Perspectives of Student Dis/engagement in Youth Attending an Alternative School as Viewed Through a Lens of Respect and Relationships

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PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENT DIS/ENGAGEMENT IN YOUTH ATTENDING AN
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL AS VIEWED THROUGH A LENS OF RESPECT AND
RELATIONSHIPS

By

DANIEL VALLEE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Daniel Vallee

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in
satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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by

Daniel Vallee

Advisor: Dr. Nicholas Michelli

This study enlists the voices of youth attending an Alternative School in a small town in Western Canada to further theorize what it means to be dis/engaged with/from school. Findings suggest that school relationships with both staff and peers are key to understanding student dis/engagement, and that relationships are understood in terms of their degree of respect or un/fairness.
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Chapter One - Introduction

This dissertation study is about educational relationships. It seems that the dominant discourse in schools these days is tests, charters v. traditional schools (a growing concern in Canadian provinces like Alberta), and education reforms, but here I will suggest that instead of those discourses, what should be talked about are the relationships that live or die in schools. Relationships between youth, relationships between youths and teachers, youths and education assistants, youths and principals. Alternative schools are of interest because they represent a stop-gap or mitigating measure for the failure of a one best system of public schooling (Tyack, 1974) for all students. For this reason, they also must be scrutinized from a perspective of equity or fairness. This dissertation is based on a small (n=15) exploratory study of youth attending alternative school and traditional high school, and will show that what matters most to students who are asked about school dis/engagement—and therefore, what matters most for learning—is the un/fairness of relationships that happen in schools.

What is student engagement? What are alternative schools? Student engagement is a monolithic construct that has gained much popularity in the last 15 years. Educational researchers, politicians, have a renewed interest in the term for its apparent ability to explain the essential problem of public schooling. Alternative schools are a subtype of Canadian public school. These schools are commonly regarded as places for children and youth who, for one reason or another, do not assimilate into traditional public schools. Asking youth who attend alternative schools about the nature of their school dis/engagement has the potential to develop (a) literature on both alternative schooling (e.g., Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009) and student dis/engagement (e.g., Vallee & Ruglis, 2017), as well as addressing issues of race/ethnicity and
class, and social equality in relationship to public education. This dissertation asks: how do youth attending alternative schools understand school dis/engagement?

**Alternative schools.** Alternative schools are places designed for youth, typically aged 12 and older, who for any number of reasons, are removed from traditional/mainstream/”normal” schools by public school administration, and sometimes youth themselves. The name “Alternative School” on the West Coast of British Columbia stirs images of youth who behave in ways that are transgressive to conservative social mores, for example, they use drugs, have sex, openly resist/defy teachers and administrators, act aggressively towards others, fail academically, and are dubbed “at-risk” of school dropout. Some scholars of education have gone so far as saying alternative schools are viewed as “dumping grounds” (Kim & Taylor, 2008) for youth too disruptive to traditional school classrooms (Slaten, Irby, Tate & Rivera, 2015). Indeed, this unfortunate reputation is grounded in some truth: in the neighboring US, the Chicago Reporter wrote that one in four student gun deaths occurred in alternative schools that taught only two percent of the school going population (Belsha & Clements, 2018).

This research contributes to three literatures in the field of education: (1) educational relations, (2) student dis/engagement, and (3) alternative schools. I will begin from the theoretical position that public school systems are normative: historically, they were developed upon a praxis of social efficiency, buttressed by the marriage of statistics and behaviorist theory (Friesen, 2014; Gallagher, 2010; Vallee, 2017). Public schools are designed to “work” (e.g., Biesta, 2014) for a certain population of students who are most often implicitly White, and middle-class. Alternative Schools appear to be a compensatory mechanism for the problem of having a one best system for all students (Tyack, 1979). I will offer that in keeping with Sidorkin (2002) and other researchers of *educational relations* (e.g., Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004),
alternative schooling, and schooling in general must be understood as fundamentally about relations between people, for example, youth and teacher, youth and education assistant, youth and youth, and more. Finally, keeping with Ruglis (2008) and Ruglis and Vallee (2017) I will suggest that un/fairness is perhaps the defining feature or indicator of the health of relations, whereas the presence of unfairness in school relations is interpreted as disengaging, if not disengagement itself in both traditional and alternative schools (Ruglis & Vallee, 2017).

Outline of the Dissertation.

The dissertation is organized in a conventional manner (Biklen & Casella, 2007). Chapter One serves to introduce the topic, background, and sets the tone for the entire paper. Chapter Two is the literature review, in which I review the literature on multiple constructs including student disengagement and engagement, relations, un/fairness, and more. Chapter Three is devoted to explicating the methodological framework and methods employed in this study. Chapters Four, Five, and Six are the main data analysis chapters. Chapter Four presents an analysis of semi-structured interview data; Chapter Five, map data. Chapter Six synthesizes all interview and map data, and presents a theory of alternative school dis/engagement. Chapter Seven is the concluding chapter.
Chapter Two - Literature Review

This research aligns with three primary discourses in educational research: alternative education, student dis/engagement, and educational relations. The primary theoretical framework employed in this study will be the notion of educational relations, theorized in Sidorkin’s (2002) pedagogy of relations, however, before speaking about that, one must begin with a background overview of the literatures of Alternative Education and student dis/engagement. Some passages from this section have been quoted verbatim from the following source: Student engagement and inclusive education: reframing student engagement (Vallee, 2017).

Alternative Education

Alternative schools are generally addressed within the field of alternative education (e.g., Aron, 2006; Bluechardt, 1995; Caulkins, 2010). It appears that much of the existing literature on alternative education emanates from the United States; however, with the renewed interest in school choice among politicians and pundits, this may change in the near future. Researchers interested in public schooling have noted the rise of free market values in school reform and policy change in both Canada and the US (e.g., Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). More and more it seems that a system of market-like choice is being touted as the best mechanism for ultimately ensuring the quality of all schools (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). The idea of school choice and alternative education each rest upon the notion that traditional public schools are somehow deficient in some regard, and that the “willful” movement of children and families from one school to another ultimately benefits not only individuals, but the public school system as a whole. This idea needs further analysis, but for the purposes of discussing alternative education and schools, suffice it to say that traditional public schools do not seem to
be working for everybody and so alternatives are required. Conversely, it may be that the existence of alternative schools makes it possible for traditional schools to forego trying to make it “work” for everyone, as they are legally mandated to do (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016).

**What is alternative education?**

**Historical background.** In Toronto, alternative schools “emerged as part of a broader movement in the 1960s and 1970s around ‘free schools,’ co-operative parent teacher elementary schools, and community, conservative elementary schools” (Gulson & Webb, 2013, p. 171). In the following two decades, alternative schools represented a contestation to Ontario schooling, challenging an Anglocentric, Protestant, and bourgeois dominance in school culture (Gulson & Webb, 2013). In this way they represented a grassroots movement of sorts, with parents desiring different cultural or language focuses in schools. Neighborhood schools would be handed over by school boards to be converted into alternative schools. Another group of mostly white, middle-class parents would also push for a more market-oriented perspective, in which they participated in consumer democracy in education (Dehli, 1996). Over time and with the amalgamation of the Toronto School Board District, in 2007 the TDSB put forth a definition of “alternative school” that said they were sites unique in pedagogy, “forms of governance and staff involvement” with parent/student involvement, environments that vary and offer personalized learning experiences (Quan, 2007; Gulson & Webb, 2013). With this shift, Gulson & Webb (2013) say that school choice and school establishment is reinforced.

In many ways this description of alternative schools in Toronto resembles the push for charter schools in the United States, which are built upon a foundational notion of school choice and market competition among schools as the mechanism of improving all public schools in time. This ideology has endured strong critiques (e.g., Fabricant and Fine, 2013; Orfield &
Frankenberg, 2013) for its short-sightedness with regards to the potential harm it may do traditional public schools.

In British Columbia, alternate schools seem to bear less of the market-choice nature displayed in the TDSB. The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2013) “characterizes students with serious behavioural and mental health difficulties as requiring co-ordinated inter-service/agency intervention and assessment processes” to educate students (Pereira & Lavoie, 2016). Students that present with such specialized needs find an effective academic, disciplinary, and socioemotional support in alternative schools (e.g., Cox, 1999); though there appears to be a lack of longitudinal research supporting such a claim.

**Prevalence of alternative schools in British Columbia.** There are approximately 245 alternative schools across BC (BC Alternate Education Association, 2018). Alternative education programs were first introduced to BC in the 1960s to “assist youth who were struggling in the mainstream school setting […] the overarching philosophy [is] to assist youth to successfully attain an education in a supportive, nurturing and non-judgmental environment.” (McCleary, 2008). There are a “diverse range of alternative education programs and administrative structures operating across the province.” (McCleary, 2008). Examples of diversity include the TAPS program in Prince George, which provides high school completion support and employment training. 8J9J in Vancouver provides a setting for strongly academic students who find a mismatch with mainstream schools (McCleary, 2008).

**Alternative education in research literature.** The literature on alternative education generally relies upon a normative notion of traditional public schools, beyond which all else is generally regarded as alternative education (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). K-12 schooling in Canada happens in two types of school: elementary (K-6,7) and secondary (7,8-12).
In the United States, a tertiary institution known as middle school (7-9) is sometimes inserted between primary and secondary schooling. All other educational activity outside of the K-12 system is regarded as alternative education, examples include: home schooling, charter schools (e.g., in Alberta), alternative schools. In the US, General Education Diploma preparation programs and on occasion, magnet schools, are also considered specialized programs for whom the majority of the public school population is not suited.

How alternative education is organized varies from researcher to researcher. Raywid (1994) created a three-tier typology of alternative education (AE) that grouped AE projects based on (a) programmatic goals (such as individualized teaching, curricular innovation), (b) disciplinary intervention, and (c) therapeutic short-term programming. Another typology by Melissa Roderick is based on educational need (Aron et al., 2003). Aron (2006) summarizes by saying that AE emerges out of a bureaucratic need to accommodate youth who fail (“are not succeeding” Aron, 2006 p. 6) in traditional public schools. Such students, according to Aron (2006) are those who may have “learning disabilities, behavioral problems, or poor attendance.” (Aron, 2006, p.6). Indeed, for better or for worse, alternative schools are often thought of as “second chance” schools with a stigma attached to students and the “teachers who work with them” (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2013)

Notably, Vadeboncoeur and Vellos (2016) highlight the importance of teacher-student relationships in alternative education. These authors suggest that what emerges across these flexible learning sites is the attention paid by the participants — both students and teachers — to social relationships, their interest in learning how to relate to each other dynamically and openly, and in so doing, to transform how they engage in schooling. (Vadeboncoeur and Vellos, 2016)
The finding about relationships, though not necessarily in alternative schools, is consistent with the assertion of Sidorkin, (2002) and other researchers of engagement who posit the fundamental importance of school relationships in their theories (e.g., Neary & Hagyard, 2010).

The general theme of AE literature, as already alluded to, is that traditional public schools are places for most students, but not all students. The issue raised grows more pressing when held in its context: the possible divestment in public schooling including alternative schools.

**Dis/Engagement**

*Student engagement* is a construct that has received continued attention from educational researchers. Conceptual frameworks of student engagement are diverse, affecting the way engagement is understood and researched (Christenson & Reschly 2012). Broadly speaking, while the domain of educational psychology tends to adopt the tripartite model of engagement (posing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions) with minor variations (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004; Chase, Hilliard, Geldhof, Warren & Lerner 2014), other researchers have conceptualized student engagement in terms of: school relationships (e.g., Klem & Connell 2004; Shernoff 2013); democratic participation or critical-democratic practice (e.g., McMahon & Portelli 2004); race/ethnicity and class (e.g., Dei 2003; Smyth 2012); pre-service teacher education (e.g., Seltzer-Kelly 2012); student voice (e.g., Fielding 2006; 2012; Mitra & Kirshner, 2012), and; historical materialist perspectives (e.g., Ferguson, 2013; Neary & Hagyard 2010).

As mentioned, educational psychologists tend to, but not exclusively, utilize the classic tripartite model of engagement, constructing engagement in behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions and attributing to these a “proliferation of subcomponents” (Eccles 2016, 173). A persisting problem with engagement is its variance of definition, and hence, its measurement.
Christenson and Reschly (2012) name this variance of operationalization the “conceptual haziness” of engagement. While admirable in its scope, the voluminous Handbook of student engagement (Christenson, Reschly, & Wiley 2012) does not go far enough, offering minimal if no critique of ontological and epistemological assumptions buoying engagement—those conceptual matters that might be included in what Eccles (2016) declares is the needed “in-depth theorizing about the conceptual space called engagement” (173).

Some of the conceptual haziness of engagement arises organically from the rather composite nature of the field of education: Sidorkin (2002) goes so far to call it “a field where other disciplines such as psychology, cognitive science, sociology, etc., are applied” (49). Christenson & Reschly (2012) declare that the “jingle and jangle” of engagement emerges from three disparate schools of thought: (1) dropout prevention literature, (2) general discourses of school reform, and (3) motivational literature (Christenson & Reschly, 2012); subfields in psychology, including educational psychology overlap with these domains. Some of the most important issues pertain to how engagement should be parsed-out, for example into two-, three-, or four-subtype models; whether it should be conceptualized as process or outcome; whether dis/engagement should exist on single or separate continua; and if engagement should break from, or be harmonized with the corpus of psychological research on constructs like motivation (Christenson & Reschly, 2012). Each of these issues has implications for measuring engagement. Regarding the measurement of engagement, survey instruments are the most favored and such tools have proliferated “dramatically” (Christenson & Reschly, 2012, 15).

