, their impressions of the early elementary years were of a simpler time because they did not have to worry about social hierarchies. Participant 14 rated peaks in his early elementary years as due to not having to make decisions about which social groups to identify with, and as a result feeling that there is greater equality between students:

There were no stupid decisions… Like there was no “who wants to be the coolest” and all that, there was no discriminating into groups, like there are the popular kids, there are the nerds and stuff like that… Everybody was equal, not like in high school. (P14)

Some participants referred back to their early elementary years with peak ratings and gave the impression of simpler experiences due to the lack of problems they had. Participant 15 stated “They are the best years of my life when I didn’t have any problem and all that stuff.” For Participant 7, simplicity in the early years was related to his school experiences as “regular” in that he did not have problems, made friends, and went to school. He stated, “It was pretty good, there was nothing wrong really. Like I don’t know, like making friends, going to school, I don’t know. I
guess like the regular thing.” He later elaborated on what specifically was perceived as better about the elementary years, which entailed being in a more close-knit school environment which allowed for learning experiences that were more applied and “hands-on”:

    Grade 1 all the way to grade 8 I liked the whole more of like hands-on experience, where like everything was more of… since it was a smaller environment, you were actually like building things kind of. (P7)

Participants reported their elementary school years to be simpler in comparison to their experiences later on, in terms of their social interactions, overall problems, and learning experiences. This suggests a greater need for adolescents to be supported in schools as they learn to navigate their increasingly complex social world.

**Results: School Timeline Valleys**

The categories derived from the school timeline valleys were as follows: school problems (comprising of: school transitions, changing expectations, discipline, falling behind, learning issues, and problematic peer relations) and social and emotional difficulties (comprising of: mental illness, substance use, parent separation or loss, living transitions, and peer problems). There was significant overlap across the categories and sub-themes in the analysis. Together, these themes provide a brief glimpse of the kind of struggles the participants in this study disclosed in their lives over the course of their education which may have contributed to the gradual process of student disengagement over time.
Figure 3. Thematic map of school timeline “valleys”

School Problems

Many participants identified school problems as contributing to their reported “valleys” on the school timeline. The theme of school problems is comprised of four sub-themes: school transitions, changing expectations, falling behind, and learning issues.

Stressful school transitions. All participants experienced at least two school transitions regardless of whether they were discussed in this interview; one when they transitioned from elementary school (K – grade 8) to high school (grade 9 – grade 12), and another when they were transferred from their home school to the alternative high school in this study. Many participants reported frequent school changes throughout their education, particularly during high school. The
reasons for the school transitions varied and included moving, family separation, or problems at school (e.g., expulsion). Students on the whole experienced changing schools as stressful, usually associating this stress to not having any friends, needing to meet new people, and not knowing the physical space of the new school. One participant explained how her shyness and needing to meet new people in high school also played a role in feeling stressed out during that school transition:

   Grade 9… it was—I guess it was pretty good. It wasn’t as great as I thought it would be, but it was a huge transition, so that was really stressful… I think meeting people because I’m so shy at first. I’m not anymore, but I think in grade 9 and I was so young, and I’d meet people and I’d just be—I was so shy. I’d have to wait for someone to come introduce themselves to me. (P12)

Although school transitions were reported to be generally stressful, some students enjoyed the experience of meeting new people. Participant 1 reflected on how attending different schools provided her with opportunities to develop more friendships: “Grade 4 is when I moved to the new school so that was very stressful… But I did meet a lot of new friends so it was pretty positive.” In spite of the new friendships being made, multiple school transitions were predominantly experienced by participants as instability during a time where students wanted consistency. This participant shared her experience of multiple school transitions as having the benefit of knowing more people, but this was outweighed by her desire for consistency:

   I’d say grade ten was when the drugs started getting really bad, and I moved to a different high school. I have been to three high schools in my entire life so every year it was different so I could meet new people, so it was a good idea that I was moving different schools because then, now, I know more people, but… I was a little kid and it was a new change… I just wanted to keep the same thing going. (P1)
School transitions overlapped with other sub-themes such as living transitions, separation from family, and parent conflict. Students often experience a constellation of stressful events, and the cumulative effect of school problems and social and emotional difficulties led to more steep valley ratings on the school timeline.

**Changing expectations.** Many students reported their high school transition to be particularly difficult and stressful, due to the numerous changes that come with entering high school, including the changing expectations that high school students should be more responsible and independent. One participant identified the most stressful part of her high school transition to be having to take on the responsibility of getting her school work done:

> I think having to rely on yourself, because the teachers would kind of guide you in elementary school and be there for you, and in high school it’s kind of like, “ok, if you have it done then that’s great, and if you don’t, that’s your fault” with assignments and stuff. (P12)

Many students reported their high school transition to be particularly difficult and stressful due to factors related to changes in the physical space (e.g., larger school, larger classes) and the schedule (e.g., physically changing classrooms for each subject). Here, a participant described some of the challenges she faced in her transition to high school:

> Grade 9 was okay, but… I don’t know, high school, actually going into high school, it sucked […] Uh it was hard. Having to do four different classes a day, having to move around, having 5 minutes to get to your class, to go to your locker… difficult. (P6)

**Falling behind.** Participants described a cycle of falling behind in their academic achievement, particularly in high school, that led to their eventual withdrawal and disengagement from school. Students described initially missing some school for various reasons (e.g., skipping class to be with friends, etc.), they began falling behind in their classes, and that over time it
became increasingly difficult to catch up until they finally gave up on their academics altogether. This participant provided some insight as to how his school problems accumulated over time, to the point where he fell so far behind that he no longer felt he could catch up, and therefore stopped caring about his attendance:

It was a time where I just didn’t really care about school, you know what I mean? Like everything piles up onto each other. So I was just kind of like “screw it”, so I didn’t care when I skipped. And it got to the point where like, I’m pretty sure it was the school board or whatever, they were like pulling me from classes, because it got to the point where I missed so many classes, that even if I went for the rest of the year, I wouldn’t have been able to… Like even if I went, like you know what I mean, got perfect and everything for the rest—yeah, I wouldn’t have been able to pass because I missed that much type thing.

(P7)

In addition to social pressures and negative peer groups influencing their behaviour, many students described the transition to high school as a time when they began skipping classes and not attending school after realizing the ease with which they were able to do so. And once again, not attending school led to a lack of credit accumulation and falling farther behind. For one participant, the negative influence of an older peer group in high school also contributed to falling behind:

I went to high school and I figured out “oh, you can just skip class and leave whenever you want”. And I made a group of friends that wasn’t very good, people that were older than me, that had…poor, bad influences. Yeah, so I didn’t go to school, I actually stopped going to school like two weeks in to be with these people. And then I didn’t go back to school until I switched to [high school name] second semester of grade 9. I had no credits
whatsoever that semester, and then when I went to [high school name], the same thing kind of carried on… (P3)

Participants described how the ease of skipping classes in the high school environment contributed to not attending school, not accumulating credits, and adopting an attitude of not caring. One participant described falling so far behind that she stopped caring about school and lost all hope for accomplishment in her life:

For some reason I feel like my grade 9 year wasn’t that positive at all just because it was new and I was like “oh I am in high school I can skip” and stuff like that. I remember my grade 9 year… I only received 3 credits actually in my grade 9 year, which is pretty disappointing now but at the time felt like “yeah I don’t care, I’m not going anywhere in life”… so I would say that was pretty negative year. (P11)

Negative teacher relationships and disciplinary practices perceived as too strict were some reasons provided for initially missing school. Over the course of the school timeline, participants often remembered having teachers who were “mean”, “bad”, or “strict” as contributing to the valleys on their graph. While participants reported “mean” teachers throughout their educational years, many students described their high school teachers to be particularly mean, strict, and generally less supportive. Having “mean” teachers also led to their perception of the discipline and rules in high school to be too strict. A vicious cycle was described in which students felt they were unable to recover from the disciplinary actions placed upon them, which eventually led to students not caring as much about school. Students who stopped caring or valuing school were also reporting increased negative behaviours such as skipping school, having further disciplinary actions placed on them, and eventually students gave up on the possibility of ever completing their education. This participant shared how she eventually gave up on attending school due to the discipline:
The people, the teachers, the discipline. The discipline was way out of whack, I guess […] I’d miss a detention and get two, and then I wouldn’t go, and then I ended up having like a whole month of detention I never went to… They kept adding it up and adding it up… I was skipping after that. (P2)

Participants often felt their teachers were “mean” if they were very strict with rules and schoolwork. One student described their teacher not allowing them to participate in gym class if they misbehaved. Another participant recalled a specific interaction with a teacher that led to her no longer attending that class:

Religion was never really my strong point because it’s a lot of remembering dates names and places, and I’m really bad at that. And so, we had this big test and I never study, it doesn’t make a difference for me whether I study or not. But this time I actually did because I wanted to do good, and as soon as the paper got put in front of me, my mind went blank, so I looked at her and I said honestly I did study, and I explained to her and everything, and I was like can I have half the period to study, I don’t care if that takes away 30 minutes of me being able to do the test, but like honestly even if I can do it during lunch or after school or something, like I’m not ready for this. She goes do what you can, so I wrote my name down and I said that’s what I know. And she sat down right in front of me, took a red pen, did a big 0, circled it and went like that (slapping the table)) and walked away… so I stopped going to that class too. (P10)

**Learning issues.** Many participants spoke about struggling with learning throughout their education. Most participants described having these learning challenges as generally negative, and only having a slightly negative impact on their ratings on the school timeline. For most students, their learning difficulties were described as something they always struggled with, which may explain why learning may not have been a primary factor driving their overall ratings. Participant
One participant spoke about the year she was diagnosed with a learning disability. While she reported that receiving the diagnosis did not impact her greatly, and described her overall year as being positive due to other factors that appeared more salient to her, such as making friends good friends that year. In spite of this, there was still some negativity associated with her parents’ reaction to the diagnosis:

Grade 4 was actually when I met a lot of my friends that I am still friends with now today so that was really good. I don’t really remember that much about teachers, it was more social stuff. But I do remember in Grade 4 I did some testing stuff so that I had a learning disability […] It didn’t really influence me much or anything like that it didn’t really impact me, um, my parents were quite upset though about it but they didn’t really treat me any differently or anything because of it. (P11)

Participant 20 shared how his learning difficulties may have led to strained relationships with his teachers: “When I was in kindergarten I kind of had like troubles learning and had a difficult time with my teacher, she was really hard on me.” In this instance, the student is suggesting that his teacher may not have recognized his learning needs, and this misunderstanding may have led to challenges in the teacher-student relationship. These challenges were reported to affect him the following year as he would anticipate getting into trouble when he was not. Regardless, he was able to develop positive relationships with other elementary teachers following this negative experience.
Social and Emotional Difficulty

Social and emotional difficulty was identified as a theme while examining the content shared by participants during recognized “valleys” on the school timeline. This theme is comprised of five sub-themes: mental illness, substance use, family conflict, separation, and loss, living transitions, and peer problems.

Mental illness. Many participants spoke about how mental health problems negatively impacted their schooling experiences. Some participants referenced specific conditions such as depression, suicidality, and bipolar disorder. One participant shared how the death of a friend led to her depression, which gravely impacted her ability and motivation to attend school:

And then grade 11 was a really bad year. Yeah, grade 11 was really bad because one of my good friends died in August. And umm, it was really, uh, I was depressed for like almost about a year and 6 months, a year and a half. Um, it was really hard for me […] It wasn’t a good school year just because I was so sad all the time. I wasn’t really coming, like, I just, spent a lot of time in my room crying. And just, I didn’t want to do anything. (P19)

Here, a participant described how her depression contributed to low self-esteem, skipping school, doing drugs, and partying. Eventually her depression became so severe that she was hospitalized on a psychiatric unit for a month, which then prompted her enrollment in the alternative school:

Grade 10 it just started getting worse and worse, I wouldn’t go to school. I’d miss days and weeks at a time and I ended up getting into like this serious kind of depression. So like, throughout the whole year I would just be doing drugs and alcohol and not going to school and partying all the time. So my confidence was low, my mood was really really low, like dangerously low. And yeah, by the end of grade 10 I’m surprised I even finished the amount of work I needed to get through the year. And then grade 11 I was there for about a month, and then my depression got so bad that I had to go to the hospital for a month. After
that I really didn’t know where I belonged. And then all of a sudden the school called and they’re like “okay yeah you’re going to come here” and like oh, okay. So grade 11 was okay. (P5)

One participant described how her mental health challenges, emotional difficulties, and substance use caused conflict with her parents that resulted in being kicked out of the family home (i.e., a living transition):

Grade 11 was probably the worst year I’m not going to lie. I got kicked out of my house cause I was into a lot of drugs and we found out this year that I’m bipolar, so my like moods would really fluctuate so that like stuck with my parents and I also have anger issues so that really got in with my parents and they just ended up kicking me out. (P8)

Participant 22 spoke more generally about her poor and unstable mental health throughout her childhood, which was often in response to very stressful life events such as bullying, interpersonal conflict, abuse, and trauma. She stated, “I was bullied through like… I would say excessively, excessively bullied until up to like grade 9. Excessively bullied, like there were so many suicidal parts…like so many suicide attempts between these grades.”

**Substance use.** Many participants reported substance use, primarily drugs, as being a major factor contributing to their eventual withdrawal from school. It was often associated with negative peer groups, skipping school, “partying” behaviours, and a coping mechanism for their personal problems. This participant recalled how much her life revolved around drugs, and how negatively she rated that year in retrospect:

Yeah my life then really started focusing around doing the drugs at school and making all these new drug friends who weren’t really my friends, they were just there for the drugs but like that’s what grade 10 basically revolved around […] At the time I would have rated it pretty good but now it’s pretty shit… (P8)
Another participant described how drug use was associated with skipping school, and also explicitly interfered with her motivation and ability to learn:

I didn’t really go to class in grade 10 […] Yeah, actually I started getting into drugs in grade 10 so […] Screw, screw class, screw going to school. I don’t need school. And then in grade 11, I don’t know grade 11 was kind of a neutral year because I kind of started going to class but I was still doing drugs, I would go to class on drugs, I was like “ahhh it’s okay I can do it”, I didn’t really learn anything. Ever. (P6)

Participant 6 also spoke about how her pregnancy was an incentive to stop using substances, which then had direct benefits to her ability to learn and overall schooling. “I can’t do drugs [now] because I’m pregnant, so I was like ‘yay, I can actually focus and learn, and get my shit straight’.” A different participant also described how their second pregnancy helped them refrain from partying and care more about school:

I was in a little bit of rough shape after grade 11 stuff just trying to worry about friends and partying was during that time, and I also had a child to take care of. But then I also got pregnant again so that actually brought me to a good place, so I started worrying about school at that time and I got a lot of, like got a lot of credits that year I think I got nine so I was worrying about what was important at that time. (P11)

One participant spoke about his extensive drug use and experimentation, and how that had a major impact on his ability to engage with school. Here, he explained how substance use interfered with school even when he felt supported by teachers, and how it took going a rehabilitation center and being incarcerated to finally overcome his addiction:

For the most part I had good teachers that cared and they really were supportive, and if I did fail a class, I deserved to, I deserved the mark I got, you know what I mean, and I take responsibility for that. But all my teachers believed in me, I had good teachers so, the big
thing was probably drug use you know I’ve been, I’ve been to rehab and I’ve been to jail for it so like you know I had to learn the hard way, but I’ve learned. (P20)

**Family conflict, separation, and loss.** Many participants shared instances in their school timeline about how family problems negatively contributed to their student engagement. More specifically, participants described high conflict in their families, parent separation and divorce, as well as loss of family members as contributing to the valleys of their school experiences. This participant described how her conflictual relationships with family members negatively influenced her capacity to form positive friendships and other relationships, and further impacted how she behaved at school:

Outside things influence the way you are at school right, so making friends was harder, like not having a good relationship with my dad or my stepdad, and then things were hard with my mom because of those relationships, um so that kind of influenced how I was towards other people and you know how I acted at school and stuff. I got in a lot of trouble in grade 5… my mom was at the school like all the time, because I was a little bit of a shit disturber. (P3)

Some participants shared how the introduction of a new partner for their parents (e.g., a mother’s boyfriend, a stepfather) created family conflict and stress, which then inevitably impacted their school attendance and performance. This participant spoke about the negative impact that her mother’s boyfriend had on her experiences:

My mom met a new boyfriend and since I was a kid she didn’t really date a lot of guys, and getting a new boyfriend was a big change for me because like I wanted to see my mom happy but I didn’t think that this guy was right for her and he was just really mean and stuff like that and she just, he just took her away from me like he just, they would always be gone, wouldn’t come home until like four in the morning, they never cooked dinner,
they never did anything. So it was just like me and my brother had to fend for ourselves all the time. (P1)

One participant described the extent to which her parents’ high conflict divorce negatively impacted her, including her memory and ability to concentrate in school. Sometimes a difficult divorce between parents meant that participants needed to temporarily reside with other family members:

Grade 5 was pretty bad… My teacher was good and everything, like she was an amazing teacher but that’s when like my parents divorced and everything, and everything started to slip […] My grades weren’t that great, like I couldn’t concentrate and like nothing would really like stick in my memory, like the only things I remember about grade 5 was like struggling because all my friends were in the other class and they stopped talking to me because they were in the other class, and like, my parents were divorcing and that’s when I needed them and none of them were there […] because of my parent’s messy divorce I had to move in with my aunt and uncle in [different city]. (P10)

One participant shared how his father’s death led to missing school and eventual dropout prior to enrolling in the alternative school. This particular student was also placed into foster care following his father’s passing away:

Between grade 8 and 9 my dad passed away, so that was a low time in between I guess […] It made me not really want to go [to school] as much, so I started slowing down and then in grade 10 I just stopped going for the last half of the semester and then got my social worker to get me into [alternative school]. (P16)

High family conflict, parent separation, and family loss often resulted in overlap with another theme discussed below (living transitions), as these family problems often resulted in participants
and their families moving, having alternate living arrangements, going to live with other family members or friends, living in a group home, or being placed foster care.

**Living transitions.** Living transitions described in the school timeline interviews involved changing physical living space (e.g., moving into a new house, a new city, etc.), which sometimes included a change in the composition of individuals living with them as well, including their primary caregiver. Some students described the cumulative stress of having to change schools while also undergoing a living transition:

It *changing schools* was hard because you are still a young kid you had to meet new friends. I think when you get older it is easier to meet new friends… but elementary school leaving was pretty hard I guess, just because like moving to a different house and a different school instead of just school, it was… you had to get the new house and the new school and it was crazy. (P1)

Other students expressed difficulty in maintaining friendships due to frequent moving:

We did a lot of moving around and stuff like that so it was kind of hard to make friends, because like nobody lived in my area ever so it was like… to hang out with them I’d have to take 45 minutes of a bus ride or whatever. (P10)

Living transitions were reported to be especially difficult when they involved parents getting a divorce or separation. This meant different things for participants; some described having to alternate living with each parent, while others no longer saw one of their parents. One participant shared how it was difficult to be living back and forth between parents due to the inconsistency of expectations:

When I started to get older and stuff and I could choose where I could live and stuff it was easier on me than having to be forced to go back and forth and it was like, you spend more time with your dad, and you start getting to know all the stuff your dad wants you to do,
but then you go back to your mom’s and then, you know it’s different stuff and it’s like what they expect is different. (P18)

Several participants shared their experiences of being placed into foster care during the school timeline interview. Theses living transitions were mostly described as stressful, and overall negative experiences. This student talked about her difficulty managing her emotions when she was placed in foster care:

> I went into foster care. So it was really hard, like, I don’t know. I didn’t know how to balance my emotions with school, and it was like, really, really, really hard. And I had an abusive boyfriend at the time. So…yeah. It was a bad run. (P13)

When asked about how this impacted her education, the same participant remembered that she lacked the motivation to attend school, which was further reinforced by her foster mother not encouraging her to go:

> I never went, right? I was always so frustrated that I just never had the ‘oomph’ to get up and go to school, and yeah, it was just so frustrating. I didn’t feel like my foster mom pushed me enough to go to school, so I didn’t have that extra balance to go to school I guess. (P13)

One participant shared a specific memory of when her mother kicked her out of her home, which resulted in a transition to residing primarily with her father’s and grandmother’s, and eventually being placed into foster care:

> Well in grade 5, my mom, she ended up kicking me out… she kicked me out and she said that she had to go to work and she didn’t have time to come find me and stuff like that, and so she called my dad and left a message on his phone and he got the message and him and my nanny came to look for me and he said that I was going to be living with him and stuff so […] shortly after grade 6 I think it was, just when it was ending I went and lived with
my nanny, and then when I was in grade 8, I went and lived in foster care, and I was in foster care until like, grade 9 was pretty much over. (P18)

Peer problems. Memories of problems in peer relationships and examples of “drama” or bullying were all described over the course of the school timeline as contributing to valleys. Many reported having challenging experiences related to friendships and peer groups. Often, this was in the context of students not having friends in their class, or more generally reporting not having many friends. At times this was directly related to not having friends following a school or living transition, which was discussed previously.

The growing independence along with certain social pressures associated with entering high school, including wanting to keep up with or impress older peers, sometimes led to participants making questionable decisions about their friend groups and behaviour:

Grade 9, high school hit. I was excited but nervous at the same time… it is a big change and plus I was already trying to be the ‘bad kid’ in grade eight so in my mind I had to step it up because I was going into high school, so the cool kids in high school would like me. (P1)

Being mistreated by peers was mentioned by several participants as contributing to their negative experiences at school. Participants spoke about being teased for their appearances, called mean names, or having rumors spread about them:

And then like grade 9 was absolutely horrible, a horrible time for me. I didn’t go to school, people were spreading really bad rumors about me and I wasn’t getting along with a lot of the people outside of my group of friends, so like my confidence level was like zero. (P5)

Similarly, some participants referred to “drama” between peers as contributing to their negative experiences at school. When participants were asked to clarify what they meant by “drama”, they usually alluded to interpersonal problems such as relational aggression between girls (e.g., talking
behind someone’s back), and overall conflict between individuals who did not like one another. At times, the conflict described as “drama” developed into physical aggression between girls. One participant shared how engaging in physical aggression with other girls resulted in the school applying consequences, which she attributed to a valley on her timeline:

I kinda remember getting into a little bit of trouble that year. I wasn’t allowed to go on my grade 8 trip which is kind of disappointing […] I think I got in a few, few fights, like physical fights so yeah. There was a lot of that and I summed that up at the beginning about ‘drama’ and stuff like that. (P11)

Participants identified that having strained or lacking peer relationships had the capacity to negatively impact their schooling experiences. This speaks to the potential importance of peer relationships in supporting, or detracting from, student engagement.

