MARGINALIZATION AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN ONTARIO: EXPLORING STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THE CITY OF PETERBOROUGH

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ABSTRACT

Marginalization and Alternative Education in Ontario: Exploring Student Experiences in the City of Peterborough

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In Ontario, mainstream education often does not meet the individual learning needs of high school students who experience marginalization. Alternative school programs may offer these students greater support and flexibility in completing their high school diploma. While previous research on alternative education in Ontario is thorough, it is limited to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). To address the lack of research within smaller communities, this project uses the experiences of alternative education students in the City of Peterborough to explore how alternative programs meet student needs. Using a narrative methodology, the project relies on interviews with six students who offer their stories of attending alternative education programs. Research findings suggest that alternative education programs offer a meaningful and effective way for students to complete high school. Participants emphasize the importance of positive relationships with teachers and staff, student-driven curriculum, paid co-operative credits, and material benefits.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Contextualizing the Issue

Education has increasingly become a gatekeeping mechanism for wellbeing. Quality education increases access to sustainable and well-paid employment (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020a), improves health and wellbeing throughout the lifespan (Low et al., 2005; Shankar et al., 2013), and raises personal self-esteem (Morrissette, 2011). Despite the clear benefits of education many young people face barriers to success in school, while for others, mandatory participation in public education can be violent and disruptive. Groups experiencing systemic marginalization, characterized along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and many other social identities, have trouble in mainstream educational environments, and are therefore excluded from the benefits outlined above (Vega, Moore III, & Miranda, 2015; Nichols, 2018). As such, alternative education schools have been constructed to ensure students who experience difficulty in mainstream education are still able to receive their education, while also meeting the legal obligation to provide education for those 18 years and under. Alternative education refers to the programs, institutions, and models that operate outside the mainstream K-12 education system. Alternative schools often serve adult learners, individuals re-entering secondary school after dropping out, and students transferred from mainstream schools to avoid expulsion (Raywid, 1994; te Riele, 2007). Within alternative schools, research suggests that supportive classroom environments, learning flexibility, and greater connection to staff and teachers enhances learning for students (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Morrissette, 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2012).

1.2 Project Overview

This research project explores the experiences of youth in alternative education and involves the stories of six students who have completed or are currently enrolled in alternative education. Participant's stories will be explored to discover the themes and patterns that characterize the student experience of enrolling in, attending, and graduating from an alternative education program. These experiences are an important step towards a better understanding of how alternative education meets the unique needs of youth. The concept of marginalization will also be explored, with a specific focus on processes of marginalization, identity formation, and the awareness of oppression among the young people who participated in this study. To avoid generalizing the experiences of young people, this research project avoids the term 'marginalized youth' when referring to young people who are experiencing the process of marginalization. Five general questions guide this research:

1. What motivates a student to attend an alternative education school?
2. What benefits do students find in attending an alternative school, rather than a mainstream school?
3. What challenges do students experience in alternative education?
4. What outcomes do the students expect upon graduating from an alternative school?
5. What changes would students like to see to better meet their needs?

These questions help guide the data-gathering process through the collection, transcription, and coding of student experiences. Moreover, these questions served as the foundation for analysis and inquiry into the storied lives of young learners explored

herein. Recognizing the need for research on alternative schools, this project has been conducted with students attending an alternative education school site located in Peterborough, Ontario. This location has been chosen specifically as a response to the limited amount of Canadian research on alternative education outside of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The methodological foundation for this project relies on narrative inquiry (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Kim 2016), while data analysis will use emergent theme analysis (Bowen, 2006; Massey, 2011) to explore shared themes among research participants.

The goal of this project is to better understand the experiences of students in alternative education, including student motivations, intentions and expected outcomes. This information will help future researchers, educators, and policymakers understand how students can succeed in school despite the barriers imposed by marginalized social identities. While this project explores experiences of marginalization and exclusion, it does not seek to portray students in alternative education as one-dimensional examples of trauma and damage. Acknowledging the critiques of damage-centered research offered by Ellsworth (1989), hooks (1990), and Tuck (2009), this project attempts to explore how marginalization operates within educational systems without adopting a "a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (Tuck, 2009, p. 413). Rather than presenting experiences of marginalization as the basis of participant identities, an effort has been made to portray the complex and nuanced identities held by students who participated in this project.

1.1.2 Chapter Outline

Chapter one introduces the focus on student experiences in alternative education and provides an overview of the research methods used in the project. The idea of marginalization is introduced as an important aspect of student experiences in alternative education. A personal rational is given for why the research topic was chosen, based on personal experiences working in social services, housing, and poverty reduction agencies. A conceptual framework is provided, detailing the theoretical background which framed the project.

Chapter two explores the literature relevant to the research project. The importance of quality education is connected to shifting labour needs in the global economy. Education is further connected to health and wellbeing across the lifespan. Chapter two also explores the idea of marginalization and identity formation in youth. Marginalization is defined as the process by which a person or group is peripheralized from the dominant experience of society, limiting their access to resources, and exposing them to violence, exploitation, and humiliation. An intersectional approach to marginalization is used to better understand how different social identities influence how one experiences marginalization, often along the lines of race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and gender. Marginalization and identity formation in youth is explored, emphasizing the interaction between age, education, and non-dominant social identities. Chapter two further defines certain factors that contribute to non-completion in school, and the turning points that lead students to return to education. Finally, chapter two defines alternative education schools, how they operate, and the different kinds of

alternative programs. An outline of the research base on alternative education is provided, along with a contextual base for alternative education in Ontario.

Chapter three outlines the methodological framework for the research process. Narrative inquiry is identified as the primary means of inquiry into student experiences, focusing on student narratives and how participants interpret their experience in alternative education, while emergent themes are introduced as a way of analyzing the data gathered from participants. Narrative inquiry and emergent theme analysis are offered as a means of better understanding subjective student experiences, while also allowing participants to shape the direction of the research. The method of data collection and analysis are also described, including the process of recruitment, interviewing, coding, and interpreting participant discussions. The challenges involved in the research process are explored, along with the difficulty related to partnership with local alternative schools. Finally, chapter three provides a description of participants and the alternative program they attended.

Chapter four explores the different themes that emerged during participant interviews. These include the personal and socio-structural factors that led to participants enrolling in alternative education and the turning points that brought them back to school. The benefits of alternative education are explored, focusing on positive teacher-student relationships, the flexibility of curriculum and evaluation, the necessity of paid co-op credits, and material benefits such as bus passes and meals. The challenges of alternative education are also explored, specifically in the lack of social connections between students, and the lack of higher learning opportunities. Student motivations are analyzed, emphasizing expected outcomes related to employment and post-secondary education, as

well as the importance of social connections with friends, family, and teachers. Different arguments for change are defined, emphasizing participants' critical awareness of marginalization and disengagement within education. Chapter four concludes with an examination of each participant's vision of an ideal school.

Chapter five connects the initial research questions to several topics that arose during the interviewing and analysis process. Counter-narratives are discussed, emphasizing how students' motivation to succeed challenges dominant narratives of youth who experience marginalization in education. A comparison is made between the benefits of alternative schools and the limitations of traditional education, with a specific focus on how alternative curriculum is supported by anti-oppressive pedagogy. The challenges experienced by students are explored in connection to the strength and resilience of participants, while the needs-first ethos of radical humanism is connected to the purpose of alternative education. Finally, the possibility of change from within is discussed, using the suggestions made by participants in their description of an ideal school. Chapter six concludes the research project, exploring suggestions for future change, the limitations of the project, and potential areas for future research.

1.3 Rationale

My reason for exploring the experiences of youth in alternative education is motivated by both personal and professional reasons. From my past experiences working in the fields of social services, housing, and homelessness, I have witnessed the benefits that education provides. This is particularly true in my hometown of Peterborough, Ontario, which experiences a high degree of housing insecurity (United Way, 2019), poverty (Peterborough Public Health, 2017), and, as of January 2022, has the highest

unemployment rate in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). In my professional experience working in Peterborough, I encountered many young people who experienced barriers to the workplace and broader flourishing due to lack of education. The unfortunate truth I heard from these youth was that the requirements of mainstream schools did not meet their needs. For these youth, more pressing concerns such as housing and income took priority over education. Despite these concerns, I also witnessed how, when given an environment conducive to their individual learning needs, many youths were able to succeed in school. Moreover, this success often led to more stable employment, higher self-esteem, and a greater ability to provide for their basic needs. These experiences, combined with my personal desire to encourage and support positive social change, have led me to conducting research on alternative education.

My personal motivation for this research is further supported by empirical research on the importance of education for youth. Education has the opportunity to support the long-term wellbeing of groups who experience marginalization, as it is a necessity for stable employment, a living wage, safer and more secure housing, and improved health-related decision-making (Low et al., 2005; Shankar et al., 2013; OECD, 2020a). Ideally, this project will serve as a part of the greater effort to improve educational outcomes for youth. Further research into the effectiveness and applicability of alternative education, therefore, has the potential to improve the long-term wellbeing of youth who have experienced marginalization in mainstream educational settings.

The rationale for conducting research on alternative education is further derived from the limited number of Canadian studies in this area. While several recent studies have explored alternative education in Canada (Morrissette, 2011; Bascia & Maton, 2015;

Rothstein, 2017; James & Samaroo, 2017; Azzarello, 2017; Shuttleworth, 2017; Stewart, 2020), most Canadian research focuses on schools within the Greater Toronto Area. Research findings from these Toronto-based studies are used to make generalized conclusions for the rest of the country. As such, a research gap exists in Canadian studies on alternative education outside of the Greater Toronto Area. To bridge this gap, and to provide insight into local experiences, this research explores the specific stories of students in alternative education in the comparatively smaller community of Peterborough, Ontario.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

Before engaging in this research, it is necessary to outline a conceptual framework for pursuing this project. Foremost, my conceptual approach to this research project is framed through critical pedagogy, and the work of Paulo Freire (1968/2018). Freire's influential text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2018) has largely informed the conceptual approach to working with and understanding youth who experience marginalization. More specifically, Freire's work on the alienation of youth provides a framework for analyzing the oppressive social structures which lead to barriers to success within mainstream education. Furthermore, this research project rejects the banking model of education which views students as empty vessels to filled with academic knowledge, and instead embraces Freire's (1968/2018) idea of a liberating education. This approach to education provides students control and choice in how they learn – an idea which shares many similarities with today's alternative education school.

My approach to research relies on the concept of radical humanism, which emphasizes the necessity to work within structures of oppression and marginalization in

order to change such systems from within (Mullaly, 2007). Mullaly (2007), who himself is influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, informs this research project through his writing on radical humanism. Radical humanism emphasizes the necessity to work within institutions of oppression and marginalization, in order to better understand how such institutions may be changed from within. For the purpose of this project, radical humanism is useful in framing research within an education system which has failed to meet the needs of youth who experience marginalization. Through efforts of empowerment, consciousness-raising, collectivization, and politicization (Mullaly, 2007; Dean, 2020), working within an oppressive educational system provides an opportunity for meaningful change.

Finally, this research project draws on an anti-oppressive framework. Clifford (1995; as cited in Burke & Harrison, 1998) provides a broad explanation for the term, emphasizing that anti-oppression:

> indicate[s] an explicit evaluative position that constructs social divisions (especially 'race', class, gender, disability, sexual orientation and age) as matters of broad social structure, at the same time as being personal and organisational issues. It looks at the use and abuse of power not only in relation to individual or organisational behaviour which may be overtly, covertly or indirectly racist, classist, sexist and so on, but also in relation to broader social structures for example, the health, educational, political and economic, media and cultural systems and their routine provision of services and rewards for powerful groups at local as well as national and international levels. (p. 132)

As such, an anti-oppressive pedagogical approach is concerned with how broad social structures interact to produce oppression and division within an educational context (Burke and Harrison, 1998). Similar to the work of Freire, anti-oppressive pedagogy is a necessary approach when working with youth who experience marginalization. In order to avoid reproducing oppressive social structures, anti-oppressive pedagogy places the

oppression experienced by youth in the context of power, privilege, and institutional inequality. Rather than having students adapt to oppressive institutions, anti-oppressive pedagogy is more concerned with changing institutions to better meet the unique needs of youth who experience marginalization.

Ultimately, this research project employs a blended approach of critical pedagogy, structural social work, and anti-oppressive practice. Together this approach creates a framework which attempts to: 1) explore experiences of marginalization within schools, 2) challenge oppressive educational institutions, and 3) seek effective educational alternatives for youth. This framework assumes a critical stance, emphasizing the political nature of education in Canada, as well as the role that power and privilege play in reproducing educational inequality. This critical approach, however, is tempered with a pluralist understanding of our current neo-liberal, capitalist reality. While the ultimate goal of this approach is to change oppressive structures of education, it is also necessary to acknowledge the short-term, material needs of young learners, which may, at times, require one to conform to the same educational institutions and bureaucratic barriers which enforce inequality. It is here that radical humanism is crucial, with the notion of working within the system to change the system providing an ethical imperative to engage with structures of oppression. While this framework acknowledges the experiences of youth, it does not attempt to assume or generalize these experiences; the purpose, rather, is to provide an opportunity for youth to voice their lived experiences of oppression, marginalization, resilience, and strength.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 The Importance of Quality Education

This chapter will explore two arguments for the importance of ensuring quality education; first, education as means of ensuring success in the labour market, and second, the influence of education on health. Together, these arguments emphasize that quality education is necessary for long term wellbeing. For many people, education limits access to employment, health, and other basic necessities. While one's access to education should not exclude them from meeting their basic needs, it is a reality of our current global economy in which one's employment opportunities (and related access to income, health benefits, and housing) are limited by their educational attainment. As such, it is necessary to explore how education is connected to individual wellbeing.

Education as means of job preparedness is a necessary function of our current economic system. While goals of system-level change to structures of education and employment are ideal, they do not preclude meeting the needs of youth in the short-term. As such, education must attend to the current reality of a globalized labour market at the same time as it pursues justice-driven changes. This means that a focus on employability is both understandable and necessary within alternative education. The same logic holds true for health; in an ideal world, one's level of education would not directly impact their health and wellbeing, however, the relationship between employment, income, and health is present and ongoing. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the current realities of globalization and health to better understand the importance of quality education for all youth.

2.1.1 Education and the Global Economy

The integration of world economies has led to dramatic shifts in labour markets, job qualifications, and the flow of goods and services. This integration, referred to as globalization (Spring, 2008), has resulted in significant changes to educational institutions. Discourse surrounding this change has largely focused on the understanding that the ever-increasing flow of technology, innovation, and ideas between countries has resulted in new markets, increased product consumption, and emerging global economies (Marginson, 2007; Spring, 2008; Misra, 2012; Khan, 2015; Stromquis & Monkman, 2014). In response, educational institutions have shifted to meet the needs of a globalized market (Spring, 2008; Stromquist & Monkman, 2014), and while these changes have largely affected tertiary institutions (Marginson, 2007), they have also affected primary and secondary schools (Misra, 2012). A recent example of this influence is evident in the rise of information and communications technology; the shift to information and service-based economies has resulted in the adoption of coding and computational based curriculum in the classroom (Misra, 2012; Wong, Cheung, Ching, and Huen, 2015; Stromquis & Monkman, 2014). This shift in curriculum supposes that for today's children to be successful in tomorrow's global economy, it is necessary to provide quality education and training for the skills needed to succeed within a job market dominated by information and communication services.