In the fields of education, psychology, and educational psychology, there is a tendency towards approaching complexity by constructing variables, elements, or domains within constructs like motivation, self-regulation, and engagement. Engagement researcher Ruth
Deakin Crick (2012) suggests that this approach is a dominant ideology influencing educational reform approaches. Indeed, Britain, the US, and other countries have made a turn towards evidence based practices (EBP) in education (Biesta, 2007; Fine, 2012; Gallagher, 2010). Perkins (2010) named this scientific reductionism as *elementitis*, or a focus on the elements rather than the whole; Indeed, most studies of engagement appear to display this tendency, and this has not gone unnoticed within its own community of scholars (see Eccles, 2016).

The predominantly educational psychological literature just surveyed has been challenged from both within and outside its borders. Given the popularity and common-sense appeal of the term, these challenges should come as no surprise. Admirably, within the *Handbook* is found a scathing critique by Crick (2012) identifying the racial/ethnic sample bias of engagement research: that is, engagement research is founded upon a predominantly White, middle-class sample (Crick 2012). Also coming from within its own walls, Lawson and Lawson (2013) have called for an expansion of the definition of student engagement beyond the narrowly defined, behaviorist (McMahon & Portelli, 2012) tripartite model. Lawson and Lawson (2013), call for a broader, socio-ecological framework of student engagement that goes “beyond the walls” of the schoolhouse to include community, family, and social influences on engagement and disengagement (also known as disaffection; Skinner et al., 2008). In other words, these authors appear less inclined to focus primarily on attributes of the individual, and more inclined to situate engagement in diverse relationships social, institutional, economic, historical, and more. Some of this research draws upon theories hailing from human development for their support, for example, the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles & Roeser, 2011), which couches the individual at the center of a developmental system of
multiple nested, bidirectionally influential, and temporally contingent systems of varying proximity to the individual (Lerner, Bizen, & Warren, 2011).

**Engagement, race/class, and culture.** At the core of issues relevant to engagement, such as student voice and educational relationships, are the interconnected issues of class, race, and culture (Dei, 2003; Seltzer-Kelly, 2012; Smyth, 2012). Without mincing words, Smyth (2012) suggests that the problem of engagement is the problem of the institution of schooling in contemporary Western societies, that is, schooling in both structure and ethos is a middle-class institution. Middle-class values such as “politeness, acquiescence, civility, and manners” (Smyth 2012, 75) are foundational in the development of ideas of appropriate school behaviors; moreover,

> a deferral of immediacy that fits reasonably easily with people accustomed to deferred gratification [but] rest[s] uneasily with people for whom questions of relevance, meaning, and presentism loom very large in the struggle of their daily lives. (76)

The unspoken major premise (Becker, 2008) is that poor- and working-class students often develop in environments in which qualities such as delayed gratification, and middle-class civility may do little to satisfy the pressing daily needs of survival. This claim even finds support in the intersecting fields of human development and public health, where scholars like Jack Shonkoff (2010) note that children growing in poverty may develop behaviors in response to the toxic stress of environments characterized by privation (McLoyd 1998). Framed from this perspective, engagement seems to beckon for a framework that responds to the social justice imperative of race/class analyses.

The problem of racial and class differences of engagement is taken up by researchers of student disengagement, like Dei (2003), who emphasize the political and cultural significance of
racial/ethnic difference in their analyses. Disengagement is also articulated as a function of macrosocial forces such as political and public discourses, world affairs, and the shifting dynamics of labor in globalized economies (Fergusson, 2013; van Kessel, 2016). Indeed, this focus on global political-economic trends, or upstream corollaries of dis/engagement is ultimately desirable, for it nests dis/engagement in a more accurate conceptualization—that is, within human relationships.

**Engagement and relationships.** An emphasis on *relationships* as a fundamental requisite in engagement theory is more prominent in some studies (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Fielding, 2012; Seltzer-Kelly, 2012; DeLuca, Hutchinson, deLugt, et al., 2010; Shernoff, 2013). McMahon & Portelli (2004; 2012) conceptualize engagement as fundamentally dialogic within their critical-democratic framework, suggesting that this perspective is “qualitatively different” (2012, 4) than behaviorist definitions of engagement like that proposed by Finn and Voelkl (1993). McMahon & Portelli (2004) propose that engagement

[...] has built into it intrinsically the purpose of democratic transformation. Engagement is realized in the processes and relationships within which learning for democratic reconstruction transpires. As a multifaceted phenomenon, engagement is present in the iterations that emerge as a result of the dialectical processes between teachers and students and the differing patterns that evolve out of transformational actions and interactions. As enacted, engagement is generated through the interactions of students and teachers, in a shared space, for the purpose of democratic reconstruction, through which personal transformation takes place. (70)

Simply put, engagement is fundamentally contingent upon educational relationships. Engagement is something generated and shared.
Other researchers also posit relationship as critical to their engagement theory. Seltzer-Kelly (2012) asks us to consider engagement as a “deficiency in terms of the interaction rather than assigning pathology to the student.” (153, italics added). Neary and Hagyard (2010) echo Seltzer-Kelly (2012) by rejecting consumerist figurations of the student-as-employable, and embrace a historically grounded notion of educational relationships (e.g., student-teacher, student-institution) as collaborative and transformational. McMahon and Portelli (2012) argue persuasively that a neoliberal threat to democracy has restricted student engagement to behaviorist terms by highlighting task performance, homework completion, and test scores—each of which adapts conveniently to measurement and standardization. A major problem with this approach is that it quashes student voice (Fielding, 2006; Mitra & Kirshner 2012), and is correlated with increased boredom and disengagement for both teachers and students (e.g., Fine 1995; Armstrong & McMahon 2002).

**Relationships: The pedagogy of relation.** What is the pedagogy of relation? Alexander Sidorkin (2002) argues that what takes place in schools – which are fundamentally different from other institutions—is founded in the reality of relations between people:

> I argue that an underlying reality of human relations constitutes the crucial context of education. What teachers, administrators and students do and say could only have meaning and be understood against this invisible but very real matrix of intersecting relations. […] Educators should really concentrate on establishing effective educational relations and only then worry about what to do.” (Sidorkin, 2002, p.2)

In Sidorkin’s analysis, relationships are the paradigm in which school functions. All else is secondary to this fact. In his book *Learning relations: Impure education, deschooled schools, and dialogue with evil*, Sidorkin (2002) elaborates his theory of the pedagogy of relation.
Sidorkin (2002) conducts a historical materialist analysis of schools, then moves from Buber to Bahktin, through historical analysis of the Communard and the collective education movement in Russia to suggest that schools should become more like after-school clubs and community centers in order to facilitate the building of interpersonal relationships between teachers-youth, and between youth. This relational turn, he claims, is what must take place before the highly individualistic task of academic work takes place. Indeed, the founding of good relationships is the key to ensuring such work takes place, which is difficult in today’s public schools.

Public schools are at a disadvantage when compared to their elite counterparts. Sidorkin (2013) describes elite schools as offering clear rewards to students in the form of secured economic futures, robust extracurriculars, the unspoken threat of expulsion, student support, and the use of more progressive and authentic teaching methods. On the other hand public schools are unique economic entities in which student labor is neither paid, neither are the same rewards offered as found in elite schools. As a result, the problem of student motivation is a constant concern for public school teachers and administrators.

What is perhaps Sidorkin’s (2010) most interesting analysis though, continues along the lines of thinking of public schools in an economic anthropological sense. Sidorkin (2010) is careful to distinguish between thinking of schools as market economies, rather he suggests that schools display characteristics more closely associated with relational, or more pejoratively “archaic,” economies, as found in tribal life. Schools offer relationships, dances, proms as payment for the labor of students. For students to continue to labor under conditions no adult would endure (no pay, extended work hours, boring activities), there must be an exchange involved: “In the crudest terms, students exchange their labor of schoolwork for the opportunity to build social relations with peers and adults.” (Sidorkin, 2010, p. 64). In order to understand
how this economic relationship between youth and adult functions, we must return to an earlier work of Sidorkin’s (2002) in which he describes *relational fields*.

This dissertation will focus on Sidorkin’s description of *relational fields*. If relationships are abstracted to individual relations between two people, then *relational fields* are Sidorkin’s explanation of the matrices of relationships between people over time. Sidorkin draws heavily upon his dissertation advisor Liudmila Novikova who was interested in the employment of collectivist theory in Russian education. Sidorkin (2002) notes that there are strong connections to the Communard movement, which has been associated with collective education. There are also strong connections to the theories of Vygotsky and Leontiev “traditions of Russian psychological theory of activity and learning, in which “Learning is understood as a function of social activity and not just any kind of cognition” (Sidorkin 2002, p.122). In Russian theories of the educational collective, while schools may have a “core activity”-- that abstract notion of converting objective, super-personal knowledge to subjective, personalized phenomenological knowledge of experience” (122)--there is also a relational field composed of intersecting relations past and present. “Therefore, human relations do not exist as isolated phenomena” (122).

**Dis/Engagement and un/fairness.** If relationships are the fundamental element of schooling, then un/fairness is the paradigm in which relationships are best understood.

In an earlier work, Ruglis & Vallee (2016) theorize un/fairness and/as disengagement (Ruglis & Vallee 2016). In that theory, disengagement is understood as being more about the “nestedness of the individual and school within an ecology shaped by social unfairness” (Abstract), such as interpersonal un/fairness and income inequality. In that study, youth constantly scrutinized relationships with others through a lens of
fairness; the authors found that part of the process of disengagement is the disruption of one’s projected future self; meaning, unfair policies and environmental qualities impinged on youths’ projections of future well-being.

Youth articulate a commitment to projects and pursuits that extend well into the future, shaping their idea of “adulthood.” Disruptive relationships in school, characterized by unfairness spur disengagement (Ruglis & Vallee, 2017). Exclusionary disciplinary measures (i.e., suspension), banishment to alternative schooling, and the high visibility of neighboring private schools and their affluent students are among some of the aspects of disengagement narratives given by participants; notably, a common thread among these examples of unfairness is exclusion. Accordingly, relational characteristics like un/fairness (Ruglis & Vallee 2016), dignity, and affect would be of salience for study. A shift of this nature might open up engagement conceptually to excluded populations such as those labelled (dis)abled, by reconciling the theoretical chasm present in the metaphysics of autonomy (Vallee, 2017).

The metaphysics of autonomy and relations. What is meant by “metaphysics of autonomy” is that engagement relies upon an ontological assumption of the autonomous individual, who is situated in context, rather than actively transforming context in an activist collaborative practice with others (Stetsenko 2015), a quintessentially relational dynamic. As mentioned previously, there is merit in suggesting that epistemologically, engagement theory is built upon studies of a predominantly White, able-bodied, middle-class individual who is involved in a transmission-based conceptualization of knowledge (Crick, 2012; Janosz, 2012; Wentzel, 2012). Suggested here is an alternative view of the knower as bound by relationship with the other (e.g., Biesta, 2014; Stetsenko, 2015;
Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Sidorkin, 2002)—a more inclusive, participatory representation of the human that foregrounds the importance of the quality of participation in communicative relationships, rather than a “learnified” judgement of a desirable change in an individual (Biesta 2014), or a simple notion of the autonomous individual.

The overall effect of such a vital metaphysical shift is to reframe engagement as being fundamentally about relationships (Sidorkin, 2002). In other words, engagement as primarily about relationships and un/fairness (Ruglis & Vallee 2016), and therefore is concerned with the nature and quality of school relationships (e.g., issues of un/fairness, voice, participation).

**Figured worlds and third spaces**

Two final useful theoretical perspectives emerges from the literatures on third space (e.g., Gutierrez, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2008) and figured worlds (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, skinner, and Cain, 1998). Alternative schools and certain classes within them appear to be instances of third spaces and figured worlds arise within them.

**Third Space.** Third Spaces are places that emerge where

…teacher and student scripts—the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment—intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge.

(Gutierrez et al., 1995)

The theory arises out of the recognition that strict temporal analyses of classrooms are less beneficial than regarding them as systems with conflicting activity and multiple
layered interconnections (Gutierrez, 2008) In Third Spaces, there are borderlines of activity that have “remarkable sense-making character of those seemingly unrelated processes, what we called the “script” and “counterscript” (Gutierrez, 1993). In the study ahead, we will read of numerous psychic and physical spaces where authentic interaction arises as a result of informal and unofficial spaces in the learning environment; moreover, we will see how the alternative school itself might be regarded as a Third Space at its best times.

**Figured Worlds.** Another relevant theory that is similar to that of Third Space is the notion of Figured Worlds (Holland et al. 1998) Figured Worlds

…is one of the four contexts that Holland et al. suggest are sites where identities are produced. People “figure” who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds. People develop new identities in figured worlds.

(Urrieta Jr., 2007)

Figured worlds, like Third Spaces, are “socially organized and performed […] dependent on interaction and people’s intersubjectivity for perpetuation.” (Urrieta Jr., 2007). Blending these two theories, one might suggest that Third Spaces offer an opportunity for a new type of Figured World in which youth may engage in identity work. Figured Worlds are recreated by work with others. Figured Worlds are also historically contingent, and sites of possibility that live in relations of power.
Chapter Three - Methodology

This qualitative study of youth attending alternative schools took place in two schools in a small town on the West Coast of British Columbia, Canada: an alternative school (grades 7-12) and one traditional public secondary school (8-12).