Discussion: School Timeline

The present study set out to better understand from the student perspective, the kinds of experiences that contribute to or take away from student engagement and learning, in a sample of at-risk youth currently attending an alternative school. A school timeline graphing method was employed to anchor and visualize the interview with students on prior school experiences. Students were asked to provide subjective overall ratings of the quality of each year (see Figure 1). Withdrawal from school is considered to be a developmental process that happens gradually over time (Finn, 1989). The school timeline provided an opportunity to collect and document experiences perceived as salient to the students (i.e., peaks and valleys) across their education, and examine how these experiences related to student engagement and learning. The peaks and valleys on this timeline were examined separately to better understand what might support or detract from student engagement more broadly. This activity also served as an alliance builder prior to engaging in the interview about their current school experience. Four superordinate themes were
extracted from the school timeline: two from the “peaks” (1) school connection, and (2) social and emotional stability, and two from the “valleys” (1) school problems, and (2) social and emotional difficulty. Within each superordinate theme, two to five subthemes were extracted and interpreted (see Figures 2 and 3).

**School Timeline Peaks**

Results from the school timeline peaks consisted of various experiences described by participants as positively contributing to their experiences at school. Most research has focused on understanding child psychopathology and deficits with much less examining how children and youth grow to experience positive emotions and well-being. Recent advancements in the field of positive psychology have shed light on the importance of understanding experiences that contribute to positive emotions and flourishing in addition to those which present challenges and lead to deficits (Fredrickson, 2001). Such an approach stems from a body of literature showing that lacking negative experiences may only suffice for reducing aversive symptoms, and that positive experiences are necessary to feel positive emotions and maintain mental health in the face of stressors (Fredrickson, 2001; Keyfitz et al., 2013). This relates to the student engagement literature, as more research is needed to better understand how students thrive and flourish in academic settings. Such an approach may be particularly important to pursue for youth at risk of dropout.

**School Connection.** Participants shared a range of experiences throughout their schooling associated with peaks on their school timeline. Many of these experiences were related to a sense of connection to their school, including their relationships, their level of involvement, and learning new skills and achievements. The sub-theme of relationships at school entailed students reflecting on positive relationships with teachers and peers which helped them feel comfortable at school. Having good connections to people at school has been found to positively impact student
outcomes. Previous qualitative research (e.g., Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007; Phelan et al., 1992) suggested that when students liked their teachers, their level of effort and persistence in school was higher than those who disliked their teachers. In addition, a quantitative study also found that students earned higher grades in classes in which they liked the teacher (Montalvo, Mansfield, Miller, 2007). Thus, by developing close connections and relationships with teachers and peers, students are more likely to be engaged and successful at school. Furthermore, research has suggested that strong relationships with teachers may be especially important for youth with prior experiences of negative relationships, and those at-risk of school withdrawal (Roorda & Koomen, 2011), much like the sample of youth in the current study.

Participants described their involvement in school, such as extra-curricular activities, including sports teams, clubs, volunteer positions, school events and trips as contributing to positive experiences on their school timeline. These results fit with the participation-identification theory (Finn, 1989), which posits that students who participate with their school (e.g., social, extra-curricular, and athletic aspects) and classroom activities (e.g., attending to the teacher, completing assignments) are more likely to experience increased student engagement. In addition, research suggests that extra-curricular activities and school involvement yield positive effects (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001) through one’s sense of relatedness and belonging, as they provide students with a safe and caring environment, in which prosocial adults are able to promote self-efficacy and model effective behaviours (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Mahoney et al., 2001). Participants in this study also shared positive memories and feelings on the school timeline about instances where they learned a new skill, obtained an award, or succeeded in some academic achievement, which led to feelings of pride and self-efficacy. In line with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the experience of learning something new and achieving may
contribute to one’s sense of mastery and competence, which is considered an important psychological need necessary for motivation and student engagement.

**Social and Emotional Stability.** This theme was comprised of the sub-themes emotional well-being and simple, early years. Participants shared experiences of emotional well-being where they recovered from addiction and mental health, and developed better relationships which they described led to greater emotional stability in their lives. Participants also provided descriptions of stability and ease of early childhood experiences, in comparison to the more challenging and socially complex middle and high school years. This was reflected directly on the school timeline as consecutive high peaks in the early elementary years. The participants who reflected fondly on these early educational experiences recalled not having many problems when they were younger, and not needing to worry about social cliques and challenges that come in the later stages of development. The simplicity and stability in friendships, the school environment, and the learning was described as contributing to their student engagement in these early years. Experiences of social and emotional stability were reported by participants both in the form of overcoming negative experiences and in the presence of positive experiences. This result fits with the dual-factor model of mental health (Antaramian, Huebner, Hills, & Valois, 2010), whereby psychological distress and well-being are two distinct but interrelated constructs as opposed to opposite ends of the same continuum. As such, efforts to promote student engagement and well-being in at-risk youth should consider both reducing psychological distress and aversive experience in addition to creating opportunities for the student to experience stability and positive emotions.

**School Timeline Valleys**

Results from the school timeline valleys shed light on the various challenges reported by participants as negatively impacting their school experiences. This information not only helps to
better understand the study sample with some historical context, but also informs how a series of valley experiences beginning at an early age can accumulate over time to result in the eventual withdrawal of these youth from traditional school settings.

**School Problems.** Not surprising, a number of school problems were identified by participants as contributing to dissatisfaction with school over time. School transitions (i.e., changing schools) were described as stressful and contributing to valley ratings on the school timeline. Participants reported multiple school transitions to be especially difficult. The transition to high school was reported to be a challenging time for students, particularly due to the changing expectations that come with the high school setting. High schools tend to be larger buildings with more students, have a schedule with changing teachers and classrooms, and hold an overall expectation that students be more independent and responsible than they were in their elementary years. Participants also described how much easier it was to skip school once they entered high school, potentially because of the above mentioned changes that take place in high school settings. In addition, falling behind was described as a major school problem which directly impacted attendance and student engagement. Participants described a pattern of missing school for various reasons (e.g., to be with friends, substance use, disciplinary actions, illness), which lead to them falling behind in their schoolwork, and subsequently continuing to skip school because of losing hope they can recover from how far behind they are. Participants also described various learning difficulties as contributing to the valleys on their school timeline. Some participants shared their perception of never “being good at school”, or having specific learning disabilities that have negatively impacted their ability to do well and feel engaged with their learning.

The school problems identified in the school timeline valleys relate to various lines of research, including the frustration-self-esteem model (Finn, 1989) which posits that poor school performance (e.g., due to learning issues, missing school) leads to frustration and poor self-view
by the student, which results in problem behaviour and further school problems. In addition, the stage-environment fit model (Eccles et al., 1993) is relevant for understanding these results, particularly with respect to the transition to high school and how this change in environment may not suit the developmental needs of belonging, autonomy, and competence desired in adolescence. Research has found that this mismatch between the environment and developmental needs may result in a lack of motivation and student engagement (Eccles et al., 1993). This could account for the longstanding and marked decline in motivation and student engagement found in adolescent students entering high school, including those who are not particularly at risk for school dropout (e.g., Simmons & Blyth, 1987). These results support the need for reform in high school programs to better suit the developmental needs of students in their early adolescence.

Social and Emotional Difficulties. Social and emotional difficulties were described as barriers to enjoyment and student engagement. Participants described how their experiences with mental illness (e.g., depression, anxiety, trauma) negatively impacted their life, including their schooling experiences. These participants reported feeling overwhelmed with their emotions, and for some this led to feeling suicidal and requiring hospitalization. These experiences of psychological distress made it difficult for students to engage with their learning and be mentally present at school. When left untreated, psychological distress may impede one’s capacity for student engagement due to limited remaining resources available to the individual (e.g., mental effort) leaving little available energy to devote to learning and school. For example, one study found that depression in adolescent boys and girls was associated with difficulties in concentration, social relationships, self-reliant school performance, and reading and writing as well as perceiving schoolwork as highly effortful (Frojd, Nissinena, Pelkonenb, Marttunenb, Koivistoa, 2008). Another potential explanation for these results is the concept of the secure base phenomenon of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) which indicates the prerequisite of an
individual to feel secure before they can explore their environment and engage in learning. This model has been extended to the school setting; for example a recent study (Van Ryzin, 2010) concluded that school-based advisors can act as secondary attachment figures for some students, which can promote school-related outcomes for youth.

Many participants reported that substance use directly contributed to their withdrawal from school. Participants described being addicted to substances, and the widespread negative impact this had on their lives, including their schooling. These results are not surprising, given that there is an established association between substance use and low levels of emotional and behavioural aspects of student engagement (Li & Lerner, 2011).

Family conflict, separation, and loss were reported to have a negative impact on the participants’ educational experiences. Participants reported not being able to concentrate at school, let alone attend, when there was significant conflict in their family. This is consistent with previous research which has found that lower levels of family assets (e.g., care and support from family) is a risk factor for low student engagement (Sharkey et al., 2008). In this study, family conflict often overlapped with other negative and stressful life events that also contributed to the valleys on their school timeline, such as substance use and living transitions. Living transitions as a result of moving, parent divorce/separation, being placed in foster care, and being kicked out of their family home and living in shelters, led to valleys on the school timeline.

Interpersonal problems described by participants, including drama and bullying among peers, also contributed to the valleys on the school timeline. In addition, lacking interpersonal connection, such as not having many friendships, contributed to valleys on the school timeline. This is consistent with prior research, which demonstrates that negative relations with peers such as rejection (Buhs, 2005), absence of friends (K. R. Wentzel, McNamara Barry, & Caldwell, 2004), aggression and bullying (Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009) increase the probability of
disaffection from school, as well as school dropout and delinquent behaviour (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

**Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions**

The strengths of this study entailed using a new school timeline method to interview students which allowed for both subjective ratings of student experiences as well as discussions regarding important moments throughout their educational histories. This method allowed the participants to decide what mattered or stood out to them the most about their past, while providing the researcher with more context surrounding their lived experiences.

Several limitations need be taken into account regarding the interpretation of the school timeline. The study sample was limited to the students enrolled in the alternative school at the time of the data collection, and this was further limited to the students who agreed to participate in the study. As such, one methodological limitation is a potential self-selection bias in the study sample. It is possible that students who agreed to participate in the research study were more engaged to begin with than those who elected not to participate. One potential way to minimize selection bias in future studies is to extend the data collection time frame, or to offer more substantial and/or different compensation for study participation.

Another limitation to this method design is the lack of member checking, making it difficult to know whether the students would agree with the researcher’s interpretation of their lives. One barrier that stood in the way of obtaining member checks was the extended period of time that took place between the data collection and data transcription and analysis, making it impossible to track down participants. In addition, participants attend the alternative school on modified schedules and were not reliable in attending appointments, making it difficult to see some of the students a second time to conduct the member check.

In addition, the researcher was both the study designer and interpreter of experiences in
this dissertation, making it possible that data were influenced in some way by the researcher’s own experiences and biases. While this remains a limitation, the researcher attempted to be transparent in the data analysis process to ensure the trustworthiness of findings.

The retrospective account of experiences from participants on the school timeline presents as a limitation to this study. The purpose of the timeline method was to elicit salient experiences driven by the students and from their perspective which was considered a strength. However, asking participants to reflect on their experiences from over 10 years ago could pose problems. Accounts would have therefore been subject to participants’ memory and potential errors or biases in recall.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study helped to elucidate the role of earlier life and school experiences on student engagement and the gradual withdrawal from school. While the school timeline described here contributes to our knowledge and understanding of various factors that may increase or decrease student engagement in at-risk youth, it also underscores the need for a richer understanding of developmental trajectories that could arise from a temporal analysis of the school timelines. In addition, more in-depth interviews with targeted questions and elaborations to accompany the school timeline could yield richer data on previously documented as well emerging factors that contribute to or derail from student engagement. Lastly, the school timeline could be further studied and adapted to be used as an educational tool for assessment of individual student engagement trajectories, with the hopes of using the tool to also identify and intervene at early stages of disengagement.

**Student Interviews**

The central aim of the student interviews was to better understand factors that contribute to the process of how disengaged youth become subsequently re-engaged with learning and their schooling in an alternative school setting. There was a clear need to examine the nature of student
engagement from the perspective of at-risk students who have withdrawn from traditional school settings and are currently attending an alternative school. Hearing personal accounts provided insight into the varying factors that can facilitate learning and increase student engagement. As the process of student engagement is complex and likely differs from person to person, an exploration of the experiences of at-risk youth was meant to provide insight into what those experiences might look like and which factors may influence whether and how student engagement takes place.

In addition, hearing the participants describe the alternative school and share their experiences within this setting allowed for a more in-depth recording of how this alternative school may be similar to or differ from other depictions of alternative education in the broader literature. Documenting and describing aspects of what a potentially successful alternative program entails could assist in overcoming the stigma and barriers associated with these settings. It could also support future development or adaptations to programs to better suit the needs of youth at-risk of school withdrawal. Given the exploratory nature of this study, there were no a priori hypotheses as to which themes might be identified in the student interviews and subsequent thematic analysis.

**Results: Student Interviews**

The themes derived from the student interviews are as follows: positive teacher-student relationships, sense of community, flexible structure, holistic support, and students making progress (see Figure 4 for a summary of themes and sub-themes). There was significant overlap across the themes and sub-themes in this study, which was expected given the notion that the various aspects of a school program are meant to work together to support student learning and facilitate engagement. Although there was considerable overlap, the thematic analysis method employed supported the salience of the theme as unique patterns within the data.
The most common and impactful theme evident in the student interviews, both in terms of frequency and meaningfulness, was positive teacher-student relationships that participants experienced at the alternative school. Every student at some point during their interview noted how their relationships with teachers were the single most important factor in helping them attend school and succeed. Common adjectives used to describe the teachers at the alternative school included: nice, friendly, welcoming, understanding, and positive. These teacher qualities translated into teacher-student relationships that were described as caring, genuine and close, and more
“family-like”. Participants also spoke about how the teachers know the students well and therefore to know when to push them to do work and how to resolve conflict quickly and calmly.

Significant overlap was found among the themes in this analysis, largely due to the widespread impact that these caring, close teacher-student relationships had on other aspects of the school, including the sense of community, flexibility, holistic support, as well as individual student progress. Participant 10 described it nicely by sharing: “I keep going back to the teachers because like any school is a building, it’s the people inside that make a difference and the teachers are one thing that really motivate me to come in.” While the themes in this analysis are separate concepts, they are also connected, and together they tell the story of how a school has changed student trajectories for the better.

Caring, close relationships. Many students expressed feeling truly cared for by the teachers at the alternative school, and as a result shared how this made them feel as though they really mattered to the teachers. Although most would agree that teachers generally care for their students, the participants in this study described the experience of feeling cared for that extended beyond a typical teacher-student relationship. Here a student described having a personal connection with her teachers, to the degree that she trusted they would remember her long after graduation:

I feel like they actually care. I’m a person, I’m not just a student number that they’re just going to send away in a year and they’re not going to remember me. I feel like they’re all trying their best to help me go where they know I can go and where I know I can go, and move forward to something better. (P5)

Not only did this participant describe feeling cared for, their depiction assumes a kind of reciprocity in the relationship, suggesting that perhaps the students had an impact on their teachers as well. Evident in this excerpt is also the notion that teachers believe in the students and support
them toward betterment. This ties back to themes discussed later in the analysis, where participants share instances of the holistic support received at the alternative school and the growing pride and belief in self they developed over time.

Participants reported being able to go to the teachers for help with matters beyond their academics and education, which also made them feel genuinely cared for. Participant 22 explained: “You go to the teachers for anything, they’ll do anything for you. This is a family environment; it’s not just education. They actually genuinely care about where you go in life.” This level of care and the actions taken by teachers was described as going beyond what is typically expected of staff who work in schools. Here, a participant shared his belief that teachers at the alternative school are there for students because they want to be, and not because they are obligated:

It’s not all like “I’m going to help you because it’s my duty or job” it’s more of like… they’re like morally there for support in a sense as opposed to like I said administratively because like they “have to” so it’s pretty good. (P7)

When it comes down to it, participants believed that teachers put overall student well-being above any academic progress. For example, this next participant shared how teachers typically respond with genuine concern and care when students miss school for several days:

I noticed just being here changes my mood. If at home if there’s something going on, when I come here it completely changed my mood, just because it’s so happy and friendly. And I don’t know, also the fact that if I don’t come for a couple days the teachers aren’t calling to be like, “where were you, you’re missing out on credits”… They’re calling to say “is everything okay?”, or “we’re worried about you”. And it makes me want to come in because I know that they care. (P10)
This participant also discussed how the happy and friendly atmosphere established by the teachers in the school helps improve her mood, which then leads to a desire to be at school and thus better attendance. The theme of a welcoming environment is further discussed later in the analysis, as contributing to an overall sense of community.

In addition to feeling cared for by teachers, participants also described their relationships with teachers as being genuine and close. There was a sense that these relationships were personal in nature, and extended beyond what is considered typical for a teacher-student relationship. Some students noted now these relationships more closely resembled parent-child relationships or friendships, and described the school to be “family-like”.

Participant 5 equated her relationships with teachers to ones with primary caregivers: “The teachers are amazing. I have these amazing relationships with all of my teachers. [Teacher’s name] is like my second mother. [Another teacher’s name] I can talk to her about anything.” It seems as though this participant is not only describing being able to talk to teachers about topics outside of school, but also being able to discuss things that may be difficult to talk about in general. For this participant to report that she is able to speak to her teachers about “anything” implies that she feels comfortable, secure, and accepted in the relationship. Being able to speak with teachers about “anything” and “everything” was further discussed by this same participant as an important contribution to the close, family-like quality of these relationships:

It’s like a big family […] Everybody’s so nice and you can talk to them [teachers] about everything and you can call teachers by their first name and you can hug them and just talk, and if you need a chance to talk they have people here […] It’s a close relationship that I never would have had with any other teachers at a different school. (P5)

The above excerpt explains how being able to call teachers by their first names, or hug them, also contributed to these relationships seeming genuine, close, and “family-like”. Several other students
highlighted how calling teachers by their first names was unique to the alternative school, and contributed to a feeling of closeness:

I’ve had a really bad run with high schools. But here I love the fact that our teacher and student relationship is like a parent-student or like a best friend relationship. I like that we call our teachers by their first name. That’s a big one. (P13)

This excerpt also demonstrates how the participant equated her relationships with teachers to other relationships in her life such as friendships, as a means of capturing the close and personal quality of these interactions. Once again, this participant is implying a reciprocal relationship that is not typical of teacher-student relationships in more traditional school settings.

In addition to calling teachers by their first names, language and the style of communication between students and teachers also played a role in how participants perceived closeness and equality in these relationships. Here, a participant provided some examples of how teachers speak more casually with students, using endearing nicknames and even voicing the term “love”:

The teachers are welcoming they like you know [teacher’s name] is always like “Hi sweetie” and [principal’s name] is always like “Hi babe, how are you, love you”. It’s really sweet it’s almost like you’re everybody’s equal do you know what I mean? And you know like I said before it’s not like calling [principal’s first name] Ms. [last name] – that would just be weird. (P3)

This participant was also referring to how teachers helped create a welcoming environment at school, which is related to the theme of community discussed later in the analysis.

Several participants spoke about how their relationships with teachers were closer than their relationships with other students attending the alternative school:
I really like the teachers here. I’m probably more friends with the teachers than the students. I like that they’re so friendly and just, I don’t know, just really nice. I kind of like that there’s only ever a few kids in every class so that if I need it a little bit of help, the teachers are there. (P19)

The participant also expressed how the small size of the school and individual programming allows for students to feel better supported by teachers, which are related to the theme of flexible structure discussed later in the analysis.

**Knowing when to push.** One benefit of having close, caring relationships with teachers is that participants described that they know each of the students well, including knowing when to push them to do school work and when to leave them be. As a result of these positive teacher-student relationships, participants described feeling understood by their teachers and being able to trust them:

> Our teachers are really trustworthy. And they get where you’re coming from when you’re working. Like if I was frustrated and I didn’t want to do something and I didn’t have any motivation, they’d leave me be. They wouldn’t push me beyond what I could do on that day or at that time. So, that’s one thing I really really really like about this school. (P13)

The above excerpt also conveyed how important it is for teachers to truly know each student on an individual basis, to be able to assess what constitutes pushing “beyond” what they are capable of on any given day, at any given time. This also speaks to a more holistic understanding of students, inclusive and respectful of their overall well-being and circumstance. What works for one student, may not work for another. Here, another participant described how the teachers know her well enough to make the most of her competitive nature as a way to motivate her to do school work:

> If I don’t feel like working, I’ll just tell [teacher names] I don’t feel like working. And they’ll be like “okay just at least do one question” and they know if they can get me to do
one question then it bugs me if I don’t finish the whole lesson. So then I have to finish it
[…] They challenge you all the time and I’m pretty competitive so it’s like “okay you’re
going to challenge me and say I can’t do something. I’m going to show you I can do it”.

(P8)

Although teachers encouraging and motivating students to do work was described as
helpful, teachers knowing when not to push was described as equally, if not more, important. This
kind of carefully balanced support was facilitated through the sincere caring and closeness in the
teacher-student relationships. This participant described the importance of teachers understanding
their students well, which consisted of a more balanced view inclusive of strengths and
weaknesses:

I love [this school] so much more [than my old school]. I was at [old school] and the
teachers there are just jerks. They have nothing good to say about you. They’re just very
rude and it just bugs me. At least the teachers here are nice and they get to know you and
they know your strengths and your weaknesses. They know when they can push you and
when they shouldn’t. They know when you’re… they just know you and the teachers at
other high schools don’t have the chance to get to know you so they have to come off as an
ass. (P8)

This participant is also eluding to the fact that the small size of the alternative school may have
allowed for teachers to get to know the students better, as opposed to her previous school
experiences which consisted of much larger class sizes. Several other participants also described
how teachers were able to get to know them well and develop individualized supports at the
alternative school due to in part the small size of the student body.

In addition to teachers knowing when to push (and not push) students, they were also
described as being very encouraging and supportive in the same way a caregiver might reassure
their child. Not surprising, this interaction was particularly salient for students who expressed lacking this support from their primary caregivers:

Having the teachers here especially keep pushing me and pushing me and pushing me and keep telling me “you’re doing good, you’re doing good”. It really helps because I’ve never really been told like ‘I’m proud of you’ or any of that sort of stuff so it really helps. It’s a really big ego boost. (P8)

Again, this excerpt demonstrated the teachers’ abilities to modify their approach to match the individual student’s unique needs including their learning style, past experiences, and/or circumstances. There is some overlap here with the previously discussed sub-themes of caring, genuine, and close qualities, contributing to overall positive teacher-student relationships.