Shifting curriculum to align with the needs of the global market further confirms the growing connection between education and employment. In 1990, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published the *World Declaration on Education for All*. This document acknowledged that across the globe,

"more than 100 million" (p. 1) children and adults are unable to complete basic education, and that many more "do not acquire essential knowledge and skills" (p.1). Article 3, chapter 2, of the *World Declaration on Education for All* states that:

> An active commitment must be made to removing educational disparities. Underserved groups: the poor; street and working children; rural and remote populations; nomads and migrant workers; Indigenous peoples; ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities; refugees; those displaced by war; and people under occupation, should not suffer any discrimination in access to learning opportunities (1990, p. 5).

Findings from UNESCO suggest that a global effort is needed to ensure there is access to quality education for all that promotes equitable integration into labour markets. More recent data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggests that secondary education alone cannot guarantee successful employment. In the 2020 report *Education at a Glance*, the OECD found that across 37 countries, the employment rate of adults without upper-secondary education (Grade 10 to Grade 12) was 59%, increasing to 77% for adults with completed secondary education, and 86% for adults with post-secondary education. The OECD report (2020a) further suggests that higher education reduces reliance on part time and seasonal employment. Findings from the OECD emphasize that youth and young adults without secondary school qualifications face barriers in finding successful employment; without completing high school, youth and young adults are restricted to precarious, low-paying employment, if employed at all (OECD, 2020a; OECD, 2020b).

2.1.2 Education as a Social Determinant of Health

Beyond improving employability in the global labour market, education is also an important factor in determining health and wellbeing across the lifespan. In the current

context of health research, there is an important recognition of the social environment; certain factors, separate from biology or genetics, have a significant impact on health outcomes throughout one's life (World Health Organization, 2008). These factors are situated in an individual's social environment, and can include housing, income level, employment conditions, education, and early childhood experiences (Low et al., 2005; Shankar et al., 2013).

While not a health researcher, Engels (1845; as cited in Raphael, 2019), in his research on the working class in England, provides an early documented effort the explain how the social environment can influence health outcomes. In his work, Engels (1845; as cited in Raphael, 2019) emphasizes that "a class which lives under the conditions already sketched and is so ill-provided with the most necessary means of subsistence, cannot be healthy and can reach no advanced age" (p. 139). Further development in the field of health and social determinants evolved from the work of the sociologist Emile Durkheim (Berkman, Glass, Brissette & Seeman, 2000). Durkheim's work on the social pattern of suicide help bring forward an "understanding of how social integration and cohesion influence mortality." (Berkman et al., 2000, p. 844). Drawing from the work of Durkheim, Berkman et al. (2000) explain that social-structural conditions, such as social cohesion, poverty, and urbanization, shape both the extent and nature of an individual's social support network. This network, in turn, influences an individual's social capital and their health-related behaviours (Berkman et al., 2000). Significant development since the early work of Engels and Durkheim has led to a general recognition of the social determinants of health; in 2008 the WHO published a

Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, outlining the modern state of health and social inequality (WHO, 2008).

The connection between education and health is well documented, with several studies suggesting a positive correlation between an individual's educational attainment, and their health outcomes across the lifespan (Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery, 1997; Low et al., 2005; Bambra et al., 2009; Shankar et al., 2013; Apostolico & Shendell, 2016). Shankar et al. (2013) maintain that education directly influences health related decisions as individuals with higher levels of education tend be informed on health-related issues. As such, educated individuals are generally able to make more informed decisions regarding their health. Education also influences one's access to higher paying and more stable employment, improving an individual's access to employee health benefits, a healthy work environment, and greater workplace accommodation for chronic illnesses (Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery, 1997; Shankar et al. 2013). This finding is shared by Low et al. (2005) who emphasize that "well-educated people are more likely to work full time, have higher incomes, and be in more satisfying jobs" (p. 1139).

Job safety is also an important consideration when examining the connection between education, work environment, and health; Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery (1997) suggest that "people who enter less well paid employment are … more likely to encounter … physical and chemical hazards at work" (p. 1195). This finding is shared by Apostolico and Shendell (2016), who further emphasize the higher likelihood of workplace injury exhibited by young workers of low socio-economic status. While physical workplace hazards are a potential cause of health concerns, there is also a significant potential for poor health outcomes related to social stressors in the workplace.

In a study on risk factors for cardiovascular disease, Winkleby, Jatulis, Frank and Fortmann (1992) emphasize a potential connection between work environment, smoking, and high cholesterol, concluding that "in general, those with the lowest educational attainment exhibited the highest prevalence of risk factors" (p. 817) for cardiovascular disease. This area of research was expanded upon by Pereira, Meier, and Elfering (2012), who further explain that workplace stressors can contribute to poor sleep quality, prolonged fatigue, and chronic tensions. Research on the connection between work and health outcomes suggest that poor work environment may increase the likelihood of both chronic and acute physical impairment. Considering the potential impact education has on an individual's ability to secure high quality employment, it can be argued that education is a significant factor in determining health outcomes across the lifespan.

2.1.3 Conclusion

Together, health and employment serve as the primary benefits of education. While an argument can be made that learning for learning's sake should be the primary benefit of education, the current social and economic realities of Canadian society do not allow for such an outcome. As such, it is necessary to consider the current implications that education has for Canadians, including access to stable employment, a living wage, safe housing, and healthy work environments. Recognizing these benefits also implies the opposite; that without education – and the benefits afforded by having it – individuals are more likely to experience precarious employment, sub-standard wages, dangerous housing, and unsafe work environments. It is necessary, however, to recognize that access to quality education is not the sole solution to improving outcomes for individuals who experience marginalization. Rather, education is one component in a broader system

which must also include systemic change in housing, employment, health services and social assistance.

2.2 Marginalization of Youth in Canada

Another important step towards understanding the experiences of students in alternative education is to define marginalization, identify what groups of people face marginalization in Canadian society, and explore how marginalization affects identity formation in youth. Defining the process of marginalization is necessary to better understand why certain students experience difficulty in traditional models of education. As such, the following chapter will explore marginalization in Canada.

2.2.1 What is Marginalization?

The concept of marginalization is derived from the root word margin, which refers to an edge or border. Marginalization, therefore, can be understood as the process by which something is pushed from the center, towards the edge or border. From a socio-cultural perspective, marginalization is understood as a process, rather than an identity. Hall and Carlson (2016) emphasize that the process of marginalization occurs when a person or group is peripheralized from the dominant experience of society; through peripheralization, people are deprived of control, including access to resources and exposure to violence, exploitation, and humiliation. This definition suggests that marginalization is an inherently political process, whereby certain groups, cultures, and ideologies develop a dominating influence over others. Ferguson (1999) contends that the 'center' creates the standard to which all else is compared to. In other words, the 'center' is the "political power which implicitly defines itself as representative of a stable center around which everyone else much be arranged" (Ferguson, 1999, p. 9). This

understanding is supported by both Hall (1999), and hooks (1984/2015) who emphasize that marginalization cannot be divorced from political power, including the access to and the restriction of resources, information, and political voice. Hall (1999) further explains that marginalization is preserved through intermediacy; boundaries, such as skin colour, maintain perceived differences between groups, allowing for clear differentiation between the dominant groups of the 'center', and the subordinate groups of the 'margin'. Further, these boundaries between groups create perceived danger in the 'invasion' of the border between the 'center' and the 'margin', an example of which can be found in the ideology of white supremacy (hooks, 1984/2015; Hall, 1999; Hall & Carlson, 2016).

Freire (1968/2018) provides an alternative view of marginalization, emphasizing that "that the oppressed are not 'marginals,' are not people living 'outside' society. They have always been 'inside' – inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'" (p. 74). While this notion of marginalization criticizes the construction of marginal identities as being oppressive, it shares similarities with Ferguson (1999) and Hall and Carlson (2016) in that those considered marginalized are held in comparison to the "good, organized and just" (Freire, 2018, p. 74). Further, Freire's (1968/2018) view of marginalization implies similar political notions as Hall (1999) and hooks (1984/2015). A crucial aspect of Freire's (1968/2018) understanding is the purpose of education for those who have been subject to processes of marginalization:

> The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves." Such transformation, of course, would undermine the oppressors' purposes; hence their utilization of the banking concept of education to avoid the threat of student [consciousness]. (p. 74)

For Freire (1968/2018), marginalization and education are inherently connected. While banking models of education reproduce structures of oppression, alternative forms of education may contribute to liberation and the development of critical consciousness – two concepts which support politicization within students and collective action towards systemic change (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 174).

2.2.2 Who Experiences Marginalization?

Recognizing that marginalization is a process by which the actions, opportunities, and abilities of a group are restricted, the question now turns to who experiences marginalization – what groups occupy the "margin" and what groups occupy the "center"? Within the last century, the concept of marginalization has largely focused on race, religion, class, gender, and other social identities associated with a restriction of rights guaranteed to those at the 'center' (hooks, 1984/2015; Hall 1999; Ferguson, 1999; Coussee, Roets & De Bie, 2009; Sleeter, 2012; Hall & Carlson, 2016). Critical race theorists emphasize the marginalization of non-white identities through a restriction of power and resources (Sleet, 2012; Milner IV, 2013), while feminist theories emphasize the marginalization of women and gender diverse people through the perpetuation of patriarchal structures (hooks, 1984/2015; Hall, 1999, Hall & Carlson, 2016). Other theoretical perspectives informing this understanding of marginalized groups include critical class theory, critical disability theory, decolonial theory, and queer theory (Coussee, Roets & De Bie, 2009; Wilton, 2006; Ortega, 2017; Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). What these critiques hold in common is an understanding that the groups occupying the margins of society hold non-dominant social identities; racialized groups, individuals with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, women and gender minorities, 2SLGBTQ+ people,

non-dominant or persecuted religious identities, immigrants, refugees, and individuals living in poverty are but some of the groups that make up the "margin". It is important to note that these non-dominant social identities experience marginalization differently, and the unique experiences one individual has of marginalization cannot be generalized to a group as a whole.

By identifying marginal groups, we can better understand who holds dominant social identities, therefore occupying the "center." Scholars on this topic suggest that dominant social identities afford one a degree of privilege in society, with privilege being understood as the unearned benefit or entitlement based on one's social identity (Bedolla, 2007; Gedro & Mizzi, 2014; Hall & Carlson, 2016; Minarik, 2017). Such privileged identities are typically associated with White, heterosexual men, who are able-bodied and have access to wealth. It is important to acknowledge, however, that privilege and oppression are not mutually exclusive; rather, one can hold multiple identities that are simultaneously privileged and oppressed (Bedolla, 2007; Minarik, 2017). Furthermore, individual experiences are shaped by intersecting social relations and categories of identity. This concept, known as intersectionality, emphasizes that multiple dimensions of domination shape people's access to power and opportunity (Crenshaw, 1990). As such, the terms "marginalized" and "privileged" contain within them many converging social identities, which locates an individual along a spectrum of oppression and privilege. Any attempt to describe marginalization must acknowledge intersectionality, and the complex layering of identities that exist within each individual. From this understanding, anybody can experience marginalization; however, the current valuing of certain privileged

identities over others means that non-dominant identities are more likely to experience marginalization.

2.2.3 Processes of Marginalization and Identity Formation in Youth

Pursuant to the goals of this project, it is necessary to understand marginalization within the context of youth and young adults. Young people who hold non-dominant social identities may face oppression and restriction in society (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002; te Riele, 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Watson, 2011). Age is an important factor in understanding the experiences of youth, as the structures and laws within Canada limit a young person's ability to exercise agency in their environment, restricts the choices they are able to make, and directs the relationships they hold (te Riele, 2010; Olle & Fouad, 2015; Sapiro, 2020). This may result in limited motivation and desire towards achieving future goals (te Riele, 2010). For Olle and Fouad (2015), this lack of perceived capacity can lead to avoidance behaviour, low academic performance, and limited career-related decision-making. Age, however, is not the sole factor implicated in the marginalization of youth; rather, age intersects with other non-dominant identities, resulting in further oppression and restriction. Literature points to non-dominant racial identities, as well as low socio-economic status as two factors that often intersect with one's age to uniquely shape a young person's experience of marginalization (Diemer & Li, 2011; Olle & Fouad, 2015; Rapa, Diemer & Bañales, 2017). This intersection of identities is what forms the basis of understanding the stories of youth who experience marginalization. Limited control, combined with the restrictions of non-dominant identities results in the unique process of marginalization imposed upon the lives of some young people.

Indeed, when applied to actual young people, the category of "marginalized youth" can also shape the way they understand themselves in relation to others. Similarly dubious labels, found in both policy and literature, include at-risk youth, urban youth, disadvantaged youth, and troubled youth (te Riele, 2006; Watson, 2011; Follesø, 2015; Slaten et al, 2015). Together, these terms frame some youth as out of sync with the typical (or normative) life trajectories of young adults in a particular socio-cultural context (Nichols, 2017). Research suggests that instead of the youths themselves being out of sync, young people experiencing processes of marginalization often face atypical systemic constraints including limited economic resources, structural and interpersonal discrimination, violence, substance use, family dysfunction, and disability (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002; Diemer & Li, 2011; Rapa, Diemer, & Bañales; 2017; Sapiro, 2020). These experiences of marginalization can limit successful outcomes in work, education, health and social connection, potentially leading to poor wellbeing across the lifespan.

2.2.4 Conclusion

Marginalization is an inherently political process by which individuals are restricted in their access to resources, information, and opportunities. This definition implies a certain inequality between people, an inequality which often falls along the lines of social identities such as race, class, sexuality, gender, and other politicized measures of difference. As emphasized by Freire (1968/2018), people experiencing marginalization are often held in comparison to the "good, organized, and just" (p. 74); namely, those who hold privilege in society. However, privilege and marginalization are not dichotomous, and social identities are complex and layered. As such, an intersectional approach which recognizes such complexity is necessary to understand how

marginalization operates in the lives of young adults. Youth who hold multiple non-dominant social identities may experience unique forms of marginalization that can result in limited agency. This understanding of marginalization is necessary to accurately capture how youth experience marginalization within the education system.

2.3 Barriers and Turning Points

Recognizing the unique experiences of marginalization that young people face, it is necessary to explore their impact. An important area of consideration, and the primary focus of this research project, is education. Facing social constraint, youth experience barriers to successful retention in, and completion of, secondary education. As explored previously, education is an important social determinant of health, and an increasingly necessary requirement for employment. Consequently, the barriers to success for youth experiencing marginalization have consequences beyond a simple lack of diploma, as the access to quality education is an important step towards improving wellbeing for youth. Despite these barriers, youth who leave school prior to completion can successfully re-engage in education under the right circumstances, and with the necessary supports. This return to education can be understood as a turning point for the youth, and is often the first step towards enrollment in an alternative education program.

2.3.1 Factors Contributing to Non-Completion

Access to wealth and material resources is a significant barrier which limits success in education. Limited family income can restrict access to out-of-school learning opportunities such as pre-school, early childhood education programs, tutoring, travelling, and youth camps (Ladd, 2012; Vega, Moore III, & Miranda, 2015). Further, youth coming from families with low-income may have an expectation to contribute to

family expenses through part-time work. These expectations may clash with the weekday schedule of traditional schools, leading to difficult choices between school and work (Nichols, 2018). Race, intersecting with barriers related to socioeconomic status, creates further difficulties for students (Battle & Lewis, 2002). In addition to limited income, youth experiencing racialization, including immigrants and refugees, may face both overt and discreet discrimination, over-policing, language barriers, low academic expectations, and a culturally homogenous school environment (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Vega, Moore III, & Miranda, 2015; Nichols, 2018).