Research Goals: Intellectual, Practical, and Personal

Joseph Maxwell (2004) writes that there are three types of research goals: intellectual, practical and personal.

Intellectual. This study sought to understand the meaning that youth participants attribute to the social condition of being enrolled in alternative school.

A second intellectual goal was to understand the context of alternative schooling and “the influence that this context has on actions” (Maxwell, 2004. p.22), that is, youths actions/thoughts/perspectives around school dis/engagement. Finally, desired was a goal of developing causal explanations of alternative school dis/engagement, that is, how is dis/engagement from an alternative school like or different from traditional public school dis/engagement? Is there anything harmful about attending alternative schools rather than a traditional public school? For example, does the generally held belief that traditional public schools are better than alternative schools correlate with how youth perceives their alternative school? Do youth in alternative schools even hold such a “generally held belief?”

Practical goals. Qualitative approaches to research are said to be easier for teachers to connect to (Maxwell, 2004, p.24). By presenting youths’ experience—by regarding them as experts of their own lives (Ruglis, 2011), all those involved in the life of alternative schools will be better informed about how the systemic composition of alternative schools contribute to student dis/engagement.
**Personal goals/Researcher’s role.** The achievement and protection of a system of mass mandatory public schooling that is accountable to the education of *all* peoples is the defining characteristic of public schooling. The impetus for the preservation of the public good (Noddings, 2000) of public schooling is grounded in educational equality (Stetsenko, 2017). This position is made more poignant from a public health framework, in which research has demonstrated a steady and linear education-health gradient in which each additional year of schooling sees a commensurate rise in lifecourse health (Cutler and Lleras-Muney, 2006). Upholding this mandate of a state-protected system of schooling is a personal goal that grows first out of recognition of social inequality, and secondly, out of an understanding of how social institutions play a role in reproducing that inequality through structural violence (Farmer, 2003; Ruglis, 2008; 2010). My experience as a teacher and school counselor in both private and public, rural, suburban, and urban school settings, and my academic work as both adjunct professor and doctoral student in the field of urban education policy also compels me to address issues of inequality.

Speaking further about the researcher’s role, admittedly, to a certain degree I have engaged in “backyard” research (Glasne & Peshkin, 1992). I am a teacher-on-call (substitute teacher) in the district and work regularly at Berrywood High School (a pseudonym), and have worked briefly (a total of three days) at the proposed alternative school. My employment in the district raises issues around power, disclosure, and researcher bias (Creswell, 2009). To ensure validity of my findings, I have set in place these measures: (1) triangulation via multiple data sources (maps, interviews, observations, memos), (2) “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2009, p. 150) to provide detail and multiple perspectives, and (3) statement of researcher bias throughout the course of the study, and in manuscript writing.
Study Objectives

This central questions of this qualitative study are:

(1) What are the perspectives of youth in alternative schools about school dis/engagement in a small school district in British Colombia, and

(2) Are there differences and similarities of dis/engagement across alternative schools and traditional public secondary schools?

Qualitative Research

John Creswell (2009) writes that qualitative research is a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). In this proposed research, qualitative data (interviews, maps, memos, observation notes) will provide understanding of what meaning youth make of dis/engagement in alternative schools.

Recruitment

Population and Site Selection. This study includes a sample of two populations from two separate schools in a small West Coast town. Participants are from alternative (n=9) and traditional (n=6) secondary school students age 13-17 (see Table 1). Participants were recruited by poster and by word-of-mouth. Participants were largely recruited by “network sampling” a variation of the snowball approach that involves “asking each participant, typically at the close of the interview, for a recommendation of other individuals who might also be willing to participate” (Galletta, 2013, p.34). Participants were asked to bring back a signed consent/assent form giving permission to participate in semi-structured interviews while being audio-recorded. Recruitment proved to be very difficult in both settings, hence, the low recruitment numbers in general.
Table 1. Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Krista</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>British/Romani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Identifies as both Transgender and Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>German/Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>First Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diedre</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>First Nations / White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassandra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>East Indian / Scottish / Welsch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eloise</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Traditional School Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zephyr</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>American (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippe</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Filipino / Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sienna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>European (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnolia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parker</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White / South American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Scottish / Irish / Italian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Setting.** This small town of 10,216 people (2016 Census) is located on a peninsula on the West coast of British Columbia, Canada. The town is located North of Vancouver BC, occupying Coast Salish First Nations territory. Vancouver, BC is a metropolitan city of 2.3 million people (Stats Canada, 2011) also located on Coast Salish First Nations territory. The study site is multi-racial/ethnic, with English, as opposed to French or other languages, being the language most often spoken at home. The most common non-official language mother-tongues reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of the site whose languages spoken include: Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin), Punjabi, Tagalog (Philipino), Korean, Japanese, Farsi (Persian), Spanish, German, and Hindi. This list is not exhaustive; other racial/ethnic groups hail from all parts of the globe. Neither does this brief demographic description engage with the impossible task of ascribing solid racial/ethnic identities/origins/cultures in a globalized, mobile world.
There are ten alternate education programs in the school district. Programs are all self-contained and located at different sites. Students are referred to the programs by schools when their needs are not being met. Personnel support in the school includes Special Education teachers, Counsellors, Career Preparation Teachers, Aboriginal Education Support Teachers, Fine Arts Teachers, and Administration and Office Assistants.

**Compensation.** Interviews were administered during and after school hours by the researcher. Compensation was one pair of free movie passes per participant.

**Data Collection**

This study used of two qualitative methods: (a) Semi-structured interview, and (b) Mapping.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** All participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview (Galletta, 2013; Mishler, 1990). Semi-structured interviews are desirable for their ability to “draw the participant more fully into the topic under study” (Galletta, 2013, p. 45). Semi-structured interviews employ open-ended and theoretically driven questions (Galletta, 2013). Interviews immediately followed a mapping exercise in which participants drew the story of their dis/engagement with schooling. At this point, the interview was opened with a simple “tell me about your map”—the topic of the discussion already well established by the content of the map. Alternatively, in some cases it seemed more appropriate to repeat the full prompt as written in Appendix A (*interview protocol*). In either case the effect was similar: students began to tell the story of their dis/engagement with schooling. Participants were aware that they controlled the “introduction, content, and flow of topics” with respect to “the shared task and purpose: to understand how they came to […] view their current [situation]” (Mishler 1990, p. 297).
Interviews (see Appendix A for interview protocol) took up to an hour each, and were conducted by the researcher. Transcriptions were performed by Rev.com and then cross-checked with their respective audio file for errors.

**Mapping methodology.** A mapping methodology gives researchers access to data describing “that which cannot be seen,” (Ruglis, 2011, p. 630; Haney, Russell, and Bebell, 2004; Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney, 2000) giving youth participants a medium to express those experiences which words tend to fail. Focus group participants were asked to take the first twenty minutes to use poster paper and markers/pens/pencils to respond to the single prompt: “please draw a map of your school dis/engagement” (Appendix B, Map Protocol). One participant (Krista) abstained from creating a map. All map data and verbal description of the map were analyzed as data.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data (transcripts, maps, video footage, memos, and fieldnotes) was analyzed on an ongoing process throughout the course of the study. Analyzed were interview transcripts, maps, observations, and memos. A grounded theory approach and constant comparative method (e.g., line-by-line coding, focused coding; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was performed on both map and interview data. In conjunction, a content analysis of maps was performed (Magno and Kirk, 2008; Mitchell, 2011; Rose, 2011; Sensoy, 2011). Codes were constructed using gerunds, rather than topics or themes, to facilitate the development of a theory of alternative school dis/engagement.

While this study is not a grounded theory per se, Charmaz’s (2014) approach to data analysis is effective in generating valuable themes and perspectives (Ruglis, 2009). All transcripts were coded using qualitative research software (MaxQDA 11). Chapters Four and
Five are devoted to data analysis of interview and map data respectively. A synthesis of all data across the various methods is conducted in Chapter Six and contributes to and/or pushes-back against preexisting theories of dis/engagement and/or alternative education.

**Validity**

Validity and reliability. A number of established procedures that increase qualitative validity (Creswell, 2013) were employed, including purposive sampling (Luttrell, 2010), and other validity strategies.

While participants were gathered largely via social networking (“network sampling”), purposive sampling (Luttrell, 2010) of students who wished to tell about dis/engagement with schooling ensured that we gathered data from a group individuals who could provide data that expands or transforms existing theories of dis/engagement. The fifteen participants provide us with rich data around theories of dis/engagement and relational and structural un/fairness (Ruglis & Vallee, 2016). Student voice is highlighted throughout the dissertation via two methodologies, one of which is highly creative. Luttrell (2010) notes that, rather than a concern for how many participants ensure validity, qualitative researchers must be concerned with which participants to include (Vallee & Ruglis, 2017).

Elaborating upon methodological validity, according to Creswell (2013) qualitative validity entails that the accuracy of findings is ensured through the employment of validity strategies such as (a) triangulation of different data sources (I employ two different data collection methods); (b) rich, thick description; (c) clarification of researcher bias; (d) the presentation of negative/discrepant information; and (e) prolonged time in the field. Each of these validity strategies was employed at various times throughout the research process.
Qualitative reliability (Gibbs, 2007) refers to the necessity to demonstrate a consistency of both approach and between-researcher and –project; to this I might also add between-method. The reliability of this study is increased by the careful review of transcripts, codes, and constant comparative analysis (including memo-writing). These practices are established reliability procedures of qualitative research (Gibbs, 2007).
Chapter Four – Interview Analysis

I argue that an underlying reality of human relations constitutes the crucial context of education. What teachers, administrators and students do and say could only have meaning and be understood against this invisible but very real matrix of intersecting relations. […] Educators should really concentrate on establishing effective educational relations and only then worry about what to do.” (Sidorkin, 2002, p.2)

I argue that distinct conditions of justice lead to diverse wellness outcomes through a series of psychosocial processes. Optimal conditions of justice, suboptimal conditions of justice, vulnerable conditions of injustice, and persisting conditions of injustice lead to thriving, coping, confronting, and suffering, respectively. The processes that mediate between optimal conditions of justice and thriving include the promotion of responsive conditions, the prevention of threats, individual pursuit, and avoidance of comparisons.

(Prilleltensky, 2011, Abstract)

This chapter will present data gathered from semi-structured interviews. Primarily employed will be the theoretical lens of the pedagogy of relation (Sidorkin, 2002; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010), which Sidorkin (2002) posits as “an approach to educational theory centered on the notion of relations” (p.7). As we shall see, Sidorkin’s theory (as covered in the literature review) best explains the happenings within alternative schools, which are quintessentially different in their smaller-scale, stripped-down, yet relational approach to schooling.

As we shall soon see, the data emergent from this study affirms the notion of the relational field as salient for understanding youths’ stories of dis/engagement. Again, the relational field is “a matrix that determines all available repertoires of relations allowable in a given group” (Sidorkin, 2002, p.124). We will see how youth lament failed or transgressive
relationships with education assistants and teachers. I will also suggest that Ruglis & Vallee (2017) are correct when they describe disengagement as unfairness; however, this research will lay the relational foundation of that finding, suggesting that unfairness or injustice is an aspect or quality of relationships in both alternative and traditional public schools.

**Un/fairness and/as disengagement.** In conjunction with a theoretical lens of the pedagogy of relation, this chapter will also adopt a theoretical perspective of un/fairness as disengagement (Ruglis & Vallee, 2017). In their study of a small group of youth in Montreal, Quebec, Ruglis & Vallee (2017) found that student disengagement was a function of systemic unfairness (see also Ruglis, 2009). Unfairness or injustice, as already described in the literature review, is a fundamental lens by which humans understand themselves and the conditions and relationships of their lives (Prilleltensky, 2011). This chapter will show that while Alternative school is generally perceived as a good place to dwell, there are problems of relational and systemic un/fairness that correlate with youths’ disengagement with school.

**Analysis of Alternative School semi-structured interview data.** Table 1 details the primary findings for all methods for each type of school: alternative and traditional. Interview data from alternative school youths’ interviews produce a range of findings. Youth attending alternative schools generally feel that their school is a good place, but bears improving in many ways. These findings are detailed in the section following.
### Table 1

**Primary Findings, All Methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Alternative School</th>
<th>Traditional High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternative school is generally a good place.</td>
<td>Good relationships are life-giving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth have relationships with teaching staff in this small school.</td>
<td>Feeling included is important and contingent on the quality of relationships with people (including students and staff).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth appreciate flexibility in academic demands, start and end times, and individual learning plans.</td>
<td>Bullying and arguments quash feelings of inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A refuge from the threat of failure and the threat of exclusion typically found in traditional school (being kicked out of class or of the school itself)</td>
<td>Bullying is threatening and rarely forgotten. Bullying increases with frequency for those in earlier grades e.g., Grade 8, and seems to blend in with the general challenge of social life in school for the senior students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Much of what needs improvement at alternative school is understood as an issue of un/fairness, for example:</td>
<td>The social environment is precarious with in-group and out-group statuses. This seems to ebb in senior years of high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. being treated fairly by Education Assistants, teachers, and other staff, including school policy.</td>
<td>Youth are particularly sensitive to and are acutely cognizant of teacher/administrator unfairness in the form of: bias, favoritism, disciplinary misjudgment, teacher burnout, public humiliation, and eurocentrist speech. Even those who benefit from favoritism because of good grades or standing with teachers, recognize the injustice to other youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. diversifying a stripped-down, bare-bones curriculum</td>
<td>Good relationships with teachers lead to learning, and feelings of well-being. These relationships can be life-changing. Extracurricular activities are opportunities for 1-to-1 time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. the stigma of attending an “alternative school”</td>
<td>Good teachers support students socioemotionally. They can sense socioemotional strife in students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. the underfunding of alternative schools</td>
<td>Feeling alive in the community often includes being at work, being with friends, or volunteering with church/religious events (e.g., food drive). These are interpreted as largely relational by nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. not receiving mental health education</td>
<td>Feeling alive in school is about being with others and taking part in a host of school activities such as extracurricular sports, science, drama, and PE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. sexist treatment towards females by both students and staff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Yearning for a relevant curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Being pushed out of alternative school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth are aware of the future, making plans around a theme of stability: good jobs, partners, families.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth have stories of homes marked by instability, including:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. divorce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. school mobility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. foster care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. addiction/alcoholism among caregivers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some youth identify as neuroatypical, having been diagnosed with “learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“disabilities” such as ADD/ADHD and Autism

This alternative school in particular is LGBT+ welcoming.