**Sense of Community**

Another major theme that was apparent in reviewing the student interviews was the sense of community present at the alternative school. The alternative school engendered a welcoming and inclusive environment where students expressed feeling like they belonged. With respect to peer interactions, many participants described getting along with some students and not others. However, participants were in agreement that peer interactions were civil, that conflict in the environment was dealt with quickly and calmly. How teachers and student interacted with one another played an important role in establishing a positive school environment in which students described feeling like a part of a close-knit community.

**Sense of belonging.** Many students described having a sense of belonging at the alternative school, including feeling safe, comfortable, and accepted by others. According to the students, part of what contributed to this sense of belonging is the welcoming environment at the alternative school. Earlier in the analysis, teachers were described as welcoming and caring, which in turn helped create an environment that was welcoming and inclusive. When this participant was
asked what helps him show up to school, he attributed it to the teacher support and welcoming environment:

The teacher support really. How they support you to come to school. But other than that, I dunno, they’re just really, they’re just like a second family sorta thing. Because like you come and at school they all come greet you, say hi, even if you’re happy or mad, like it doesn’t matter […] They’re very welcoming to students, community, whoever comes to the school you’re pretty much already in their family, so they’re nice and welcoming. (P14)

From this excerpt, the manner in which people are made to feel welcome at the alternative school contributed to an inclusive and family-like environment. While there is significant overlap with this sub-theme and others in this analysis (i.e., positive teacher-student relationships), the feeling at school that students described as welcoming is a separate concept that contributes to a positive sense of community. For example, in addition to the teachers contributing to a welcoming environment, certain students also went out of their way to help others feel comfortable and welcome at the alternative school:

[I] love meeting new people here we always get new students and it’s the first person I talk to just to make them feel like they’re welcome and they’re not to be scared at a new school like I was when I was a kid. (P1)

Again, another participant echoed the notion that caring and close peer relationships, in addition to teacher relationships, helped her feel welcome at the school:

All my friends and the teachers are definitely a big part in why I want to come here. They’re all so caring. So, yeah, I just feel more welcome here than in a normal high school. I feel so much closer with everybody here than I would at a normal school. (P13)

Part of what contributed to feeling welcome at the school was related to a mutual respect the people have for one another at the alternative school. Participant 14 reported his view: “I’d say
they’re nice and welcoming, they welcome you, they don’t know who you are so you should respect them. Do unto others as you’d want them to do unto you.” The concept of respect is described further in the next section of analysis, in the context of civil peer interactions.

Participant 5 described the school as a “non-threatening environment”. Here, another participant spoke about how he felt the alternative school was a safe and supportive environment he could always return to over the course of many transitions and difficult periods:

It has helped me a lot. Like over the past couple years that I’ve been here. I was here and then I left and then I came back and in between then I’ve had a lot of… like I’ve been to jail, I’ve been to rehab and this school has been a safe place for me to come back to with a lot of support so… you know [social worker’s name], she’s so supportive, know what I mean? She’s just so fantastic. Same with [teacher’s name], pretty much like every teacher here.” (P20)

The teachers were credited for helping the students feel safe and comfortable, and being very supportive. Participant 11 shared: “I always feel comfortable here.” This in turn facilitated this student to seek out help when she needed it. “I always ask the teachers for help, because I feel very comfortable.” There is some overlap with this theme and the positive qualities of the teacher-student relationships discussed previously, whereby students feeling cared for, having genuine, close relationships, and feeling understood by teachers likely contributed to feelings of safety and comfort.

In addition to her close relationships with the teachers, Participant 13 described how friendships with peers and the small school size also helped her feel like she belonged at the alternative school and was a part of a community: “I just like the sense of belonging here. I just feel so much more comfortable in a small community where I can be recognized more than in a big community.” This participant conveyed how feeling like she belonged, and being a part of a
community allowed her to feel comfortable and recognized, which in turn improved her level of student engagement (e.g., her desire to be at school).

Another participant spoke about how the small school size helped her develop a sense of belonging. She contrasted her experiences at a previous high school where she felt insignificant and alone due to the large size and lack of relationships with people, with her experience at the alternative school where she felt supported:

I like the support from the staff and students [at this school]. At [my old school], I think the only person that I actually talked to was the vice principal, and I didn’t feel like I belonged at that school. I think I was a number because there were so many students. I mean, in a class of 30 I know it’s hard, but when I came here I worked better independently and got help when I needed it. But I just found that the support was a lot better than where I was before. (P12)

Many participants reported that people outside of the alternative school (e.g., students and teachers from other schools, parents, members of the community) have stigmatized them as “bad kids” or “delinquents” who are not going to amount to anything in their lives. Some participants admitted also holding this assumption regarding the student body at the alternative school prior to attending; however, they shared coming to the realization once they arrived of how generally civil the students are and positive the school is. Participant 9 described changing his mind once he began attending the school: “It’s not what I thought. I thought they [students] were going to be more closed off and like I guess hostile but everyone’s pretty friendly here.” In addition, there was a consensus that people needed to experience being at the school themselves to really understand what goes on and to overcome the stigma associated with it. This participant shared his belief that people’s opinions of the school would change drastically once they were able to experience it first-hand:
I’d say the school’s reputation outside of the school, if you haven’t been here, is probably really bad. But if you’ve been here and after that reputation that you’ve heard, you totally change your mind, and you’re like “I love that school, I wish I could go there”. (P14)

Many participants shared examples of other people judging the student body at the alternative school, and as a result they would defend their school and peers. The students at the alternative school appeared to defend their school and share feelings of pride about the program:

They think that we’re all bad, and like I know that my friend’s mom did something for the school and she said like “everyone that goes to that school isn’t going anywhere in life and you’re all suspended from school you all do drugs blah blah blah” and it’s like a lot of us graduate a lot faster than other people do at normal schools so… you just get the attention that you need. (P6)

Interestingly, students reported that one aspect of what helped them develop a sense of belonging to the school was their perception that all the students there have had various problems, and therefore have a shared understanding of what it is like to struggle. This was described as a commonality among the peers at the alternative school:

I think it’s a good fit because everyone has their own problems and you come here and you can just relate to everyone and be able to talk to them about the exact same thing, and how everyone’s dealing with it and you deal with it different. So it’s nice to just be able to come and be in common with people. So that’s why I think it’s a good fit. (P6)

This participant’s ability to feel comfortable talking to peers at the alternative school about her struggles was contrasted with her interactions with peers in traditional school settings, who were described as not understanding and minimizing of her challenges:

The students are good and everybody has their own problems so it’s able to– it’s easier to actually sit down and talk to someone about something when they actually understand
rather than at a normal school where they’re like “oh no it’s okay you’re just going through a shitty time” it’s like, “no, you don’t get it”. (P6)

Participants who found commonality in the experience of struggling also reported feeling less judged at the alternative school. Participant 16 described his experience: “No one really judges each other because everyone has problems here. So everyone gets along.” When asked what helps her bounce back from having a hard time, another participant also described knowing she will not be judged as an important factor:

I just think of it as a new day and everybody has hard days, and nobody’s going to judge me because I had a hard day. And I know that around here, not a lot of people judge people and so I’m not afraid to be judged here. (P18)

Overall, not feeling judged conveyed a sentiment of acceptance for the students at the alternative school, which then contributed to their overall sense of belonging.

Civil peer interactions. Participants generally reported getting along with their peers at the alternative school, with a consensus that there are also peers with whom they do not get along. How these peer interactions were managed allowed for the school environment to remain positive, despite some challenging peer relationships. Participant 6 described having mixed feelings about her peer group: “I like the majority of the students but… just the other (laugh) the other half annoy me… get on my nerves like really easy – really loud.”

Several students described keeping their heads down and focusing on their work at the alternative school, and were not overly concerned about developing friendships. Some participants described getting along with other students at the alternative school, yet not feeling close to them. As this participant stated, the teacher relationships were commonly described by students as better developed than the peer relationships:
Well, I get along with them, but it’s not like, I don’t like really have any personal relationships with some of the kids here like I have more of a relationship with the teachers than I do some of, most of the students at this school. Like we get along, me and the students get along, but it’s like, we don’t hang out outside school type thing. It’s just an in-school thing. (P18)

Some participants noted that individual differences (e.g., age, interpersonal style) made it less likely that they would develop close friendships at the school:

I don’t know at this point I don’t really have a lot of close friends at [alternative school], so I wouldn’t really say that I’m a very social person here. But if someone talks to me I will obviously reply respectfully. But I stay very focused on my work while I’m here. And I think kind of because I’m one of the older students here it kind of puts me aside from all of the drama and stuff like that which is a downside to having a small high school. But for me, it worked out great. (P11)

Being a part of a small school community made it difficult to manage peer relationships. As such, participants described needing to respect one another’s space and maintain civil interactions, even when they did not like one another. A common strategy for managing peers that participants did not get along with was keeping a distance from them. This participant was especially careful to avoid getting caught up in “girl drama”:

For the most part I get along with everybody really well. There’s some drama but I try to stay away from those people as much as possible cause I’ve been through that and I don’t want to get involved with all of that girl drama you know. (P5)

Similarly, a different participant described making an effort to stay away from peers she did not like or get along with. This involved a deliberate choice to refrain from making hurtful comments to others, and thus opting to maintain some civility at school:
For the most part I do get along with everybody. There’s a couple students who I’m not fond of but I don’t go out of my way to say that I don’t like you. Let them live their lives and move on with mine. (P10)

While another participant also adopted the strategy of maintaining civil interactions by keeping certain peers at a distance, she described it was not always possible to avoid conflict:

I get along with most of them [peers] even the ones I don’t get along with. We just kind of keep our space I mean I know a lot of other students who don’t get along with people… you know conflict a lot. But with me it’s just like the people I don’t get along with it’s just “okay just stay away from me”. (P3)

Participants discussed how conflict resolution among peers contributed to civil peer interactions and the overall positive school climate and sense of community at the alternative school.

Overall, participants reported that most students get along at the school, and for those individuals who do not get along they are able to stay away from one another or resolve their differences quickly and calmly. This successful conflict resolution was attributed to both effective management from the teachers and student behaviour. Participant 10 explained: “If there are problems with the students, the teachers handle it really well, even the students handle it really well which is surprising sometimes…”

The way teachers interacted with students in times of conflict was reported to be calm and respectful, which was depicted as helpful for de-escalating situations when they arose in school. In addition, students described appreciating the teachers’ ability to see past the actions and outbursts of students who were struggling, and manage the situations of conflict quickly:

It’s the people… everyone’s welcoming, everyone’s always positive, like if someone gets mad I don’t know, you’ve probably experienced it with a student here where they can’t
control themselves like they freak out or whatever, it’s not like everyone around them
freaks out, it’s controlled in a calm collected manner as opposed to like you know what I
mean… completely blown out of proportion and whatnot. (P7)

This same student also spoke about his perception that peers at the alternative school are
able to overcome conflict by talking to one another directly, as opposed to escalating the problem:

Here, if people actually have a problem they’ll actually like step forward to each other and
tell each other what’s going on like that they have a problem and they’ll like overcome the
issue instead of making a stupid big deal about it and like having some stupid fight to put
on like a show for their friends. (P7)

Another student described how student conflict is dealt with immediately and in person at the
alternative school, instead of dragging on and continuing through other forms of media:

There’s not as much drama. Like if a girl here had a problem with another girl, they’d talk
about it right then and there. So, that’s really good, it’s not like days upon days upon days
of Facebook and texting, it’s dealt with right then and there. (P13)

When prompted, this same student went on to talk about her belief that conflict between peers
could not carry on for extended periods of time because of the small, community centered, and
upbeat feeling of the school’s environment:

I feel like it’s because at this community, I don’t think anyone could sit there and actually
fight for a long period of time. I don’t think it would work, even if you wanted to try, I
don’t think it would work because there is so little people, but the environment is just so
upbeat and we’re all so – we have to be part of a community and not just think about
yourself. (P13)
In addition to quick and direct conflict resolution, this student further explained her perception that peers do not talk behind each other’s backs at the alternative school, which inevitably helped students feel closer to one another and a part of a close-knit community:

The students here – like there’s some ones that you just don’t get along with, but a lot of the students here are just like me, that just want to have a sense of belonging, and have a good relationship... If someone has something to say to you, they say it right to you. They don’t talk behind your back. I feel so much closer with everybody here than I would at a normal school. (P13)

**Flexible Structure**

Most students reported that the flexible structure at the alternative school made it easier for them to be there and get their work done. This was attributed to the flexibility created through individualized programming and timetables, being able to work at their own pace and the opportunity for more individual support, and more flexible application of rules that help keep students out of trouble.

**Individualized programming.** Students spoke about how the school’s altered timetable, which includes a later start time and earlier end to the day as well as only three class periods, was helpful in getting them to show up for school. In addition, students are able to further personalize their timetable, course selection, decide on the amount of credits taken, among other individualizations intended to support student engagement and overall well-being. Often, what resulted from individualized programming was the ability for students to work at their own pace, which was described on many occasions as contributing to student engagement.

Some students also benefited from the added flexibility of working with their teachers to develop an appropriate substitution in their lessons, as a way to diversify the methods in which
they were learning or to accommodate for individual learning styles. This participant expressed his preference for more experiential and hands-on learning which was often accommodated:

I like it a lot better than a traditional school because I like being able to work at my own pace. And work at my own hands and like if there’s a lesson that I don’t like or I don’t like the way it’s worded, I can approach the teacher and offer a substitute for that lesson like do a project for it or something. In a sense you can really actually work on things the way you need to work on them. (P7)

Participant 10 reported liking being able to have some control over her course selection and course load, in addition to selecting the pace at which she completed the work: “I like it because we get to pick our own courses and what we want to do each year and how fast we do it.”

Furthermore, students described receiving appropriate support from staff to help them get the credits or experiences they needed to accomplish their particular goals, for example to graduate within a specific time frame or apply for a specific program. The individualized programming allowed students who were unsure about what they wanted to do next to have some flexibility to develop their interests or change their mind. This participant shared recently becoming interested in a particular program, which the school will be able to support her in obtaining the specific pre-requisite courses for:

I like that it’s so flexible because I just recently decided what I wanted to do for post-secondary […] I want to take a vet-tech program. So I like that it’s flexible because I just decided recently that I can go, “oh I need this” whereas if I was going to regular high school, I wouldn’t be able to do that. (P19)

Here, another student spoke about how the combination of the individual programming and the teacher support and encouragement to get their work done is what ultimately helps her be more successful in school:
I want to work with special needs kids, so the teachers here are helping me out a lot. Like figuring out what I need to get done and stuff, and they’ll push me and its good, cause if you tell them “push me push me, I want to get this done” and they’ll make sure that they do that so it’s nice. (P12)

Even when students did not have clear goals, they reported feeling supported by the staff’s efforts to adjust their individual program and cultivate their interests. This participant described feeling surprised with the amount of changes teachers were willing to make to support him:

They help me out a lot with it [course selection]. Because I don’t really– since I don’t really want a job or anything, I don’t really have a base, I guess. They’ve just been trying to help me with things I might be interested in. And they’ve switched a lot of courses for me, which is really surprising. (P17)

Not only were staff described as supporting students in developing their interests and planning for the future, they were also reported to go above and beyond to help students. In this case, a participant described how meaningful it was that teachers were willing to extend their support beyond her enrollment at the school and after she graduates, which helped her feel supported and less stressed about the future:

One of the things I was concerned about was I don’t know what I want to do for a career, so I don’t know if I want to go to college or university and that was really stressing me out […] I expressed my concerns to the teachers and they said “you know what, next year we’ll do campus tours we’ll do personality tests to see what job suits you best, we’ll do co-ops so you can get a sense of what jobs entail. And even if you’re graduated you can come back and we can do that for you”. And it took so much weight off my shoulders knowing that. (P10)
Students also have the flexibility to obtain credits through various planned activities at the alternative school. Participant 16 described how the many activities and alternative learning model helped with his school attendance. “And there are lots of activities. I get to do the dog training for a half credit. So, that gets me to go to school.”

Students reported feeling very supported in working with teachers and staff to develop individualized learning plans, select courses, and decide what they wanted to do after high school. This flexibility in the programming was described as helping students accomplish what they needed to succeed or meet their goals. In addition to the flexibility, this participant described feeling supported by the willingness of the teachers to sit down and help students work through their individual learning plans:

I don’t know how many times I sat down with like [teacher’s name] and [teacher’s name] and like talked like, “okay like what do you want to do because we need to give you like this credit and this credit”. And if something wasn’t working we could like switch it, right, and if like I needed that help with math [teacher’s name] was usually there like he has to help other people too but […] They were good in finding out what I needed, to do what I wanted. (P3)

Some students reported the utility of being on an altered school timetable, as this allowed them to continue to attend school while also maintaining part-time employment. This student spoke about how the school’s adapted timetable alleviated her stress associated with working part-time while being in school:

Well the timetable for one is a huge thing, we only have three classes instead of four and we start a little later, end a little earlier than other schools That really helps me because right now I’m working a part time job. And getting out at 2:15 is really awesome when I
have to work at 4:00, because I have to take the bus and it takes a long time and I don’t have that stress of like… you know trying to fit it all together. (P10)

The classroom structure is different at the alternative school, such that most learning takes place independently, and not through traditional lecturing. The reason for this is because each student in the class is working on something different, and at their own pace. Students largely reported using Independent Learning Centre (ILC) booklets in the alternative school to complete their credits. This allowed students to set their own pace to work through the course material, whether their goal was to complete their credits faster or there was a need to slow down while dealing with other personal issues (e.g., mental health, family problems). Nearly all students in the study reported that the ability to work at their own pace contributed greatly to their ability to attend and succeed in school. One student directly attributed the flexibility of the alternative school and ability to work at your own pace to her academic progress and success:

Well it’s different because it’s not like a regular classroom atmosphere, like you’re not in rows of desks and it’s not one teacher teaching and what not. You can work at your own pace, which I really like. Obviously I wouldn’t be done right now if I had to sit in a classroom. There’d be no way because I got 17 or 18 credits last year. There’d be no way I could’ve done that at a regular school. (P3)

Working at your own pace was described by students on numerous occasions as preventing them from falling behind in school. Some students described working at their own pace to be useful for alleviating the pressure to learn things quickly, and as a result, students were then able to focus on actually learning the material. In addition, this student described how working at their own pace alleviated the boredom she would feel at school:

I like also the way we learn, the ILC booklets, it’s not a teacher standing in front of you, so you can work at your own pace and that helps me a lot because I used to get so bored in
school. I’m actually learning the information and there’s not the pressure so it sticks more. (P10)

Many students described a phenomenon whereby initially their poor school attendance due to various factors discussed in the school timeline (e.g., substance use, emotional issues) leads to missing important course material, which makes it difficult to catch up and recover. In contrast, being able to work at their own pace at the alternative school was described by students as an important factor for improving attendance overall, as they are able to pick up their work where they left off should they miss some school:

I think I’m doing alright. Better than [old school] because my main problem with [old school] was an attendance thing. So you don’t go to the classes, you don’t find out about things, you don’t get good marks. Whereas here it’s just, if I don’t come for a couple of days, my books are exactly where I– I’m at the same spot. And so I think just in that sense I’m doing better. (P19)

For some students, the feeling of being behind then became the reason for even worse attendance, falling farther behind, leading to students eventually losing hope and giving up on their schooling entirely. Several students reported this negative cycle being problematic at their previous school (as discussed in the school timeline results). Some students described feeling ashamed of needing to take courses with students much younger than them, which contributed to yet another barrier to attending school. This next participant described how her substance use, falling far behind, and then being uncomfortable with her age served as barriers to her attendance and student engagement:

Like hanging out with older people so I started doing things that they were doing, like alcohol and drugs and all that stuff. And then throughout high school, even after that was kind of pushed aside, a lot of me not wanting to come to school was that I was so behind.
And I felt so uncomfortable being the age I was, or even the age I am, I’m going to be 20 years old this summer and I’m graduating high school. Right now I’m comfortable with it, better late than never… I remember being in grade 11 or something and being in a grade 9 math class, and I stopped going because I was that uncomfortable. (P3)

Students often noted how working at their own pace and the small size of the school helped them get the attention and support they needed to be successful. Having an individual program and working at your own pace created a flexible environment which enabled students to have more attention from teachers. Instead of lecturing in front of a classroom, teachers were described as more available to students, free to answer individual questions as needed and therefore better able to meet the unique needs of each student. One participant shared how her experience of working independently, on an individualized schedule, and in a small learning environment helped her get the attention and support she needed from teachers:

You get to do independent work. Come on your own schedule pretty much, so, it’s nice. It’s a nice learning environment because it’s so small that you actually get the help that you need […] Then being at a school with like 5000 kids you can’t really get the attention you need when you need help. It’s nice here – whenever you have a question they can just answer it for you. (P6)

Participant 17 noted how the smaller class sizes allowed him to feel more comfortable asking for help from teachers when he needed it: “I like how the classes aren’t that big [at this school], I can actually ask for help if I want it. I don’t ask for much help but, I never really did, but I can actually ask for help [here].”

Although most students reported benefiting greatly from the flexible structure and the ability to work at their own pace, a few students spoke about also wanting to be in a more traditional classroom environment, where teachers lecture, group work is possible, and students
can learn from one others’ questions. Participant 14 spoke about how a traditional school would have more selection in terms of elective courses he could take, whereas the alternative school is more limiting in what they can offer with respect to their facilities: “I can’t really get any other courses, because all I have are electives, so that’s like all like gym and stuff. And I don’t want to really be doing gym out of a book…” This participant also reported feeling less motivated to attend school, because he found independent work less interesting and felt he could complete the work from home most of the time. Lastly, this participant noted how he sometimes “takes advantage” of the flexible, laid-back environment and does not sit down to do the work (e.g., he likes to “slack off”). However, over the course of the interview this same student also identified many positive qualities of the alternative school related to other themes in the analysis, including the welcoming environment and teacher support.

Interestingly, a few participants also noted that the flexible structure at times lends itself to a distracting environment where students are socializing and may not work as hard as they could be, and yet they also reported overall academic improvements. Participant 6 reported: “I get really distracted here too – someone starts talking it’s like ‘oh ok someone’s talking I’m not going to do my work’.” However, when asked about how she is doing academically, the same participant reported that she has accomplished more credits and is achieving better grades since attending the alternative school. “At [old school] I wasn’t getting any work done but I have more credits than I did when I left like I have more now than when I was at [old school]. I can actually graduate next year.”