Te Riele (2006), in their review of Australian education policy, identifies three interconnected levels of 'risk factors' which contribute to non-completion: individual factors, family factors, and school/societal factors. Individual factors refer to self-esteem, motivation, and behaviour. These factors emphasize the choice and agency students hold, as well as the influences such choices have on their learning experience. Both Furlong (1991) and Munns and McFadden (2000) emphasize that students develop a clear rationale for leaving schools, a choice which is often logical to the student, based on their current circumstances. It is important to note, however, that individual factors do not exist in a vacuum; rather, individual factors affecting student choice and agency are influenced by the surrounding family and societal factors that make up an individual student's social context (te Riele, 2006). Family factors may include family functioning, structure, economic status, and parental education (te Riele, 2006). These different conditions may influence how a student perceives school and affect the choices they make towards education; for example, a student who is not allowed to live at home may make a choice to drop out in order to financially support themselves. Both individual risk

factors and family-level factors can be further connected to societal characteristics, such as the availability of social support, cost of living expenses, unemployment level, and poverty (te Riele, 2006). These broad issues are reproduced both within the family and within the individual, who are then exposed to greater risk for non-completion of school. McGregor and Mills (2012) emphasize this point:

> Some young people struggle to connect with the culture of the school. Their unique background combinations of gendered influences, family practices and support systems, language development, emotional and social capital, and class positioning all contribute to the shaping of a young person's attitude towards schooling. (p. 846)

For young adults, these risk factors coalesce within educational structures (te Riele, 2006). These risk factors may include negative teacher-student relationships, limited support services for students, lack of student agency/choice, and inflexible curriculum (te Riele, 2006; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Vega, Moore III & Miranda, 2015). In an American study, Vega, Moore III, and Miranda (2015) highlight the detrimental impact negative relationships with staff have on a student, and that "relationships with people in the school setting communicate the value and necessity of those persons" (p. 48). Participants in the study expressed poor connections with teachers and administrative staff, explaining that teachers often conveyed low expectations in their academic achievement. These low expectations result in students holding a negative perception of the supports available to them in their school, leading to poor motivation and academic performance (Vega, Moore III & Miranda, 2015).

Similarly, inflexible curriculum and assessment may limit a student's motivation or engagement in learning, as it forces them to meet curriculum requirement that are not interesting or immediately relevant to the student's needs (Ross & Gray, 2005; Daniels &

Arapostathis, 2005; te Riele, 2006). According to McGregor and Mills (2012), standardized grading, credit requirements, and the rank-ordering of students through course-level streaming requires strict uniformity amongst students, taking little account the individual circumstances of youth experiencing marginalization. Attempts to seek accommodation for these individual circumstances are frequently met with significant barriers; strict rules, overwhelming systems of process and appeals, and a large amount of paperwork blocks students from receiving the accommodations they require (McGregor & Mills, 2012). McGregor and Mills (2012) emphasize that "vulnerable students may not have the confidence and/or skills to use systemic avenues of appeal, particularly if they have a history of conflict with school authorities." (p. 846). Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) suggest that students often become disengaged from the school environment if "they do not fit in to the social expectations or are not interested in what the school is teaching" (p. 35). As such, inflexible curriculum and the lack of student choice in learning material may contribute to disengagement in learning and a lack of motivation towards school.

Together, these different factors contribute to poor student retention in secondary education. However, te Riele (2006) also emphasizes that these risk factors should not imply a deficit view of young students, as "for instance low self-esteem can be understood as having been caused by school experiences. However, unless this is made explicit, discussions of such individual factors may easily be interpreted as 'blaming' students for their own school failure." (p. 134). Student dropout occurs when one or more of these risk factors make regular attendance impossible or physically/emotionally unsafe. Often, students must prioritize more immediate needs, such as employment or

housing, over the expectations of school (Nichols, 2018). Moreover, dropout is often a complex layering of several ongoing and related issues, ranging from broad societal factors to more personal factors (te Riele, 2006; Lange and Sletten, 2002). As such, school dropout cannot be easily attributed to one specific issue or event. Rather, it must be understood as the result of an interplay between social structures and individual concerns.

2.3.2 Turning Points

Recognizing the barriers that some students face in attending traditional schools, what motivates them to re-engage in learning and enroll in an alternative school? In a study on students who return to school after dropping out, Metzer (1997) explains that such students often experience a turning point. The idea of turning points for students is corroborated by Munns and McFadden (2000), who emphasize that they are "a point of choice and transition" (p. 61) where students decide to willingly return to school. These turning points are often the result of personal reflection and social rejection. Metzer (1997) explains that a common aspect between students leaving school early was the "shading realization that they had placed themselves on the outside and put themselves off not only from their friends at school but their entire social milieu" (p. 6). This understanding is supported by Ross and Gray (2005) and Morrissette (2011), who both emphasize that chronic absenteeism can result in students developing a sense of non-belonging, isolation, and alienation by friends, family, and community. Metzer (1997) further explains that many students who leave school are confronted with limited career prospects. As such, turning points often occur when a student is confronted with the lack of employment opportunities for individuals without a high school diploma, as well as the

stigma one may experience when labeled a ‘drop-out’ (Metzer, 1997; Ross & Gray, 2005).

Recognizing the social-economic limitations of dropping out, students who make the decision to return school engage in an act of self-reflection (Ross & Gray, 2005). Much like the decision to leave school, the decision to return has a clear rationale for the individual (Munns & McFadden, 2000). The adverse experiences that may result from leaving school at a young age leads students to make a calculated decision to return to school. As Ross and Gray (2005) conclude “the notion of a ‘second chance’ is linked with the desire to change the circumstances of their lives by returning to education after episodes of educational failure, homelessness, emotional deprivation, criminal behaviour or even sickness” (p. 114). This choice to return to school is often accompanied with a renewed sense of engagement, as students who may have previously lacked motivation or interest in completing school develop an intrinsic self-meaning in their purposes for returning to school (Monaghan & Swords, 2021). Ross and Gray (2005) explain that this return to school can be understood as “a personal act of agency through which young people struggle to reclaim successful personal and educational identities.” (p. 103). Thus, turning points can be defined as the moment in time when a student who has left school feels motivated to improve their circumstances, and makes a purposeful choice to re-engage in education.

2.4 Alternative Education Schools

Recognizing the challenges that youth experience in education, alternative school programs offer the means to re-integrate students back into education. For early school leavers, students with missing credits, and adult learning returning to school, alternative

education programs address the very real need for educational options outside of the traditional school system. To better understand alternative programs, the diverse services they provide, and the specific needs they meet, the following chapter will define alternative education, explore the benefits they provide, and detail the current research on alternative schools. Finally, state of alternative education in Ontario will be explored to provide context for experiences of youth in Peterborough.

2.4.1 Defining Alternative Education

Alternative education schools refer to educational sites which operate beyond the structure of traditional schools. According to Raywid (1994) "they represent our most definitive departure from the programmatic, organizational, and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform" (p. 26). Alternative schools provide innovative service delivery models, designed to support students who face difficulty in the traditional school environment (Raywid, 1994; Morrissette, 2011; O'Gorman, Salmon & Murphy, 2016). These service delivery models are diverse and vary depending on the intended purpose of the educational institution. Raywid (1994) identifies three types of alternative education. Type I schools, referred to as popular innovation programs, "reflect organizational and administrative departures from the traditional, as well as programmatic innovations" (p. 27). Type I schools also includes students returning to school for their diploma after dropping out (te Riele, 2007). Type II schools refer to last-chance programs, enrollment in which typically results from behavioural issues, failure to follow school rules, and are often an alternative to expulsion. Finally, type III schools have a remedial focus, emphasizing greater social/emotional support for students with the goal of eventually supporting the student's return to mainstream school. Raywid (1994) further explains that

these different types are not mutually exclusive, and some alternative school may be considered a mix of the different types. Te Riele (2007) expands on the differences between alternative education schools, emphasizing a key distinction between schools that attempt to change student behaviour, and schools that attempt to change the provision of education to meet student needs. This conceptualization of alternative education further emphasizes the wide degree of difference between the types of alternative schools that exist in modern education.

While there seems to be a great degree of difference between alternative schools, several commonalities exist. Lange and Sletten (2002), in their research synthesis on alternative education, state that common features include "maintaining a small size … emphasizing one-on-one interaction between teachers and students … creating a supportive environment … allowing opportunities for student success relevant to the students' future … and allowing flexibility in structure and emphasis on student decision-making." (p. 12). These characteristics are supported by O'Gorman, Salmon, and Murphy (2016), who further emphasize flexible behavioural support, acknowledgement of student culture, and sense of community as being key features of alternative schools. In a study on Australian students in alternative education McGregor and Mills (2012) found that a combination of practical supports (on-site support staff, connections to community resources, housing, and employment support) and student-centered learning (flexibility in attendance, student choice in curriculum, no uniform, partnership in the teacher-learner relationship) facilitated successful re-engagement to learning.

2.4.2 Benefits of Alternative Education

Positive teacher-student relationships are a crucial aspect of alternative education. As discussed by te Riele (2006) and Vega, Moore III, and Miranda (2015), poor teacher-student relationships are a significant risk factor that can contribute to early school leaving. As alternative programs are designed to address the limitations of traditional schools, there is a specific focus on facilitating positive relationships between teachers and students (te Riele, 2006; Watson, 2011). Several studies suggest that positive teacher-student relationships are characterized by teachers being more approachable, non-judgmental, and flexible in how they approach teaching (te Riele, 2006; Watson, 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Morrissette, 2011). Teachers develop positive rapport with students through a respect for their individual needs and circumstances. McGregor and Mills (2012) describe how the respect is conveyed:

> The structures within [alternative] schools acknowledged, for example, that there were often life circumstances that required flexibility of attendance, that recognised many students were addicted to nicotine and required time off the premises to smoke, and that having young people involved in decision-making, not having uniforms and being able to call the adults by their first names helped to create an environment where students felt like equal partners in the teacher–learner relationship. (p. 859)

The notion of equal partnership emphasizes the willingness of teachers to work with students to ensure their needs are being met within the alternative program. This willingness to meet student needs extends into curriculum and evaluation. As Morrissette (2011) explains, “the [alternative] programs’ flexibility allowed students to learn at their own pace and fostered their unique learning styles” (p. 182). This flexibility is encouraged by altering how curriculum is taught, and the means of evaluating students. Morissette (2011) provides the example of allowing students to complete and submit

assignments at their own pace, and not punishing them if they take longer than expected to complete schoolwork. The idea of flexibility is expanded on by Daniels and Arapostathis (2005), who emphasize the importance of personalized learning within alternative programs. Within the research literature, personalized curriculum is a crucial part of learning within an alternative program, as it allows a student to meet the curriculum requires of their high school diploma, while pursuing learning material that is interesting and relevant too their needs (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; te Riele, 2007; Watson, 2011). Expanding on Morrissette's (2011) definition, Watson (2011) explains that "personalized learning places a strong emphasis on parental involvement, more teacher and student interaction, attention to personal learning styles, smaller class sizes, student ownership in setting goals and designing the learning process, and technology use" (p. 1501). The inclusion of personalized learning and student-driven curriculum provides students with a sense of control over both how and what they learn. According to Daniels and Arapostathis (2005), "if disengaged learners are not interested in the curriculum being taught, they will not exert the effort necessary for success. They appear to be less willing to trust when their teachers tell them that the information will be useful later in life" (p. 55). By developing curriculum that is interesting and relevant to students, teachers are better able to foster positive relationships, which, in turn, improve student engagement in learning.

Positive teacher-student relationships, flexibility, and personalized learning contribute to alternative schools as places of support and care. Recognizing that many students who enter alternative programs have experienced marginalization, isolation, and a general distrust for the education system, a supportive and trusting learning

environment is an important aspect for alternative schools (Morissette, 2011; O'Gorman et al., 2016). According to Morrissette (2011) this support and trust is necessary for students who are in particularly vulnerable situations. In their study on student experiences in alternative education programs, Morrissette (2011) found that "[students] benefited from speaking with teachers and seeking their advice regarding life choices and future plans. [Students] described an inherent ability of teachers to support and guide them without becoming judgmental or overbearing." (p. 180). These findings are supported by O'Gorman et al. (2016), who provides the following excerpt from their own study on student experiences in alternative education:

> Participants attributed changes in attitude towards school to perceived belonging. Participants enjoyed attending their alternative schools, commenting positively on experiencing acceptance. Many participants described school as 'my place'. Perceived acceptance created behavioural changes as participants felt more comfortable in their environment. (p. 541)

According to O'Gorman et al. (2016) and Morrissette (2011), developing a better sense of belonging for students through fostering positive teacher-student relationships allows for greater student success within alternative education programs. Combined with greater flexibility for teaching and evaluation (Morrissette, 2011) as well as student driven curriculum through personalized learning opportunities (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; te Riele, 2007; Watson, 2011), alternative schools allow for students to effectively re-engage with secondary education. Together, these understandings of alternative education imply a pedagogical shift from mainstream education; rather than an asymmetrical teacher-learning relationship, where-in students conform to the needs of the educational system, students in alternative education schools flourish in the ability to exercise agency over their own learning.

2.4.3 Research on Alternative Education

Research on alternative education offers rich insight into alternative learning, how such programs operate, who they serve, and the benefits they provide students. Modern literature on alternative education tends to be participant-based, using qualitative and mixed-method approaches to research such as phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative analysis, and critical ethnography. Authors such as te Riele (2006; 2007) Morrissette (2011), and Bascia and Maton (2015), explore the lived experiences of students and teachers within alternative education programs, and provide qualitative analysis based on participant interviews. More broad understandings of alternative education are provided by Raywid (1994), Lange and Sletten (2002), and O'Gorman, Salmon, and Murphy (2016), who offer a synthesis of research on the different kinds of alternative schools, how they operate, and why students enroll in such programs. Other research is decidedly more narrow, focusing on specific aspects of alternative education, such as the reasons why early-school leavers return to school (Metzer, 1997; Muns & McFadden, 2000; Ross & Gray, 2005; Monaghan & Swords, 2021). The research base also includes topics that intersect with alternative education. Nichols (2018), for example, explores how social inequality impacts school engagement, making connections to student enrollment in alternative programs. Similarly, Azzarello's (2017) analysis of neo-liberalism in Ontario emphasizes the resulting policy implications on alternative education. The existing research base provides a solid foundation for understanding student experiences outside the traditional education system and offers a clear platform for future research for alternative education in Canada.

Participant-based research, focused on the experiences of students in alternative education, is highly concentrated within a Western context, with many studies coming from the United States. These studies include the work of Metzer (1997), Daniels and Arapostathis (2005), Watson (2011), and Slatten et al. (2015). Beyond the United States, significant literature has also come from Australian research, such as Munns and McFadden (2000), te Riele (2006; 2007), and McGregor and Mills (2012). Canada, however, appears to offer some of the most recent insights into alternative education. Canadian-based research on alternative education is explored through the works of Gardner and Crockwell (2006), Morrissette (2011), Bascia and Maton (2015), Nichols (2018; 2019), and Stewart (2020).