School and parents communicate the threat of failure.

Anxiety and depression make school difficult.

Curriculum needs more relevancy, for example, teaching students how to do their taxes.

Youths’ vision of the future includes attending post-secondary, being in an intimate relationship with another person, raising a family, being content.

| Dis/engagement is about relations with people in the alternative school: teachers, education assistants, other youth. Those who treat youth unfairly strongly damage youths’ perceptions of the quality of their school experience. |
| The flexible academic structure (working at one’s own pace) and the independence it requires is both a strength and weakness of the school. Strong because it allows for efficiency in the completion of work in a comparatively shorter period of school time to traditional schools. Weak because efficiency depends upon students being almost entirely motivated on their own. Not all students display this ability. |
| Small class size and smaller school reduce the number of distractions in class to learning and makes it easier to forge personal relationships. However, “drama” does exist among students. |
| Staff display the ability to regard the socioemotional life of youth (including those that identify as LGBT+). This is highly valued and unlike traditional high schools. |

| Relationships are most important with regards to dis/engagement. The relationship between relationships and fair treatment are reciprocal. Youth are engaged when they feel a part of a community, afforded dignity, treated as equals. This happens while playing group sports or in clubs, taking part in group work. |
| Fairness among relationships with teachers, youth and administrators is important. Unfair treatment is egregious and identified in different ways: (1) social hierarchies and condescension (from teachers and youth alike, including bullying) (2) harmful words from teachers/administrators (3) not being treated like an adult (being ignored, perceived as less than, not being “taken seriously”). |

| Maps |
| Physical education is a non-academic course that is beloved. |
**Alternative school is generally a good place.** Alternative school students had many positive comments about the alternative school that must be mentioned outright:

Devon They're a lot more understanding, and they give every student, they treat every student individually, like the way that they think that student is going to be.

Evan So I wrote basically why the alternative school works for me and a lot of other people, like they're more flexible in how certain things that you can do at the alt school that you can't do at Berrywood (the local traditional high school). You have a more personal connection with your teachers and the environment 'cause there's less students obviously. So you kind of get to develop a more personal connection with them and they help you more so on your individual goals and work plan to get yourself graduated.

Diedre And basically this school is for kids that can't focus in big groups, which is me, and to work at your own pace, which forwards you to work faster than you think you could, which is what happened with me. […] Well, basically different kids, as in kids that people find as freaks or strange or just different I guess, in some cases. It's kind of changed now in 2018. Everybody wants to go to the alt school. Everybody wants to do this. It's a cool thing now, apparently.
Which I remember when I was a kid, I hated when I started here. I did not want to be here. I hated being here, but now I don't. And everybody wants to come to this school now, because they think it's easier. We're all like every other person. We just work at different paces, and we focus on school differently.

Broadly speaking, this alternative school is a small—if isolated—community of youth and adults in which youth feel known (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014) and cared for. Structurally speaking, the teaching style of the institution is light: students work independently at their own pace and according to their own goals for graduation. While youth are/were aware of the social stigma attached to alternative schools as places for those with social-emotional problems or transgressive behaviors (drug-taking, absenteeism, defiance towards school staff), they discover that while those behaviors are present, the school is more than that. Alternative school is a place where the approach to education is different.

**Youth have relationships with teaching staff in this small school.** The major difference in the educational approach is the foregrounding of relationships that may not be possible in a larger traditional school. As reported by Evan in an earlier quotation, “you have a more personal connection with your teachers and the environment ‘cause there’s less students obviously.” Students report that teachers are both kind and caring, showing concern for students in emotional distress. An example of school staff having both willingness and resources (e.g., time) is the social worker, who goes so far as to deliver some students to and from school, or picking up a coffee on a students’ request:

Evan For instance, I'm not sure if teachers at Berrywood do this but say if - we have a lady named Gladys that's really good, she's like a social
worker. She picks up students, drives them home sometimes, she'll get coffee in the morning if I ask her and give her money. You definitely don't get that at Berry. She's there to talk about your life. You have easy access to counselors here. I don't know if there's counselors at Berry but it's more students, less readily available I guess. Yeah that's about it.

The actions reflect a couple of key points about alternative school: (1) there is a regard for the needs of youth beyond the purely academic, (2) youth are treated more like adults (i.e., coffee may be drunk by youth as well), and (3) the school population is small enough that adults are not burdened by extra attention of the sort that Gladys demonstrates. While personal relationships with every student are ideal, this is bemoaned as impossible to achieve, particularly in traditional schools with student rosters as high as 30 students or more (Sidorkin, 2002). Admirably, in this study, many youths are pleased with the level of care they perceive from teachers, and one must attribute this to the presence of reasonably strong interpersonal relationships.

**Relationships lacking care.** While there were many descriptions of the care communicated by school staff towards youth; however, there were dissenting opinions. This will be engaged with further on in discussions about un/fairness. At least two of nine alternative school youth described instances where staff did not demonstrate the same level of care described previously:

Krista For the most part most of the staff here are very kind, they're not mean. Just the way they handle things I feel could be improved. And their understanding of students' feelings and motivations could definitely be improved. I feel like there is a bit of a barrier between
the students and the teachers and how they understand things.

Because the students here - I feel the students here have more special needs that the teachers just aren't meeting.

Krista notes that while kindness is present, teaching staff lack the ability to read students emotional status, or perhaps more generally, what constitutes “youth.” She goes on to say that

Krista: In the handling of conflicts especially. They don't understand. They try to - I feel they try to do things as neutrally as possible, but it definitely ends up being one-sided. That and that they - when a student is frustrated or upset they don't try to deescalate the student more - help them in what's making them frustrated. The just more or less tell them to either continue working or leave. That has happened many times when I've had an off day and I've come to school trying to focus. And, they've told me to leave because I was being too much for them to handle or something like that. That's happened a lot of times for me.

Rather than giving the youth some time to settle down, or to ensure that a grievance is heard, in this instance, staff resort to the last bastion of the teacher’s behavioral strategies: ejection from class, or exclusion (Sidorkin, 2002).

Youth appreciate flexibility in academic demands, start and end times, and individual learning plans. Time and again, youth report that “flexibility” and “freedom” are defining elements of the core activity of the school. Flexibility in both time and space are allowed. It is acceptable for a student to attend school for a shorter period, for example, half a day. Youth may find a private space to work, enlist the assistance of an Education Assistant (EA) to take notes, or
offer more general academic assistance. Staff understands that youth need to “take breaks, not just work and work” (Dan).

Flexibility and freedom are not bereft of organization. According to Dan, students are not allowed to walk out of classrooms at will or not show up; rather, a teacher may choose to “message you sometimes and ask if things are okay. If you don’t go to school, which is really nice.” Again, this appears to be part of the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982) that seems to make up the school’s ethos. This understanding and care is “one of the reasons why everyone goes to this school” (Dan).

A refuge from the threat of failure. One of the defining features of traditional public schools is its grounding in pass/fail systems of academic assessment. The threat of failure, the haunting nature of past failures (Vallee & Ruglis, 2017) are present in the stories of youths’ trajectories of disengagement. Alternative school in this study is a place where the threat of failure, while still present, is largely neutralized.

Daniel  Do you feel the threat of failure here at alternative school?
Devon  Oh no. I mean it's in the name, alternative. Right, so, if you mess up, or if something is wrong, you can always go back and redo it. But, in a regular school, you can't really do that. You need that assignment to be done or that project. You can't really do any alternative things. At least with my experience.

And,

Daniel  Yeah. Totally nice. You said something about being at Berry there's a risk of failure but not so much here. Is that correct?
Evan: Yeah. I mean here obviously if you don't do your work you're gonna fail but it's not so ... you have one year, if you don't do your work, you fail. Some students are in grade 12, they have few grade 11 courses still, carry on to the next year. So it's not like, "Oh you didn't finish English 10, you did 90% of it, you're almost passing, but you didn't do the rest, you have to restart 'cause the year's over. Do it next semester. Take the class again." Here it's just you continue 'til it's done.

So, while failure still seems to exist, it appears rather a toothless threat as youth know they have second chances and will not have to repeat work already done; this may not be the general case in all alternative schools, but it is in this particular one. Alternative school is paradigmatically different than traditional school in this regard. The significance cannot be understated. Upon arriving at alternative school, the misery of multiple failures is relieved and a new beginning commences in which one works at one’s chosen pace towards the goal of the accreditation.

*Much of what needs improvement at alternative school is understood as an issue of un/fairness.* As described in the review of literature, fairness is both synonymous with justice, and is embodied (Prilleltensky, 2012; Krieger, 2005). In this study of alternative school youth and others like it (e.g., Ruglis & Vallee, 2017, Vallee & Ruglis, 2017) fairness is the primary lens through which youth understand what happens in their schools. Un/fairness is a quality or element of relationships; arguably the most defining feature of them. Of utmost importance to youth in this study is that they are treated fairly by school staff. When staff members such as teachers and EAs transgress youths’ sense of fairness, the result is both dramatic and lasting.
Daniel       Okay. Do you - does unfairness or - have anything to do with
           engagement or disengagement? At alternative schools?
Krista       Yeah, I think so. I feel like there is a lot of unfairness and
           favoritism at this school. Like, for example, the staff, they seem to
           favor the male students and let them get away with more.

Complaints about the unfair treatment of youth by one EA in particular—Barbara—are made by
two youth participants in great detail.

Krista       […] I feel the most motivated to work when I'm given some
           space and some freedom to get my work done without someone
           looking over my shoulder every two seconds to be like “oh that's
           how much you've gotten done?” Or that kind of thing.
Daniel       And does that happen a lot?
Krista       Particularly from one staff member.
Daniel       Okay, all right.
Krista       But its, it's been over the course of the four years that I've been
           here it's been a repeated thing where she's come up to me and
           looked at my work and if it's not done enough to her satisfaction
           she will publicly voice this. She'll be like “oh, THAT'S all
           you've gotten done?”
Daniel       Ohhhhh.
Krista       And is like, “are you serious?” She says those words like “are
           you serious? That's all you've gotten done in that amount of
           time? Wow.” And then she'll walk away and say that very loudly
           so everybody in proximity can hear her, and it's a very very big
blow to my feelings. Especially when I know I've been trying hard, but it’s just not up to par with her.

Daniel    Uh huh. It seems unnecessary.

Krista    Yeah no, it’s not just me that she does that to. She does that to other students too.

Daniel    Okay.

Krista    It's just not nice.

In this example, we see demonstrated the historical aspect of relations; unfairness is never forgotten for this youth. New unfairness’s compound with the old. Barbara figures heavily in the disengagement of another youth in the study, Eloise, as well:

Daniel    Sure, or just tell me about your map, yeah. Or you can read it if you want yeah.

Eloise    I wrote I have had some positive experiences at the alt school, but I can't even read this. But a majority of my individual experience has been negative. This is not to say the system doesn't work, but for some students, but for me it has done more damage than good. I wrote, "I was extremely engaged upon first arrival, but after problems with a specific staff member my experience went downhill fast. She belittles me, border line harasses me, and dehumanizes me daily. I have felt unheard, and frankly useless in this situation from the lack of justice served to me, and several other students who have reported her several times.

And,

Daniel    Does unfairness have anything to do with any of this?
Eloise I feel that that is definitely a part of this, because I've reported specific staff members.

Daniel Barbara you’re pointing at (on the map), yeah. Who’s Barbara?

Eloise She is an EA who works there, and she's older. She's extremely negative. She's come up to me several times, and called me fat.

Judge d my actions so much …

So while having a small school may be beneficial for its facility in relationship building, the opposite is also true, as Eloise and Krista make clear. A relationship with a staff member marked by unfairness rather than fairness, flippancy, rather than respect, has a potentially staggering effect on how youth understand dis/engagement. Eloise appears to have been treated unfairly twice: first by the staff member, and second when her reports create no change in the EA’s behavior. These incidents with Barbara were among the worst examples of interpersonal and systemic unfairness.

Unfairness is also reported in school policies, for example, expulsion. School pushout (Tuck, 2011) is defined as when a student is counselled-out or simply expelled by school administration. Cassandra, who is dating a former student of the alternative school, describes the process by which he was pushed out of the school. She believes the example is quintessentially unfair.