Flexible application of rules. Many students spoke about how the staff at the alternative school were more flexible with how they applied school rules than typical schools. This was thought to be due to staff approaching students at the alternative school more holistically and conveying a greater understanding for how personal situations might impact students at school.
Two of the reported benefits of having rules applied more flexibly were that it allowed students to feel more relaxed and comfortable, and it conveyed a general message of acceptance and forgiveness. As a result, students described how this helped them with attendance and completing their work with greater ease.

One participant explained how the teachers being more understanding of students is what helped him stay out of trouble at the alternative school. This participant shared the utility of staff talking to him directly after he broke a rule, as it gave him opportunity to stay in the classroom and remain at school:

I really just like how laid back the school is. Like if you do something wrong, you get in trouble, but it’s harder to get in trouble because the teachers are so much more understanding, you know what I mean. Like you’re not going to get kicked out of class if you say a cuss word. You might, but chances are you won’t because they’re gonna come talk to you. Whereas in regular school you know— you’re out… you know, you’re probably gonna get suspended for it. (P20)

This excerpt demonstrates that while the general expectation of student behaviour is likely similar across schools (e.g., in this case to speak in a respectful manner, including not swearing), the staff at the alternative school are more tolerant and understanding of student behaviour and therefore show flexibility in how they apply rules, and by extension consequences. This example does not answer the question of whether overall student behaviour at the alternative school is better or worse as a result of this flexibility; however, the flexibility does appear to keep students physically present in school which brings about future opportunities for student engagement.

The most prominent example provided by students to demonstrate this flexibility of how rules are applied involved what happened to them when they were late for class at the alternative school compared to more traditional schools. One participant contrasted how the alternative
school’s understanding and flexible approach helped her feel more relaxed and productive, as opposed to typical school settings where she felt stressed and was often in trouble:

Just feels like it’s better to come to school relaxed, and if I come a bit late not to be so stressed out that I’m late, and just start doing my work. I don’t have to be stressed out about it. Like if I went to another school they’d be all like yelling at me and freaking out and like “go to the office”. I don’t like that stuff. So I just come into school and am able to sit down and do my work, without getting yelled at. And not having to go to the office, and get in trouble and they talk to you like, they either get you to go home or something. (P15)

This participant is conveying an underlying assumption that there will be some days when she will inevitably be late for school, and the more understanding approach helps with her attendance and productivity. The excerpt also suggests how the participant perceived the disciplinary approach of staff at their old school as punitive and aversive, holding the belief that staff were intentionally trying to send her home. Once again, by having more flexibility in how rules are applied, students at the alternative school were sent home less often, which in this case created opportunities to complete more schoolwork and make progress.

Several students noted that while the environment was more flexible and laid-back, they felt it did not impact their ability to get their schoolwork done. Participant 17 reflected on how it helped with his productivity, which he felt was counter-intuitive: “It’s a lot more lenient but it’s easier to get things done. It’s weird, it’s kinda contradicting…”. Similarly, Participant 4 shared how the flexibility at the alternative school contributed to an overall more comfortable environment, similar to a home, which did not interfere with her productivity: “I guess the different environment is better. It’s more laid-back and more, just home-like rather than school. But you still get your work done.”
In addition, some participants reported how the flexible application of rules conveyed more acceptance of student inevitably making mistakes, which then created an opportunity for students to improve. This participant shared her experience of being given a second chance by the staff at the alternative school:

I just think that it is a place where we can turn it around and you know, they give us a second chance if we mess up. We don’t just make one mistake and then we’re expelled.

They give us a second chance to try to help us turn around our life. (P18)

This excerpt speaks to the benefits of the school’s flexibility going beyond academic productivity, and allowing for improvement on a larger scale. This approach may be particularly important for the sample of at-risk youth in this study, who have had many disappointments along their educational pathways and personal lives.

**Holistic Support**

Many participants shared an overarching view that they received more support at the alternative school compared to prior traditional settings. Much of the academic and school support that students reported on was related to the theme of flexible structure, where students have individual programs, work at their own pace, and rules are applied more flexibly. However, participants also shared instances of more holistic supports they received through the alternative school, related to practical support, emotional support, and helping them achieve basic human needs such as hunger by providing food.

When students were asked where they might be had they not enrolled in the alternative school, one participant described a host of issues she would be facing with housing, academic setbacks, substance use, and mental illness:

I’d probably still be living on the streets, well in [group home]. I wouldn’t have five credits done, I wouldn’t be two and a half credits off graduating, I wouldn’t be anywhere near
where I am now. And I probably would still be doing drugs and screwed up and I wouldn’t be on any meds. (P8)

Inherent in this excerpt is the notion that being at the alternative school has helped her overcome the practical and emotional barriers, in addition to the academic barriers, that prevented her from succeeding in school in the past. This theme overlaps with the sub-theme of feeling cared for discussed previously, as many students equated this holistic support from teachers as an act of caring.

**Practical support.** Participants shared many instances of practical support, such as teachers going out of their way to drive them to a doctor’s appointment, call them to check in on how they were doing, or provide students with food throughout the day. This participant described how helpful it has been for her to receive support with transportation at the alternative school:

> I’ve missed the city bus a few times or I’ve forgot my bus pass so I would have had to walk from [location] all the way to here. And like you can just call [teacher] or [teacher] or [teacher] or anybody and just ask them “hey can you be able pick me up or I’m going to be late for school”. They’re like “yep, sure, yup gimme 10!” And they’ll come get you. [Alternative school name] is amazing. (P8)

Participants also recognized the benefit of receiving practical support by the alternative school with housing, employment, and other everyday issues and skillsets. Here, a participant shared how the school social worker helped her find housing and employment, which were important goals for her in addition to the overarching goal of graduating high school:

> Since I’ve been here I’ve actually gotten a job from [social worker] helping me. I’m getting my own place now which [social worker] has been helping me too with that, and just coming here is just, I don’t know what word to use… coming here just makes me see life better I should say than – instead of a regular high school it’s just, “oh I’m done now I
need to go to college” like here they actually help you think about like housing and how much would you have to pay, and just the different goals in life that you need to do compared to just “let’s finish high school and college, let’s go”. (P1)

Many participants shared how the school staff and teachers were willing to support students by helping them solve problems through offering practical support. In this instance, the participant shared how staff genuinely care for the students, and therefore go out of their way to help support them in any way possible, including providing transportation:

[Social worker] drives you home. [Social worker] takes you to the doctors. You come to [social worker] for anything she’ll do whatever. You go to the teachers for anything, they’ll do anything for you. Like this is a family environment, it’s not just education. They actually genuinely care about where you go in life. (P22)

Participant 10 spoke about how some teachers would drive the students to their co-operative placement interviews for support of getting there on time, and to help them feel comfortable:

“[Teacher’s name] is an amazing teacher she offered to drive [student] to the co-op and stay there for a bit until they were comfortable. She even did that with me for mine.”

Another topic raised many times by participants was the food program at the alternative school, and how addressing the basic need of hunger helped the students on multiple levels. Students frequently commented on how being fed breakfast, lunch, and snacks at school meant they did not have to worry about making a lunch or being hungry. Participant 1 stated: “They feed us here every day; you don’t have to worry about finding a lunch the night before. I don’t know; I just love it here.” Participant 16 echoed how having access to food alleviated some of his anxiety, which helped him stay focused on his work during class time: “And since they feed me I don’t have to worry about being hungry or something in the middle of class.”
One participant shared a belief about how being fed a proper diet improves one’s mood, which could in turn make it easier to be in school and focus on his work:

I like the free food. I think it’s cool they have free lunch and snack and breakfast, because your diet is really important to your mood and stuff like that. So if you eat good you’ll be in a good mood, most likely. (P20)

Providing students with food also helped remove barriers for some by providing equal opportunities. Participant 10 shared: “There’s no discrimination against certain kinds of people or you know if you’re hungry then you know you can come here and get food.”

This same participant also commented on how the alternative school provided big family-style meals during the holidays, which created opportunities for everyone in the school to come together, celebrate, and eat food. This was noted by several students as an important aspect of the school feeling like a family, especially when students did not have opportunities for these kinds of gatherings at home:

And there’s the food program, which gives us lunch and snack and everything, which is amazing because around the holidays if you don’t have Christmas at home or Easter or whatever you can have it here, and that’s when we all really feel like a family.” (P10)

**Emotional support.** For many of the participants in this study, barriers in their personal lives (e.g., family issues, substance use, mental health issues, etc.) have impacted their ability to engage with their schooling experiences in the past. Participants reported that greater access to emotional support through the alternative school, at times more formally through therapeutic services, and other times more indirectly in their relationships.

This participant described how staff at the alternative school pay closer attention to student struggles and their emotional needs, as opposed to merely focusing on academic outcomes as they experienced in traditional schools:
They pay more attention to what the students need rather than – that they need to finish school […] Usually at a different kind of school they’re just trying to get you to finish high school and not pay attention to like your struggles or just how you’re emotionally feeling. (P4)

Another participant spoke about how her declining mental health and family problems were significant barriers to her schooling prior to attending the alternative school. She attributed the emotional support received through therapeutic services with the school social worker to address family issues, peer relationships, and mental health concerns as being crucial to her ability to then make progress in school:

I didn’t want to do anything, not school, not work, nothing. And I was like that’s not going to get me far. So I don’t know I just gave up on everything at one point. Like I even stopped talking to my family, like there was just no effort put in to my life […] Like I could talk to [social worker] like “I’m having this problem with my mom how do I approach it?” And then like it helps – I’ve even had my mom come in before and talk to [social worker] with me and kind of have a mediator between the two of us. So it’s really helped a lot, especially with like friends and stuff. I was never one to really have friends especially with my anxiety and everything I, wouldn’t want to go out, and even that’s improved. (P10)

**Students Making Progress**

Traditional means of measuring progress pose challenges in an alternative school where students are on individual programs with differing expectations. Over the course of the interviews, students reported feeling as though they were making progress since attending the alternative school with respect to improvements in their academics, motivation to graduate, and sense of hope.
and belief in themselves. Students attributed their progress to a variety of characteristics of the alternative school, many of which have been discussed over the course of this analysis.

**Academic progress.** Most students reported that they are doing better in their academics, including achieving higher grades, obtaining more credits quickly, putting more effort in school, and in their overall attendance and desire to be at school. Many students made statements indicating that their grades were greatly improving:

“Since I’ve been here my grades are actually a lot better than what they used to be, by far.” (P21)

“I’m actually getting in the 70s now instead of like barely passing classes.” (P8)

Participant 4, among other students, attributed her improved grades to getting more work completed. “I’m doing better yeah um… I’m getting work done and then my marks are getting better so I’m pretty happy about that.” And as a result of their hard work and academic achievements, students reported feeling proud of themselves:

Last year I got no credits, and this year I’m at, I think I’m at nine. Nine credits… My grades have gone up so much. For the life of me, I never would have gotten a 75 in math. And I got a 75 in math... So I’m really proud of myself. (P13).

In addition, this next participant shared how his parents are also expressing pride in his academic accomplishments and effort since attending the alternative school:

Well, my grades actually, yeah. My parents, my report card earlier this year, my parents are really impressed… because I was working really hard, so obviously I want to get good marks or at least half-decent marks anyways. (P20).

Students spoke about how the credits and grades they received while attending the alternative school helped them prepare for their future goals. This participant in particular spoke
about how he was able to achieve specific courses that would directly help him build a useful skillset for his future program and career choice:

I want to go to trade school and I need some math skills, I’ve already taken my math here. I got good grades in math. It’s just, it has helped me a lot, like this school prepared me and I think I’m ready for trade school. (P20)

While most students reported improvement in their grades, a few students spoke about how they did not feel as productive as they could have been. However, what followed these statements were expressions of a desire to improve and meet their academic goals. In addition, students were generating goals that they had previously not thought possible. Therefore, these students were reporting relative improvements in their academic engagement, albeit not the progress they would ideally like to see:

My grades have definitely improved, I’m just slower like I find that I don’t get as much work done… even though I’m coming to school every day I procrastinate a lot and I need to get on track and figure out a plan to get everything done by next year. (P5)

When this same participant was asked what she would be doing if she was not attending the alternative school, she responded that she would not be in school and “Either sitting at home doing drugs or in the hospital or worst-case scenario dead somewhere I don’t know… it’s kind of hard to say”. This is in stark contrast to the previous excerpt, which revealed the participant’s belief that she will be capable of graduating next year. These examples demonstrate that even for the individuals who struggle with productivity, they are making progress in their personal life and relatively large improvements in their academics by attending the alternative school and working toward their goals.

Several students attributed their academic improvement to the effort they put into their school work as well as the added support they received at the alternative school:
“My grades have gone up a lot. My math even, because math is my worst subject, and working with [teacher] and with math I went up to like 75 I think, and I was like failing math and all my other grades, so yeah. It was nice to see that because it shocks me, but at the same time it’s not shocking because I know I can do it. It’s just the fact of me actually trying and having support I think is a huge thing.” (P12)

**Hope and belief in self.** In addition to students reporting making progress in their personal lives and academics, an underlying shift in their mindset was noted. Students reported having hope about their future as well as an overarching belief in themselves and their ability to succeed. Student also described seeing more value in education and graduating high school.

Many students explained how seeing progress in their academics is what helped them in turn believe in themselves and their ability to succeed in school. Some participants suggested that there is an ease with which they can accomplish things at the alternative school. The flexible environment, in this case, was thought to contribute to this next participant’s overall success by making it easier for her to complete her work and therefore provide evidence that she is more capable than she previously thought:

It’s easier on me and it shows that I can– the marks that I get here show that I can do the things that I thought I couldn’t when I was at the other schools. So it’s just easier to get work done, just at my own pace. (P4).

Here, another student described a similar process of not knowing she was capable of something until she saw the results of their grades going up. “I know my grades have gone up for sure. I was barely passing before and now I’m getting 80s and 90s, and it makes me so happy to see that because I didn’t know I could do that.” (P10)

One student described the belief that she could turn her life around and make real changes through the help of teachers and students at the alternative school:
This is like just a place like where you can like turn around and change. You have physical and mental help with it. Like there are people that are here to help you and it’s not only just the teachers, it’s the students helping each other. (P18)

Another student spoke about how the alternative school is a good fit for students who have given up and lost hope in their ability to succeed in school. In this extract, teachers were credited with helping the students realize their potential:

This [school] is a better fit for kids that don’t want to come to school anymore […] The school is more for kids that don’t feel like they can accomplish anything, and then when you come here it’s just like “oh my God I actually can do this” and they just make you realize it here. I like it. (P1)

This same participant spoke about how her parents have not been there for her in the past, which has been a major barrier to her student engagement and academic progress. As such, she described how the staff’s support at the alternative school has been paramount in developing the confidence she needs to succeed in school. “I’m paid more attention to and they [staff] just, they make you feel good about yourself at the end of the day.”

**Motivation to graduate.** Many students described an underlying drive and motivation to graduate from high school. This motivation to finish their schooling often stemmed from wanting to accomplish another goal, whether it be post-secondary education, finding employment, or more generally to improve their quality of life in the future. At times, students wanted to graduate for the sake of graduating without articulating further goals.

Some students reported being motivated by the mere opportunity to accumulate credits and graduate quickly. At a traditional school, it would not be possible for some of the students in this study to graduate in a timely manner. However, the flexible structure of the alternative school
allows for credit recovery through independent work. One student explained how rapid credit accumulation motivated her to attend school and complete her work:

I’ve gotten more credits that I can think of [since] I’ve been at [alternative school] because at a high school you just, you always want to skip with your friends, and go hang out with people. But here nobody ever skips, nobody ever leaves because it’s just like why do I need to leave this to go hang out with friends when I came here to finish high school faster. So it’s just, I never need to leave I just want to come here and get it done and get out. (P1)

Participant 14 noted how the effort he puts into his work at the alternative school directly translates into improved outcomes: “Here you can get your credits way quicker, so like if you come to school and you actually put pen to paper, you’ll actually get credits faster.”

Another student shared a similar experience and belief that her efforts will result in more guaranteed outcomes at the alternative school: “Academic wise it’s like whatever effort you put in to your work is what you get out of it, it’s more along the lines here.” (P8). This particular student also spoke about how the independent course materials made her feel more in control of the school work, due to more clear and straightforward expectations, which made it easier to know what she needed to do.

Participant 7 commented that he felt more in control of his academics which made the work feel much more relevant and served as great motivation: “I feel more in control of what I’m actually doing with my life instead of just going to a school and feeling like I’m just being handed shit to tell me what I’m doing.”

Several students were motivated by the sheer possibility of knowing they would be able to graduate now that they were at the alternative school. At times students expressed great excitement at the prospect of graduation, such as Participant 1: “I love waking up every morning knowing that I’m going to finish high school.” Other times, students described feeling motivated to “finally”
graduate after a long series of academic dissatisfaction and setbacks. Participant 21 noted a shift in his mindset, which is the desire to want to graduate: “I guess this year, I’m nineteen and I actually want to finally graduate considering I dropped out for a year, so. The main thing is getting my diploma and everything and then going to college.”

In addition, this participant described how the environment helped her stay out of trouble, which then provided her with the opportunity to accumulate credits and work toward graduation:

I just want those credits. I just want to do it, and this is a good atmosphere to actually get down and do it and get stuff finished on time and… you know not be in a different school getting in trouble. This school keeps me out of trouble, so I guess that’s all that matters. (P18)

One student described how being at the alternative school over time helped her place greater value on receiving an education, including its potential to improve her life in the future:

I just wanted to hang out with my friends and school didn’t really seem that important at the time – that was before. […] I’d say recently, probably in the last two years or so, I’ve really realized how important school is, especially if you want to have a satisfying life past high school. (P11)

These results demonstrate the tremendous progress these students have made while attending the alternative school. Participant excerpts were able to demonstrate progress made in their academics, hope for their future and belief in themselves, as well as their motivation to graduate. These are striking differences compared to their initial at-risk status for school withdrawal.

**Discussion: Student Interviews**

The current study set out to better understand factors that contribute to the process of how disengaged youth become subsequently re-engaged with learning and their schooling in an
alternative school setting. This study examined student perceptions of engagement in the context of an alternative school that employs a strength-based approach to learning. Students were interviewed about their experiences and results shed light on factors within the school setting that may contribute to greater student engagement. Taken together, the results indicate that using relationships to support learning is a critical component for promoting student engagement in at-risk youth. Five superordinate themes were extracted from the student interviews: (1) positive teacher relationships, (2) sense of community, (3) flexible structure, (4) holistic support, and (5) students making progress. Within each superordinate theme, two to three subthemes were extracted and interpreted (see Figure 4).

It is important to acknowledge the importance of the small size of the school as the foundation for many of these themes to take shape. A smaller school meant smaller teacher to student ratios, making it more feasible for better teacher-student relationships to develop. The small size also facilitated the sense of community, flexible structure, and holistic support. Without the structure of a smaller school size, many of these aspects of the alternative program would not have been possible.

**Positive Teacher Relationships**

There is no doubt that teachers have the potential to influence student motivation and achievement, with wide-ranging literature supporting the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student engagement (as reviewed by Martin & Dowson, 2009). Unfortunately, some studies have found that at-risk youth are particularly susceptible to developing negative teacher relationships that are overly dependent on the teacher and high in conflict (Murray & Murray, 2004). Results from this study provide further support of the importance of the teacher-student relationship in a sample of youth at risk of school non-completion. Murray and Holt (2014) wrote that in alternative programs the teacher role is expanded beyond instructor, to function as
counselor, advisor, and mentor as well. It is thought that purposeful staffing of the teachers in the studied alternative school program was imperative in obtaining positive teacher-student relationships, as teachers need be committed to supporting at-risk youth and willing to adopt these extended roles. In addition, student perceptions of their relationships with teachers is a form of emotional student engagement, and therefore the current finding that students in this alternative setting value and report positive teacher relationships is in itself an indicator of increasing student engagement. Results from this study suggest that caring, close teacher relationships and teachers knowing when to push students are central in promoting student engagement.

**Caring, close relationships.** All participants in the study reported that the relationships with their teachers at the alternative school had a positive impact (e.g., increased their desire to be at school, improved their mood). Caring, close relationships were reported between teachers and students. Participants described feeling like they truly mattered, and that teachers genuinely cared about them. In a study by Phelan and colleagues (1992), high school students frequently reported the importance of caring and approachable teachers who show an interest in the student’s life outside of school. Current results build on these findings, by revealing the *aspects* of the relationship which contributed to this sense of closeness: reciprocity in the relationship and a casual, personal style of interaction. Students eluded that reciprocity between teacher and student added authenticity to these relationships (e.g., students and teachers mattered to one another). In addition, the more casual style of interacting with teachers contributed to the closeness in the relationships, such as calling teachers by their first names, hugging them, and being able to talk to them about “anything”. These relationships were described as having a personal quality to them, often referred to by participants as “family-like” and more akin to friendships or caregiver relationships. This was a marked difference from their prior reported experiences with teachers in traditional high school settings.
Feeling close and connected to others is akin to the sense of relatedness in Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory of motivation where the basic psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are posited to be essential for student motivation and engagement. Linking the sense of relatedness to engagement has been studied and described through various theoretical lenses. For example, relatedness can be explained within a positive psychology framework where positive emotions felt at school through the teacher-student relationship could trigger positive thinking (e.g., broadened cognitions such as problem solving) and acting (e.g., behavioural coping strategies such as seeking support) and thus promote student engagement (Reschly et al., 2008). Alternatively, attachment theory suggests that secure attachments and their corresponding internal representations function as a secure base from which children can explore and engage with the world and people around them (Bowlby, 1973).

Knowing when to push. In addition to feeling cared for and having close relationships with teachers, students spoke of the importance of teachers knowing when to push them to do work, and when to step back. The small student body at the alternative school along with the close relationships, likely allowed for teachers to know their students very well and therefore individualize their approach with each student. While some students reported feeling motivated by encouragement and praise, others fared better when teachers pushed them to do one more question. Other students were more focused on their teacher’s ability to give them space and to not push them when they were struggling, and the importance of feeling understood by teachers being considerate of their personal circumstance.