2.4.4 The State of Alternative Education in Ontario

The province of Ontario offers a valuable case study on alternative education. The Toronto District School Board alone supports one of the largest number of public alternative schools in North America, with approximately 19 elementary and 21 high school programs (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Levin, 2017). With such a variety of alternative programs, Ontario is on the cutting-edge of alternative education research. Ontario has been at the forefront of alternative programming for many years, with a number of programs originating in Toronto, Etobicoke, North York, and Scarborough in the 1970's (Levin, 2015). These early programs emerged during a period of pedagogical change, influenced in part by the Hall-Dennis report, published by the Government of Ontario in May 1968 (Gorham, 2009). Azzarello (2017) described the impact this report had on education in Ontario:

> As a result of the Hall–Dennis Report, *Living and Learning* , the Ontario education system implemented progressive changes that promoted critical thinking, envisioned a more equitable notion of education, recognized that students should be active participants in their learning rather than passive vessels, and understood that it was imperative to consider not only what we teach but how we teach it. Work begun during this period saw transformations in educational thought, policies, and initiatives concerned with serving diverse communities while working toward enacting equity connected to race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (p. 50)

According to Levin (2017) and Azzarello (2017), the Hall-Dennis Report created the foundation for modern alternative education by supporting new ways of teaching students, organizing classrooms, and developing curriculum. This departure from more traditional notions of education allowed for more radical approaches to education, and the development of further alternative programming (Levin, 2017; Azzarello, 2017).

The next major shift to alternative education came from the neo-liberal policies enacted by the Progressive Conservative Party, led by Mike Harris (Levin, 2017; Azzarello, 2017). The policy agenda of the Progressive Conservative party emphasized free-market capitalism, devolved provincial responsibilities, and significantly cut public services. This included Bill 160 (*Education Quality Improvement Act)*, which gave the government greater decision-making power in educational policy (Azzarello, 2017). According to Azzarello, "Bill 160 resulted in loss of resources both material and physical by implementing a funding formula directly linked to enrollment numbers" (p. 53). This funding cut affected the staffing and resources available to alternative schools, many of which were considered afterthoughts to the more populated mainstream schools (Azzarello, 2017). As Azzarello describes, alternative schools are "forced to comply with neo-liberal business models, budgets, staffing, and resources must be divided equally rather than equitably. Value is not assigned by what you do, but by how many seats you

fill." (p. 62). Today, alternative schools are still affected by cuts made over two decades prior. However, despite these difficulties, many alternative programs continue to develop and operate in Ontario. Despite the wealth of research on alternative education, little can be said about the student experience outside of the Greater Toronto Area. While this makes sense considering the high concentration of alternative programs in the Greater Toronto Area, there is a significant lack of research on the state of alternative education in other parts of Ontario.

Chapter Three: Methodological Framework

3.1 Methodology

Conducting participatory research with students to understand their personal experiences of education and marginalization requires a strong methodological foundation. The methodological foundation for this research project is largely derived from the field of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry, and the related techniques of narrative interviewing, relies on the stories of participants to collect and interpret data (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Kim 2016). Through narrative inquiry, participants are invited to explore their experience of a particular phenomenon or event and provide their personal interpretation of the experience "in relationship both to the other and to a social [environment]" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). As such, narrative inquiry offers an effective means of understanding the student experience in alternative education.

Narrative inquiry relies on certain elements from the work of Michel Foucault, specifically in connecting the construction of narratives to power and knowledge relations (Tamboukou, 2013). From this perspective, narratives shape how an event or phenomenon is perceived by both society and the individuals experiencing it. In the context of education, narratives surrounding student success privileges certain behaviours, values, and characteristics, thus constructing a dominant public narrative of an "average" student (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997; Tamboukou, 2013). The important purpose of narrative inquiry with students who are not considered average, then, is the construction of counter-narratives (Tamboukou, 2013; Kim 2016). Counter-narratives have the potential to shift the framing of an 'average student' narrative to include the experiences of students who do not exhibit the particular behaviours, values, or

characteristics of the dominant student narrative. Moreover, counter-narratives exploring the process of marginalization of students within the educational system allows for an opportunity to challenge the dominant structures which maintain the process of marginalization within schools.

Narrative inquiry further draws from the work of John Dewey and his writing on experience. As "experience in narrative research is an ever-present process" (Kim, 2016, p. 43), it is necessary to provide a methodological basis for understanding experience. According to Dewey (1938/2015), experience is defined through continuity and interaction. The continuity of experience refers to the idea that all experience is both built upon, and influenced by, past experiences. The interaction of experience emphasizes that experiences result from the interaction of the individual and their environment, resulting in a particular situation, event, or phenomenon. For narrative inquiry, this means that a participant's reconstructed description of a situation, event, or phenomenon is influenced by their past experiences, their subjective internal conditions, and their objective environment (Kim, 2016). Consequently, narrative interviewing with students who have experienced educational marginalization provides a unique window in the ongoing conditions and experiences which influence patterns of inclusion and exclusion in schools.

This unique window into the experiences of marginalization is the rationale for using narrative inquiry to explore alternative education. While quantitative methods of data collection and analysis could be used to explore the effectiveness of alternative education schools, this project is more concerned with a nuanced understanding of how students perceive themselves and their stories of learning within alternative settings.

Together, stories from different students may be synthesized to create an overarching counternarrative of students' experiences of marginalization. It is important to note, however, that any counternarratives or analysis that develop from discussions are being portrayed by a third party; while direct quotes from participants will be used as much as possible to accurately represent student experiences, any depiction of counternarratives is influenced by the researcher's analysis and representation of student dialogue. As such, while narrative inquiry provides the relevant tools for meeting the objectives of this research project, any conclusions must acknowledge the influence held by the researcher.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data gathered from the research participants has been transcribed, coded, and analyzed using emergent theme analysis. Emergent theme analysis is a type of inductive data analysis which focuses on the unanticipated comments and exchanges which lead to new insights into the participant's experience (Bowen, 2006; Massey, 2011). According to Patton (1980; as cited in Bowen, 2006) "inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 13). As such, the construction of patterns, themes, and categories has emerged from interviews with participants. While certain patterns can be hypothesized prior to interviewing participants, this research project is more concerned with the themes which emerge organically throughout the research process and are informed by the lived experiences of the research participants.

This process of inductive analysis is an opportunity for participatory engagement with the research process through "sharing the experiences and reality of the participants

and empowering their role in partnership with evaluators" (Massey, 2011, p. 22). Furthermore, emergent theme analysis is often used in research with students, with several studies employing inductive forms of data analysis when working with groups experiencing marginalization (Osterholm, Nash & Kritsonis, 2007; Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008; Vacarro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). The reason for using an inductive approach to analyze data with groups experiencing marginalization is two-fold; first, inductive analysis recognizes the "limitations in fully knowing beforehand the multiple realities that … emerge from the participants' discussions" (Ferguson, Ah Kim, & McCoy, 2011, p. 4), therefore providing agency to the participants in shaping the research process; second, in providing such agency, inductive analysis provides an opportunity to empower groups who have historically faced marginalization and oppression (Massey, 2011). Narrative inquiry asks the participant to explore how they understand a specific phenomenon in the context of their life. This introspection gives rise to novel thoughts and reflections, thus leading to nuanced insight into a particular experience. Furthermore, narrative inquiry and emergent theme analysis offers an opportunity to explore the subjective student experience of alternative education, providing a clear avenue for collecting the data necessary to analyze common emergent themes amongst participants and therefore answer the research questions guiding this project. As such, the combined used of narrative inquiry and emergent theme analysis offers a complimentary approach to data collection and analysis.

3.2 Methods

Data collection began in Fall 2021, with initial recruitment beginning at the end of September and continuing until the middle of November. During this period, one-hour

interviews were held with six participants. These interviews occurred both in person and using online video conferencing software. Following the completion of the interviews, the dialogue was transcribed and coded according to specific recurring themes. Analysis of these themes began in the latter half of November 2021, informed by the theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy, radical humanism, and anti-oppressive pedagogical practice.

3.2.1 Partnership

Despite the efforts of the researcher and the thesis committee, the research project did not have any official connection or partnership with any alternative school, program, or board of education. Several attempts were made to contact both the principal and administrative staff of Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education (PACE), however no response was received from school staff or administration. Contact was also attempted with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board Research Advisory Committee to assess the potential for research within the school board, however no response was received from the board. As such, the study proceeded without the support or partnership of any particular alternative program.

3.2.2 Recruitment

The research process began by identifying an appropriate study population. During the initial proposal phase, the research project was to include both students and teachers in the interview process. For student participants, two major selection criteria were used: 1) an age range of 16 to 30 years old, and 2) prior or ongoing enrollment in an alternative education program within the Peterborough and Kawartha Lakes Area. The age range was chosen to capture younger students who were currently enrolled in an

alternative education program, as well as former students who had graduated. The geographic range was chosen as the explicit purpose of the research project was to learn more about the experience of alternative education within smaller communities.

Once a study population was chosen, a plan was developed for several forms of participant recruitment. This included three primary avenues; physical recruitment materials, such as flyers and posters, digital recruitment, including posting about the project on social media, and relationship-based recruitment, whereby the research reached out to pre-established community contacts to find participants. The first effort made for recruitment was through postering. A flyer outlining the details of the project was posted in several locations in the downtown Peterborough area. These centered around Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education, as well as other high-traffic areas in the downtown core including bus terminals, bulletin boards, crosswalks, and streetlights. Care was made to avoid posting the flyers on PACE property, as to avoid any direct association with the school. These flyers were kept up for one month, at the end of which several were taken down and moved to different locations in the same area.

After two weeks of using physical recruitment materials, digital recruitment methods began. A modified version of the original flyer was posted on the researcher's professional social media accounts, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. These included both direct posts and stories (time-limited posts). These posts were shared by several of the researcher's colleagues and community members, who passed the information on to potential participants. Communication with participants through social media direct messaging was avoided, and instead transitioned to email communication once contact was made. Requests were also sent to several clubs and groups at Trent

University asking for their assistance by sharing the project, however no response was received. Finally, the researcher used existing contacts within the Peterborough area to promote the project. Posters were given to community contacts who passed them on to potential individuals. Contact information for the project was given to potential participants, allowing them to make the choice to reach out without feeling pressured.

3.2.3 Recruitment outcomes

Participant interest was varied between the different methods of recruitment. Digital recruitment through social media posts appeared to be the most effective means of reaching potential participants, however not all participants that reached out through social media followed through after learning more about the project. Of the six total participants, two participants were found through social media recruitment. Physical recruitment through postering efforts were surprisingly effective, though similar to the social media efforts, not all individuals who made contact followed through with participating in the project. However, postering efforts still managed to recruit two participants. The final two participants were recruited through the researcher's pre-existing community contacts.

While the initial intention was to recruit participants who had attended a range of alternative schools across the Peterborough and Kawartha Lakes region, the final participant pool was made up entirely of students who attended PACE (or its former iteration CIS). While the research methodology for the study is not based around a case study, the boundedness of the participant pool to PACE may provide some future opportunities for mobilizing the research findings toward program development that

improves student experience at PACE, and perhaps also in the mainstream schools from which PACE students originate.

3.2.4 Challenges

The initial goal of the project was to recruit five to eight participants. Efforts were made to recruit more than the final six participants who followed through with interviews, however several challenges made further recruitment difficult. The most prevalent issue at the time of this research project was the COVID-19 pandemic, which poses unique challenges for academic research. This included limitations on in-person meetings, a greater reliance on digital communication, and a generally heightened level of stress on the average person. Together, these issues made it difficult to connect and maintain a working relationship with potential participants, who were experiencing COVID related disruptions to their employment and education. The use of remote video conferencing software such as Zoom helped reduce some of these challenges, however it also introduced new challenges such as audio-technical malfunctions and internet capacity issues. Moreover, not all participants had access to computers and the internet to attend an online interview.

Beyond COVID-19 related challenges, there was also difficulty recruiting current students at PACE, as they were often very busy with school and employment. Several potential participants were unable to attend interviews, as their schedules did not align with that of the researcher. After numerous attempts to schedule meetings with these participants, communication was dropped; this, however, is by no means the fault of the participants, rather it is the result of the busy circumstances students found themselves in at the time of recruitment.

Finding teacher participants was the most challenging part of the recruitment process. Without the support of the local school board, finding interested teacher participants was a difficult process. Relying on the support of some local community partners, contact was made with one teacher, who then made connection with several other teachers. Despite this initial success, communication was dropped almost immediately after initial communication. Repeated efforts were made to reach out to these potential participants, however this was met with either silence or confirmation that they were no longer interested. Similar to student participants, this loss of interest is no fault of their own; at the time of recruitment, many teachers were entering back to in-person classes after several months of virtual classrooms as a result of COVID-19 school shutdowns. As such, several teacher participants explained that despite their initial interest, they were too busy to take part in interviews. Consequently, no teacher interviews occurred, leaving a gap in study population initially considered in the research proposal.

3.2.5 Interviewing Process

Participants agreed to attend a one-hour interview on their experiences in alternative education. Participants were informed of their rights and obligations as research participants and provided signed consent documentation prior to starting the interviews. All participants consented to having the interviews audio recorded. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions and the preferences of some participants, four of the six interviews occurred through online video meetings. Two interviews occurred in person, one at a local park, and the other in a study room at the local library. Most interviews were one hour in length, resulting in approximately six hours of dialogue.

Based on the foundations of narrative inquiry, the interviews were posed as conversations, and focused on how the participant interpreted their experience of alternative education. The questions followed three broad categories: (1) questions about the process leading to enrollment in an alternative education program; (2) questions about the student's experience of attending an alternative program; and (3) questions about student desires and expectations after graduating from an alternative program. The questions employed a compare-and-contrast approach, which required the participants to reflect on the differences between their traditional and alternative school experience. While a broad list of questions was used to direct the conversation, dialogue with participants would often diverge into new and unexpected topics. These topics were consciously probed by the researcher, recognizing the importance that unexpected dialogue has in conducting emergent theme analysis.

Overall, participants were highly motivated to discuss their experiences of alternative education. Several participants expressed that they were excited to have the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings on how alternative programs helped them, as well as how such programs could be improved to support future students. Some questions were discarded during the interview process, as participants would often bring up relevant lines of questioning unprompted.

3.2.6 Coding and Theme Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded according to general themes which emerged during the interviewing process. Consistent with an inductive analysis, the codes used to organize the data developed throughout the process of analysis (rather than being defined prior to analysis). These codes were developed based on recurring patterns that

emerged from the dialogue, including repeated words, phrases, ideas, and events. The transcript of each interview was coded by three general themes which loosely followed the three categories of questions explained above. These included: (1) goal-oriented themes, focusing on motivation, future-related thinking, and career/post-secondary ideas; (2) process-oriented themes, focusing on experiences related to both traditional and alternative schools; and (3) Systems-oriented themes, focusing on system-level thinking, including critical analyses of education and learning, and what the ideal school system might look like. Once the transcripts were coded according to these three themes, a second round of coding occurred categorizing the dialogue into specific sub-themes. A coding chart was created and used to track the different themes and sub-themes across the six transcripts. Once the transcripts were coded according to each sub-theme, all relevant dialogue was moved into separate documents for analysis.