Cassandra There are kids in the Alt school that don't show up at all. They show about twice a year maybe just to check in or whatever. Just because they have to, and my boyfriend actually, he was in the Flex School (a program in the alternative school), and he showed up for about two months at the start of the year, and the guy upstairs,
Mike, he told them that if he wants to switch back to [a different program], because my boyfriend wanted to switch back to [a different program], which he was already in before, but he thought he'd work better down here, which he hated the teachers down here. So, he couldn't work down here, and he didn't realize hated them until he came down here.

Then, he talked to Peter, and he was like, "I need to go back up there. I'm not getting anything down here. I hate it. I'm not going to come to school." and Peter told him, "If you come to school two weeks straight, you can go up there and we'll have a talk about it." He came to school three weeks straight, and Peter said, "We haven't seen enough of you," because sometimes he would leave half way through the day, and said, "We haven't seen enough of you here.", and so my boyfriend was just fed up and now he doesn't come back for school.

He got a letter last week saying that he is completely out of the school, which doesn't make any sense because there are kids […] that come twice a year, and that's it, and he came for more than that, and he also has a school work at his house and they just kicked him out, which is really stupid. […] He's not going to go to school. He's not going to graduate because he has no motivation to do it because of all the bullshit he's going through here, and when he tried to go to [Chat 00:19:26], it was so bad for him. It just did not work out, and now I don't think he's going to school anywhere now, and might not just graduate for the rest of his life.
This example of school pushout is not the only example of school policy identified as unfair. Cassandra also resents the fact that certain courses are leveraged as rewards, rather than rights. Courses like Art and PE are sometimes “distributed” in a behaviorist, reward-like manner to encourage more academic output. The practice is unfair according to Cassandra:

Cassandra: Then I think the biggest bullshit part about this school that completely is unfair, entirely especially to the old, not old, art teacher, is that sometimes teachers here try to use certain courses as privileges. [...] And say you can't go to art because you didn't get enough English done, but art is a course that you need to pass, and so that's really unfair. It's a little bit corrupt in that way or they'll use gym in that way, and they'll say, "Don't go to gym. You didn't get enough whatever done.", and they can't force you to do anything. In the end, it's always your choice here, which is actually really awesome. It's actually really, really awesome that way. You don't have to do anything. [...] they'll try to convince you not to, which isn't fair. [...] They'll act like they do have the authority to say you can't go, and they'll say you can't go, but really you can, and that's not fair. It's totally manipulative.

Cassandra has tried to effect change around this policy, but with little impact.

Stripped-down, “bare-bones” curriculum. Also, interpretable as an unfairness to alternative school youth is what appears to be a “bare-bones” approach to education. Except for Art and PE, the curriculum is not as diverse as the one offered at the neighboring traditional high school. Youth are cognizant of this disparity:
Cassandra: That's another thing is up there, they have a lot of events and stuff, and things I'd like to be a part of. Stuff that I don't get to do down here, opportunities.

Daniel: Can you tell me more about that?

Cassandra: Well, I don't know. Just like dances and parties, and things like that. Those are social things, but then there's also skill stuff as well that I don't get to do down here that I would be able to do up there.

I heard they have a martial arts class, which I'd be really interested in, and things like that.

Cassandra does take advantage of the freedom of taking classes in the traditional school, a fine policy, but it does not seem to make the difference for her. She enrolls in auto shop and photography.

Cassandra goes into greater nuance about the difference between the two schools. At her school, they perform the “bare minimum” in a number of ways. Students can “ask for the bare minimum” it takes to pass a course; however, another meaning exists as well. The bare minimum educationally speaking can mean that subject matter is not engaged in great depth – by depth Cassandra refers to those conversations and little assignments here and there that aren’t actually part of the course outline that the teacher will assign you because they made it up. That’s not what happens here, and a really big problem about down here, is I’m not taught anything. (Cassandra)

Rather, Cassandra “…learns it all off online or out of a book.” One gets the impression that school has been reduced to its skeleton, the bare minimum required by law to award the accreditation; this is not meant to be a rich education, rather a last-ditch effort at graduation.
Cassandra explains that for those who wish, there are courses to be taken at the school that are a little more as she explains. These are called cohorts and they exist for Math and Science, but that is all.

*Yearning for a relevant curriculum.* In the same discussion of the academic work (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) presented to alternative school youth, Cassandra and other youth yearn for subjects and content that are not covered, examples include mental health and career education classes, tax filing instruction, communication skills, different sciences like biology. Eloise knows that at Berrywood if ten students want a course taught in, say, German, the school will “bring in a German teacher” but at the “alt school, you can have 30 people screaming they want a class [and] you won’t get it. Which sucks.” Eloise notes that this practice occurs in clubs as well. Because the interest in Dungeons and Dragons (an elaborate role-playing game) was so great, the school invited an official Dungeon Master (expert) to come in a few times a month. According to Eloise, the Alternative school does “not have clubs.” She explains further that the distance, which is the equivalent to two or three city blocks, is straight up hill. Eloise states that students are limited to traveling on foot and risk being late for their next block or may not get to eat their lunch – “That’s the only way that you can really be involved in those classes.”

*Not receiving mental health education.* Being even more specific about what is lacking in the curriculum, two students (Eloise and Cassandra) identify a need for mental health/public health education at the alternative school. Eloise witnesses homophobic and transphobic behaviors at school. Cassandra identifies the problems of anxiety, suicide, and depression. Eloise is explicit, stating that “we need a health and career education class […] we need some sex ed. We need some stuff that will set us up for life […] because these are important things, and you can’t just throw us in the world, and tell us to do it.” In the traditional school, the course
that would cover this material is called Health and Career Education Class (HACE), and Eloise
knows it by name. This would be a step in the right direction, but it still is not quite enough to
satisfy Eloise’s sense of care for her LGBTQ+ friends, or friends who she recognizes engage in
what are sometimes identified as “risky health behaviors,” namely unprotected sex with multiple
partners and drug-taking. Eloise feels this is of utmost importance as she knows that her school
is “filled with a lot of people who are going through stuff in their life, and they do drugs, or
they’re sleeping around. It’s important that these people know the information they need for
people to these things safely.”

Underfunding of alternative schools. In at least two instances, there was data to suggest
that alternative school is underfunded, or at the very least, obviously having fewer resources than
a traditional or private school. Eloise states it plainly: “I've seen a lot of issues myself with the
system, and how it's being run, and how there's a lack of funding for the alt school, which is
effectively [sic] the students.” She echoes this sentiment when she notes astutely that a single
teacher may be teaching a subject to a group of youth in varying grades. The reason for this
being that “we don’t have enough teachers to be able to teach all those classes for the individual
grades” hence, the cohort model. In some cases, she may choose to study online, which does not
“work” for her, but she feels generally “really screwed over” by the options presented to her. A
surprising amount of work may be done online, which more and more schools are adopting as its
cost-effectiveness makes it desirable, despite evidence that it offers the same quality of education
as a classroom experience.

Sexist treatment towards females by both students and staff. Another aspect of unfairness
was the report by three female participants of sexism in their Alternative school. Krista states
that the staff “seem to favor the male students and let them get away with more.” Eloise says
that “there’s a patriarchy among the men and Barbara in our school.” Examples include: taking photos and videos without permission; the playing of loud misogynistic rap music, and; general rude and disrespectful behaviors towards female students. Diedre, who is younger, also claimed that male classmates were sexist. The dynamic wears on the students, being both annoying (Ruglis & Vallee, 2017) and unfair.

*The stigma of attending an “alternative school.”* This final unfairness is a burden which youth have had to bear. Evan has had to explain to people the truth about alternative school, that it’s more than just a place for “retards” “stoners” and “people with mental illnesses and stuff.” Evan does not believe the place lives up to the stigma, noting that “there’s lots of nice people here.” Diedre also had a hard time deciding to transfer to the alternative school for its reputation, reported to her by others. They warned that it was a school “where bad kids were … that did things like drugs and drink and stuff like that.” Diedre is pleased to say that now everyone wants to come to alt school because its “a cool thing now” inverting the stigma. Eloise is not as cheerful about attending the school noting that going to the alternative school in a small town makes it “very hard to keep a good name.”

*Identifying as neurotypical.* Three students identified as having been diagnosed with a neurotypical condition such as surplus anxiety, depression, or autism (Charles, Eloise, Krista). In addition, youth made it clear that the school had many students that struggled with depression, suicidal ideation. “There’s people that have mental illnesses and stuff …” states Evan.

*This alternative school in particular is LGBTQ+ welcoming.* A single participant, Dan, had glowing remarks to make about the difference between this alternative school and the last one he had attended in a neighboring small town. If the former school he attended was discriminatory, and exclusionary to he, who identified as transgender, his new school was quite
the opposite, with students and teachers expressing open welcome and embrace of he and his sexual identification.

Dan  And then I was like someone from the LGBT plus. I was kind of an outcast and not treated right, like even by some of the teachers […] And at this school it's been really nice. The teachers and students are all friendly and supportive, most of the students anyways. I mean, you can't really help that. The whole school is really good with LGBT and I've noticed a lot of people try to befriend me rather than oh, there's a new kid awkwardly walk away.

Youth are aware of the future, making plans around a theme of stability. Alternative school youth are very much in a process of becoming, of acting out their plans for the future. When asked where they see themselves in the future, or in five years, their answers consistently project an image of stability. Stability in the form of monogamous intimate relationships, families, having a steady job, home ownership, being happy or at peace. Dreams for post-secondary attendance and the better life it leads to abound.

Krista  More than anything, I hope for stability. That's something I've never really had.

And,

Daniel  What do you hope for in your future?
Devon  Family. And, just a stable career. […] Living with my girlfriend, whoever that would be. My own house. Somewhere. Maybe not my own house, but basement suite apartment.
Youth have stories of homes marked by instability. The hopes of youth are made more poignant when more is learned about the great instability displayed in the home lives of many participants. School mobility (Rumberger, 2011), foster care, living with grandparents, divorced parents, drug-or-alcohol addicted parents, parents recovering from addiction, moving from town to town—these are all conditions of the home life that many alternative youth school students hail from. Krista states that “I had a very tumultuous childhood. So, a lot of instability […] that led to a lot of absences from school in my earlier days.” Absenteeism is perhaps the strongest predictor of school dropout (Rumberger, 2011). The freedom and flexibility offered at alternative school appears to draw students who leave school early back into the system of public education.

Concluding thoughts, Alternative school interviews. Much, if not all of what youth describe as important elements of their dis/engagement stories can be connected to relationships and their degree of fairness. Systemic unfairnesses that relate to the core activity (Sidorkin, 2002) of alternative schools are indeed apparent, for example, the absence of health education (see also Ruglis, 2009), youths’ claim of underfunding, and school pushout, can be understood regarding funding and policy; however, what is most present on the minds of students are their immediate relationships with school staff. While good relationships do exist, the powerful stories of unfairness told by multiple youth overshadow the good work of certain teachers—indeed, one youth states this explicitly (Eloise). The data serves to remind educators of all stripes, from EA to principal, that while relationships are fundamental, fairness should be a guiding philosophy of youth relations.

Traditional High School. By means of comparison, this study interviewed six youth who attended the nearby traditional public high school. Much of what follows reiterates the
importance of school relationships and un/fairness as pivotal elements of the lifeworlds of youth. There were multiple findings of the study, which are detailed in Table 1, Primary Findings, All Methods; however, only those deemed most important will be covered in this section.

**Good relationships are life-giving.** Time and again traditional school youth described good relationships with peers and teachers as making them feel good, comforted, and generally a-part-of.

Daniel Why is it that group work is more fun?

Sienna Because you don't have to do all the work yourself, and you have a companion to do it with, it's not like you're sitting there researching by yourself, right. You have someone to research with. It's very comforting and, I don't know I think you get to communicate better when you're in a group. When you're just by yourself you don't really have to, you're just kind of secluded from everyone.

Daniel Do you think a lot of what happens here has to do with relationships?

Sienna Yeah, I guess. You don't really want to learn or come to school if you don't have anyone, right?

And,

Parker Well, I'm going to start with the engagement, I suppose. I suffer from anxiety and depression and stuff like that, so I find I don't have the greatest attendance a lot of the time. My teachers support me with that and it's coming to school after being anxious for a few days or something like that is never like, "I really need to catch up
all my work, blah, blah, blah," and have to worry about school in that sense. They're really good like that, so that's really nice and just having good relationships with my teachers.

And,

Sienna

Okay. Well, I really want to know what it meant to be engaged in school. So I just put like after school activities because they engage more of the students and you get extra one on one time and stuff. So like passion block and all the the clubs and stuff that we have. In class and stuff when you share ideas. In classes you get to share ideas, you feel more included in the group and it's really good and team sports. It makes you feel like you represent the school in away and you feel like you have a place so I think team sports are pretty important.

Sidorkin (2002) goes so far as stating that what makes school for the most part bearable is that youth get to see some people that they like for a few hours of the day. This sentiment is echoed in both Sienna and Parker’s remarks. Parker states again that “teachers are a huge, huge part of school” and that they are life-changing. No small remark.

Being in relationship is elaborated upon further. Magnolia describes being a part of a club called MVP, which is about violence prevention in schools. She claims that “making it a lot better for the grade eights” makes her feel “super involved and like I’m doing more than just going to school.” Darren echoes the sentiment of service when he tells about how he tries to “help people out” like a depressed friend, by encouraging her to talk to counselors, and calling the police on her behalf when she’s in danger to herself. Protecting relationships is of utmost
importance to these two students. Relationships of trust and care are reported. Those helpers in critically important positions like the school counselor are described as trustworthy. Teachers’ behaviors such as the way in which they treat students “well” are described. The critical message of the importance of good relationships in high school is clear.