Deci and Ryan (2002) wrote about the paradox of achievement, in that “the harder you push the worse it gets”. Their chapter summarizes the importance of teachers fostering self-determination (e.g., encouragement for self-initiation and choice) in students as opposed to motivating them through more controlled methods (e.g., pressure to think, feel, and behave in
certain ways) to facilitate engagement in school. Participants in the present study discussed the importance of teachers knowing when to push students to work and when not to push, and how this balance is different for every student. Consistent with Deci and Ryan’s model, it is possible that these findings describe teachers as supporting student autonomy and self-determination in driving schoolwork (e.g., providing choices and freedom) as opposed to focusing on external controls (e.g., deadlines, pressure for achievement).

**Sense of Community**

Participants in this study reported on how their perceived sense of community, including their sense of belonging and the civil peer interactions, contributed to positive experiences and feelings toward the alternative school. The concept ‘sense of community’ has been used by researchers to describe the basic psychological need to belong in social settings and groups (e.g., Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002). School plays a central role in the lives of adolescents, and previous research has shown the importance of students’ sense of community for success in school and well-being (e.g., Lee & Burkam, 2003). Vieno and colleagues (2006) have summarized past studies on how an increased sense of community in students is positively related to aspects such as happiness, intrinsic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and adherence to social norms and rules, and negatively related to problematic behaviours such as loneliness, distress, truancy, violence, and substance use.

**Sense of belonging.** Belongingness can be described as the need to be an accepted member of a group. Students largely reported a sense of belonging to the alternative school, through their descriptions of feeling safe, comfortable, and accepted at school. Some students expressed such positivity and pride about the school, which went beyond a sense of belonging. The environment was described as welcoming and upbeat, and a place where there is mutual respect and inclusivity. The small size of the school, as well as the supportive nature of the teachers also contributed to
this sense of belonging. Students reported feeling understood and accepted by people at school, and they attributed this to the shared experience of knowing what it is like to struggle among students which brings them together as a community. The alternative school environment was often described as “family-like” and “home-like” in student interviews, which speaks to the safety and comfort felt by students.

Sense of belonging might be conceptualized as a form of relatedness, defined as the desire to interact, connect with, and experience caring for others, which is considered to be a basic psychological need in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The sense of belonging described in this study suggests increased emotional engagement of students, as they reported feeling connected to the people and physical space, and valuing the environment. One qualitative study concluded that emotional engagement preceded any real behavioural changes in a sample of at-risk adolescents attending an alternative school (Jones, 2011). This study also concluded that it takes time for students to develop a sense of valuing and belonging with a school community, highlighting the importance of prioritizing emotional and relational support at schools for at-risk youth (Jones, 2011). The current study extends these results by identifying specific ways in which positive teacher relationships and school community facilitate student motivation and engagement.

Civil peer interactions. Students reported mixed findings with respect to peer interactions, with some students getting along well with their peers, and others preferring to keep to themselves and stay focused on their work. Students shared that some peers do not get along, and there is sometimes drama at school. However, the ability of students to remain civil with one another, despite their differences, was identified as important in maintaining a positive school climate. The small school size also makes it so that students have to manage being around one another in a smaller space. Students reported that peers deal with their problems directly (e.g., by talking to one
another) and quickly. Teachers were described as remaining calm during times of conflict, which also helped resolve things quickly and with minimal disruption to the school environment.

Results from this study suggest great variability in the quality and sense of relatedness among peer relationships, with a consensus emerging such that teacher relationships were better developed than peer relationships in the alternative school. It is unclear how the peer relationships in this study impacted overall engagement, and whether closer peer relationships would have uniquely contributed to further engagement. Some studies have supported the notion that peers are less influential social partners than teachers and parents. For example, Ryan and colleagues (1994) found that, after the effects of relatedness to parents and teachers were controlled, relatedness to peers made no unique contribution to engagement (or other academic outcomes). It is possible that peer relationships that are civil and “good enough” in the context of very close, caring teacher relationships are sufficient to promote student engagement in a population of at-risk youth.

Consistent with this premise, Hymel and colleagues (1996) found that neglected peers (i.e., rated by their classmates as neither liked nor disliked) did well in school as long as adults liked them, whereas peers who were actively rejected by classmates were more likely to become disaffected from academic activities and eventually leave school.

**Flexible Structure**

Gilson (2006) suggest the success of any alternative school is the ability to design a program that meets the academic and social needs of the at-risk student. Findings from the current study suggest that a flexible school structure was fundamental in addressing the unique needs of each student. Finding a balance in which the environment is flexible, yet still productive, was identified by students as important for supporting their needs while also making progress toward the goal of graduation. Typical high school environments and classrooms are more limited in their ability to meet the unique needs of each student, resulting in less support for student autonomy
overall. By contrast, an alternative school with fewer students, more resources, and supportive teachers creates a less constrained environment, which is better suited to take into account the needs of a developing adolescent. Both individual programming and the flexible application of rules were found to be important contributors to a flexible environment in this study.

**Individual programming.** Creating an environment, learning style, and structure that enables student success is pivotal for working with at-risk youth. Most students reported how helpful it was for their learning to take place in a flexible school environment with individualized programming, which allowed their unique needs to be taken into consideration to best support their progress and success. Working at their own pace was identified by many students as an important factor in being able to succeed academically, because students are able to pick up where they left off and not fall behind in school. Students identified how the support from staff and teachers was also paramount in their learning, including more one on one teaching, finding and/or creating relevant learning opportunities, and making accommodations to the work to suit their learning.

These results imply that the flexibility that individual programming offers enabled students to access the curriculum at an appropriate pace and level while taking into account their individual needs. This in turn, will support students having input in their academics, experiencing success at school, and feeling competent in their abilities. Self-determination theory postulates that student autonomy (i.e., the experience of one’s behaviour volitional and self-endorsed), together with student competence (i.e., the experience of behaviour as effectively enacted), is essential to maintain intrinsic motivation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), which in turn facilitates psychological well-being (Burton, Lydon, D’Alessandro, & Koestner, 2006).

**Flexible application of rules.** Students noted a significant shift in how the alternative school responds to misbehavior compared to traditional schools. The alternative school was
described as more understanding, accepting, and forgiving of student behaviour, which resulted in students perceiving the rules as more fair and the environment as more supportive. Although the rules and expectations are largely similar to typical school settings, how rules are applied and the resulting consequences were described as very different. Students reported feeling more relaxed and supported by staff at the alternative school, as teachers were described as more considerate of the context and circumstance unique to each student. Potentially as a result of these practices, students were encouraged to remain at school as opposed to being sent home as a disciplinary tool, and therefore were able to continue to make progress in their work and had more opportunities to further their engagement.

Prior literature on school climate has examined the importance of promoting safety in schools through school rules and perceived fairness in regard to dealing with student behaviour (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). As part of Ontario’s approach to making schools safe places to learn, every school is required to have a progressive discipline policy. This policy allows for more flexibility, as principals are able to decide on the appropriate supports and/or consequences, while taking into account individual circumstances of the students. The alternative school in this study follows a progressive discipline approach that is corrective and supportive, which builds upon strategies that support students in building skills for healthy relationships and positive behaviours. The school achieves progressive discipline by making use of a continuum prevention programs, interventions, supports, and consequences. The small school size along with positive teacher-student relationships and available supports (e.g., a full-time social worker on site) likely contribute to the effectiveness of this approach. Larger, traditional schools with more impersonal teacher-student relationships are likely to experience more difficulty taking individual student circumstance into account, which could lead to more consequences applied and perceived as unfair by the student, leading to gradual disengagement from school.
Holistic Support

Results from this study suggest that the alternative school provided holistic support to meet the unique needs of students, including practical and emotional modes of support. Previous studies have found that the perceived availability of social support serves as a buffer in the face of obstacles (e.g., Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). As such, providing holistic support, or at least the perceived availability of holistic support, should help students overcome the various barriers they face to student engagement.

**Practical support.** Students shared instances in which the alternative school helped them resolve practical issues by providing support with housing, transportation, and employment. Teachers were reported to go above and beyond to help them get to school, find a place to live, or find work. In addition, the food program at the school was discussed on many occasions as providing nourishment throughout the day, improving student mood, as well as providing meals during celebratory gatherings on holidays. For some students, this alleviated the need to worry about being hungry while at school. Providing practical support to students in these ways removed barriers for students attending school while simultaneously demonstrating caring for students, which may well contribute to greater student engagement. Consistent with these results, previous research suggests that the experience of support and caring from teachers increases student engagement and satisfaction with school (Klem & Connell, 2004).

**Emotional support.** The alternative school was also described as a place where students could go for emotional support, either formally through therapeutic services, or informally through their relationships with staff and peers. Students identified getting help with their mental health, addiction, family issues, peer relationships, and other problems that impacted their well-being. In a recent study by Wang and Peck (2013), emotionally disengaged youth (i.e., low on emotional engagement despite moderate behavioural and high cognitive engagement) were found to be at
The greatest risk for developing mental health problems such as depression. Results from the school timeline similarly highlighted the significant negative impact of social and emotional difficulty (i.e., mental illness, substance use, family conflict, transitions, and interpersonal conflict) on student-rated school experiences. Addressing these factors that interfere with student engagement by providing students with emotional support is important for supporting youth in more holistic ways toward increasing their student engagement and well-being.

**Students Making Progress**

The present study sought to find individualized methods for measuring student outcomes, via the subjective reporting from participants on their progress since attending the alternative school. Participants reported making progress in their academics, their sense of hope and belief in self, and their motivation to graduate. These results also suggest increased competence (i.e., the feeling that one can produce desired effects and outcomes), cognitive engagement (i.e., learning goals, investment in learning), and autonomy (i.e., feeling in control of school work) within students since attending the alternative school.

**Academic progress.** Measuring traditional markers of academic progress in this setting was not feasible due to the extensive amount of variation in the individual programs developed for each student (e.g., timetable, number of courses, types of courses, pacing of work). As such, having a student account of perceived progress is helpful for determining the utility of this program and also for informing the broader literature on factors that underlie school engagement in this population. Students reported making progress in their academics since attending the alternative school, such as achieving better grades and accumulating more credits. Other measures of progress were also noted, such as better attendance, a desire to be at school, and more effort put into schoolwork.
These results are indicative of improvements in both academic and behavioural aspects of student engagement. While causality cannot be assumed from this study, it is likely that various aspects of the alternative school made it possible for students to achieve this progress. The frustration-self-esteem model (J. D. Finn, 1989) posits that poor school performance causes frustration or embarrassment which leads to an impaired self-view (e.g., poor self-concept), and in turn the student opposes the context that is seen as responsible (e.g., skipping class, disrupting instruction, delinquent acts). Therefore, by creating opportunities for students to succeed in school via caring, close teacher relationships, sense of community, flexible school structure with individual programming and progressive discipline, and holistic support, students can begin to enhance their self-view and in turn encourage more prosocial behaviours, as well as increased behavioural engagement. Making academic progress also builds competence in the individual student, which is considered a basic psychological need important for student motivation according to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

**Hope and belief in self.** Students reported a marked shift in their mindset after attending the alternative school, in that they were more hopeful about their future and believed in themselves and their ability to succeed. In addition, students expressed valuing their education and its ability to improve the quality of their life. Interestingly, students reported believing in themselves after seeing some progress in their academics and achievements. Many students noted that their academic progress was proof that they were capable of accomplishing things they did not think were possible. This in turn gave students hope for graduation and achieving their goals.

These results suggest an improvement in student cognitive engagement, defined as one’s perceptions and beliefs about the value and relevance of schoolwork, and one’s investment in learning. Results also begin to highlight more internal psychological factors that may play a role in student engagement, such as potential changes in cognitive schemas and self-concept (e.g., self-
efficacy and hope for the future). By expressing belief in themselves, students also reported a greater sense of competence in their abilities, one of the basic psychological needs in self-determination theory defined as the feeling that one can produce desired effects and outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Motivation to graduate.** Student motivation to graduate was reported by many participants, either for the sake of graduating high school or to accomplish another goal such as further education, employment, or other opportunities. Students attributed their increased motivation to graduate to several factors, including clear and straightforward expectations, opportunities to accumulate credits quickly, and their effort translating directly into results. The flexible structure of the school was identified as greatly contributing to these factors. Overall, many students reported a “get it done and get out” mindset about their coursework, which is quite different from what is typically described as motivation and engagement in the literature. And yet, for these at-risk youth this mindset is what helped them accomplish their goals and is indicative of motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), “To be motivated means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated.” (p. 54). By this definition, most participants in the current study could be described as extrinsically motivated to achieve a means to another end (e.g., graduate, meet demands of society, get a job) as opposed to intrinsically motivated to learn (e.g., just for the sake of learning).

Student motivation and engagement in this study looks different than what is typically depicted in the broader literature, such as the experience of “flow” which is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). According to flow theory, concentration, interest, and enjoyment in an activity must be experienced simultaneously, and the student would perceive the activity as worth doing for its own sake, even
if no further goal is reached (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This is not a realistic state of motivation for the majority of at-risk youth described in the current study, who have experienced years of disappointment with their schooling and have traditionally been disengaged from their learning. Although it is important to strive to attain outcomes of highly engaged, intrinsically motivated students who regularly experience flow, it may not be realistic or necessary to achieve improved student engagement and successful completion of high school in the current at-risk sample of youth.

**Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions**

A major strength of this study is the opportunity to share the experiences of how youth at-risk of school withdrawal become re-engaged with their schooling, from their own perspective. The results demonstrate the tremendous impact the alternative school has had on their educational trajectories, and highlight aspects of the school environment that made this possible. Using qualitative methods allowed for these descriptions and findings to be presented in a way that increases our understanding of how to best support youth at-risk of school withdrawal and failure.

Although participants shared many rich experiences regarding their past and current schooling experiences, some limitations are important to acknowledge. As noted previously, the potential for self-selection bias in that several students opted to not participate in the research project must be considered. The method employed aimed to describe in detail the experience of these particular students attending this particular alternative school; how well these results resonate with the experience of students attending alternative schools in different settings may vary considerably (e.g., large urban settings, remote rural communities). The study findings and conclusions may be limited by the absence of teacher and family perspectives on student engagement. The study set out to better understand the subjective experience of youth in particular; yet, teacher and family report may well have deepened the understanding of the
alternative setting and process of re-engaging at-risk students. Future studies should consider using a multi-informant approach towards a more comprehensive understanding of the re-engagement process.

Lastly, due to the exploratory nature of this study, the scope of topic was broad which allowed the participants more freedom to discuss relevant school experiences. However, the interview protocol administered was lengthy which discouraged the use of additional prompts which could have garnered deeper, richer responses from participants. In addition, the researcher attempted to use similar prompts across participants as opposed to more targeted follow up questions which could have helped garner deeper meaning of significant factors involved in the unique experiences of each participant.

The results from this dissertation provide some initial insights on student experiences in this alternative setting, and provide several routes to pursue for more in-depth exploration in future research. Future studies may benefit from expanding these results by narrowing the topic of study and encouraging additional prompts and follow up questions to better target the process of re-engagement. For example, future work could focus on conducting student and teacher interviews aimed at better understanding the complexities of the teacher-student relationship, to further inform practice on how educators can support learning and engagement through relationships. In addition, focusing on individual student experiences and examining patterns within a participant may also help clarify the underlying process of re-engagement that takes place in a sample of at-risk youth.

Conclusion

This study set out to better understand the factors that facilitate at-risk youth to re-engage with their schooling in an alternative setting. While this study could not directly speak to the specific order of events, speculations could be made about the overall progression toward student
engagement in three domains: emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement. Results from this study emphasized the great importance of the teacher-student relationship in helping students be present at school, evidenced by reports of students feeling cared for and supported, with a sense of belonging at the school (e.g., emotional engagement). Even the participants who expressed some dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the program agreed that the teacher support and relationship quality was exceptional in the alternative school. The support provided at the school was reported as holistic, in that it assisted students in overcoming their unique barriers to attending school such as transportation, conflictual family relationships, mental health, or specific learning needs, to name a few. This in turn made students feel cared for in areas of their life beyond school. The flexibility of the environment, including the individual programming and flexible application of rules, enabled students to experience success in their academics which then instilled a sense of hope and belief in themselves (e.g., cognitive engagement). As students come to realize that graduation is possible, they become motivated and work toward this goal.

Overall, it appears that the process of engagement is non-linear and unique for each student, based on their current context and needs. As such, every student might experience the various components of engagement in a different order, and to varying degrees. There does not appear to be a one size fits all approach to re-engaging youth, although what is clear is the importance of relationships and a flexible school setting, which allows for the unique needs of these at-risk youth to be met.

**Overview: Study 2**

Study 2 was conducted to determine how intra-individual factors (i.e., positive schemas and psychological inflexibility) may contribute to an understanding of the relation between youth life satisfaction, psychological distress, and student engagement, in a population of youth at risk of
school failure who were currently attending an alternative high school. Study 2 also aimed to follow students longitudinally to determine whether one year of attending a strength-based alternative high school would associate with improvements in their life satisfaction, psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement.

**Hypotheses**

This research was informed by a strength-based approach to education, emphasizing the importance of moving beyond a deficit-based model for illuminating processes that may underlie student engagement. Previous research has found positive associations between measures of life satisfaction and student engagement (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016) as well as life satisfaction and positive schemas (Tomlinson et al., 2016). In examining associations between the study variables, it was predicted that measures of student engagement, life satisfaction, and positive schemas would positively correlate with one another and negatively correlate with measures of psychological distress and inflexibility (H1).

It was hypothesized that positive schemas themes (i.e., subscales on the Positive Schema Questionnaire) would predict student engagement beyond effects of self-reported sex, however, no specific hypotheses were made about which particular schema themes would emerge as most important (H2). Prior research on the positive schema questionnaire has found the theme of worthiness to emerge as predicting measures of subjective well-being (Tomlinson et al., 2016), however positive schema themes have not been studied in the context of student engagement.

Application of the broaden-and-build perspective (Fredrickson, 2001) in educational settings would suggest that student positive experience at school should trigger positive thinking and acting which then facilitate more adaptive responses to environments, create greater learning opportunities and accrual of resources, and could in turn enhance student engagement. Schemas are theorized to influence how individuals navigate the world, interpret events and respond in
social situations (James et al., 2007; Schmidt et al., 1999). Even in the context of significant psychological distress, endorsing positive core schemas about self and the world (e.g., optimistic beliefs that things will turn out well or self-efficacious beliefs that one can cope with life’s challenges) may set the stage for student engagement.

Psychological inflexibility (or experiential avoidance) is another psychological construct that may help elucidate the link between mental health and student engagement. Students who are more psychologically inflexible may react with rigidity to situations as opposed to responding to the present moment more flexibly and engaging in actions consistent with their values. They may also avoid unwanted internal events or feelings, or become entangled with and believe the literal content of their negative thoughts about self and schooling experiences (i.e., cognitive fusion). As such, it was predicted that positive schemas and psychological inflexibility would mediate the relation between youth life satisfaction or psychological distress and student engagement, in a population of youth at risk of school failure who are currently attending an alternative high school. More specifically, in the context of psychological distress, positive schemas were anticipated to promote student engagement, whereas psychological inflexibility thought to hinder it (H3).

Alternative schools may serve as a primary intervention for school dropout prevention, and have shown to improve psychosocial outcomes for youth (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The alternative school setting in which the current study took place was expected to help students become re-engaged in school and in turn promote positive outcomes for youth. As such, it was expected that youth would show increases in positive schemas, life satisfaction, and student engagement and decreases in psychological distress and inflexibility from their initial data collection period to one year later (H4). Given the hypothesis that positive schemas and psychological inflexibility would act as mediators for the outcome of student engagement, it was also expected that these variables would predict student engagement one year later (H5; see Table 1 for a list of hypotheses).
Table 1. Summary of Study 2 Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross-sectional</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Higher levels of student engagement were expected to associate with higher levels of positive schemas, life satisfaction, and lower levels of psychological distress and inflexibility.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Positive schemas were hypothesized to uniquely associate with student engagement beyond the variance explained by sex. The positive schema themes (i.e., subscales of optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy) that preferentially associate with student engagement were explored (no a priori hypotheses).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>It was expected that positive schemas and psychological inflexibility would mediate the relation between life satisfaction and student engagement as well as psychological distress and student engagement. Greater positive schemas and lower psychological inflexibility were thought to foster greater student engagement in these contexts. The positive schema themes (i.e., subscales of optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy) were also examined as potential mediators (no a priori hypotheses).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Longitudinal</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Student engagement, life satisfaction, and positive schemas were expected to increase after one year in the alternative school, whereas psychological distress and inflexibility were expected to decrease over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Positive schemas and psychological inflexibility measured at time 1 (i.e., the mediator variables) were expected to be associated with levels of student engagement at time 2, approximately one year later.</td>
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**Methods: Study 2**

**Participants**

Participants were high school students attending an alternative school in Ontario, whose purpose is to provide an educational environment for students whose needs are not being met in traditional high school environments. Youth attending this alternative school all face challenges and barriers to educational services. Participants were recruited by the author at the same alternative high school over the course of three years to provide as large a sample as possible to support the research questions through quantitative inquiry, recognizing the important contextual variables may well have varied over time (e.g., particular teachers employed in the setting).
Participants were recruited each year around the same time in the school year, specifically within the final two months of the school semester. There were 71 unique participants whose data from the first data collection were used in the cross-sectional analyses (44 females and 27 males). Participants in the cross-sectional sample ranged in age from 14 to 19 years ($M_{age} = 17.00; SD_{age} = 1.22$). Approximately 87% of this cross-sectional data sample self-identified as being White or of European descent, while the remaining participants reported belonging to various ethnicities, including Asian, Indigenous, African American, Hispanic, and mixed ethnic backgrounds.

There were three data collection time points occurring over three years (see Figure 5). The 22 participants (14 females, 8 males) who were included in the longitudinal analysis provided data at two of these time points (i.e., in year one and year two or in year two and year three); these participants were between the ages of 15 to 18 ($M_{age} = 17.00; SD_{age} = 1.02$) during their first data collection period. Approximately 77% of this longitudinal sample self-identified as being White or of European descent, while the remaining participants reported belonging to various ethnicities, including Indigenous, African, Hispanic, and mixed ethnic backgrounds.

Please see the flow diagram in Figure 5 for more information regarding participant recruitment and sample. All participants were proficient in the English language and had attended at least one traditional high school before being admitted to the alternative school. The participants in this sample attended the alternative high school for a minimum of one year, however there is not data for the total duration of their enrollment (specific amount of time beyond one year enrolled in school not available to researcher). Prior to commencing the study, ethics approval was granted by the University of Guelph research ethics board.