3.3 School Profile

The main alternative school involved in the research project was Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education (PACE), which is part of the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (KPRDSB). PACE is located in the downtown core of Peterborough, Ontario, and began offering alternative programming in 2012 (KPRDSB, n.d.). Prior to the opening of PACE, alternative programming was provided by the Peterborough Centre for Individual Studies (CIS). Today, PACE provides a number of alternative programs for both youth and adults, including regular day classes, the School for Young Moms program, the Literacy and Basic Skills program, correspondence courses, and the suspension/expulsion program for mainstream schools within the Peterborough area (KPRDSB, n.d.). Other programs offered through PACE include the

School Within a College (SWAC) program, which partners with Fleming College to support student transitions into post-secondary education, as well as Cooperative Education programs that allows students to receive credits for their employment (KPRDSB, n.d).

PACE provides a food program for students, and has on-site daycare for young parents (KPRDSB, n.d.). PACE partners with several community agency in the Peterborough area, including the Canadian Mental Health Association, FourCAST Addiction Services, Employment Planning and Counselling, and the Youth Emergency Shelter (KPRDSB, n.d.). The KPRDSB website outlines PACE's mandate:

> Our mandate is to identify the gaps in our students' educational profiles and then to develop and implement a program that meets their needs as they work toward the achievement of an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). (KPRDSB, n.d., para. 5).

As of 2020, approximately 390 students were enrolled at PACE (Government of Ontario, 2020). Using the same data set, the three largest high schools in Peterborough had 1065, 1070, and 915 students, respectively. Compared to other alternative secondary schools in Ontario, PACE has considerably higher enrollment (Government of Ontario, 2020). This, however, may be the result of Peterborough only having one main alternative school, whereas other municipalities may have similar student enrollment spread amongst different alternative schools. All participants in the research project attended PACE, or CIS. Participants were enrolled in different programs within PACE, including regular day classes, correspondence courses, the cooperative education program, and the SWAC program.

Using Raywid's (1994) categories of alternative education, PACE appears to provide a blended model of type I (departure from traditional structures of learning) and type III (greater social/emotional support) schools. While the suspension/expulsion program would suggest a type II school (often referred to as last-chance programs), PACE offers a greater number of programs that fit more appropriately within type I and type III schools. For example, the School for Young Moms and the SWAC program both offer social support for students (type III), while also providing academic programming that departs from the learning structure of traditional schools (type I). Moreover, direct partnerships with local social service agencies suggests a greater concerns for the social/emotional wellbeing of students, consistent with the type III definition. However, PACE seems to depart from the type III definition in that it does not appear to place a significant emphasis on returning students to mainstream school programs. Raywid (1994) acknowledges that schools will often blur the lines between the different categories of alternative schools, depending on stated purpose of the specific school.

3.4 Participant Pool Profile

The following chapter provides an outline of the participants who shared their experience in alternative education. An amalgamated profile of participants is presented here to contextualize the different participants who took part in the study. In other words, here and in Chapter 4, participants are not referred to as individuals, and all statements provided by individuals are attributed to the "pool" of participants. The stories explored here and in the following chapter include a number of vulnerable experiences and events; as Peterborough is a relatively small community, participant names (and even pseudonyms) have been removed to limit the potential for a reader to guess the identity of

any specific participant. Moreover, certain identifiable details have be disguised or otherwise removed to ensure they cannot be connected to the participant who shared such details. In certain cases where an identifiable detail is integral to a specific theme or point, an effort has been made to alter the information shared by the participant to ensure privacy. These changes are for the purpose of confidentiality only, and do not otherwise alter the findings of the research.

Participants ended up in alternative education through a variety of means; some participants left school due to mental health concerns while others were no longer able to attend due to disruption in their home life. Participants described experiences of homelessness, poverty, mental health crises, addiction, and racism when discussing why they left high school. Participants also described their lack of motivation and interest in the curriculum being taught, resulting in sporadic attendance and eventual disengagement in school. Participants navigated various community agencies to find the support they needed, including Peterborough Youth Services, Ontario Works, guidance counsellors and support staff, mental health services, and local healthcare centers. Through these supports, as well as the support of friends, family, teachers, and other community members, participants decided to re-engage with school. Some participants moved directly from their former high school to alternative education, while others spent time working and away from school completely prior to returning.

Participants resided in the Peterborough area and attended different high schools across the local Public and Catholic school boards prior to enrolling in alternative education. All participants attended, or are currently attending, PACE (or its former iteration, CIS). Participants described the positive experiences they had at PACE but did

not shy away from discussing the aspects of alternative education that did not work for them. Participants noted the benefits of paid co-op credits, flexible curriculum, individualized assignments, and positive teacher-student relationships, while also emphasizing challenges relating to the limited social connections offered through the school, as well as the lack of academic learning opportunities. Participants emphasized their desire to attend post-secondary education, while some participants who graduated from PACE have already completed post-secondary education. Participants expressed future career goals, which included working in the fields of nursing, teaching, social work, art, and self-employment. Together, participants described how alternative education shaped the trajectory of their education and future careers at a time when they were experiencing significant difficulty or vulnerability. While not perfect, participants agreed that the alternative programming offered through PACE was beneficial for their individual goals for the future.

Chapter Four: Analysis

4.1 Emergent Themes and Student Narratives in Education

Interviews with the six participants offered a unique window into the experience of learning in an alternative school. Participants were highly motivated to engage in these interviews and spoke passionately both about the difficulties they had in traditional high school and their motivations for attending an alternative program. While certain points of discussion aligned with the research literature and the anticipated outcomes of the project, other discussions were unexpected. These emergent themes became the focus of most participant interviews; while a general set of questions were used to guide the discussions, participants would often provide tangential explanations of a particular idea that was important to them. Together, these points have been synthesized into 4 general themes, including: (1) pathways to alternative education, which captures how participants ended up attending an alternative program, their experiences in traditional education, and the turning points that led them to enroll at an alternative school; (2) experiences within alternative education, which explores the benefits and challenges that participants identified in their alternative program, as well as their motivations for re-engaging with school; (3), critical understanding of alternative education, which focuses on experiences of marginalization and participants' critical analysis of education; and (4) ideal school system, which captures student ideas for change in both traditional and alternative schools.

Throughout the following chapter, these emergent themes will be explored. This exploration will be driven by direct quotes from the participants. These narratives serve to portray the student experience in both traditional and alternative schools, while also

providing unique insights into how the participants understood their time in these programs.

4.2 Pathways to Alternative Education

Participants described a variety of factors which they believed contributed to difficulty with traditional school, and their eventual enrollment in alternative education. These factors were shared broadly across participants and can be organized into two categories: social-structural factors which became explicit to students within the school system, and personal factors such as motivation, self-esteem, and interest. Both factors coalesce at specific turning points, influencing how and when participants decided to return to school. It is crucial to note that the relationship between social-structural and personal factors are highly nuanced, and not wholly separate. These factors intertwine with each other, developing a complex and layered relationship.

4.2.1 Social-structural Factors

Poor experiences within the traditional school system were described by all participants. These experiences tended to focus on teacher-student relationships, and the perceived lack of support and concern for the difficulties faced by the students. For some participants, these poor experiences with teachers occurred when socio-structural issues outside of school made attending school and completing work difficult. A participant described their experience with housing insecurity while in high school:

> So I became homeless in Grade 11. I wasn't able to live at my parent's home anymore. So I lived at like a shelter in town. And I was still enrolled in my previous school … I missed a lot of school in the beginning and towards like, the end of that semester, like after I had secured housing for myself and everything. Like it was just way too hard to kind of try and get back into the groove of going to regular school and to be able to work to pay my rent and everything at the same

> time. It was like, there was just no, no way to do it.

This participant was forced to balance work and school, the difficulty of which resulted in them leaving school for a time. Sporadic attendance was often the first sign of difficulty for participants. Another participant described similar difficulty as their mental health worsened, and they began using drugs:

> My mental health like really spiraled, like, sort of during this summer between Grade 10 and Grade 11. And, um, as soon as, like, my mental health got really bad, I just sort of got to see like, the dark side of the, the dominant education system. Like it really just stopped working for me. And so I started using a lot of drugs. And I started like, I would skip first period, and then go to second, third and fourth, and then I would skip first and second, and then lunch, and then eventually just started like coming to school on the bus, and then doing drugs all day, and then coming back home on the bus.

The participant, who described themselves as being successful in their first two years of high school, quickly encountered difficulty with their teachers as their situation got worse:

> So then I just like, sort of dropped out of school, I tried to go to [a different school] and um, and it was very much the same, like maybe even a little worse with the teachers being like, they didn't really know what to do with me. Um, just very like paternalistic in the sense that like, I was out of class, and they would like grab me by the arm and be like, "you need to go back to class" or I would get sent to the principal's office, that kind of thing

Their experience suggested a school system ill-equipped to deal with mental health crises. This suggestion was shared by another participant, who described their own experience during a period of poor mental health:

> I was failing all of my classes. All of them. I failed math multiple times. I was failing art, which is my best thing … And they were basically telling me like, "we're gonna kick you out if you don't show up" and I was taking work home trying to get it done. And they were just calling my mom every single day and being like, "they have to go to school, they have to show up, or we will kick them

> out.” And my mom like, of course, this was stressing my parents so much. And I could have, like, if I could have gone to school I would have, but I couldn't even get myself out of bed.

Participants described experiences of poverty, homelessness, substance use, mental health crises, and physical health impairments. When such issues occurred, they quickly seeped into the participant’s school life, making it difficult to meet the expectations of the traditional school system. Students also described marginalizing experiences in which they felt insulted, belittled, or ignored by teachers, school staff, and peers. One participant described their experience of racism:

> I left [my former high school] because there was just too much racism going on. And it took me a while to understand that because I feel like when you're the only [person of colour] in any, I guess, situation, it's hard for you to actually like grasp the, like, the depth and severity of what's going on.

This participant emphasized that being the only person of colour in a predominately white school made it difficult to understand the severity of the racism they experienced. As the problem worsened, the participant made the choice to leave the school entirely. Participants also described explicit experiences of racism and homophobia, while others told stories of being singled out by teachers for not attending classes. Together, these marginalizing experiences, compounded with system socio-structural issues outside of school, resulted in participants giving up.

4.2.2 Personal Factors

Other participants emphasized their lack of interest in the assignments and material taught in their original high school. This lack of interest appeared to lead to disengagement from school. This disengagement was explored by a participant:

> I was rationalizing a kind of frustration based on the pretense that I knew that what I was being taught was insufficient. And was not, it didn't interest me. And I felt like the teachers were just there to be kind of- I didn't respect them

This participant further explained that their disinterest in what was being taught resulted in their sporadic attendance. The participant had attended a military co-op training, which only furthered their desire to leave school:

> School started to seem like kind of trivial as well, after doing the military training, it was like, okay, I'm doing way cooler stuff that is, like, I'm treated like an adult with serious responsibility. And now I have to go to this place where people are like, gossiping, and, you know, playing games with one another. I'm just like, hey, this is a waste of time.

However, the participant did acknowledge that they had a very cynical outlook towards the world at the time. This outlook contributed to a lack of motivation in general and was not specific to the disinteresting curriculum. As the participant explains:

> The stuff that was most salient in terms of making my latter years of high school difficult were things beyond the control of, of teachers in a lot of ways. Yeah. I kind of had to find my own path and really learn things the hard way.

The participant emphasized that their disengagement from school was a combination of several factors, including their cynicism and lack of motivation, as well as a disinterest in the curriculum. A different participant described a similar experience, as they found themselves more focused on pursuits outside of school:

> I never struggled with the actual work. I just didn't, I just didn't want to do it. And then I would get so behind and so behind. I did better doing the work, the same classes, the same coursework by myself, and with the teacher to ask now and then but that's my, you know, that's a very individual situation.

This participant's experience also seemed to be the result of disinterest in the material being taught at their school. They emphasized that they were able to complete work when

necessary, but had little motivation to actually attend class. This lack of motivation completed a feedback loop; participants had negative experiences of school, resulting in low motivation to attend classes which then led to further disengagement and negative experiences within the school system. This spiral was made even more challenging the more school students missed. Several participants describing being left behind when they missed class, eventually feeling as though there was no point even attending, as they were so far behind. With so many negative experiences, and such little opportunity to learn on their own terms, participants described a sense of apathy and disengagement towards school.

4.2.3 Turning Points

Once disengaged from school, participants diverged in their pathways towards ending up in alternative education program. Most participants continued to attend correspondence programs in their original high school, however these programs were described as inadequate, disinteresting, and seen as a form of punishment. One participant left school entirely, choosing work full-time instead, while another left school to receive support for their mental health. Participants converged, however, in having a self-described "turning point" in which they felt confident and capable of returning to school. A turning point can be understood as a point in time when a student reflects on their circumstance, and makes a calculated decision to return to school. This choice is often attributed to a lack of employment opportunities, social isolation, improved health, and renewed motivation.

Several participants described a particular person when discussing their turning point, such as a principal or counsellor. One participant described how the help they received from a local youth agency during their period of homelessness:

> I had a really good counselor with like, [local youth agency] at the time. And she like, kind of, you know, tried to help me in getting, like a social worker does, getting everything else set up for my life.

With the support of this youth agency, the participant was better able to re-engage with school. A similar experience was described by a different participant:

> I had some luck with like, some really good guidance counselors and stuff like that. But I think yeah, probably if it weren't for the guidance counselors, I wouldn't have even found like I wouldn't have maybe kept going enough to go to the credit recovery and then get told about [alternative programs].

The participant explained that they may not have known about the possibility of attending an alternative education program without the support of their guidance counsellor. Other participants were also informed of this opportunity through administrative staff at their high school. Another participant described how they learned about PACE:

> I talked to the superintendent of diversity, equity, and inclusion, at [my school board], I think. And like, I told her about all my experiences that I've had at [my high school], and she was like, “Oh, we got to fix this, like, um, get you your credits”, and led me to PACE but PACE was always like, a last choice for me. Because it, it was never advertised like that. It was never advertised, like, you can do advocacy work and also get credits.

A different participant was also directed to PACE through their guidance counsellors at their high school:

> There was maybe a couple guidance counselors that are trying their best to help me, but one of them came to me and was like, “Hey, you should probably just, like go to PACE” and I was like, okay, okay. So I went to PACE.

From the experience of several participants, it appears as through certain staff within traditional high schools were crucial to enrollment in alternative programs; non-teaching staff such as guidance counsellors and administrators seem to hold an important role in advising students about their options for alternative means of obtaining their diploma.

One participant described a similar experience, but also emphasized that they had to stabilize their mental health before returning to school. After entering an inpatient program at the local hospital, the participant was able to improve their mental health. The participant explained how their outlook changed at this time:

> So when I was in the hospital that third time, I started to get better. And I actually started to think that maybe I could have a future. Because when I was in that state, like I'm not thinking of the future, I'm just trying to get through today, and I didn't even want to get through today, you know, um, and so. Like, I started to think that I had a future and part of that. Like, I knew that I had to get a high school diploma, if I wanted to do the thing that I wanted to do at that time.