**Feeling included/bullying/social precarity.** Good relationships in school help youth at traditional schools feel included. One way of stressing the importance of feeling included is to listen to youth describe when they are excluded, or put in a position either through an argument/disagreement that makes them feel alone or alienated.

Daniel  What about the disengaged side [of your map]? What bugs you the most?

Philippe  It would probably be ... that's a hard one because all of them are really the same. It would have to be frustration and arguments because there's a lot of people that I dislike but don't hate them. I just don't really want to hang out with them because they said some bad stuff to other people. Arguments are just the worst thing to have.

Daniel  Yeah, totally. They shake you up, don't they?

Philippe  Yeah.

And,

Philippe  Yeah, there's a lot of bullies in high school and it's kind of unfair how they always pick on the little kids. Yeah. I've dealt with one of [inaudible 00:03:42] 12s bullying tons of grade eights. For some reason that happened.

And,
Darren Like I used to have a really bad problem with bullying. I don't anymore. Like when I was in grade two or three or something like that. So I've learned to kind of just ignore things. But every once in awhile, it just drives me insane.

Arguments and bullying seem to interrupt a sense of belonging, of being included. This makes sense as good relationships are contingent upon the absence of intimidation. Darren described being bullied in his elementary grades, but the experience has never left him. He attends high school now with his former bullies, but steers well clear of them today.

While not necessarily about direct bullying, Magnolia reports that there is a powerful social pressure, less so now that she’s in Grade Eleven, that exerts itself upon the psyche. She describes school as having cliques, and in-group and out-group status that occupies the mind. While this is not a new finding in the field of educational research, in this study about dis/engagement there is a suggestion that room be made for further inclusion of measures of relationships, such as the condition of exclusion (which is the underlying violence of bullying) in measures of dis/engagement.

**Un/fairness.** Like youth in alternative schools, youth in traditional schools are particularly sensitive to and are acutely cognizant of teacher/administrator unfairness in the form of: bias, favoritism, disciplinary misjudgment, teacher burnout, public humiliation, and eurocentrist speech.

Philippe Oh. Teachers, like in relationship with them? Sometimes I don't hate or dislike my teacher. That's why I put science down. I just have disagreements with my teacher and it kind of sort of gets me frustrated sometimes but, yeah.
Daniel: What are they usually about?

Philippe: One time I was ... he would get mad at me for like ... Okay, so one time I was right behind this person who was moving something around that was super loud. I was moving something back and he was thinking it was me. Then, I said it wasn't me. He kept arguing with me. Saying it was me for a little bit.

Daniel: So he falsely accused you?

Philippe: Yeah.

Daniel: Does fairness, around fairness have anything to do with anything?

Sienna: Yeah, I guess. You shouldn't have biased teachers 'cause that's not good, that's rude. I have a bias teacher and it's really awful because when they favor people, that just do really well in that class or whatever, that's not fair for the other people that are struggling.

Parker: … my teacher was a little humiliating at times. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. I had to drop the class and I just couldn't do it. I mean, that's fair, I guess, because everyone else was in the same class, everyone else was taking the same course. I'm the only one that didn't get through it, but it was just ...

Daniel: Can I ask you one last time about fairness and unfairness? Do you see it as kind of like an idea that spreads throughout other places in this map? Like, is it important or not?
Magnolia I definitely think it does. I think teachers treating students unfairly can like affect their social lives as well. Like if, I don't know. I think it's quite possible that if students see a teacher treating a student unfairly, it kind of almost gives them permission to treat that student unfairly as well. So yeah, I think it's super important that teachers treat all their students the same, like regardless of their grades or what they might do in their spare time or anything like that.

Even those who benefit from favoritism because of good grades or standing with teachers, recognize the injustice to other youth:

Magnolia Some teachers are way harder on some students than they are on others for like making the same mistake or doing the same thing wrong, breaking the same rule. Like some kids get so much shit if they show up late, but I ... And it might be because they're not getting a good grade in that course or something like that, or they don't work really hard in class. I get pretty good grades and usually pretty productive in class and stuff, but I show up to class late all the time and I never get anything for it. So I guess I'm capitalizing on that, but I think that's just like one example, but there's a lot of examples where one kid will get like a lot of flack for doing something and the another kid who is maybe a better student in the teacher's eyes, will do the same thing and just get nothing for it.

So yeah. Yeah, it's about fairness between students.

Abundantly clear is that youth in traditional schools are watching their teachers with great scrutiny for transgressions of fairness. They are particularly sensitive to social hierarchies
among peers, but they are equally as sensitive to those who wield power over their lives, so much of which is spent at school. Favoritism, bias, humiliation, are all forms of unfairness that teachers demonstrate in this study and appear in the story of students dis/engagement with their schooling.

Administrators such as principals and vice principals are also guilty of treating youth unfairly in this study. As Darren tells it

I've had a number of issues, even with people that are higher up than teachers and stuff and they've said things that are definitely not okay to say to a student. It's, nobody listens. […] the person said that one day they wouldn't be surprised if one of us came to school with … well not came to school, I don't know what they meant by that. I think, but with chunks of the other person on them saying, "I didn't expect that to happen." Like we would end up causing the violent death of a friend. And that's not okay to say to a student. (Darren)

The tale is rather shocking and an example of how unguarded words from administrators are interpreted as unfairness and never forgotten. Darren also feels out of favor with his teachers, and his friend notes the same:

But it's not just me that says stuff like this. Especially when it comes to favoritism. Today, one of my friends turned to me in class and asked like,

"Why does this teacher hate you so much?" (Darren)

The expectation is that teachers, who occupy positions of power, and are leaders in their classrooms, model fair behavior to their students. Fair treatment communicates acceptance and care. Unfairness communicates moral exclusion (Deutsch, 2006), and animosity.
**Conclusion.** Of interest is the similarity between the findings between alternative school youth and traditional school youth. With some differences with regards to in-and-out group peer status, the presence of sports clubs, and a greater emphasis on bullying in school trajectories, much of what we see as critically important to youth is similar.

Youth value fairness in their relationships. Youth feel the powerful sting of unfairness. Traditional school youth see fit to describe to the interviewer those relationships in school that play roles in their stories of dis/engagement. Feeling a sense of belonging in school happens in sports clubs and PE; something generally absent from alternative schools due to smaller numbers and a perhaps a lack of funding. Being treated fairly by teachers and principals is of utmost importance to youth in traditional schools; being heard, or having a voice, is a part of this. To be ignored is perhaps the greatest unfairness one can inflict on another, a complete voiding of the other (Tarc, 2006; Buber, 1958), and yet we have one youth in traditional school who describes this very occurrence when he tries to alert school authorities about a troubled peer. While there are structural resources at the traditional school that seem to promote fair relationships, that is, sports teams/clubs, a larger student population, teachers and counsellors who care, the underlying principles of what makes up a story of dis/engagement is the same as those found at work in alternative schools: school relationships colored with fairness are critical to stories of dis/engagement. School staff are particularly important in these stories of relational fairness and would do well to promote such qualities in all dealings with students.
Chapter Five – Map Analysis

This chapter will build upon the findings of Chapter Four by analyzing the second qualitative method employed in this study, mapping (Haney, Russell, & Bebell, 2004). Maps are analyzed with the support of interview data.

Mapping is an excellent strategy for getting at what is difficult to say in words. Pictures, diagrams, text can be used interchangeably to communicate about a subject. In this study, youth were asked to “create a map of their engagement and/or disengagement with school.” Youth were asked to describe the people, places, things, and events using words, pictures, lines, in the creation of their maps.

As in Chapter Three, this chapter employs two primary theoretical frameworks to understand/interpret the content of maps: the pedagogy of relations (Sidorkin, 2002; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010), and unfairness and/as disengagement (Ruglis & Vallee, 2017). Much of what has already been covered in Chapter Three will be echoed in this chapter, therefore, more attention will be focused upon new findings that emerge because of the mapping method.

Alternative School.

**Dis/engagement is about relations with people in the alternative school // unfairness.**

As in interview data, maps refer most often and in greatest detail to the nature of relations with other people located in the school such as school staff (teachers, Education Assistants (EA), Principal, Case Worker, Social Worker) and other students. The strongest message is that those who treat youth unfairly strongly damage youths’ perceptions of the quality of their school experience. The central focus of the map is transgressive story of one EA, Barbara, who consistently criticizes Eloise and Krista, and other students. Eloise’s map is organized into neat...
tight paragraphs, written in serious purple marker, telling a detailed story of Barbara’s transgressions against her (see Figure 1, Eloise’s Map)

Figure 1. Eloise’s map.

Eloise’s entire map is about relationships. The map is dedicated to a scathing report of the unfairness of a social relation in alternative school that is pivotal in the story of her disengagement with school. While positive experiences and relations do thrive, they are overshadowed by the abuse suffered at the hand of Barbara, who repeatedly casts judgement on Eloise’s academic output, body, diet, mental disability (i.e., “it’s because she’s autistic.”), and more. The relationship seems bereft of care and sensitivity on the behalf of the EA, who work
closely daily with students. Not even the positive relationship with the teacher seems to mitigate
the damage done by the EA.

While the aforementioned relationship between Eloise and Kayla (who did not produce a
map, but affirmed Barbara’s behavior in the interview) and Barbara is one characterized by
unfairness, the majority of maps speak highly of relationships in alternative school. Staff display
the ability to regard the socioemotional life of youth (including those that identify as LGBT+).
Some examples include Devon (Figure 2), who’s minimalist map is dedicated to the singular
message of saying that alternative schools are “awesome,” “more understanding,” and “more
aware of feelings and/or problems. (Ready for anything).” Quite in opposition to the previous
example, this map is talking about relationships guided by an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982), and
a preservation of youths’ dignity. Evan’s map, also reports that he is involved in a “personal
connection with my teachers” and that he witnesses a level of interest in his personal life that is
not displayed in the “mainstream high school” who “doesn’t keep into consideration what each
student goes through in their lives.” (See Figure 3). In what amounts to admirable praise of the
alternative school, Evan notes that “the alt school looks at the bigger pictures of the students in
order for them to succeed” – in other words, they regard the whole student, not simply the
academic elements of the student.
Awesome!

Alternative schools are more understanding.
They are more aware of feelings and/or problems. (Ready for anything)
Figure 3. Evan’s map.

Relationships with other students. Relationships with other youth display a similar tension as that existing between teachers-youth. Relationships with other youth can be characterized as both life-giving, and “drama[tic],” supportive as well as distracting to academic goals. This section will provide examples of youths’ relationships with each other as communicated on maps.

Many challenges and difficulties can arise among peer-to-peer relations. Cassandra’s map (Figure 4) is divided into two sides: “Why I stay” and “Why I’m leaving.” “Why I’m leaving” almost exclusively pertains to relationships with other youth. She begins by stating that alternative school requires “self motivation” to succeed, and regretfully, “most people in this school are not and don’t really care to learn.” Cassandra says that “being surrounded by people like that does for sure drain my motivation.” The sentiment is a recurring one. Eloise’s map also
says that students can be “confrontational,” become involved in “altercations […] a lot” and that social “drama feeds our school like weeds” and that this is “unsettling” to her. Despite the positive influence of the case manager, Eloise states plainly that “the toxicity of some students and staff (singular) is disheartening and hard to ignore.” Eloise notes that sexism is present, and she writes in bold red marker that females students are objectified, a patriarchal society exists in the school, and are rarely held to the same standards of fairness as the women. In other words, unfairness has a gendered dimension to it as well in this setting.

**Figure 4. Cassandra’s map.**
While maps communicate what seems an inordinate amount of strife in peer relations, there is also glowing praise. The most prominent example comes from Dan, the one youth who identifies as transgendered. Dan’s map (Figure 5) is all about the shift from one alternative school to another and the discovery of relationships with peers and teachers marked by inclusion and respect. If Dan is depicted as out-group in the former school, he is embedded happily in-group in the new school. Where he was once outcast for his gender identity, he is now surrounded by love (hearts around “LGBT+”). In a rainbow of colors, is written “Friends” “Teachers” “helpful” and “Support.” Dan indicates in his interview that “most” people are embracing of him and his gender identity, casting a small shadow over his map, but generally speaking, his map communicates relational goodness, fairness, and joy.

*Figure 5.* Dan’s map.
Also interpreted as indicative of good peer relationships is the presence of “PE” and “Gym” on youths’ maps. At first glance, one tends to be dismissive of physical education as little more than one-dimensional; however, upon relational analysis, one may regard PE as an interesting example of how relations develop in schools. Sidorkin (2002) notes that schools should become places more like after-school clubs or neighborhood community centers. What he means by this is that relations are formed in what are considered to be nonacademic or informal settings. PE can be considered such a setting; moreover, PE class can be considered as a Third Space, in which un/official and in/formal scripts intersect with one another, giving rise to authentic teacher-youth interactions. In turn, this Third Space gives rise to a different Figured World, in which identity work may occur. Youth and adults in PE engage in a single activity together that is characterized by movement, teamwork, and raised heart rates and hence, the release of endorphins. In other words, it is an excellent place to build good feeling with other people.