**Procedure**

To maximize the sample size and follow students over time, participants were recruited in person at the alternative school over the course of a few weeks in the spring for three consecutive
years (2012, 2013, 2014), approximately one year apart. Approximately 100 students were enrolled at the alternative school each academic year, and thus eligible to participate in the study. Once informed consent/assent was obtained, participants completed six questionnaire measures taking approximately 30 minutes (study 2). During the second year of data collection, students were also invited to participate in a qualitative interview about their school experiences which lasted approximately 30 minutes (study 1). Please see Figure 5 for further information.
Figure 5. Flow diagram outlining data collection process and participant samples for Study 1 (qualitative interviews) and Study 2 (cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses)
Measures

Life Satisfaction (Appendix A). The Brief Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS; Huebner, 1994) was used to measure participant reported life satisfaction. The BMSLSS is a 6-item self-report measure that asks about the participant’s satisfaction with different areas of their life, including family life, friendships, school experience, themselves, where they live, and their overall life. Participants must rate how satisfied they are using a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from “terrible” to “delighted”). The possible total scores range from 6 to 42. A review of two studies investigating the psychometric properties of the BMSLSS revealed that the scale has acceptable internal consistency, criterion-related validity, and construct validity as well as convergent and discriminant validity among adolescents (Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003). For the current study the BMSLSS showed acceptable internal consistency (α = .78).

Psychological Distress (Appendix A). Participants completed the 21-item Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) to measure the severity of depression, anxiety, and stress. The DASS-21 questionnaire is designed to measure Dysphoric mood (depression subscale; DASS-D), symptoms of fear and autonomic arousal (anxiety subscale, DASS-A), and symptoms of general nervousness and agitation (stress subscale, DASS-S). Participants rated their symptoms on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from “did not apply to me at all” to “applied to me much, or most of the time”). Higher scores on the scale indicate higher psychological distress captured by elevated depression, anxiety, or stress scores. Possible total scores range from 1 to 126, and subscale scores range from 0 to 42. The DASS-21 has been shown to have good reliability and validity (Antony, Bieling, Cox, Enns, & Swinson, 1998; Henry & Crawford, 2005). The DASS-21 showed excellent internal consistency in the current sample (α = .95)

Positive Schemas (Appendix A). Participants completed the 20-item Positive Schema
Questionnaire (PSQ; Keyfitz, Lumley, Hennig, & Dozois, 2013). The PSQ was used to measure the youth’s positive schemas. The measure consists of five subscales including: Worthiness ($\alpha = .92$), Self-Efficacy ($\alpha = .86$), Optimism ($\alpha = .87$), Success ($\alpha = .84$), and Interpersonal Trust ($\alpha = .83$). Participants were asked to rate how much they agree with positively worded statements on a 6-point Likert scale (ranging from “completely untrue of me” to “describes me perfectly”). An overall PSQ score is calculated by summing all items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of positive schemas, with possible total scores ranging from 20 to 120. This measure has been found to have strong convergent validity and high internal consistency in an adolescent sample (Keyfitz et al., 2013). The PSQ demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .96$).

**Psychological Inflexibility.** (Appendix A). Participants completed the 7-item Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011). The AAQ-II is a self-report measure of a single latent dimension of psychological inflexibility (i.e., the tendency to avoid unwanted internal experiences such as emotions), or psychological inflexibility. Respondents rate how true each statement is for them on a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from never true to always true). High scores on the AAQ-II indicate higher levels of psychological inflexibility and thus lower levels of psychological flexibility (i.e., the ability to fully contact the present moment and the thoughts and feelings it contains without needless defense, and, depending upon what the situation affords, persisting or changing in behaviour in the pursuit of goals and values; Hayes et al., 2006). Possible total scores range from 7 to 49. Bond and colleagues (2011) found the AAQ-II to have sound factor structure, good internal consistency, good test-retest reliability, and good construct validity. The AAQ-II demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .93$).

**Student Engagement** (Appendix A). Participants completed the 33-item Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). The SEI measures both cognitive (e.g., self-regulation, value of learning) and psychological (e.g., feelings of
belonging, relationships with teachers and peers) subtypes of engagement in high school students. Validation of the SEI support the use and reliability of the 5 factors (Betts, Appleton, Reschly, Christenson, & Huebner, 2010). These empirically derived factors include: Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR, \( \alpha = .93 \)), Control and Relevance of School Work (CRSW, \( \alpha = .82 \)), Peer Support for Learning (PSL, \( \alpha = .93 \)), Future Aspirations and Goals (FG, \( \alpha = .86 \)), and Family Support for Learning (FSL, \( \alpha = .88 \)). These five subscales are scored on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) where higher scores indicate more student engagement. Subscale scores are computed by calculating the mean of subscale item response, and a total student engagement score is computed by adding the subscale scores. Possible total scores range from 33 to 132. The SEI has demonstrated convergent validity with respect to other educational measures, such as academic performance (e.g., GPA) and behaviour (e.g., school suspensions; Appleton et al., 2006). The SEI demonstrated excellent internal consistency within this sample (\( \alpha = .94 \)).

**Results: Study 2**

**Analytic Plan**

Following data collection, questionnaire data were entered and checked for accuracy. Missing data were filled according to the specified instructions for each questionnaire. The distribution of variables was examined using boxplots and frequency distributions.

For the cross-sectional data sample \( (n = 71) \), bootstrapping procedures were administered. Bootstrapping is a non-parametric method based on resampling with replacement that is done many times (in this study, 5000 times). From each of these samples, a sampling distribution is empirically generated. Bootstrapping can estimate the sampling distribution without many of the assumptions needed by parametric methods (e.g., normality, unequal variances). As such, tests of normality were not necessary for the cross-sectional sample.
Next, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between variables were calculated for the cross-sectional sample. In addition, sex differences were examined across all the measures.

A hierarchical regression was then conducted to determine the unique contribution of positive schema subscales in predicting student engagement, after accounting for sex differences.

A series of multiple mediations were conducted to determine whether student internal perceptions including positive schemas and psychological inflexibility mediate the relation between youth life satisfaction and student engagement, as well as psychological distress and student engagement (see Figure 6 for models). To assess the presence of multiple mediation, bootstrapping of the indirect effects, a macro designed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was used. Using this method, bootstrap confidence intervals are generated for the total indirect effects (the aggregate effects of all proposed mediators) and specific indirect effects (the individual effects of each proposed mediator) of X on Y (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This method has been shown to be superior to more traditional tests of mediation, such as those initially described by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Sobel (Sobel, 1982, 1986) because it provides higher power while decreasing Type I error rates (MacKinnon et al., 2002; MacKinnon et al., 2004). It also assesses the effects of multiple indirect effects without assuming multivariate normality in the sampling distribution (Williams & MacKinnon, 2008; Mallinckrodt, Abraham, Wei, & Russell, 2006; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Bootstrap analyses generate multiple random samples based on the obtained sample, which then serve the basis for repeatedly computing the statistic under investigation (Mallinckrodt et al., 2006). Parameter estimates and confidence intervals of the total and specific indirect effects were generated based on 5,000 random samples. A mediation is demonstrated by evidence of a statistically significant indirect effect, or when the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the parameter estimate does not contain zero. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 24.0 including
the SPSS PROCESS macro designed for assessing multiple mediation models (Preacher and Hayes 2008).

Model 1)

```
Life Satisfaction -> Positive Schemas
|                   |
|                   |
Psychological Inflexibility -> Student Engagement
```

Model 2)

```
Psychological Distress -> Positive Schemas
|                   |
|                   |
Psychological Inflexibility -> Student Engagement
```

*Figure 6*. Multiple mediation models 1 and 2 examining the pathway of life satisfaction and psychological distress on student engagement with positive schemas and psychological inflexibility as the mediators
For the longitudinal sample ($n = 22$), data were examined using boxplots and frequency distributions. Data that fell outside of the range of three standard deviations above and below the mean were considered outliers. Four outliers were identified for the measure of life satisfaction, but the decision was made to retain these cases due to potential clinical relevance. Data were then examined for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality. All measures were found to have normal distributions, with the exception of life satisfaction (see Table 2). In addition, sex differences were examined across all the measures.

Table 2. Normality Test, Skewness and Kurtosis Values for Longitudinal Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction (BMSLSS)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$p = .071$</td>
<td>-.85</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$p = .024^*$</td>
<td>-1.46</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Distress (DASS-21)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$p = .133$</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$p = .059$</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schemas (PSQ total)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$p = .596$</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$p = .922$</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Inflexibility (AAQ-II)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$p = .222$</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-1.22</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$p = .980$</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement (SEI total)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$p = .555$</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$p = .111$</td>
<td>-.76</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant result on the Shapiro-Wilk test indicates a non-normal distribution

Next, paired sample t-test analyses were conducted on the longitudinal sample of 22 participants who completed the study approximately one year apart to determine whether any variables (i.e., life satisfaction, psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement) improved or worsened over time. Effect sizes were also computed by taking the estimated mean divided by the standard error to provide an estimate of how far away the estimated mean is from zero, which is denoted by Cohen’s $d$. 

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Finally, a regression analysis was conducted using the longitudinal sample to examine whether the hypothesized mediators (positive schemas and psychological inflexibility) at the first time point would predict the outcome variable (student engagement) one year later.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Means and standard deviations for all study variables in the cross-sectional and longitudinal samples are listed below in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for Cross-Sectional Sample Variables (n = 71)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Possible Range</th>
<th>Total n = 71</th>
<th>Female n = 44</th>
<th>Male n = 27</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction Total (BMSLSS)</td>
<td>6-42</td>
<td>27.62</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>26.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Distress (DASS-21)</td>
<td>0-126</td>
<td>48.79</td>
<td>31.69</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schemas Total (PSQ)</td>
<td>20-120</td>
<td>78.49</td>
<td>22.08</td>
<td>74.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>4-24</td>
<td>15.24</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>14.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthiness</td>
<td>4-24</td>
<td>15.67</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>14.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>4-24</td>
<td>12.92</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>12.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>4-24</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>4-24</td>
<td>16.47</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>15.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Inflexibility (AAQ-II)</td>
<td>7-49</td>
<td>27.55</td>
<td>12.13</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement Total (SEI)</td>
<td>33-132</td>
<td>104.45</td>
<td>16.03</td>
<td>107.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Engagement</td>
<td>24-96</td>
<td>61.40</td>
<td>10.17</td>
<td>62.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Relationship</td>
<td>9-36</td>
<td>30.87</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>31.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support for Learning</td>
<td>9-36</td>
<td>17.84</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>18.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Engagement</td>
<td>9-36</td>
<td>43.05</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>44.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control &amp; Relevance of School Work</td>
<td>5-20</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>27.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Goals and Aspirations</td>
<td>4-16</td>
<td>16.38</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>17.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sex differences.** To determine the effects of self-reported sex differences (where participants were to select from a binary option of ‘male’ or ‘female’), independent sample *t*-tests were
completed on all the variables. Significant sex differences were found in the cross-sectional sample (n = 71). Male participants (n = 27) reported greater life satisfaction, \( t(69) = 2.31, p = .024 \), Cohen’s \( d \) = 0.58, and higher levels of positive schemas, \( t(69) = 2.10, p = .039 \), Cohen’s \( d \) = 0.51, compared to females (n = 44). Female participants rated themselves as experiencing significantly more psychological distress, \( t(68.84) = -4.19, p = .000 \), Cohen’s \( d \) = 0.97, and psychological inflexibility, \( t(66.87) = -4.13, p = .000 \), Cohen’s \( d \) = 0.97, compared to males. Female participants were also found to be significantly more engaged, \( t(69) = -2.01, p = .048 \), Cohen’s \( d \) = 0.49, than males. Given the significance in sex differences in the cross-sectional sample, further analyses using these data will incorporate sex as a covariate.

Independent sample \( t\)-tests were completed on all variables across both time periods of data collection for the longitudinal sample (n = 22) to examine the effects of sex. No significant sex differences were found between females and males for any of the variables in this sample.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for Longitudinal Sample Variables (n = 22)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction Total (BMSLSS)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>6.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30.72</td>
<td>6.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Distress (DASS-21)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>43.36</td>
<td>25.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47.00</td>
<td>31.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schema Total (PSQ)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>77.23</td>
<td>22.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>78.91</td>
<td>20.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Inflexibility (AAQ-II)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26.91</td>
<td>12.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.18</td>
<td>9.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement Total (SEI)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>106.55</td>
<td>13.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>109.64</td>
<td>14.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hypothesis 1: Associations Between Cross-Sectional Study Variables**

Table 5 displays the correlation matrix of the associations between the cross-sectional study variables.
**Life Satisfaction.** Life satisfaction was negatively correlated with overall psychological distress, \( r(71) = -0.45, p < .05 \), and psychological inflexibility, \( r(71) = -0.66, p < .05 \). Life satisfaction as positively correlated with positive schemas \( r(71) = 0.68, p < .05 \), and student engagement, \( r(71) = 0.32, p < .05 \). Pearson (r) correlations were also computed between the study variables and the five subscales on the Student Engagement Instrument, namely: teacher-student relationship (TSR), control and relevance of schoolwork (CRSW), peer support for learning (PSL), future goals and aspirations (FG), and family support for learning (FSL). Life satisfaction was positively correlated with PSL, \( r(71) = 0.42, p < .05 \), and FSL, \( r(71) = 0.49, p < .05 \).

**Psychological Distress.** Psychological distress was negatively correlated with positive schemas, \( r(71) = -0.42, p < .05 \), and positively correlated with psychological inflexibility, \( r(71) = 0.60, p < .05 \). Overall, psychological distress was not correlated with student engagement \((p > .05)\).

**Positive Schemas.** Positive schemas were negatively correlated with psychological inflexibility, \( r(71) = -0.54, p < .05 \). Positive schemas were positively correlated with student engagement, \( r(71) = 0.43, p < .05 \), and positively correlated with the student engagement subscales of CRSW, \( r(71) = 0.32, p < .05 \), PSL, \( r(71) = 0.44, p < .05 \), and FSL, \( r(71) = 0.52, p < .05 \).

**Psychological Inflexibility.** Psychological inflexibility was not correlated with self-reported student engagement \((p > .05)\). However, psychological inflexibility was negatively correlated with the student engagement subscale FSL, \( r(71) = -0.28, p < .05 \).
Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics and Pearson (r) Correlations for Cross-Sectional Sample Variables (n = 71).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
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<th>7.</th>
<th>8.</th>
<th>9.</th>
<th>10.</th>
<th>11.</th>
<th>12.</th>
<th>13.</th>
<th>14.</th>
<th>15.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Life Satisfaction (BMSLSS)</td>
<td>27.62 (6.67)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>- .48*</td>
<td>.68*</td>
<td>.67*</td>
<td>.69*</td>
<td>.64*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.57*</td>
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<td>.32*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.49*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Psychological Distress Total (DASS-21)</td>
<td>48.79 (31.69)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>- .42*</td>
<td>- .38*</td>
<td>- .48*</td>
<td>- .29*</td>
<td>- .27*</td>
<td>- .38*</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>- .02</td>
<td>- .07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Positive Schemas Total (PSQ)</td>
<td>78.49 (22.08)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.95*</td>
<td>.91*</td>
<td>.85*</td>
<td>.81*</td>
<td>.88*</td>
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<td>.43*</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.44*</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.52*</td>
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<td>4. PSQ Optimism</td>
<td>15.24 (4.99)</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.84*</td>
<td>.76*</td>
<td>.72*</td>
<td>.82*</td>
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<td>5. PSQ Worthiness</td>
<td>15.67 (5.59)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.73*</td>
<td>.66*</td>
<td>.74*</td>
<td>- .57*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. PSQ Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>12.92 (5.11)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.59*</td>
<td>.63*</td>
<td>- .43*</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.47*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. PSQ Success</td>
<td>18.20 (4.28)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>.66*</td>
<td>- .31*</td>
<td>.43*</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.48*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. PSQ Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>16.46 (5.10)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>.31*</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Psychological Inflexibility (AAQ)</td>
<td>27.55 (12.13)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>- .12</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>- .06</td>
<td>- .18</td>
<td>- .10</td>
<td>- .28*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Student Engagement Total (SEI)</td>
<td>104.45 (16.03)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.80*</td>
<td>.86*</td>
<td>.84*</td>
<td>.71*</td>
<td>.57*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. SEI Teacher-Student Relationship (TSR)</td>
<td>30.87 (5.40)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.80*</td>
<td>.52*</td>
<td>.50*</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. SEI Control and Relevance of Schoolwork (CRSW)</td>
<td>26.67 (4.87)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.68*</td>
<td>.59*</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. SEI Peer Support for Learning (PSL)</td>
<td>17.84 (4.19)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.56*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. SEI Future Goals and Aspirations (FG)</td>
<td>16.38 (3.10)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. SEI Family Support for Learning (FSL)</td>
<td>12.69 (3.16)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05 (two-tailed)
Hypothesis 2: Unique Contribution of Positive Schemas on Student Engagement in Cross-Sectional Sample

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was computed to determine whether specific positive schema themes would emerge as unique associates of student engagement in this sample of at-risk youth. The data were entered in two steps: 1) sex, 2) optimism, worthiness, trust, success, and self-efficacy. The multiple regression revealed that at step 1, sex contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1,69) = 4.05, p = .048$, 95% CI [5.129, 19.430], and accounted for 6% of the variance in student engagement. Introducing the five positive schema themes in step 2 explained an additional 31% of the variance in student engagement after controlling for sex, and this change in $R^2$ was significant, $F(5,64) = 6.33, p < .000$. At the subscale level, only worthiness emerged as a strong and unique predictor of student engagement $t(70) = 2.401, p = .019$, 95% CI [.225, 2.448].

Table 6. Regression Analysis for Positive Schema Themes Predicting Student Engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schemas</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$

Hypothesis 3: Tests of Multiple Mediation in Cross-Sectional Sample

Positive schemas and psychological inflexibility were assessed jointly as proposed mediators to determine whether they could account for unique variance in mediating the relation between Life satisfaction and student engagement (model 1) as well as psychological distress and student engagement (model 2). Participant sex was included as a covariate in each model. Sex was a
significant covariate on the total effect model for each mediation. Analyses were conducted using total scores (i.e., the sum of scores of the total items in a given measure) for positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, student engagement, life satisfaction, and psychological distress ($n = 71$).

**Positive Schemas and Psychological Inflexibility mediating the relation between Life Satisfaction and Student Engagement.**

The total effect of life satisfaction on student engagement was significant ($c = 0.98$, $p < .001$) with an overall model $R^2$ of 0.21 (see Figure 7). However, after adjusting for the indirect effects of the mediators, the direct effect of life satisfaction on student engagement was no longer significant ($c' = 0.38$, $p = .319$). Recent statistical research suggests the importance of examining indirect effects, given that the total effect is not necessary for mediation to occur (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Shrout, P. E., & Bolger, 2002).

Table 7 contains the parameter estimates for the total and specific indirect effects on the association between life satisfaction and student engagement as mediated by positive schemas and psychological inflexibility. The total indirect effect and the indirect effect of psychological inflexibility were not significant, as evidenced by confidence intervals that contained zero. The indirect effect of positive schemas was found to be significant, as evidenced by confidence intervals that did not contain zero. Hence, a youth’s self-reported total positive schemas score was a significant mediator of life satisfaction predicting student engagement. As shown in Figure 7, life satisfaction was positively related to positive schemas and negatively related to psychological inflexibility, but only the positive schemas mediator was related to student engagement. Not surprisingly, there was a significant contrast between the two mediators, further indicating that positive schemas had a significantly greater indirect effect than psychological inflexibility of student engagement.
Figure 7. A multiple mediation model of the association between life satisfaction and student engagement via positive schemas and psychological inflexibility (with sex as a covariate).

Standardized regression coefficients from a bootstrap procedure are provided along the paths.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Indirect Effects of Life Satisfaction on Student Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>Parameter estimate</th>
<th>Boot SE</th>
<th>Lower 95% BC CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% BC CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0.599</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>-0.172</td>
<td>1.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schemas</td>
<td>0.715*</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>1.377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Inflexibility</td>
<td>-0.117</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-0.605</td>
<td>0.423</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BC CI bias-corrected confidence intervals. * $p < .05$

Next, the five subscales (optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy) of the Positive Schema Questionnaire (PSQ) were examined as multiple mediators in the relation between life satisfaction and student engagement (see Figure 8). Similar results were found in that the total effect was significant ($c = 0.98$, $p < .001$) and after adjusting for the indirect effects of the mediator, the direct effect was no longer significant ($c' = 0.31$, $p = .393$). Table 8
contains the parameter estimates for the total and specific indirect effects on the association between life satisfaction and student engagement as mediated by optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy. The total indirect effect and specific indirect effects of optimism, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy were not significant, as evidenced by confident intervals that contained zero. The specific indirect effect of worthiness was significant, as evidenced by a confident interval that did not contain zero. Hence, the participants’ self-report of worthiness on the PSQ was a significant mediator in the relation between life satisfaction and student engagement.

Figure 8. A multiple mediation model of the association between life satisfaction and student engagement via PSQ subscales optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy (with sex as a covariate). Standardized regression coefficients from a bootstrap procedure are provided along the paths. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$. 
Table 8. *Indirect Effects of Life Satisfaction on Student Engagement with PSQ subscales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>Parameter estimate</th>
<th>Boot SE</th>
<th>Lower 95% BC CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% BC CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0.676*</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>1.344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>0.304</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.392</td>
<td>0.949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthiness</td>
<td>0.668*</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>1.310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>-0.217</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-0.816</td>
<td>0.322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>0.302</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>-0.254</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-0.752</td>
<td>1.470</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*BC CI* bias-corrected confidence intervals. *p* < .05

Positive Schemas and Psychological Inflexibility mediating the relation between Psychological Distress and Student Engagement.

The total effect of psychological distress on student engagement was not significant (c = -0.05, *p* = .478) with an overall model R² of 0.06 (see Figure 9). After adjusting for the indirect effects of the mediators, the direct effect of psychological distress on student engagement remained not significant (c’ = 0.07, *p* = .327). As the total effect is not necessary for mediation to occur (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), the indirect effects were examined separately.

Table 9 contains the parameter estimates for the total and specific indirect effects on the association between psychological distress and student engagement as mediated by positive schemas and psychological inflexibility. The total indirect effect and the indirect effect of psychological inflexibility were not significant, as evidenced by confidence intervals that contained zero. The indirect effect of positive schemas was found to be significant, as evidenced by confident intervals that did not contain zero. Hence, a youth’s self-reported total positive schemas score was a significant mediator. As shown in Figure 9, psychological distress was negatively related to positive schemas and positively related to psychological inflexibility, but only the positive schemas mediator was related to student engagement. There was a significant
contrast between the two mediators, further indicating that positive schemas had a significantly greater indirect effect than psychological inflexibility (which was found to not be a mediator) on student engagement.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 9.** A multiple mediation model of the association between psychological distress and student engagement via positive schemas and psychological inflexibility (with sex as a covariate). Standardized regression coefficients from a bootstrap procedure are provided along the paths. * \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \).