With an improved outlook and motivation to return to school, the participant learned more about PACE:

> I had heard that like PACE was, like, people just said it was like, easier to go to … and so that's why I called them I called them in the hospital, from their website. And I was really like nervous about this program. And the principal called and the principal left a message for me, with the nurses, I think, and I was like, "what is this program sounds like there's expectations", and I really couldn't do any expectations. But then I talked with her and she assured me like [the program] was very working *with* you.

In this participant's situation, stable mental health, an improved outlook, and renewed motivation for school, as well as the support of school staff were all necessary for them to return to school. A similar change of outlook occurred for another participant, whose cynical perspective of the world receded during their time away from school. After

working construction jobs for three years, the participant's perspective had shifted, and they had a renewed desire to get their diploma so they could attend university:

> By working in jobs that didn't require university education, I felt like, I was not- my mind wasn't being activated enough to feel the full gratification of, you know, my potential, I guess you could say, I just felt like there was more and I want- I enjoy learning. And I want to be in a setting where learning takes place. So that's when I just started to buckle down a little bit and decide, okay, I got to get this, you know, this, get the diploma and then start seeking entry to university

In this participant's case, they did not hold judgement against themselves or consider returning to school as an adult to be abnormal. This was, in part, due to the support they received from their family:

> I had also been told that there are many people who go to school, post-secondary education, older, like later in life as well. So I knew that that wasn't like a- an unprecedented thing. And I even heard from, like my mother, for instance, who taught in university settings for various times in her career. And she said, some of our best students were the ones that were that were are like a bit older. So even though I didn't graduate right away, I always knew that that was something that I, I wanted to eventually do

This participant acknowledged that it was possible (and potentially beneficial) to attend post-secondary later in their life, challenging the traditional notion of entering post-secondary right out of high school. This understanding was important for the participant, as it validated their particular journey through high school, and the time they spent away from school after graduation.

For some participants, returning to school only became possible when their health improved, while the turning point for others came from material changes such as stable housing and income. Some participants described a change in outlook; successfully negotiating certain challenges that may have, at a time, seemed insurmountable, resulted in greater confidence and belief in their abilities. Several participants spoke of important

school staff who helped direct them towards alternative means of obtaining their diploma. Ultimately, these turning points, whether they be a specific person, some material change, or a new outlook on life, led participants to reengage in learning through an alternative education program.

4.3 Experiences within Alternative Education

Participants provided detailed stories of their experience within alternative education. These experiences tended to focus on both the benefits and challenges of alternative education, as well as their motivations and expectations for attending an alternative program. Themes related to the benefits of alternative education included curriculum flexibility, positive teacher-student relationships, cooperative learning credits, and material benefits, while the challenges focused on the limited social connection and lack of academic/university level classes. Participants were motivated to attend an alternative program as it offered an opportunity to meet their goals for their future career, education, and desire for personal improvement. Moreover, participants were motived by the important social relationships in their lives, including friends, family, teachers, and other community members. Together, the benefits, challenges, and motivations involved in attending an alternative program described by participants offer valuable insight into the student experience in alternative education.

4.3.1 Benefits of Alternative Education

Participants noted a variety of reasons why alternative education worked for them. From these discussions, several common themes arose, centered around positive teacher-student relationships, flexibility in how students approached their learning, and the supportive learning environments cultivated within alternative education sites. Other

benefits included cooperative workplace learning credits and the material benefits offered to alternative students. It is important to note, however, student experiences within alternative education varied from participant to participant. Despite these differences, common characteristics between their stories can be determined.

Positive Relationships. The most common benefit described by participants was the positive relationships between staff (including teachers, counsellors, and administrative staff) and students. These positive relationships were often characterized by the willingness of teachers to meet the individual needs of students, as well being more approachable for support. Participants who described positive staff relationships cited several common characteristics, including a genuine care and interest in students, flexibility in how curriculum was presented and evaluated, and the approachability of staff for questions and concerns. Staff displayed genuine care for students by maintaining a friendly and support relationship. Participants emphasized that the school staff took a genuine interest in their lives, kept up to date with the ongoing circumstances affecting students, encouraged students to explore their interests, and kept them accountable to their schoolwork. A participant described how one teacher exemplified these characteristics:

> Like, you know, I remember a kid was writing an essay for [The John Howard Society] and then my teacher like, worked that into his English credit. Um, yeah, it was so cool … I really liked English. So my teacher gave me a bunch of books to read that were like about kids that came from, like, drug addiction and how they succeeded, but not like corny. And yeah, any- and we did lots of practical skills like resumé and cover letter writing. My teacher, like, sort of realized that every 45 minutes, we would all get up and go for a cigarette. So she started to, like, structure those in, so that we wouldn't leave [during class].

This genuine care for student wellbeing was a crucial part of the positive relationships between staff and students. In particular, participants described staff as being non-judgmental, approachable, and willing to listen to their concerns. This caring approach was pointed out by another participant, who discussed their experience:

> They cared about you holistically, like, I don't know. Yeah, you know, it could have been just the teachers I was hooked up with, but it seemed like the program in general, it's like, you know, if you, if you went to class, you were gonna have breakfast, lunch and dinner too, you know, like, you're gonna have everything you needed for that day. Um, it just, and sometimes people will go and not even like, go to class, like, you're just there to see everybody and check in and like, yeah, I feel like they cared more. Just, they just cared more.

Non-judgmental staff were important for participants who were experiencing ongoing issues related to mental health, substance use, racism, and homophobia, as they felt safe discussing their experiences. This point was emphasized by a participant who had experienced racism at their former school:

> For the individual teachers, there's a huge difference because like specifically, talking to them, it's more personal, like, it's more like they're talking to me as a person, like, they care if I have struggles in my daily life, because that then affects my learning. And they're concerned with my learning, therefore, they have to be concerned with my daily life as well. And it can be a lot more emotionally taxing for them. However, I see it like more of a two-way street. Because I think students are humans too. And they care for whoever is teaching them because, yeah, it's just how humans are supposed to work, not one sided.

Safety and trust seemed to be crucial for students who were in particularly vulnerable situations. Stories from participants supported this idea, as staff seemed to respect the vulnerable position of their students and were flexible in accommodating their individual needs within the classroom.

Flexibility. Participants consistently noted that teachers were very flexible in how they presented learning material and evaluation. Participants described being able to

choose project topics which interested them or were useful for future career purposes. This point was explored by a participant, who provided the following example:

> I'm trying to build a portfolio. That's really why I switched into my art class. And my art teacher has been giving me things and every time he gives me something like, “this would be good for your portfolio.”

This participant emphasized that their art teacher was helping them prepare a portfolio for a future career in the arts. Moreover, the teacher was very flexible in how they evaluated the participant’s work:

> He's teaching me a lot more too, which is cool, right? … I do digital art on my iPad. And I'm allowed to do my sketchbook assignments on my iPad … He gives me a lot of freedom, but the things I can do, like I am into, it's embarrassing. I'm into like that animated type of style. And he lets me do that for my sketchbook assignments. But like he has, he gives me a lot of freedom. Like he'll give me a prompt and he's like, “do whatever you want with this.” So I just kind of go crazy. I think he likes it a lot though.

This participant’s art teacher exhibits several important characteristics: sharing a genuine interest in the student’s future by encouraging the participant to develop a portfolio; personalized learning in allowing the participant to complete their assignment through their preferred medium; and the development of a positive relationship by giving the participant the support and freedom to explore the art style they are most interested in.

Having choice in how they approached their learning was encouraging for the students, as it gave them new motivations (e.g. “this will help my future career” or “this is relevant to my own interests”) to complete their work. This was especially important for participants who described their traditional school as a waste of time; with schoolwork that was clearly geared towards their interests and futures, participants noted a change in their willingness to learn and complete their assignments. Flexibility

extended beyond curriculum material as teachers were also able to provide more time for projects, as well as change due dates to fit the needs of the students. Participants explained that having a flexible due date based on their individual circumstance was very important, as many of them had responsibilities beyond schools, which could get in the way of completing schoolwork. This flexibility also extended to attendance. Participants appreciated being able to choose when and how they attended they classes, as some students had jobs or other commitments outside of school. One participant described how their program was flexible for attendance:

> You know, even like, when I first started going to that program, like I still had to miss one day, because I had to just sleep all day because I was like, so tired. So I would just, I would usually miss like Wednesdays. But I would just like, let my teacher know and she was like, okay, no worries, we will pick up when you come back. And it was just like, so accommodating, that we actually believed that our teacher wanted to see us succeed.

These efforts helped cultivate a more equitable learning environment, in which the students did not feel left to the unbending structures of mainstream schooling, as implemented by the teacher or staff member. Many participants described alternative school staff members as friends, and that they did not consider them as they would a teacher within a traditional school. This equitable relationship was especially important for participants, as teachers were described as being very approachable and open to discussing changes to material, due dates, or other academic concerns. When asked about the approachability of teachers, a participant provided the following example:

> You know, you have the connections with the teachers [at PACE] for the most part and even if you don't have the connections there's still the understanding that you know, people are doing things on their own time, on their own timeline … there was no needing to go to the teacher to beg for like an extension or anything … I guess at PACE it was more of like, at any time, kind of go in and do things as

> you're thinking about them or talk to teachers as you're thinking about them.

Participants emphasized that teachers held a respect for their lives outside of school, and acknowledged the complex lives that they held. This seemed to be mutual as participants expressed respect towards the teachers whom they held in high regard. One participant provided some examples of how this respect was shown:

> We would take turns buying her coffee … like we wouldn't be late coming back from lunch because like, sometimes some of us would go and smoke weed and then we'd come back and we'd make sure to not smell and be on time because we respected her, you know?

In general, staff held a respect for the lives students held outside of school. Participants noted that this was different from their experience in traditional school, where staff expected school to be the primary focus of a young person's life. Many participants described feeling as though they were treated like an adult. This sense of respect gave students power in a system that they had previously felt powerless; by treating students equitably, respecting their lives outside of school, and cultivating a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment, staff within the alternative education programs created an atmosphere in which students experiencing marginalization could flourish.

Cooperative Learning Credits. Another important benefit for participants were paid co-ops. A majority of participants received credits for cooperative-based learning, where the students worked at a business or organization for a certain number of hours per week, using their experience as a form of job-based education. While traditional schools also offer co-op credits for students, most high schools do not allow students to be paid for their time. This was not the case for the participants, who received wages and credits towards their diploma for their work. This was particularly important for one participant,

who was able to get all their missing credits through paid co-op. This participant explained why co-op was so important to them:

> I could not be where I am today, without the option of getting credits through co-op, it would have been a lot harder. So I definitely do attribute my current location- my current like, being a university graduate and in teachers education, like I wouldn't have been- gotten here as, as easily if it weren't for PACE, and that that system of getting- recognizing work as developing, you know, life skills that will that are worth something in the eyes of the education, like public education.

Co-op teachers would meet with students to ask them questions and provide minor assignments about their work experience to ensure that they were using the co-op as a learning experience. The opportunity to work and receive credits was very important for students who lacked financial security. Another participant, who had experienced housing insecurity during their transition into alternative education, explained the personal importance of paid co-ops:

> Like it allowed me to be able to work and be paid, but also it counted towards co-op, which you don't do, like you can't do, it can't be a paid position [in traditional schools], which didn't really work in my life at the time … I wouldn't have been able to earn so many credits in such a short amount of time or get- uh, be able to have my credits while being paid it just yeah, it wouldn't- it would not have worked out and I would just continue to be your high school dropout.

Moreover, the paid co-op programs worked with a student's existing employment, allowing them to work and receive credits in an environment they were already familiar and comfortable with. This was the case for two participants, who were both able to use their pre-existing employment to earn co-op credits. One participant expressed a unique experience with their co-op, as they were able to use their social advocacy work to receive credits:

> I'm finding it really freeing, because a lot of the like advocacy work, which is just like trying to get more awareness about how the curriculum should shift, is being

> counted as actual work, which has historically never been done before. Because it's always seen like as, I don't know, ad hoc things that you don't get a credit for.

This experience has had a significant impact on the participant's learning experience, and was radically different from their time in traditional schools:

> Co-op now is, basically is autodidactic. So I can read a book, and that book is my teacher. I can talk to like, a steering team on a gender equality project. And that steering team is my teacher, and basically taking life as my teacher, I think, is amazing.

The inherent flexibility of co-op based credits allowed teachers to shape curriculum requirements around student needs. Recognizing that most participants were already working jobs to support themselves, alternative programs allowed students to receive their missing credits without having to sacrifice their primary source of income. Moreover, co-op based education provided students with job experience, supporting their future careers after graduation.

Material Benefits. Participants also described the important material benefits provided by alternative schools. Several participants received city bus passes, allowing them to attend school, co-op, work, and other general transportation needs more easily. This was especially important for young students who did not have their own means of transportation and lacked the financial security to purchase monthly bus passes. Participants also described the food programs which offered snacks and meals to students. Similar to the bus pass, food programs provided students with a reliable means of accessing healthy meals without having to spend their already limited income. Through the SWAC program, one participant even received a gym membership, which allowed them free access to a local gym, and doubled as an opportunity to receive their

gym credits by attending self-directed fitness classes. Recognizing the financial limitations of many young students, alternative programs offered material benefits which made attending class and engaging in learning easier.

4.3.2 Challenges of Alternative Education

While alternative programs offered many benefits to participants, they were not without their challenges. Participants described having limited connections with other students in their classes, a lack of challenging material, and limited opportunities for extracurricular activities. While these challenges didn't necessarily stop participants from obtaining their high school diploma, they did make engaging in the school environment difficult at times.

Social Connections. While alternative school programs don't typically offer the breadth of events and activities that traditional schools do, some participants did describe feeling as though they missed out by not having the "typical" high school experience. Participants described feeling disconnected from their peers in the classroom. This was frequently attributed to the correspondence nature of their curriculum; as students were able to learn different material at different times, and at their own pace, classes lacked a cohesive structure. Participants explained that they were still able to ask questions to the teachers and get their work done, however they did not feel they could share their learning with other students around them. This was particularly true for younger students who often shared their classrooms with adult learners, who they did not feel comfortable talking with. One participant described this learning environment:

> Like it didn't really matter how many people were there or weren't there because you just kind of do, like you work through your curriculum. There'd be like a binder and you'd be like, okay, like, put whatever assignment into this binder, like

> that's what they belong in. Then the teacher just goes to the back and gets them and eventually gives them back to you, but like there's very little communication

This lack of shared learning made it difficult for the participant to form positive connections with other students, who described a feeling of isolation from their peers. When asked how this effected their learning, the participant had the following response:

> I would say that it did affect my learning in some, like, in some ways, right? Like talking to other people, you're always learning new things and in- and just not having those kinds of discussions, right. There's no like little, little connections that everybody's making and like seeing how other people reacted to like, you know, a piece of writing or you know, what their thoughts were on that.

However, this lack of social connection was not a challenge for all participants. A different participant did not consider social connection and relationship-building an important reason for their engagement in alternative education and did not mind the isolated learning environment described by others. When asked about this, the participant said that "when I'm there I just want to get my stuff done … I did enjoy talking [to other students] but secretly inside I was like, please let me do my work". For participants focused on completing their diploma as quick as possible, social connections were an afterthought.