PE and Gym arise time and again in interviews and maps. Two alternative school youth, Bart and Charles, create minimalistic maps with PE and Gym figured prominently in the mapscape (see Figures 6 and 7).
Figure 6. Charles’ map.
Figure 7. Bart’s map.

Bart’s map also elaborates on the theme of Gym further by having a caption below it talking about how sitting and listening to teacher’s abuse direct instruction (talking at the front of the class) is a, presumably, something he endures less of at alternative school.

Alternative school students’ maps shed greater light on the nature of peer relationships in the relational field of school (Sidorkin, 2002). If we scrutinize the presence of patriarchy and sexism we witness the relationship between individual relationships, the relational field, and school policy. Eloise’s map data, supported by Krista’s interview data suggests that the patriarchal “vibe” has as much to do with staff and school disciplinary policy as it does with the male youths’ attitudes. While the unfairness present is obvious, more interesting analytically is
what it says about the interconnectedness, or the nestedness of relationships within themselves, and then within the policies and structure of the school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

If the patriarchy in the alternative school is an example of unfairness, the map data from the one LGBTQ+ participant is an example of the fairness extended to one self-identifying as both male and transgendered. While it may be that Dan benefits from the patriarchal vibe for identifying as male, it is more likely that he is perceived first as the one transgendered youth in the school. Regardless of his sexual identification, his map is a colorful story of first rejection, and then acceptance. Judging from the respect and care he is accorded by teachers, we might conclude that this web of relations is embedded in a school that values inclusion and diversity.

**Traditional high school.** It should come as little surprise at this point that relationships and un/fairness arise as central themes in traditional high school maps, as has been found in previous interview and map analysis. At the risk of retracing older steps, this section will elaborate those two central themes.

*Relationships are most important with regards to dis/engagement.* Map data supports much of what has already been written about relationships; however, what is perhaps most interesting in these six maps is the relationship between relations and fair treatment, which are depicted explicitly and in detail.

The first and most explicit example of the connection between relationships and un/fairness is Magnolia’s map (Figure 8). Magnolia’s map is divided into two sides “What makes me happy,” and “what makes school suck.” The relational theme is pervasive throughout: she is made happy by Rugby, in which she feels “a part of something, non-judgmental social
setting” and her teammates and “Friends!” But what is equally interesting is that both sides communicate the importance of fairness among social relationships. For example, under “happy” we read that “Teachers who treat students equally and like their equals” is the third most important aspect of what makes her happy. The statement explicitly draws a connection between fairness and relationships.

One of the differences noted between the two groups in the interview section was the more elaborate description of in- and out-group status with regards to peer relationships. I suggested that interview data from traditional youth appeared to highlight the more complicated nature of peer groups in their particular setting; maps generally differ in the same manner. On the other side of Magnolia’s map, the converse of equality is depicted in “Social hierarchy,” in which one individual raises themselves up in stature over another. “Conform[ity]” is another concern of Magnolia’s, and we may understand this as the succumbing to the practices and culture of other people; certainly uncharacteristic of an ethos of fairness.
The theme of relationships characterized by aspects of fairness such as respect, mutualism, and the absence of hierarchy is supportive of an understanding of dis/engagement as being fundamentally about relationships and un/fairness (Ruglis & Vallee, 2017).

A second example between relationships and un/fairness is seen in Parker’s map. Parker’s map is organized into two spheres: engagement and disengagement. Contributing to engagement are “mutual respect w/ teachers & students,” “Adult treatment,” and “having support from many teachers,” all of which may be characterized as a quality of fairness amidst relations. Disengaging to Parker is a “lack of understanding,” “not feeling part of a “group,” “lack of friends,” “socializing with other students,” “immaturity” and more. One is impressed upon again
the importance of relations into this aspect of disengagement. The general impression is that out-group status, coupled with “immaturity” is suggestive of relationships that suffer, and may or may not also display instances of social unfairness. Again, the emphasis is not solely on relationships with teachers and staff, but with peers as well.

**Figure 9.** Parker’s map.

There are many maps that support the connection between relationships and fairness. An example from a younger participant, Philippe (Figure 10), also shows “arguments!,” and “bullys!” to be at the top of what he finds disengaging. Darren’s map is entirely about unfair behavior from teachers and administrators within a power dynamic that sees youth as less-than (Figure 11). In this instance, he writes that youth who really need socioemotional assistance will
not receive the help they need because he is not taken seriously – an egregious instance of unfairness and social irresponsibility. Finally, Sienna’s map is also almost exclusively about positive social relations, or relations characterized by fairness. Sienna’s mind map is a web of aspects of school like clubs, activities, classes, teachers, students, group projects, and how they contribute to what engages her in school. Descriptors like “interact,” “one-on-one time,” “sharing ideas,” “everyone included makes it more fun,” “good teachers,” “making friends,” “shared space,” “less excluded,” and, “a part of” pepper the map. Viewed holistically, Sienna is communicating through the map that relations in school characterized by respect and mutualism and inclusion, are critical to her engagement with school.

Figure 10. Philippe’s map.
Figure 11. Darren’s map.
Conclusion

Youths’ colorful, creative—and sometimes minimalist and austere—maps communicate in a way entirely different than semi-structured interviews. These creations remind/teach the viewer of what it means to be a youth in school. When asked to draw a map of their dis/engagement with school, all youth include some reference, if sometimes only obliquely, to relationships in school. Indeed, some maps are explicitly so. For some participants, the entire map is an analysis of relationships in school, lifted by equity or dragged down by injustice/unfairness. Nearly every level of the ecological system of schooling (Eccles and
Roeser, 2011) is depicted by youth: individual relationships to peer groups, to teacher-student and administrator-student relationships. All are included.

Youth articulate those nuances of relationships that are sometimes overlooked or taken for granted. Opportunities to “get together” with peers in the form of group projects, group discussions, and school sports, these are well-known but sometimes forgotten, as we see in alternative school maps—nary is the sign of clubs and sports in the maps of alternative school students, just PE, and sometimes Art class. We know very well that extracurricular activities are part of the lifeblood of good schools (Sidorkin, 2002), indeed, elite boarding schools know this well, spending exorbitant amounts on the upkeep of such programming (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). Despite knowing this, Alternative school as depicted in these maps shows schools, while possessing some very fine student-teacher relationships, as structurally barren when it comes to extracurricular sports and clubs. Is it a question of funding? Is there another structural violence (Farmer, 2003) at work, in which alternative school youth are devalued? The next chapter will attempt to look deeper into the structural differences between alternative and traditional schools and what it means for stories of dis/engagement with schooling.
Chapter Six - Discussion

Structural violence is a term used “as a broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses” (Farmer, 2004, p. 8 quoted in Ruglis, 2009, p.111).

[…] school wears on or protects one’s psyche, and illuminates the principal role that relationships and trust play in schools in causing or mediating stressors—relationships between individual students, between students and authority, between students and academics, and between groups of students. (Ruglis, 2009, p.111)

The problems inherent in state-mandated mass public schooling are long known and well endured (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). We have wonderfully eloquent analyses of the statistically-driven nature of the modern school (Gallagher, 2010; Labaree, 2005), with its dual purpose of teaching all students, as well as reconciling itself with massive population growth. Regrettably, this relationship between statistics, and the problematic normal curve and the institution of schooling is not yet public knowledge (Gallagher, 2010; Labaree, 2005; Vallee, 2017). As a result, when people talk about what ails the public school, they often deflect what is a structural problem to the individual, a well-established erroneous logic that is both racialized and unjust (Fine and Cross, 2016; Vallee, 2017). What is there left to do in such a discourse except to point, once again, to structural violence? To point to that unfairness at the institutional and policy level that frame the relationships living within school walls. This is not a new maneuver: theorists like Ruglis (2008), Weis and Fine (2012), Stetsenko (2017), and others have directed our attention to the contextual injustice that surrounds much if not all the educational endeavor of public schooling. This chapter will do the same regarding alternative schooling by
demonstrating how the structures house the relations (Sidorkin, 2002) that flourish or wither within them.

**Alternative schools and structural violence.** One of the difficulties about writing a policy piece about alternative schools in Canada is that little is written on the matter. If one were writing about educational reform in the United States, then that would be a different story altogether. One must begin somewhere, and where better than gathering the impressions of youth enrolled in alternative schools?

By and large, the take-home message from youth in this study is that alternative school appears woefully underfunded, which one might regard as structural violence or structural unfairness. I draw this conclusion by analyzing the data gathered from both types of students: traditional and alternative. Let us take out of hand that public schooling is not elite schooling (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). The wealthy elite and upper class relieve themselves of the challenges inherent in mass public schooling by enrolling their children in enclave schools replete with rich and robust extracurricular experiences, small classes, and a general sense of excellence and dignity around their educations. Not so the alternative school, which appears to live at the other end of the schooling spectrum: stigmatized, marginalized. Rather, what youth in this study describe seems to be quite the opposite of elite private schools: schooling is an anemic, bare-bones educational experience.

Alternative school youth in this study are cognizant of what is missing. Many have had an abbreviated introduction to traditional high school and therefore a better sense of what’s missing. Some long for the privileges afforded by traditional school, expressing deep desire for what happens “up at Berrywood.” If public school students envy private school students (Vallee & Ruglis, 2017), then alternative school students often envy traditional school students.
Certainly, there are stories of praise for the alternative school: good relationships, caring teachers, and more; however, there are deep cracks in the veneer: a story of school pushout, a longing for the social benefits of Berrywood (including graduation celebration events), a longing for health education classes and clubs. In this study, alternative school does mean “flexibility” and “ethic of care,” but it also means “bare minimum” and “doing without” much of what takes place in traditional schools. Why, we might ask, is it acceptable for the state to force youth into schools in the most developmentally sensitive period of their lives (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), yet refuse them the right to a robust and rich education as commonly understood by all? Better yet, as commonly understood by the upper classes, who for those who are curious to see education done well, would behoove themselves to have a look (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009).

**Relationships despite structural violence.** And yet despite the structural violence that alternative school seems to suffer from, there yet thrives some relationships within them. Teachers who express an interest in the well-being of their students. A PE class that makes up for the absence of a rugby team or other after-school club (Bluechardt, 1995; Caulkins, 2010). “At least we still have Art class” one might say, despite its being leveraged as a reward for academic output (Krista). No, if relationships are the heart of education, then the school is the body which houses it. If Educational Assistants, (who are not subject to the same amount of preparation as a teacher or teacher with a Masters of Education) are not trained to respect the dignity of students, then this is the purvey of the school and the regulatory bodies that declare the type of training required. If more than one student recognizes a patriarchal attitude among staff and in the administration of school discipline, then this again is within the sphere of the institution itself. Relationships do not flourish in vacuums, they are embedded in a nested ecological system of schooling that includes policy at all levels (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).
Increased funding to alternative schools. Much of the problems described in Chapters Four and Five might be alleviated with funding directed towards proper training of EAs and School staff around nonviolent communication, and an infusion of funds and qualified staff. The alternative school already has the flexibility to become something different than a traditional school. The alternative school described herein has the potential to structure itself more like a community center or after-school club, as Sidorkin (2002) recommends, what is abundantly clear is that it lacks the means and perhaps, the political will. Rather, it appears that piggybacking onto traditional school programming has been sought as a mitigating measure for an anemic school experience. Certainly, students can enroll in the traditional school classes and join their clubs, but the general feeling among youth is that they make no reference to knowing what is happening, or that the inconvenience of travelling to and from the school removes from the potential benefits. Of course, having clubs and teams right at your own school, with people you have made relationships with—or will forge relationships with—would be preferable. But for that one would need to pay teachers or outside help to run programming, to ask otherwise would be unfair and unprofessional. In other words, to create the spaces for relationships to flourish, funds are needed. To harp on a point of contrast, private and elite schools understand this well.

Relationships and un/fairness. In any case, another important message from youth in this study is that un/fairness is the primary lens by which they filter their relationships. Time and time again, youth in both types of school show and tell that they understand relationships as being fair or unfair. The relationships that are grossly unfair overshadow the fair relationships—their mark is too deep on the psyche and body. Indeed, Prilleltensky (2012) and Nancy Krieger (2005) go as far as saying these experiences are embodied, influencing the health or well-being of the individual. This is reason enough to reshape how teachers and EAs are trained before
working with youth in schools. While learning is an important part of what we wish to see in schools, data herein suggests that learning is contingent upon good relationships colored with fairness. Moreover, fairness extends into the walls of the schoolhouse itself—after all, students at alternative school are aware of what is missing from their education, and becomes the reason they “want to leave” (Cassandra) alternative school and return to the traditional school.

**A refuge from failure and a pedagogy of relation.** If there is something missing from alternative schools, there is also something found that is particularly satisfying to alternative school students: a refuge from failure and a pedagogy “driven by the complex needs of adolescents” (Fine, 2018, personal communication). The refuge from the threat of failure experienced in traditional elementary and secondary schools is a powerful attraction to some participants. The release from the traditional pass/fail paradigm of traditional schools is of great relief to students and seems to grow both out of policy and of the ethic of care displayed by teachers and staff in general. It might appear that passing coursework is not necessarily the primary goal in the school; rather, the complex needs of youth are what are most important.