**Table 9.** *Indirect Effects of Psychological Distress on Student Engagement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>Parameter estimate</th>
<th>Boot SE</th>
<th>Lower 95% BC CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% BC CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-0.115</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.253</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schemas</td>
<td>-0.103*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.202</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Inflexibility</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.122</td>
<td>0.068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BC CI bias-corrected confidence intervals. * \( p < .05 \)
Next, the five subscales (optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy) of the Positive Schema Questionnaire (PSQ) were examined as multiple mediators in the relation between psychological distress and student engagement (see Figure 10). Similar results were found in that the total effect was not significant ($c = 0.05, p = .458$) and after adjusting for the indirect effects of the mediator, the direct effect remained not significant ($c' = 0.09, p = .133$). Table 10 contains the parameter estimates for the total and specific indirect effects on the association between psychological distress and student engagement as mediated by optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy. The specific indirect effects of optimism, interpersonal trust, success and self-efficacy were not significant, as evidenced by confident intervals that contained zero. The total indirect effect and specific indirect effect of worthiness were significant, as evidenced by a confident interval that did not contain zero. Hence, the participants’ self-report of worthiness on the PSQ was a significant mediator in the relation between psychological distress and student engagement.
Figure 10. A multiple mediation model of the association between psychological distress and student engagement via PSQ subscales optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy (with sex as a covariate). Standardized regression coefficients from a bootstrap procedure are provided along the paths. * \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \).

Table 10. Indirect Effects of Psychological Distress on Student Engagement with PSQ subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>Parameter estimate</th>
<th>Boot SE</th>
<th>Lower 95% BC CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% BC CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-0.142*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.247</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.128</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthiness</td>
<td>-0.130*</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.269</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.040</td>
<td>0.0960</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BC CI bias-corrected confidence intervals. * \( p < .05 \)
Hypothesis 4: Longitudinal Analyses of Study Variables

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare participants’ scores on life satisfaction, psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement approximately one year apart.

There was a significant difference in the scores of life satisfaction one year later, \( t(21) = 2.39, p = .026 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.51 \), 95% CI [.357, 5.098], such that life satisfaction increased over time. There were no significant differences in the scores of psychological distress, \( t(21) = 0.81, p = .428 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.17 \), 95% CI [-5.711,12.983], positive schemas, \( t(21) = 0.65, p = .526 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.14 \), 95% CI [-3.737, 7.101], psychological inflexibility, \( t(21) = -0.32, p = .76 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.067 \), 95% CI [-5.244, 4.070], or student engagement \( t(21) = 1.37, p = .185 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.29 \), 95% CI [-1.601, 7.783], after one year of attending the alternative high school (see Table 4 for means and standard deviations of longitudinal variables).

Hypothesis 5: Positive Schemas and Psychological Inflexibility predicting Student Engagement One Year Later in Longitudinal Sample

Additional analyses were conducted to explore whether positive schemas and psychological inflexibility can predict student engagement one year later. Regression coefficients can be found in Table 11. Positive schemas and psychological inflexibility at time one were simultaneously entered into the regression equation. The regression model was significant, \( F(2, 19) = 4.01, p = .035 \), and the predictor variables accounted for 30% of the variance in student engagement at time two (\( R^2 = .30 \); the coefficient of determination is also the measure of effect size). Higher levels of initial positive schemas predicted higher levels of student engagement one year later, \( t(19) = 2.74, p = .013 \), 95% CI [.099, .746]. In addition, lower levels of psychological inflexibility predicted higher levels of student engagement one year later, \( t(19) = 2.18, p = .042 \), 95% CI [.024, 1.161].
Table 11. Summary of Regression Analysis for Positive Schemas and Psychological Inflexibility Predicting Student Engagement One Year Later

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Schemas</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Inflexibility</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion: Study 2

The present study sought to better understand the interplay between life satisfaction and psychological distress with internal psychological perceptions and student engagement, in a sample of at-risk youth attending an alternative school. More specifically, the study examined whether youth positive schemas and psychological inflexibility contributed to the relation between life satisfaction or psychological distress and student engagement. The study also investigated longitudinal patterns of youth reported measures over a one-year period, and whether individual differences of youth positive schemas and psychological inflexibility predict student engagement one year later.

Sex differences were found among study variables in the cross-sectional sample, which led to subsequent analyses to consider sex as a covariate. Life satisfaction and positive schemas were found to be greater for males, whereas psychological distress, inflexibility, and student engagement were greater for females. Previous literature on the sex effects are mixed, in that some studies have found no significant differences (e.g., Huebner, 1994; Seligson et al., 2003), whereas others have found that adolescent females are generally less satisfied with their lives than males (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2016). The limited previous research has not typically found significant sex differences for positive schemas (e.g., Mcarthur, Strother, & Schulte, 2017), however Tomlinson and colleagues (2016) found that positive schemas evidence stronger relations to outcomes of
happiness and life satisfaction for females than for males. Student engagement has been more consistently tied to sex differences, where females typically report higher levels of engagement (Meece, Glienke, & Burg, 2006; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2005) including subjective valuing of school (Eccles et al., 1993), greater participation in extra-curricular activities and fewer behaviour problems (Martin, 2004), whereas males feel more negatively about school (Voelk, 1997). Taken together, these patterns reflect consistent sex differences in the three types of student engagement that are consistent with the current study’s findings. Psychological distress, measured in this study as depression, anxiety, and stress, has also been commonly found to be higher for females than males (e.g., Szabo, 2010). In contrast, no consistent sex differences have been found for psychological flexibility (Bond et al., 2011).

**Hypothesis 1: Associations Between Cross-Sectional Study Variables**

As predicted, overall life satisfaction, positive schemas, and student engagement were positively correlated with one another. Associations between positive schemas and life satisfaction have been found in previous studies (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2016). Closer examination of the student engagement subscales indicated that life satisfaction was positively correlated with peer and family support for learning, but not teacher-student relationships or cognitive measures of engagement (i.e., control and relevance of schoolwork and future goals and aspirations). Furthermore, positive schema total was positively correlated with control and relevance of schoolwork, peer support for learning, and family support for learning. Therefore, it appears that emotional engagement is more strongly associated with positive schemas and life satisfaction than the cognitive aspects of student engagement. Emotional engagement in the current study refers to relationships and feelings of identification and belonging, whereas cognitive engagement examines self-regulation and investment in learning. It is possible that emotional engagement is more closely tied to positive schemas and life satisfaction because it is predominantly measuring
the support students receive in their teacher, peer, and family relationships, which may be more indicative of other aspects of their lives, whereas cognitive engagement measures beliefs more closely tied to schooling and learning (e.g., weather there is relevance in the learning that takes place at school).

Consistent with hypotheses, life satisfaction and positive schemas were negatively correlated with psychological distress and inflexibility. Contrary to what was predicted, overall student engagement did not associate with psychological distress or inflexibility. One possible reason for this result is that the measure of student engagement may have reached its ceiling for some of the subscales, including teacher-student relationships. It is also possible that the type of engagement being measured through the SEI measure (i.e., cognitive and emotional aspects) is not related to the measures used to assess psychological distress and inflexibility. In the case of distress, it could also be the case that the correlation with student engagement would be revealed in a measure that assesses student dis-engagement (e.g., negatively worded items about student-teacher relationships, peer-support for learning, etc.)

Psychological distress and inflexibility were positively associated, as expected. Being psychologically inflexible could predispose an individual to believing one’s negative thoughts about self, others, and the world as absolute truth, which in turn could lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and stress. Alternatively, people who experience more psychological distress in the form of depression, anxiety, and stress have been found to be less flexible and engage in more avoidance of painful experiences (e.g., Palm & Follette, 2011). This is in contrast to people showing psychological flexibility who are able acknowledge and respond to their present circumstance in more effective ways, which could protect against experiencing distress (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Further examination of the correlations between the student engagement subscales indicated a significant negative correlation between family support for learning and
psychological inflexibility. Therefore, the greater one’s family support for learning, the lower the levels of psychological inflexibility reported.

**Hypothesis 2: Unique Contribution of Positive Schemas on Student Engagement in Cross-Sectional Sample**

Findings from this study suggest that adolescents’ positive core schemas may provide fundamental information about their overall propensity for student engagement. More specifically, results from this study determined that the positive schema theme of worthiness emerged as a unique predictor of student engagement, after accounting for sex differences. One previous longitudinal study examined a model of school activity involvement and found that the quality of family relationships had a direct effect on school involvement as well as an indirect effect through adolescent perceptions of self-worth and perceived competence (Bohnert et al., 2007). Taken together, student cognitions and positive schemas in particular could be further explored as an identifiable treatment target not only for protecting against negative outcomes such as school failure, but also for enhancing student engagement and promoting optimal functioning. These preliminary cross-sectional findings provide reason to further investigate processes through which positive schemas impact student engagement in children and adolescents and how responsive they may be to intervention.

**Hypothesis 3: Tests of Multiple Mediation in Cross-Sectional Sample**

This study examined whether individual differences in underlying intra-individual factors (i.e., positive schemas and psychological inflexibility) mediated the association between life satisfaction/psychological distress and student engagement. Previous research has established the malleability of student engagement (Appleton et al., 2006), and its important influence on numerous developmental outcomes, including deterring negative ones (e.g., delinquency) and promoting positive ones (e.g., school completion). Life satisfaction is thought to be the cognitive
component of subjective well-being, which also includes affective components (e.g., high levels of positive affect and low levels of negative affect; Diener, 2000). Prior studies have also shown how one’s well-being and mental health can greatly impact student engagement (e.g., Antaramian et al., 2010). As such, student engagement was conceptualized as an outcome variable in this model, as the researcher was interested in examining ways to promote optimal functioning for at-risk youth in educational settings.

Although research on intra-individual psychological factors impacting student engagement is limited, a few studies have suggested that several internal factors are related to engagement. For instance, Connell and colleagues (1994) examined a model which proposed that perceived parental support shaped individuals’ self-beliefs, which related to student engagement. The self-beliefs studied included appraisals of efficacy in school, self-esteem, and quality of relationships with others. Results indicated that self-beliefs related to student engagement beyond the influence of parental support. This highlights the importance of examining intra-individual factors (and self-beliefs in particular) in addition to contextual factors when considering ways to improve educational outcomes for youth at-risk of school withdrawal.

Schemas are patterns of thoughts and mental structures that guide the way information is take in and interpreted, including evaluation of one’s experiences (James et al., 2007; Schmidt et al., 1999). Positive schemas refer to positive core beliefs that filter the way individuals absorb and interpret information. Psychological inflexibility refers to one’s tendency to make negative evaluations of private events, to control or alter the form and frequency of certain private events, and the inability to take action in the face of negatively evaluated private events (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Both positive schemas and psychological inflexibility were hypothesized to be psychological underpinnings for predicting student engagement. Understanding how underlying psychological processes may relate to student engagement would allow for educators and clinical
professionals to target prevention and intervention efforts to promote student engagement with greater specificity.

Given the sex differences found in the study variables, self-reported sex was added as a covariate for each mediation and found to be significant in the total effects model. Results from multiple mediation analyses indicated that the association between life satisfaction and student engagement, as well as psychological distress and student engagement, was mediated by positive schemas, but not psychological flexibility. It is possible that the measure for psychological flexibility used in this study (AAQ-II) has poor discriminant validity, and is measuring overall distress as opposed to a psychological process of how individuals relate to their thoughts and experiences (Wolgast, 2014). In the current study, psychological flexibility was highly correlated with psychological distress ($r = .60, p < .05$). A recent study found the items of the AAQ-II to be more strongly related to items designed to measure general distress than items designed to measure explicit attitudes of acceptance/non-acceptance or response to aversive psychological states (Wolgast, 2014).

Further exploratory mediation analyses were conducted to determine which positive schema themes (i.e., optimism, worthiness, interpersonal trust, success, and self-efficacy,) impacted the mediations, after controlling for sex. For both models (i.e., life satisfaction or psychological distress), the positive schema theme of worthiness alone mediated the association with student engagement. The core schema of worthiness refers to the sense that one has value and worth as a person (e.g., “I think I have many good qualities”). When students do not believe in or value themselves, this may negatively impact their interpretation of events and views about themselves, the world, and the future, including their school experiences. Previous studies using the PSQ have also highlighted the importance of the positive schema theme of worthiness, as it has emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction and happiness (Tomlinson et al., 2016), as well as
depressive symptoms (Keyfitz et al., 2013) in typically developing children and adolescents attending traditional elementary and high schools. Results from this study underscore the importance of understanding factors, such as positive schemas, in students both as a way to identify youth at risk and also target school programming and prevention efforts to bolster student positive schemas early in their educational experiences.

**Hypothesis 4: Longitudinal Analyses of Study Variables**

Life satisfaction was the only study variable found to increase significantly after one year in the alternative high school. Closer examination suggests that life satisfaction was the only variable with an acceptable effect size to find a statistically significant difference given the small sample size. Psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement were all found to have small effect sizes. It is possible that with a larger sample size and more power, more differences could have become evident, and therefore future research is needed.

Conversely, it is possible that differences were not found because of the stability of certain variables during adolescence. For example, more recent research has found evidence for the stability of positive self-schemas across adolescent development, beginning at a mean age of 13 years old and taking place over a seven year period (Mcarthur et al., 2019). In light of this new research, given that the current study included older youth with a mean age of 17, the finding that positive schemas did not change across a one-year period is not as surprising. Taken together, these results suggest that positive self-schemas may develop earlier in childhood, and may then consolidate and become relatively stable by the beginning of adolescence. This is relevant for school prevention and intervention efforts aimed at promoting positive outcomes for youth, as the current study has highlighted the important contribution of positive self-schemas in predicting student engagement in both cross-sectional and longitudinal samples.

It is less clear why student engagement did not improve over time. One possible explanation
for this result is that the measure used to assess student engagement reached a ceiling at the first data collection. For example, some of the subscales on the Student Engagement Instrument (e.g., teacher-student relationship, TSR) were rated quite high at both time periods (e.g., TSR mean at time 1 = 31.95, TSR mean at time 2 = 32.09 out of a possible 36) compared to the means reported from other studies (e.g., TSR mean = 25.00, Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antarmian, 2008; TSR mean = 26.46, Siddall, Huebner, & Jiang, 2013). The alternative high school examined in this study strategically aims to create warm, supportive teacher-student relationships and to support student learning through these relationships. Therefore, it is not surprising to see such high scores on the TSR subscale. This raises another methodological limitation of the current study, in that had the data been collected immediately upon entry into the alternative school for each participant (e.g., as pre/post design), there could have been a greater likelihood of seeing a positive impact of the alternative program on levels of student engagement.

**Hypothesis 5: Positive Schemas and Psychological Inflexibility predicting Student Engagement One Year Later in Longitudinal Sample**

Positive schemas and psychological inflexibility at time one were found to predict student engagement approximately one year later. More specifically, higher levels of positive schema and lower levels of psychological inflexibility associated with greater student engagement on year later. While these results are consistent with the original hypotheses, it is unclear why psychological flexibility has an effect on future student engagement but not in the cross-sectional analyses. One possibility is that psychological inflexibility acts as a barrier to improvements in student engagement in the long term. This warrants further investigation, through larger longitudinal studies over a longer period of time. Should future studies replicate these findings, building psychological flexibility in students through the development of greater present-moment awareness and flexible responding to current circumstances (including how they respond to
challenges at school) would be a potential target for intervention programs aimed at improving educational outcomes. The result of positive schemas having longer term effects on student engagement is more in line with the cross-sectional results in this study, which also found positive schemas to significantly mediate student engagement. It is possible that positive schemas have an enduring effect because of their previously documented stability over the course of adolescence (McArthur et al., 2019).

**Conceptual and Clinical Implications**

This study has implications for school personnel and practitioners in understanding the relationship between well-being and school outcomes in at-risk adolescents. Results suggest that efforts to improve life satisfaction of students as well as intra-individual psychological underpinnings such as positive self-beliefs, may promote greater student engagement in youth at risk of school dropout. One important clinical implication from this study is the need to focus on the enhancement of supportive relationships (e.g., parents, teachers), due to their vital role in the development of core schemas in children, such as worthiness. It is equally important to consider early prevention efforts in elementary years to promote adaptive self-perceptions and attributional styles, and thus bolster the development of positive schemas in younger children. Paying attention to students’ unique personal strengths and qualities, measured through strength-based assessment tools, as well as environmental supports in educational planning and intervention efforts is also important, as it may increase the likelihood of students having positive experiences at school which could promote further positive outcomes and success (Frederickson, 2001).

With respect to positive schema stability over the course of adolescence (e.g., McArthur et al., 2019), these studies have not specifically examined the potential for these positive core beliefs to be developed through more intensive clinical interventions the purpose of which is to cultivate more adaptive self-perceptions and attributions (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapies). Despite the
potential stability of positive schemas through adolescence, they may still be considered an important treatment target in clinical interventions. As positive psychology frameworks and strength-based interventions are beginning to take up more space in the field of mental health, future studies examining the potential of positive schemas in adolescence to serve as a treatment target in clinical intervention is warranted.

The current study examined potential positive trajectories of students who have been at considerable risk of school dropout, along with other negative outcomes (e.g., substance use, mental illness, high family conflict). Although results from this study have direct implications for other at-risk adolescent samples, they also provide important information that is generalizable to all students who will eventually experience the normative downward trajectory of student engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2013).

**Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions**

The results of this study provide insight on the importance of positive core beliefs in promoting student engagement and supporting youth who have struggled in typical classroom settings to the point of disengaging from school. As research tends to focus more on correlates of dropping out of school, and less on how students flourish, this study is novel in that it begins to articulate a potential positive trajectory in a high-risk sample of youth. This is also one of the few studies to have investigated the role of individual differences, such as positive schemas and psychological inflexibility, in attempting to delineate these students’ engagement with school. Often, research has investigated how contextual factors such as school environments and family support have contributed to student engagement, disregarding intra-individual factors (Fredericks et al., 2004). Examining intra-individual factors among these students has direct implications for educational practices, as these may be modifiable and promote opportunity for intervention through targeted school-based programs.
Despite the strengths of the current study, including the unique sample of at-risk youth attending an alternative high school and the use of both cross-sectional and longitudinal samples, there are limitations that should be noted and addressed in future research. As a result of the small school size, the researcher collected data over three years which brings about the potential for other factors to impact the analyses, such as changes in staff, student body, and school policies from year to year. As such, it might be more beneficial for future studies to examine differences across a shorter time span, such as the beginning versus the end of an academic semester or year. Other methodological limitations in the longitudinal analyses include not controlling for the total amount of time each student spent at the alternative high school, due to not collecting this information. While many efforts were made to increase the sample size for this study, the smaller sample size resulted in lower power in some analyses and limited the ability to use examine more complex relations among study variables using methods such as Structural Equation Modeling. It is also apparent that there are likely complex transactional relations between the study variables, including potential bi-directionality (e.g., Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011). Thus, the linear models suggested by the mediations explored herein ought to be interpreted as one possible and compelling way to understand the complex inter-relations among these variables.

Other methodological limitations of this study include the focus on self-report instruments, leading to a potential in reporting bias (e.g., social desirability, defensiveness, lack of insight, etc.). Specifically, subjective reporting of life satisfaction, psychological distress, positive schemas, psychological inflexibility, and student engagement does not necessarily align completely with youths’ experiences of these factors. Additional studies including multiple informants and observational data would provide further validation of these constructs for these youth. Such methods would also attenuate common method variance, or the error variance due to the measurement method rather than the constructs the measures are assumed to represent.
While including youths’ subjective reporting on cognitive and emotional aspects of student engagement is considered a strength in the current study, the lack of availability of behavioural measures of student engagement (e.g., attendance, time spent on task) and academic data (e.g., grades, credit accumulation) is considered a limitation. These measures were not available to the researcher due to the lack of school records (i.e., for attendance) as well as the challenge of drastically individual programs that call for very different expectations, making it difficult to operationalize success. Future work should continue to strive to incorporate all aspects of student engagement for a more comprehensive understanding of how it may be best fostered, particularly for at-risk youth.

One of the major strengths of this study is the inclusion of measures that directly assess positive functioning, in addition to more traditional deficit-based measures such as psychological distress, in a sample of at-risk youth. However, it would have been beneficial to examine negative core schemas in conjunction with positive schemas. While it may still be common perception that positive cognition is simply the inverse of negative cognition (MacLeod & Moore, 2000), researchers have demonstrated that positive and negative experiences represent separate continua (e.g., MacLeod & Byrne, 1996; Keyfitz et al., 2013). As such, the presence of negative schemas cannot be inferred from the lack of positive schemas, and it is likely that positive and negative schemas interact and impact student engagement in nuanced ways.

**General Discussion and Conclusions**

The overall goal of this dissertation was to explore school and individual factors that facilitate the process of student engagement in a sample of at-risk youth attending an alternative school that employs a strength-based approach to learning. Two studies were conducted to accomplish this aim, employing a pragmatic mixed-method approach (Greene & Caracelli, 1997), using a concurrent transformative design (Creswell, 2003).
Summary of Findings

Study 1 sought to understand prior school experiences of the participants that either contributed to or detracted from student engagement over time, as well as aspects of their current experiences in an alternative school that facilitated to the process of re-engagement. Individual interviews were conducted with 22 high school students recruited from one alternative school and themes were drawn from interview transcripts using Braun and Clark’s (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis. Superordinate themes from the first task, a school timeline interview, were drawn from student reported peak experiences (school connection, and social and emotional stability) and valley experiences (school problems, and social and emotional difficulty). School connection referred to descriptions of students feeling a part of something, including: relationships at school, school involvement, and learning and achievement. Social and emotional stability referred to steadiness and consistency, both within the individual (e.g., emotions and urges perceived as regulated) and in the social environment (e.g., stable family relationships, stable home and school environment). The theme of stability was comprised of: emotional well-being and simpler early years. Overall, the peaks on the school timeline captured the importance of relationships, connection, and stability across all environments. Results underscored that youth need to feel connection and stability to optimize their potential for learning and student engagement.