One participant provided a unique insight into the differences between alternative programs, as they attended SWAC prior to taking general courses through the alternative program at PACE. The participant explained that in the SWAC program they were able to form strong connections with other students, and the class itself developed a network of supportive relationships where they would hold each other accountable, keep up to date on their work, and ensure nobody was left out. When the participant eventually attended PACE to obtain some missing credits, they described a very different experience:

> So then I went to PACE, in like the [main] building, and I did gym, and math, and maybe cooking or something. And that was a really different experience, because it was like a really empty building. And like, I don't know, the vibe was just a lot different there … it was really, it just felt weird, because I think like physical space-wise, the building felt empty, because there was like, so few of us … like sometimes I would end up being the only kid in my class with the teacher … or like in gym, it was fun because we played basketball and like hot lunches were fun because we all went to the cafeteria and we were all there but yeah, there wasn't that same connection like the only connections that I sort of made up at [PACE] was like at the smoking section.

This description seems to capture the difference between certain alternative programs; while smaller more intensive programs allowed for the development of positive social relationships between students, more broad programs like the correspondence and day-class programs offered through PACE, were not conducive to building friendships.

Limited Academic Learning Opportunities. Beyond social connection, some participants also described feeling as though their learning was limited to less academically intensive curriculum. One participant felt as though some of the material they were being taught was not adequately challenging, and while the relaxed curriculum was beneficial for quickly obtaining the necessary credits to graduate, they did not meet all the necessary course requirements to the post-secondary programs they wanted to pursue. In traditional Ontario high schools, classes are structured in streams, based on academic level; in grade nine and ten, courses are labelled to applied or academic level, and in grade 11 and 12 they are labelled academic/university level classes according to the post-secondary destination that students are "streamed" for (Ministry of Education, 2016). Within alternative programs, some participants explained that they were limited in their ability to take academic level classes. This was particularly difficult for a participant who had completed several years of French-Immersion classes, but was not able to

continue with their French classes once they transition to an alternative program. Another participant also spoke to this issue:

> [Classes] are never at, like the high enough level. I guess that I wish they would be, because a lot of times, I guess, alternative education streams, they're veered to be easier or like, more simplified, and that's not what I need.

While challenges related to social connection and limited academic opportunities were discussed during participant interviews, most participants spoke positively of their experience in alternative education. Moreover, when these challenges were discussed, participants acknowledged that the alternative programs they attended were limited in their scope and weren't necessary designed to facilitate social connection or provide academic-level classes. In general, participants acknowledged that the limitations of alternative schooling were outweighed by the positive benefits offered by the programs they were enrolled in.

4.3.3 Motivation

Within the group of participants, themes of motivation followed two broad patterns: motivation resulting from the expected outcomes of obtaining a secondary education and motivation resulting from interpersonal connections. These two patterns motivated students to seek out, attend, and succeed in graduating high school through an alternative education program, despite the numerous challenges experienced by participants.

Expected Outcomes. All participants displayed a desire to better themselves and their future prospects. These expectations largely involved future career goals, ideas for further education, and a desire for personal improvement. One participant used the phrase

"getting that piece of paper" to describe their motivation to graduate, emphasizing their high school diploma as a clear goal for attending an alternative education program. This clear focus was shared by another participant, who emphasized that they "were on a grind" to graduate as soon as possible. Other participants felt as though they would be limited by their lack of having a high school diploma. As one participant described, "I knew that I had to get a high school diploma if I wanted to do the things that I wanted to do at that time." Statements like this often carried with it a desire to move on from secondary education, with participants feeling as though they were being held back from other goals. This statement also emphasizes the beliefs participants held about the future; several participants indicated employment as a significant factor for completing high school. Participants described an expectation of meaningful employment, consistent with a desire for financial security.

This desire for greater career opportunities was connected to goals of obtaining post-secondary education. Four participants who had already graduated from their alternative education program were either attending or had completed post-secondary education, both at the college and university level. Two participants completed college after obtaining their high school diploma through alternative schooling, becoming a nurse and artist, respectively. At the time of the interview, one participant was attending university to become a teacher, while another was finishing their Bachelor of Social Work degree. When asked why they wanted to become a teacher, one participant contributed it partly to their experience in alternative education:

> I want to be a good role model. Having severely like, just fallen off the rails, fallen off the tracks in high school. That definitely influenced it. But also, I think it's, it's a lot of just having gained experience as an instructor and teacher and find

> it a motivating, intrinsically motivating thing to try and give people access to new knowledge.

Reflecting on the challenges they overcame to succeed in school appeared to be an influential factor in the participant's career choice, specifically in how they wanted to support students going through similar experiences. This idea was also conveyed by a different participant:

> I want to work in like, policy, and like legislation development and analysis, that kind of thing. I really, I really like working with youth. I worked at a group home for two years with just older teenage boys, and I loved just like doing that, the same that my teacher did for me like, like equipping them with the resources and skills that they needed as they were progressing out of care.

Two participants who were currently enrolled in alternative education expressed a similar desire to further their education after graduating from high school. This desire for further education acted as a motivating factor for students, some of whom expressed incredulity at the fact they had succeeded in post-secondary education after struggling to complete high school. The desire for career opportunities and education were connected, with some participants expressing that they attended post-secondary as a means of obtaining a specific career trajectory, such as art, teaching, nursing, and social work. For these participants, completing post-secondary education was a necessary step to achieve their goals for future employment.

Social Connections. Participants were also motivated through their connections with teachers, school staff, friends, family, and peers. Several students explained that relationships with specific teachers was a significant motivating factors for getting their diploma. As explored previously, these positive teacher-student relationships provided students with a meaningful connection to a caring and supportive adult within the school

environment. This strong connection within the school seemed to motivate students to succeed as they knew that their teacher would support their learning needs. Furthermore, the students did not want to let their teachers down, providing a motivating factor to continue with their efforts.

Friends and family played an important role in motivating several of the participants. While some participants expressed having supportive members of their family, others relied on close friends. One participant provided a concise statement on this point:

> I think that like I am only where I am today because of the community of supports that I have had from my friends in SWAC, to my teacher in SWAC, to like community groups that I go to, to my friends … that never left.

This participant also attributed their success to the fact that their parents had also completed higher education. Similar to teachers, these connections provided students with a supportive network to assist them in their learning. Some participants explained that they had friends who had or were currently attending an alternative school; by seeing someone they knew and trusted enrolled in an alternative school, participants felt more comfortable being enrolled themselves. Moreover, knowing people who had succeeded in alternative education provided a motivation factor to participants who then felt that they too could succeed.

These motivating factors played an important part in student success. Despite the barriers posed by marginalizing factors such as poverty, racism, homophobia and mental health concerns, participants felt motivated and supported in their efforts towards achieving their high school diploma. This effort speaks to the immense strength of

participants, who, despite numerous challenges, continued to achieve their goals. Overall, participants displayed a high degree of motivation in their desire to succeed. This, however, may be the result participants already being involved in some means of obtaining their education. This thought was summarized by one of the participants:

> Like, I think with PACE … it's kind of like that double edged sword because you have to be intrinsically motivated to go to school there … at the PACE school … you have to be intrinsically motivated and very self-disciplined, which, when you know, people aren't doing well, they're not ... and so that is maybe the double edged sword aspect of it is that if you don't go, nobody will miss you. And when you show up, everyone's like, cool. Good to see you.

This participant's comment offers a serious critique of the expectations set by alternative education programs. The participant emphasized that PACE required them to be self-motivated to attend class regularly, as there was little pressure from within the school to attend. This is a significant limitation of the programs offered through PACE, considering several participants noted that a lack of motivation contributed to their difficulty in traditional school programs. Moreover, this comment offers insight into the participants of this research project; as all of the participants were already, in some form, involved in alternative education, they clearly exhibited some motivation to graduate, otherwise they likely would not be involved in alternative education programs at all.

4.4 Critical Understanding of Alternative Education

Despite the difficulties and barriers experienced by participants, they had a clear understanding why the school system did not work for them. Nuanced discussion on the oppressive limitations of educational systems was discussed more than any other subject during participant interviews. Participants were explicit in describing their experiences of marginalization, and clearly articulated how the school system contributed to feelings of

isolation, disengagement, and distrust. It was clear that participants were motivated to speak about their experiences of marginalization within the school system, as well as their arguments for change in education. These themes often emerged unprompted, and involved complex critiques based on participants' lived experiences. Moreover, these discussions often involved a very high level of critical reflection on the participants' own lives at the time they transitioned into alternative school. These reflections were often told as stories; the student's own narrative and how they understood their experience of navigating the education system. Together, these critiques and discussions of oppression emphasized how motivated the participants were to make systemic change, and how knowledgeable they were on the topic of education and learning.

Experiences of Marginalization. Participants described many experiences of marginalization both within the school system and within broader social structures. These marginalizing experiences, combined with the traditional school systems inability to meet complex needs, often contributed to participants disengaging from school. An emphasis is placed on the school system's inability to meet the complex needs of students experience marginalization, as participants were very much still capable of completing schoolwork when an ideal learning environment was provided. As such, many participants blamed the traditional school system's deficiencies in meeting their needs as a reason for their disengagement from school.

Two participants, who identified as trans and non-binary, respectively, described their experiences of discrimination and prejudice based on their gender identity within the traditional school system. One participant described their experience related to gender-identity:

> [My former high school was] always trying to put up this image of being accepting and then, like, there would be someone being bullied or something right in front of a teacher and he would say nothing. They wouldn't do anything to help them, and a lot of times the teachers wouldn't even, like the teachers would dead-name [use the former name of/misgender] people all the time. It's like they put up this big image of being like, "oh, yes, we're so supportive." And then they're not. Like, I've had a lot of friends who have had terrible experiences with the teachers there. Yet they still are like, "Yes, we're so accepting. Look at us, we're so good at this. Look at us. We have a pride flag up that means we're so great."… I think it's just frustrating, because they're trying to put up this image that they're not.

These unwelcoming experiences in traditional high schools were difficult for students who also experienced marginalization resulting for other non-dominant social identities. Other participants described experiences of poverty and homeless, with one participant dropping out from high school because they were unable to stay with their parents and ended up being homeless for a period of time. This student was placed in a difficult position, as they began working in order to pay for rent, while also attempting to maintain enrollment in their high school. They were unable to maintain their attendance, and eventually dropped out. This participant described how their former high school tried to respond to this issue:

> Like it was just way too hard to kind of try and get back into the groove of going to regular school and to be able to work to pay my rent and everything at the same time. It was like, there was just no, no way to do it. And they had kind of, they, they said to me, because they knew like, as the situation was developing, they were just like, oh, like, you know, you can just go on to Ontario Works, and you'll have enough money to be here and to go to school at the same time. And no, you don't, it was, it was brutally difficult … but the thing was also housing. So to be able to afford housing with the Ontario Works, and try and go to traditional school while working a job, I was renting like super ghetto places.

This student's experience speaks other systemic issues which culminate in marginalization at the individual level. Unable to maintain a job and school, this student turned to social assistance (Ontario Works) to support them, however they found that the

funding provided through Ontario Works did not match the real-world cost of renting an apartment. The participant's story emphasized the multiple, competing issues at play within one student's experience of dropping out; it wasn't just homelessness which contributed to them leaving school, rather it was the combined issues of poverty, housing insecurity, stagnant social assistance programs, and rising costs of living.

Another participant described their experience of mental health and substance use concerns while in high school. This student, who described their school experience as a downward spiral, had ongoing issues related to their mental health which eventually translated into drug use. As things deteriorated, the student felt increasingly ostracized by their teachers:

> The teachers started to like, give me really bad looks, like really looks of disapproval. They would like tell me to get out of the class because I smelled like weed or I would get called to the principal's office, because I was high, like just that kind of stuff. And I just really started to feel like an outsider. And like, that sort of shame, like just pushed me further away from school. And I had a gym teacher corner me in her office and say, like, "[name omitted], look at yourself, like you're going downhill. This is like, you're an example of what drugs do to people, like they ruin, they ruined you." And I can see how like, now it was sort of like a tough love trying to get me back on track situation, but it just felt so awful. Like, I just sort of felt collectively, all of the teachers that were once like, on my side, sort of go against me and like give up on me.

This participant emphasized how teachers and staff contributed to their feeling of isolation and disengagement, effectively pushing the participant into the margins of the student population. Misguided intentions of "tough love" only furthered the participant's sense of hopelessness. A participant told a similar story of being treated poorly by a teacher, when they were forced to take care of an injured pet while also having to write an exam the next day:

> I was up most of that night taking care [of my pet] because my parents didn't really take care of them. And anyway, when I went to school, the next day, and I had my math exam, I handed in my exam, and I was like- I knew that I had totally, like, just not done my best work, because I barely got any sleep. And I had told my math teacher, I was like, "yeah, like, I know, this sounds like really crazy, but my [pet was injured] last night", and she was just like, "you're lying" … and she was like, "why would, why would your parents have you take care of that?" Or like, you know, there was just no like, there's no possibility that any of those things could have happened yeah, right. And I was just like, I'm telling you this not because I want to be but because I know that I probably failed this exam and I would like, you know, to be able to retake this exam with some proper sleep and being able to, you know, study the night before, and, nope I failed that credit.

This participant described how their teacher was unwilling to accommodate the circumstance that came up the night before the exam. Previously in this participant's interview, they explained that their home life was difficult. As the participant's experience did not fit into the teacher's assumption of a 'normal' student's responsibility (i.e. it should be the parent's responsibility), the teacher accused the participant of lying. Not only did the participant fail the exam and lose their credit, but they were also further ostracized by school staff as the teacher's assumption that they were lying implied that the student's home life and responsibilities were abnormal.

Personal Analysis. As students at the margins of the educational system, participants experienced the flaws and limitations of traditional schools first-hand. Reflecting on their experiences of marginalization, disengagement, and isolation, participants developed a clear understanding of how the mainstream school system failed to meet their unique needs. One participant emphasized why traditional school did not work for them:

> I was always and I still am fixated on the motivation, like I knew, from an early age too that it's not necessarily, my intuition is- that it's not really about your knowledge that is transmitted from a teacher to a student. For the most part, people are, you know, pretty intelligent, they have the base level skills to be able

> to, to do what we're being taught to do. But the real impediment is the motivation piece. And that isn't something that you can just transmit through providing knowledge, like, you have to find a way to get someone activated and engaged, and what school was offering wasn't really doing that for me. So I wouldn't show up to school, I would sleep in, it didn't matter. That same person, within the military co-op setting, where I'm learning how to, you know, use weapons and, and do first aid and all these crazy things. I'm not- those same problems did not exist whatsoever. And I was submitting things on time, like they would make us do assignments. I was always on time, I was super, super, super, like a just a super hard worker within that particular context. Because it was meaningful. And so the motivation was just like intrinsic to that.

This participant's critical analysis of their experience in traditional schools was focused on the idea of motivation. As a young student, they had difficulty maintaining motivation to complete schoolwork and suffered because of it. Despite this, however, the participant was clear that if curriculum was made to be sufficiently engaging and efforts were made to better encourage motivation towards learning, they would have avoided dropping out. The participant developed a clear cause-and-effect understanding for why school did not work for them. This was shared by a participant, who also had difficulty related to motivation. They provided another similar description for why traditional school did not work for them:

> Like, you know, I probably could have like, worked pretty hard to make sure that my shifts were after school or whatever. But when you're looking at your life as a whole and time spent, it can just feel kind of stupid going to gym class when, you know, maybe looking after your family or, you know, even reading a book that you find more interesting than going, you know, like it just it's hard, it's hard for some people, they just want [you] to sit still all day. And you know, it's like looking back at, it would have maybe been easier if I could have just done it the more traditional way. But that didn't seem like a possibility at the time.