**Relationships in Traditional v. Alternative schools.** The notion that alternative school youth have complex needs is reinforced by the culture of relationships found in alternative schools; this differs from traditional school student data, in which relationships appear more idiosyncratic. Alternative youth data suggests that alternative schools have a culture of caring relationships (that can be transgressed by intrusive staff) which buoys the entire school. Traditional school youth do not communicate this same culture. We may speculate that there are numerous reasons for this: increased class sizes, more rigorous academic demands on students, and more. But the data suggests that in traditional schools, one must “work harder” to feel a significant sense of belonging—this means attending clubs, joining sports teams, or some other
extracurricular in which one receives more attention from a teacher, staff member, or other students.

**The nature of school relationships.** While tempting to romanticize relationships as the elixir that saves schooling, there is a greater complexity at work. While fairness in relationships is key, one weakness of this study is that the nuances inherent in relationships is missed. This study provides examples that support the notion of relational and policy un/fairness as being highly threatening to relationships; however, as people well know from their own experience, relationships are complex and nuanced choreographies with dichotomies at work such as close/far, intrusive/distant that all depend upon what at least one scholar has called emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Future studies may wish to delve deeper into an exploration of the “dance” in relationships. What can be gleaned from this study is that a culture of relationships does much to promote good relationships between students/teachers/educational assistance. This contrasts with what seems to be typically found in traditional school cultures; at least, relationships may not be the primary goal, rather, academic excellence, or some such goal might take its place.

What *can* be said about the nuances of relationships in this study? At the very least, we may say that those school staff who are too intrusive do poorly relationally. School staff who make unsolicited comments about the way students look, what they eat, the (dis)abilities they have been diagnosed with, their academic output, seem to fare worse than those who do not. Indeed, these actions are interpreted as being unfair to students, and unfair behavior harms relationships extensively. On the other hand, youth appreciate inquiries into their well-being. They recognize and appreciate actions that demonstrate that a staff member cares about the
emotional well-being of youth. These are just brief examples of aspects of the choreography of school relationships. Further study is required.

**Conclusion: “Fairness in all things.”** A “fairness in all things” approach to alternative schooling would do well to serve youth. Youth in this study communicate strong feelings of injustice/unfairness explicitly at both the interpersonal and structural level of schooling. I interpret the bare-bones, stripped-down, anemic alternative school as a structural violence in which those who are counseled-into or pushed-out of traditional schools must suffer through. Those qualities of rich and robust traditional or private school experiences are absent from the alternative school: clubs, sports teams, trips abroad, educational opportunities, health classes. Alternative school youth still praise their school for its flexibility and the good relationships they have therein, but they also scathingly criticize the structural violence of the institution, and certain staff members who treat youth unfairly. Given that sports teams and clubs figure highly with fair staff members, I interpret the structural violence of the alternative public school as being directly connected to underfunding—itsel connected to the violence of undervaluing those youth who find themselves chosen or choosing alternative school for themselves. That underfunding also extends into the training of staff members, specifically Educational Assistants, and their employ rather than other teachers or teachers with master’s degrees, who are arguably better prepared to understand the psychodynamics and needs of youth.
Chapter 7 – Conclusion

From the point of view of school as an organization, learning is impossible to sustain as an all-encompassing activity around which everything is centered. Yet what I find the most worrisome is the steady decline of extracurricular activities and other “peripherals” of school life like rituals and celebrations, the extermination of places and periods of times. Most kids get up in the morning and go to school so they can be around their friends and a few good adults. The community and fellowship are by far the strongest attractor and the hardest currency schools can offer in exchange for their incessant demands. (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 133)

I have done my best to present to the reader a fair and accurate representation of a small project undertaken at a small alternative school in coastal BC, Canada. Speaking generally, this school is beloved by most of the students in this study. The reason for this is twofold: the alternative school is unique in its ability to have flexibility in a variety of aspects, and the school is small enough that relations flourish among staff members who display an ethic of care. Spending time in the school one sees much interaction between youth and staff, most, if not all, marked by care and fairness. On the other hand, there is much room for improvement, at least according to the participants in this study. The question is, will anyone listen to these youths’ voices and effect change where it truly counts—at the level of policy?

This dissertation retreads much of what is already known about the problem of mass public education; the difference is, it looks straight at its weakest link. The problem of teaching all students in a one best system, never leaves. Schools are designed for a majority, but there is a minority population that will always struggle to be reconciled with the paradigm of public schooling (pass/fail, grade ascension, etc.). The alternative school is considered by some to be a
problem precisely because it gives traditional schools an opportunity to exclude those minority populations who struggle with traditional schools (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Administrators and teachers alike can be heard in lunchrooms saying things like “that student belongs in alt school.” They may as well be saying “I want to push that student out of this school.” And so, there is a justice imperative—a fairness imperative that arises with that understanding of the systemic failure of public school systems: one must put in place policy that ensures a robust, rich education for those whom we know and expect to have a difficulty with traditional/mainstream public schooling. As Nancy Fraser (1989) might put it, there needs to be a discourse about about how the needs of these of students is being interpreted: for example, is the failure to fit in at traditional school the fault of the student of the school? I would suggest that we interpret the special needs of students in alternative schools as an expected failure of public schooling to teach all students (Fraser, 1989; Tyack, 1974).

If we take as a starting place the knowledge that schools inherently cannot teach all students (see Vallee, 2017), then educators from top to bottom are faced with a choice: keep alternative schools, or dissolve them and improve public schools. As of the time of this writing, I am for keeping alternative schools with a few caveats. Here are my recommendations.

1. **Alternative schools as the finest of schools.** The first of these caveats is that alternative schools need to become as good as the finest private schools. This gesture communicates a deep understanding of the injustice/unfairness of maintaining a system we expect to fail certain youth (literally, fail). Private/elite schools are laden with rich educational experiences, a plethora of clubs, field trips galore, health and wellness education, and dedicated staff who respect the dignity of students in every fair dealing. Utopian? Perhaps, but I rather believe this is easier to achieve than we think, and moreover, I am not alone. Sidorkin (2002)
argues that schools need to become more like after-school clubs, community centers, where what is valued first is the building of relationships, and then academic work gets done almost incidentally. Alternative schools, while mandated to teach to a provincial curriculum, appear to have the flexibility to make such changes.

2. Employ well-educated school staff knowledgeable in relational un/fairness. The second caveat for keeping alternative schools is with regards for staffing. There is a temptation to hire Educational Assistants in place of extra teachers. We see the same trend in Universities with the hiring of adjunct staff to teach courses, instead of hiring more tenure-track professors. The reasons are simple, they are less expensive. But there is a difference in quality; and I say this respectfully and as an adjunct professor myself. Teachers must endure longer training, and may even possess extended training in the form of Master’s of Education degrees. In my opinion, this makes for a better teacher. Others may disagree. My opinion of Educational Assistants arises from my experience working with them in nearly every school in the district in which this dissertation grew. My observation is this: with few exception, they are generally behavioristic, and tend to need to “do something” in order to feel useful. What this looks like in a classroom setting is what we witness in the example of Barbara, who criticizes unfairly the amount of work students do. The criticism is interpretable as a behaviorist attempt at punishment; going to PE and Art class are rewards (though administration did make some gesture towards eliminating this practice according to participants). I have also seen Education Assistants literally insert themselves with a student who did not need any assistance whatsoever, in part to pass the time (“I’m here for the hour and I need something to do” I overheard one say), the student reluctantly acquiescing. What if EAs were relieved of the burden of always proving their value in this way? What if rather than feeling as though their value is measured by the
amount of academic output youth generate, we assess the nature of the relationships they keep and maintain with youth?

There is a need for good staff in schools, make no mistake. The question is, what makes a good staff member? Alternative school youth adored their teacher but frequently complained of unfairness at the hands of the EA. My conclusion is that teacher education has some role to play in this finding and if EAs are to be employed, EA training needs to include coursework on school relations and un/fairness. This I would consider of utmost priority.

With those caveats being spoken, I think there is much potential for alternative schools. Consider who winds up at alternative schools. The youth in this study do not hail from elite families with resources and capital; they come from working-class homes often marked with the signs of precarity. Financial precarity, residential precarity, precarious familial relationships marked by divorce and drug and alcohol abuse. The longed-for futures reported by youth are often characterized by their explicit and implicit desire for stability. These findings should generate a feeling of sympathy for this population. In a world characterized by racial/class injustice, social inequality, why do we find it acceptable to insult students with a bare-bones education in a segregated setting? If alternative schools are to endure, they must become spaces of hope and justice/fairness. The suggestions made throughout this chapter are excellent places to begin carrying out this imperative.

Limitations and Further Research

This study displays a number of limitations that bear consideration. First, the study is exploratory, and therefore the number of participants is small: generalization to larger populations is inadvisable. Further studies may consider visiting multiple sites and using mixed-
method methodologies that include the use of surveys of dis/engagement and youth health.

Which leads to the second limitation, which is the use of only two primary methods, the interview and maps. Despite these two limitations, the data gathered is both rich and descriptive and supports a theory of alternative school dis/engagement as being about relational un/fairness.

**Conclusion**

I have striven to show how this small group of alternative and traditional school youth have gone through lengths to communicate to the reader that school is essentially about the relationships forged within them. These relationships are understood and interpreted as being life-giving or -taking according to the level of fairness that lives within them. Alternative schools exist in an ecology of public schooling whose financial allocations determine the quality of staffing and the robustness of extracurricular activities they offer or do not offer. The issues of staffing, staff knowledge about relationships, and extracurriculars are important because they are critical elements that determine the nature and quality of school relationships both between youth and between youth and staff. If schooling is indeed about thriving, fair relationships between people, then we must do all we can to provide the support necessary for these relationships to flourish.

There is a tendency to gather one’s data and leave abruptly, taking the findings and letting them sit upon a library shelf. To confirm my conclusions I followed up with additional conversations with several students to determine their view of the conclusions. It would be fruitful to find out what youth participants thought of the finding that alternative school dis/engagement was largely a matter of relational un/fairness.

I contacted two participants from the alternative school and one participant from Berrywood to learn their reaction to the study’s findings. I was pleased to learn that they agreed
wholeheartedly with the conclusion that alternative school dis/engagement was mostly about relationships and un/fairness and the underfunding of their school.

Krista was “not surprised by that [finding that relationships are key]” and she agreed that is was “very very true” that her school was limited curricularly and extracurricularly by limited funds. She described how field trips were usually “hiking trips in the woods,” which was fine, but there was much more out there experientially.

Dan agreed as well but found that his relational needs were generally being met. He was fairly treated and given much “personal space” With regards to school funding, he thought there was a “lack for sure.”

The one high school student, Magnolia, was not surprised to hear the findings as well, though she expected relational unfairness to be higher in alternative schools (which it was). She was glad to hear of the findings.

As a researcher I was pleased to hear the agreement among youth participants. Personally, I am interested in equity and have much invested in the notion. I am challenged by Sidorkin’s (2014) notion, however, that generally speaking, social inequality has little to do with the international achievement of public schools. Sidorkin suggests that despite differences in levels of social inequality, various countries have relatively similar public school outcomes, seemingly putting to rest the notion that addressing social inequality will impact school graduation rates. But not so quick—he rather suggests that the society and school are caught in a “Catch-22,” meaning that to fix either society of education, each requires the other to improve.

And so, I am forced to rethink my recommendations to some extent. At the very least, I must acknowledge that throwing more money at school will have limits (Sidorkin, 2014). That
said, there appears to be way yet to travel for this particular alternative school before reaching that limit.
Appendices

Appendix A, Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Alternative School Students

Number of Participant: ___________________

Date and Time: ________________________

Digital Recording Label/Index Number: _________________________

*turn on and test the recording device!*

Interviewer:

I’m hoping for us to have a conversation about you and your schooling experience today. I’m interested in what your experience has been.

We’re here today because I’m interested in alternative schools. I want to know how youth in alternative schools understand their engagement and/or disengagement with school.

When I say “engaged” I mean what makes them feel alive in alternative school. When I say “dis/engaged” I mean what makes you feel burdened, or not-apart-of, or “not involved” about your school.

Your answers don’t have to be only about school. If there’s anything outside of school, like your neighborhood, families, friends, or something else that is part of your engagement or disengagement, please say so.

*allow participant to talk for as long as they can about their school life history – do not interrupt with requests for chronological order, that can be dealt with at a later time.

*pay careful note to anything you feel is not being said and make a record of the thought below.

More Direct Questions:

1. Where do you feel most alive in school?
2. Where do you feel most alive in the community?
3. Where do you feel passionate or interested?
4. What do you spend the most time on?
5. Where do you feel most alive politically?
6. What are you making or producing?
7. Who are you teaching?
8. Talk to me about school and politics.
9. If you are disengaged from school, are you engaged somewhere else?
10. Describe a place where time flies.
11. Tell me about yourself.
12. Tell me about your experience of alternative school these days.
13. Tell me about your experience of school last year.
14. Tell me the history of your schooling.
15. What are things you see as your strengths.
16. What do you hope for your future?
17. What do you want to do in five years?
18. How do you see alternative schools as a place for kids like you?
19. You say you’re bored, so what do you do all day?
Appendix B, Map Protocol

Map Protocol:

Name of Participant: ___________________

Date and Time: ________________________

Digital Recording Label/Index Number: _________________________

*turn on and test the recording device!* 

Investigator:

Please take 20 minutes to draw a map of how you understand your engagement and or disengagement in alternative school.

You may use pictures, words, lines, shapes ... anything you’d like to show the different places, people, and events that caused you to be engaged and/or disengaged from school.

Now that you’re finished, please explain your map to me. (Segue into semi-structured interview protocol).
References


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