In terms of the valley experiences, school problems referred to challenges that participants reported specifically within the school context, and included four sub-themes: school transitions, changing expectations, falling behind, learning issues. Social and emotional difficulty included five sub-themes: to mental illness, substance use, family conflict, separation and loss, living transitions, and peer problems. Overall, the valleys on the school timeline conveyed the importance of needing to identify and address school problems as early as possible, before they
worsen and lead to school withdrawal. Consistent with previous research (Eccles & Roeser, 2009), transitions and changing expectations were reported to cause challenges for students, including exacerbate existing difficulties. When students struggled with personal issues that negatively impacted their emotional well-being and relationships, this translated to more challenging school experiences.

Superordinate themes from the second qualitative task focusing on the student re-engagement process via a student interview, included: 1) positive teacher-student relationships, 2) sense of community, 3) flexible structure, 4) holistic support, and 5) students making progress. Participants emphasized the importance that positive teacher-student relationships played in their school success, including having caring, close and genuine relationships and having teachers who understood them well enough to know when to push them to do schoolwork, as well as when to back off. Through relationships and the welcoming environment at the alternative school, participants reported feeling like they were a part of a community where they belonged and were able to have civil interactions with all members of the community. The flexible structure helped students work at their own pace using an individual program crafted for their unique circumstances, and allowed for rules to be applied more flexibly which kept students in school and helped them feel less judged by others. Participants also shared how the holistic support received at the school, including emotional and practical support, made them feel cared for as a whole person and not just a student. Lastly, participants reported making progress in various aspects of their schooling, including academic progress with credit accumulation and grades, developing a sense of hope and belief in themselves, and an increasing motivation to graduate. This study contributes to the literature on promoting student engagement in at-risk youth, through the detailed accounts of what a seemingly successful alternative school entails from the perspective of students.
The second study explored relations between life satisfaction and psychological distress, intra-individual factors (i.e., positive schemas, psychological inflexibility), and student engagement. This study employed surveys administered to students enrolled in an alternative high school over the course of three years, which yielded 71 participants in the cross-sectional sample and 22 participants in the longitudinal sample. The primary findings from this study indicated that positive schemas, and the schema theme of worthiness in particular, mediated the relationships between life satisfaction and student engagement as well as psychological distress and student engagement. Furthermore, longitudinal analyses revealed that life satisfaction improved over the course of one year at the alternative school. Positive schemas as well as psychological inflexibility were also found to predict student engagement one year later.

Taken together, the findings from both studies support the notion that contextual factors (e.g., strength-based school practices) along with intra-individual factors (e.g., positive schemas) have the capacity to shift at-risk youth toward a more positive trajectory with respect to student engagement. Although not studied directly, is conceivable that complex transactions between the context and intra-individual factors over time lead to the gradual process of disengagement and when possible, re-engagement of students.

**Implications for Student Engagement**

Although further research is required to better understand the process of student engagement over time, the current study provides some direction for studying the school and intra-individual factors that may influence the process of re-engaging at-risk youth. The first study examined common themes among students who eventually disengaged from school, which serves as a starting point for future research to explore further in considering early prevention programs for students. This includes building stronger connections to people at school, involving youth in various activities, and celebrating the learning and accomplishments of all students. Results also
highlight the importance of social and emotional stability in all aspects of children’s lives (e.g., mental health, living accommodations, family conflict) in promoting positive outcomes. Educators should continue to make efforts to ease the transition to high school, clearly lay out expectations for students, support youth in resolving conflict, and provide early identification of learning issues and support youth with appropriate accommodations. In addition, many of the results reported would not be possible were it not for the small school and class sizes. Moving forward, educators and policy makers are urged to consider the importance of smaller class and school sizes on student engagement and outcomes.

Furthermore, the results from this dissertation suggest that traditional deficit-based approaches to working with at-risk youth would benefit from a more balanced approach, better accounting for positive dimensions of youth resources and experience. While school programs typically focus on remediation of negative behaviours and symptoms of disengagement, the current study highlights the importance of also focusing on building student life satisfaction, positive schemas, along with creating more positive experiences at school, including caring relationships within a flexible structure where youth feel they are part of a community and are provided with holistic support.

This dissertation focused on emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement, captured through the student perspective, as most work in the field tends to focus on more behavioural aspects of engagement. Moving forward, future studies should strive to include all components of student engagement using multiple informants to further a nuanced understanding of how contextual and intra-individual factors impact the various components of engagement. In addition, this study provided some insight into the students’ motivation for working toward their goals (e.g., graduation), which highlighted the existence of more extrinsic motivation in this sample of at-risk youth. Future work could examine ways to shift students into more self-regulated and intrinsically
motivated states in school, as this may yield greater student engagement and more positive outcomes for youth.

**Implications for Alternative Education**

The alternative high school in the current study employed a strength-based approach to education, whereby positive qualities in students are identified and then nurtured so that students may flourish (Rawana et al., 2011). In addition, the school placed great emphasis on supporting learning through caring relationships. In doing so, at-risk students who have traditionally been viewed as “bad” by educators were exposed to a strength-based approach where their positive qualities were emphasized and their well-being prioritized. Results from the current study outline general practices of the alternative school, and highlight the important components of the program that students attributed to their engagement and success.

What stood out from the student accounts of their school experiences is the tremendous impact that caring relationships had on their student engagement and in promoting positive outcomes. While this is a seemingly straightforward notion, the application of supporting youth in schools through caring relationships is much more complex and warrants further investigation. Purposeful staffing of teachers and administrators who support a child-centered and strength-based approach and are willing to go above and beyond for these at-risk youth also appears to be an important factor in supporting students through relationships. The small school size is a crucial factor that allowed for these relationships to develop. Future work could focus with greater detail on the specific interactions between students and teachers that contribute to positive relationships and outcomes. This work could examine teacher qualities necessary for adopting a strength-based approach to education and facilitating warm, caring relationships. This could also be examined on a larger scale of school board policies and teacher trainings that would support teachers in being able to provide the close and caring relationships needed for students to thrive.
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Appendix A: Measures

Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS)

These six questions ask about your satisfaction with different areas of your life. Circle the best answer for each.

1. I would describe my satisfaction with my family life as:
   a) Terrible
   b) Unhappy
   c) Mostly dissatisfied
   d) Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
   e) Mostly satisfied
   f) Pleased
   g) Delighted

2. I would describe my satisfaction with my friendships as:
   a) Terrible
   b) Unhappy
   c) Mostly dissatisfied
   d) Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
   e) Mostly satisfied
   f) Pleased
   g) Delighted

3. I would describe my satisfaction with my school experience as:
   a) Terrible
   b) Unhappy
   c) Mostly dissatisfied
   d) Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
   e) Mostly satisfied
   f) Pleased
   g) Delighted

4. I would describe my satisfaction with myself as:
   a) Terrible
   b) Unhappy
   c) Mostly dissatisfied
   d) Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
   e) Mostly satisfied
   f) Pleased
   g) Delighted

5. I would describe my satisfaction with where I live as:
   a) Terrible
   b) Unhappy
   c) Mostly dissatisfied
   d) Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
   e) Mostly satisfied
   f) Pleased
   g) Delighted

6. I would describe my satisfaction with my overall life as:
   a) Terrible
   b) Unhappy
   c) Mostly dissatisfied
   d) Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
   e) Mostly satisfied
   f) Pleased
   g) Delighted
Please read each statement and circle a number 0, 1, 2 or 3 which indicates how much the statement applied to you over the past week. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

**The rating scale is as follows:**

0  Did not apply to me at all  
1  Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time  
2  Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time  
3  Applied to me very much, or most of the time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I found it hard to wind down</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I was aware of dryness of my mouth</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I experienced breathing difficulty (eg, excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I tended to over-react to situations</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I experienced trembling (eg, in the hands)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I felt that I had nothing to look forward to</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I found myself getting agitated</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I found it difficult to relax</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I felt down-hearted and blue</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I felt I was close to panic</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I felt I wasn't worth much as a person</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I felt that I was rather touchy</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (eg, sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I felt scared without any good reason</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I felt that life was meaningless</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Positive Schema Questionnaire (PSQ: Keyfitz, Lumley, Hennig, & Dozois, 2013)**

*Please read the following statements. To the right of each you will find six numbers, ranging from “1” (Completely untrue of me) on the left to “6” (Describes me perfectly) on the right. Choose the number which best indicates how much you believe each statement is true for you.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Completely untrue of me</td>
<td>Describes me perfectly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I believe in myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I feel I can depend on people to keep my secrets</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I believe things will turn out well</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I feel comfortable depending on other people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I have the ability to be successful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I can deal with difficult situations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I know how to find something good in every situation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I think I have many good qualities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I trust other people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I can adapt to new situations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I usually see the positive side of things</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>If I try hard I can usually do well</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I can respond well to challenges</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>I value many things about myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I do well when I try my best</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>When things are bad I can still think of something good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I value myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I feel comfortable telling people important things about myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>If I try I will succeed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I can deal with tough things</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>
Below you will find a list of statements. Please rate how true each statement is for you by circling a number next to it. Use the scale below to make your choice.

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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>never true</td>
<td>very seldom true</td>
<td>seldom true</td>
<td>sometimes true</td>
<td>frequently true</td>
<td>almost always true</td>
<td>always true</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I would value. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. I’m afraid of my feelings. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. Emotions cause problems in my life. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Worries get in the way of my success. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
**Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton et al., 2006)**

**ID:** ____________

Please circle your response for each of the following questions:

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overall, adults at my school treat students fairly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adults at my school listen to the students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. At my school, teachers care about students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My teachers are there for me when I need them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The school rules are fair.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall, my teachers are open and honest with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I enjoy talking to the teachers here.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I feel safe at school.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Most teachers at my school are interested in me as a person, not just as a student.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. The tests in my classes do a good job of measuring what I’m able to do.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Most of what is important to know you learn in school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I’m able to do.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What I’m learning in my classes will be important in my future.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. After finishing my schoolwork I check it over to see if it’s correct.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. When I do schoolwork I check to see whether I understand what I’m doing.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Learning is fun because I get better at something.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. When I do well in school it’s because I work hard.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Other students at school care about me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Students at my school are there for me when I need them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Other students here like me the way I am.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. I enjoy talking to the students here.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Students here respect what I have to say.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>24. I have some friends at school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>25. I plan to continue my education following high school.</td>
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<td>26. Going to school after high school is important.</td>
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<td>27. School is important for achieving my future goals.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>28. My education will create many future opportunities for me.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>29. I am hopeful about my future.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>30. My family/guardian(s) are there for me when I need them.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>31. When I have problems at school my family/guardian(s) are willing to help me.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>32. When something good happens at school, my family/guardian(s) want to know about it.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>33. My family/guardian(s) want me to keep trying when things are tough at school.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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Background Information Questionnaire

Today’s date: _______________________

Name: _____________________________________________  Age: _____________
Date of birth: ________________________________  Sex: ☐ Female  ☐ Male

My Ethnicity: ☐ White/ European  ☐ African American  ☐ Hispanic/Latino
☐ Asian  ☐ Native American  ☐ Other: _____________

School name: __________________________________________  Grade: _____________

Description of alternative program: _______________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

Total # of schools attended: ________________  Grades of switch/transition: ________________

Approximate # days of suspensions: __________  Approximate # of expulsions: ___________

Guardian: __________________________  Relationship: __________________________

Currently live with: _________________________________________________________________

Have you had F&CS involvement?  Y/N  Are you a crown ward?  Y/N

Ever lived with someone other than parents: ____________________________________________

For how long: __________________________  At what age: __________________________

Have you been to court?  Y/N  Are you on probation?  Y/N  Have you been in custody?  Y/N

____________________________________________________________________________________

Do you have children: ________________________  Number: __________  At what age: ________
Appendix B: Interviews

Student Interviews

1. What are your strengths?
   
   **Prompts:** Qualities about you? What about you makes you good at…?

2. What will help you bounce back from difficulties you may face in life?

3. How do you usually cope with emotional difficulties?
   
   **Prompts:** For example, if you get into a fight with a friend, feel depressed?

4. How is [alternative school] different from your old school?
   
   **Prompts:** What’s better/worse?

5. What in your life keeps you from coming to school now that you’re at [alternative school]?
   
   **Prompts:** What kept you from coming to school before [alternative school]?

6. What helps you show up to school now that you’re at [alternative school]?
   
   **Prompts:** What helped you show up to school before [alternative school]?

7. What could help you to be more interested in school?
   
   **Prompts:** What would need to change? Changes in the school environment; classes; your life; other?

8. How is this school a good fit for you?
   
   **Prompts:** How could the school better meet your needs? What makes you feel connected/disconnected to [alternative school] and the people here?

9. How do you think you are doing academically since being at [alternative school]?
   
   **Prompts:** Are you doing better/worse than at your previous school and why? Do you feel more in control of what happens to you at [alternative school]? Do you feel better able to learn and graduate at [alternative school]?

10. Where do you think you would be now if you weren’t at [alternative school]?
    
    **Prompts:** Would you still be in school? Why or why not?

11. What do you think of the students here?

12. Do you feel the students here are misunderstood?
    
    **Prompts:** By other students, parents, teachers, schools, community?

13. What do other people (outside of [alternative school]) think of the students here?
    
    **Prompts:** What is the school’s reputation? Why do you think that is? How has that affected you, as a student here?

14. What do you wish other people understood about this school?
    
    **Prompts:** What could be done to improve the school’s reputation?
Appendix C: Youth Information Sheet

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology
phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798 fax: (519) 837-8629 e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

YOUTH INFORMATION SHEET

Introduction: You are invited to participate in a survey and an interview for the purpose of understanding student engagement in alternative high school programs conducted by graduate students Sophia Durisko and Dr. Margaret Lumley from the Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph. We are interested in finding out what will help you most enjoy your school experience and think this information will help plan for other community and alternative schools.

Procedure: In this study, we will ask you to complete a series of questionnaires that ask about your feelings about school (e.g., “Learning is fun because I get better at something”), how you think about yourself (e.g., “I look on the bright side of things”), and your strengths (e.g., “I am someone you can rely on”). You will also be interviewed and asked to talk about your school experiences (e.g., “What helps you show up to school?” “Tell me about school staff in your setting?”). This study will look at whether focusing on student strengths and building strong relationships are important for helping youth want to be at school. This study will all take place in a private interview room.

If you decide not to participate in this research it will not change your school experience or relationships with your school program staff, Family and Children’s services staff or agency or the University of Guelph in any way. Neither school personnel nor your parents/guardians will know if you decide to withdraw. If you decide to participate in this research, it will take about 70 minutes. It is important that you know that you are not required to answer any questions you would rather not and at any time, you may contact the researchers to remove your information from the study. If you stop participation, there is no negative impact, and your information will be destroyed.

We hope this research will help us understand how youth strengths are related to liking school. It is possible that questions about your feelings could upset you. If you decide to participate you will be given a $10 gift certificate to Tim Hortons.

Confidentiality: Your answers are for research and are private. We will not share your individual answers with anybody for any reason unless we are concerned that you might harm yourself, somebody else or that a child is in danger. If concerned, the investigators may need to share this information to ensure your safety and the safety of others. We are also giving all students the information about KIDS HELPLINE in case they need to talk to somebody else about how they are feeling.

All your questionnaires will be stored on our research computer at the University of Guelph. They will not have your name connected to them and will be assigned an ID number. We will keep these data for up to 10 years. The investigators of this project will keep a separate “encrypted” or specially protected electronic file that links your name with your ID number.

This project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Guelph. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights or treatment as a participant in the project, you may contact Sandy Auld in the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph at 519-824-4120 ext. 56606 (reb@uoguelph.ca), or Dr. Margaret Lumley, whose contact information is listed above.
You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by the University of Guelph. Some of you may know that your parents were contacted about this research and have agreed to allow you to participate. It is now up to you to decide if you will or not. The goal of this research study is to see if your program is doing a good job of helping youth want to be at school and learn. If you choose to participate, you will complete a series of questionnaires that ask about your feelings about school, how you think about yourself, and your strengths. You also will be interviewed and asked to talk about your school experiences (e.g., “What helps you show up to school?”). We hope this information will be helpful to school boards, community groups and researchers studying what helps young people attend and feel good about themselves and school. All students who participate in the study will be given a $10 gift certificate to Tim Hortons.

In this study, the researcher will ask you to complete the series of questionnaires and an interview one-on-one in a private setting. **We will not share your individual answers with anybody for any reason unless we are concerned that you might harm yourself, somebody else or that a child is in danger.**

If you decide not to be in the study it will have no effect on the education and supports you receive at school or other agencies. If you decide to stop the study after you start your information will be destroyed and you will still be given the gift certificate. Neither school personnel nor your parents/guardians will know if you decide to withdraw.

Here is an information form that describes this research. I will read it over with you now and you can decide if this is something you would like to do or not.

* graduate student to read through the information form (below).

I have given you a lot of information. Do you have any questions?

Would you like to be a part of this research project?

Thanks so much for your time.
Appendix E: Youth Assent/Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology
phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798    fax: (519) 837-8629    e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

YOUTH ASSENT/CONSENT FORM
Understanding Student Engagement in Youth Attending Alternative High School Programs

I, ______________________________________, have volunteered to participate in a research study on student engagement. I understand what is required for participation in this study.

Name: _________________________  Age: __________

Signature: _________________________

Date: _________________________
Appendix F: Principal Information Letter

UNIVERSITY
OF GUELPH

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology
phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798  fax: (519) 837-8629  e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

Principal Information Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian,

We are sending you this information package so that you may consider allowing your child to participate in a research project that Dr. Margaret Lumley and graduate student Sophia Durisko from the University of Guelph are conducting at [alternative school]. They have teamed up with our school and are interested in learning new ways to keep youth interested in school. They are also looking into new ways to improve learning and the school environment at alternative school settings.

Please look over the information sheet provided. In a few days, you will receive a phone call from a researcher at [alternative school] who will be explaining the study to you and asking for you to consider allowing your child to participate. At that time, you can choose whether or not you would like to further discuss this with them. You will be able to provide verbal consent for your child to participate over the phone, or you may choose to sign this consent form and return it to us. The researchers will also be able to answer any questions you have at that time.

If you have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to contact Dr. Margaret Lumley with the information provided above. We look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Principal at [alternative school]
Appendix G: Parent Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology
phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798   fax: (519) 837-8629   e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

Introduction: Your child has been invited to participate in a survey and an interview for the purpose understanding what’s working well at [alternative school] conducted by graduate students Sophia Durisko and Dr. Margaret Lumley from the Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph. We are interested in finding out what will help your child most enjoy their school experience and think this information will help plan for other community and alternative schools.

Procedure: In this study, we will ask your child to complete a series of questionnaires that ask about level of engagement as a student (e.g., “Learning is fun because I get better at something”), beliefs about self (e.g., “I look on the bright side of things”), and social-emotional strengths (e.g., “I am someone you can rely on”). Your child will also be interviewed and asked to talk about his or her school experiences (e.g., “What helps you show up to school?”). This study will look at whether focusing on student strengths and building strong relationships are important for helping youth want to be at school. This will all take place during school hours, in a private room at this school.

If you and your child decide not to participate in this research it will not negatively affect your child’s school experience or relationships with school staff or University of Guelph. If you decide to allow your child to participate in this research, it will take about 1 hour. It is important that you know that your child is not required to answer any questions he or she would rather not. At any time, you may contact the researchers to withdraw your child’s information from the study. If your child discontinues participation, there is no negative impact, and your child’s information will be destroyed.

We hope this research will help us better understand how youth strengths are related to them liking and being involved with school. It is possible that questions about your feelings could upset your child. If you decide to participate you will be given a $10 gift certificate to Tim Hortons. Your parents have given permission for you to participate in the study, but it is now your choice whether or not you would like to.

Confidentiality: Your child’s answers are for research and are private. We will not share your child’s individual answers with anybody unless we are concerned that they are a danger to themselves, to someone else, or that a child is in danger. If concerned, the investigators may need to disclose this information to ensure safety of your child and others. We are also giving all students the information about KIDS HELPLINE in case they need to talk to somebody else outside this school about how they are feeling.

All your child’s questionnaires will be stored on our research computer at the University of Guelph. They will not have your child’s name connected to them and will be assigned an ID number. We will keep these data for up to 10 years. The investigators of this project will keep a separate “encrypted” or specially protected electronic file that links your child’s name with his or her ID number.

This project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Guelph. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights or treatment as a participant in the project, you may contact Sandy Auld in the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph at 519-824-4120 ext. 56606 (reb@uoguelph.ca), or Dr. Margaret Lumley, whose contact information is listed above.
Appendix H: Parent Phone Script

UNIVERSITY
of GUELPH

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES

Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology

phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798  fax: (519) 837-8629  e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

PARENT PHONE SCRIPT – FOR participants only
(To be read by a graduate student via phone at [alternative school])

Hello, this is ______________________ from [alternative school] (ask for parent)

We are inviting your child to participate in a survey and an interview at [alternative school], conducted by the University of Guelph. By now, you should have received a package in the mail with a letter, and information sheet about the study, and a consent form to sign. The goal of this research project is to see if the school is doing a good job of helping youth want to be at school and learn.

We are calling you today to ask your permission for (child’s name) to participate in this research study. Is it okay with you if we continue?

In this study, the researchers will ask your child to complete a series of questionnaires as well as an interview, conducted by a trained graduate student. The questions will relate to your child’s ability to handle emotions, their feelings about themselves, their personal strengths and level of involvement and wanting to be at school. They will also be asked some open-ended questions about their perceptions of their school and their learning environment. We hope this information will be helpful to this school and other schools boards, community groups and researchers studying what helps young people attend and feel good about themselves and school.

I have an information form that describes this research. I will take a few minutes now to read it over with you and you can decide if this is something you would like your child to do or not.

* graduate student to read through the information form (below).

I have given you a lot of information. Do you have any questions?

Would you like your child to be a part of this research project? You have the option to tell us now over the phone or you can sign the consent form in the package you have and return it to us.

Thanks so much for your time.
Appendix I: Parent Consent Form

UNIVERSITY
of GUELPH

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology
phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798 fax: (519) 837-8629 e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

PARENT CONSENT FORM
Understanding Student Engagement in Youth Attending Alternative High School Programs

My child, _______________________, has been asked to volunteer to participate in the study on student engagement. I understand what is required for my child’s/ward’s participation in this study.

Name: ______________________________
Signature: ____________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix J: Verbal Consent Documentation

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Dr. Margaret Lumley
Department of Psychology
phone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56798  fax: (519) 837-8629  e-mail: mlumley@uoguelph.ca

VERBAL CONSENT DOCUMENTATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>Graduate Student</th>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian Name</th>
<th>Verbal Consent Obtained</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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