These two participants emphasized the difficulty in maintaining motivation to keep up their school efforts, and that having low interest in the curriculum contributed to them eventually dropping out. Other participants critiqued the treatment of students

experiencing marginalization within traditional schools. One participant described the unequal treatment they experienced amongst other students:

> [The principal], like he really rallied for a lot of the like, marginalized kids. And he would like text my mom, because I'd like left home during that period. And he'd be like, oh, yeah, I did see [them] today. [They're] walking off the property now just want to let you know. So there was that like, there was him where he was like, really, he was really trying for us. Um, but I do sometimes wonder if he really was only trying for me because like I presented differently at the start of high school. I wonder sometimes like, the teachers knew I was coming to school high and doing drugs and like drinking and I wonder if sometimes they turned a blind eye to me doing that versus some of the other kids that came into school, marginalized in grade nine right from the start. There's sort of like a difference between like, their attitudes were like "No hope for these ones. Some hope for these ones." And then once I didn't fit into the mold again, they're like, "Okay, no hope." That's what it felt like.

This participant pointed at the fact that their experience of marginalization within the education system was very different. Based on other privileged identities held by the participant, they reflected that their experience could have been much different if they did not have the initial support of teachers when they transitioned from being a "good student" to a "bad student." This nuanced reflection spoke to the participant's critical analysis of their own identity within the broader education system. The comments made by this participant offer insight into the identity formation for youth experiencing marginalization; the participant was keenly aware of how they were perceived and categorized as being marginalized by school staff, emphasizing that their behaviour relegated them to a specific identity – that of the "bad student." Further, the participant noted that being categorized as such conveyed a sense of hopelessness, reinforcing their negative perception of teachers and school staff. This seemed to have been particularly difficult for this participant, who, at one point, had positive relationships with teachers and staff.

System Level Analysis. Not all critiques of the school system focused on the negative aspects of teachers; several participants commented on the difficult position teachers are placed in when having to teach students who are experiencing marginalization and enrolled in an alternative program. These critiques emphasized a clear respect and understanding that it is not necessarily the teacher's fault that the school failed them, rather the participants pointed to broader system-level issues affecting educational institutions. For example, one participant described feeling pity for teachers within the traditional school, as they clearly have the capability to teach and support student learning, but are unable to provide the depth of support needed for some students due to the constraints posed by large classroom sizes. Another participant expanded on this idea:

> I don't think [teachers] had the time. Like, you know, they'd realize we're, you know, somebody who's not there. They just get marked absent and on they go with their day. There's not somebody that's like, has the time to really pursue what's going on with these kids who, who are, the system, it's just not working for them … I guess our system does the best that it can with, you know, like I was saying earlier, just trying to get the most people taken care of. And that goes for so many things, not just our school structure, but like health care, everything.

Several participants touched on this idea, emphasizing the need for system-level change in education. This need for change was echoed by a participant who shared a broad critique of learning and knowledge creation. For this participant, school-related issues went beyond the institution, instead calling into question how we learn, the value we place on knowledge, and the status associated with academic achievement:

> Yeah, I think that how we test people, or even how we like log, like volunteer hours or grades, it's, like, in the in the sense of it, it's like, it stamps imperm-, like, permanence on somebody's learning, right? And somebody's knowledge, um, and so it basically says, like, with this score, or with this mark, this is forever the snapshot of how you are as a person and that immobility of progress. I think it's

> against the thing of change and learning and understanding because it just basically says you can't learn anymore. You can't do better than this, because this is your mark now and everybody is gonna keep moving without you. And when it is like with that paradigm of like, I don't know, permanent and transactional work. It almost feels like a, I guess, an economy of displacing people from a not knowing person to knowing person and then once you pass that like line, then you can never go back like you can never forget or you can never learn. Yeah. Like, it doesn't make sense.

Challenging how we learn and what constitutes knowledge was an important point of discussion for this participant. Drawing from this point, the participant further explained that their transition into an alternative education program allowed them to pursue their interests and gave them the power to determine what sort of knowledge or learning was important to them. Directing their learning towards issues and topics that interested them allowed the participant to focus on learning for learning's sake, rather than learning for the purposes of achieving a particular grade. The participant emphasized how this experience differed from their former high school:

> Everybody was so into being good at a bad system, that they didn't realize it. And it harmed them, like, in being so connected to grades and connecting their own value to grades … in general, I think, it's like saying you can't learn outside of a building. And I think a lot of people truly believe that. And it overflowed into any relationship people have, because it's knowledge then becomes static, or then becomes like, "I can only learn things within this specific framework". Or "I can only learn things if it'll get me a grade."

It is important to note, however, that the critical analyses discussed by participants weren't solely focused on the faults of the traditional education system. Several participants shared their critiques of alternative school programs as well, the most common of which emphasized alternative education as a hidden system. These critiques focused on the lack of awareness participants had about the availability of alternative education programs, and blamed the school system for not making them aware of such

programs sooner. Participants who brought up this issue emphasized that they should not have to had to wait until they were at their limit to receive help, when access to an alternative program earlier in their high school career would have reduced the amount of time away from school. A participant shared their thoughts on alternative education being a hidden system:

> Like I was saying earlier, it's like, so many things. So many systems are designed to support as many people as possible and that, like, that average of people will never be everybody and can't be. So it has to cater to the most people that can be helped, you know, um, but I think it maybe [alternative programs] shouldn't be hidden so much. It just felt like such a secret. It was like, “Excuse me, there's, there's another way we can do this. Like, why are you just waiting to tell us now? Like, after we've been in and out of your office every day for the past two years?”

This participant emphasized that they felt cheated by the school system, which did very little to support them as they faced difficulty attending class, and only made them aware of an alternative school program as a last resort. This critique was shared by another participant, who further emphasized that alternative programs should not cater solely to those directly experiencing marginalization. The participant felt as though the benefits of their alternative program was an apology for the years of racism and discrimination they experienced at their former high school:

> On the other hand, I was really excited to have [alternative education] be an option for me, and also fight for it to be an option for other people. Because it isn't like that widespread. And I don't want me to be, like, the only one who can like benefit from something. Because that's just like unsustainable. And I think that's another thing, like sustainability, I think is really important to me, in education, because I don't want to be like the outlier of luck, if I just like, had a bad experience with racism, and then, oh, I got this ideal school situation to apologize for it. It doesn't work like that. I feel like everybody should like have this.

Similar to the previous participant, this student felt as though alternative education programs are offered as a last resort, and only to students presenting the most serious

issues. This participant further emphasized that while alternative programs are important for students experiencing marginalization, the benefits of alternative education (engaging curriculum, strong teacher-student relationships, flexibility) should not be an exception afforded only to students as an "apology" for their experience of marginalization, as it does not address the root causes of oppression within the school system. The participant expanded on this point, referencing a meeting held with the superintendent to address their experiences at their former high school:

> For the superintendent, I had to, like, prepare, like a whole document of like my experiences in school and my recommendations so that, like, they wouldn't happen again. And it was like a four-page, Google doc of this, and I read it off. And at the end, everybody in the Zoom was crying and stuff, and because there was like, horrible stuff in there. And at the end, a lot of people looked apologetic, however, like, getting into the PACE program didn't solve those issues … we're so disconnected from the next generation of students we don't know if they're still facing the same problems that we have.

Overall, participants displayed a wealth of knowledge, critique, and personal reflections on their experience in the education system. Many participants organized their experience as a story, with a clear narrative for why traditional school did not work for them, and an understanding of what eventually led them to attending an alternative school program. These reflections are crucial for understanding the lived reality of students who experience marginalization. These are not one-dimensional people with straight-forward stories; they are complex individuals with many intersecting identities which form together to create a diverse narrative of learning, education, growth, and empowerment.

4.5 Ideal School System

To better understand how the participants viewed their experience in alternative education, they were asked to describe what their ideal school system would look like.

Their response emphasized the changes they would like to see to avoid reproducing their own challenges, while also reinforcing the aspects of alternative education that were the most impactful for their learning. The general themes from participant responses will be explored here to capture how participants imagine change in the education system.

When asked what their ideal school system would look like, one participant expressed their concern regarding access to alternative programs. The participant emphasized that they would like to have been able to attend an alternative program at an earlier point, rather than waiting until they were failing classes and struggling to get the necessary credits to graduate. The participant questioned why schools do not intervene sooner:

> Why just now, you know, I felt almost cheated by that. I felt like, well, I probably could have finished high school in two years, instead of four years, if I'd have done this from the get go. And I mean, I was already in elementary school, finding as many ways as possible to get out of class. I would join every play every club every like, I was doing everything I could possibly do to get out of class. Faking sick for, you know, a long-, as much as possible.

The participant made the point that they were clearly struggling to attend school from an early age, and questioned why nobody told them about alternative programs, instead waiting until the problems worsened to offer any alternatives. From this experience, the participant suggested that the ideal school system would make students aware of the alternative opportunities available to them, and give them the freedom to choose how they complete high school. They acknowledged that the traditional school system prepares people to enter a “nine-to-five” job, and that alternative programs may not adequately prepare students for that lifestyle. However, the participant also questioned

this system as a whole, raising a concern that traditional and alternative schools are only designed to teach people how to work:

> I get it that like, yeah, people should learn to work, nine-to-five or whatever. That's what society wants for us. So that's what we've constructed right now. But like, you know, I'm- I don't, I opened my own business, and I work when I want to. And that's the life I've constructed for myself carefully over a very long time. Yeah. But there are other ways of living, right. Like there aren't- it's, it doesn't all have to be this way. But I mean, that's, that's what they want. They want people to be workhorses.

Despite this critique, the participant acknowledged that they do think it's important for young people to learn that "you have to show up sometimes for things that you don't want to go to. That's a part of life". The participant seemed to try to balance student choice in how and when they learn with the necessary functions of school that teaches young people time-management skills. While the participant did not have a solution to this problem, they did suggest that an ideal school system would be able to negotiate this balance and allow for the freedom of student choice in learning while also ensuring students are well-equipped to handle the responsibilities of adult life.

Participants also described how their ideal school would approach curriculum. One participant felt little interest in the material being taught to them at their former high school, and suggested more student-driven curriculum:

> I think a little bit more student driven projects … perhaps even less homework, explicit homework. But the projects would be motivating and meaningful enough that the odds are, they're going to be taking some of that work home with them.

The participant acknowledged that this may not work for everyone, so the ideal school system would be flexible and provide students with the freedom to choose how they learn:

> So some kind of system where, for those students who, who would benefit from something like that - because a lot of people just like the normal, the normal works for them - but for those students who are identified as needing something different, more like project based, where you can hyper focus on this particular project. And the role of the teacher in a sense is to facilitate you in your project and to provide you or find the curriculum connections in it.

In this participant's ideal school, the role of the teacher would be to model the curriculum around student interests, weaving the necessary credit requirements into material that is already meaningful and engaging to students. The participant further explains:

> By virtue of it being something meaningful to you, it's not- it wouldn't be a project that is like just solely based in one curriculum, based in one-, one set of curriculum but rather, like integrates many things. So, I guess to put it more concrete simple terms, just more student-driven, kind of project inquiry based credit programs and less of a clear separation between subjects.

From this participant's perspective, an ideal school would cross curriculum boundaries, making connections between different subjects through project-based learning. These projects would be facilitated by a teacher, but the material explored would be student-driven. Another participant emphasized that the material being taught to students should reflect changes in society:

> I see, like, humanists, like practices, basically rooted in value systems too like-, and seeing and preparing people like for, for the world today, because I think that's something else. It's like, there's so many biases within the curriculum. You don't hear about the LGBTQ plus community, you don't get a correct view of feminism, and its wide array over every single topic. Um, I think, also, like intersectional approaches to every single thing, because that's how life works. Because a lot of times in like, Western practices, the, the subjects, and the lines are like, rigid.

While PACE met some of these calls, the participant emphasized that alternative programs don't necessarily solve the structural issues that bring students to attend alternative programs in the first place.

A participant further suggested that more integrated co-op experiences would be an important addition to their ideal school:

> Maybe even earlier on, like allowing students to just find a job and actually be paid while in co-op, that can make a huge difference for a lot of people … I think there's a lot of like-, status anxiety starts to happen in high school. And if someone could work, and you know, be able to support their, their- themselves with some money, and then also have teachers who are really understanding and supporting of creating the curriculum connections, or just prompting and showing people how, like, "Hey, you're actually learning, you have to do these mathematical things, pursue these mathematical opportunities in your work", and show some evidence of that. Yeah, stuff like that would be good.

For this participant, school and work connections would be more explicit, allowing students to make real world connections between curriculum and employment. As the participant explained, these learning experiences would be paid, allowing students to earn an income and support themselves while obtaining their credits.

Participants also reflected on how to address some of the challenges of alternative education. One participant, who attended the SWAC program, acknowledged that there were some barriers to getting in:

> In the SWAC program, it was like- which is like run by PACE, the principal like sort of scouts for people I guess and you have to have like eight or less credits you have to get and all this different stuff, which I'm like sad that there's like those barriers to that kind of program because like oh my god, if that was like what PACE was as a whole everyone would be fucking- er, sorry, everyone would be graduated.

From this experience, the participant suggested that PACE would benefit from expanding certain aspects of the SWAC program to the school in general. For this participant, these aspects included small class sizes, genuine interest in student well-being from teachers, curriculum based on student interests, material supports such as bus passes and gym memberships, and respect for student lives outside of school.

Another participant suggested that more opportunities for academic learning should be available within alternative programs, specifically by letting students take academic-level classes. While making this suggestion, the participant acknowledged the potential barriers to providing higher-level courses in an alternative program:

> I think like, definitely, in having academic courses available, like, there's just, there's no reason that they shouldn't be available, because all of those teachers, like, it's not like you go to school to be an applied [teacher], yeah, like, you have the ability. And I know that, like, it's putting more pressure on teachers to have like, oh, they have to make multiple courses, like, I get that you're gonna have to pay more people … you know, the Board of Education is going to have to pay more people to be able to do that, but why shouldn't they? Like, that just doesn't make sense.

Despite this limitation, the participant argued that including academic learning in an alternative program was well worth the potential cost. Beyond the inclusion of academic courses, a participant also suggested that an ideal alternative program would facilitate greater social connections between students. As an example, the participant suggested that alternative programs should have more extracurriculars, such as clubs or groups, to provide opportunities for students to engage with each other:

> There's just so many benefits to extracurriculars. And I think that they should make that a priority. Not to have everything that's, like, you know, the same kind of football team or everything [at a traditional school]… but yeah, I feel like, as much as you're going [to an alternative program], and you're still getting-, like, you're still graduating, your opportunities are still being limited.

When asked about the opportunities they feel are limited, the participant provided some further details:

> Like the opportunities that are available are more geared towards like life skills[1], which is really great and they have a lot of connections with different like,

[1] The term "life skills" is often coded to those of lower economic and social class status. Those who do not perform well academically are often streamed into "life skills" classes.

> community programs for jobs and everything, which is really great and definitely, you know, definitely needed. Usually for the youth going to that program or that school, but it's just not- it takes a lot of the fun out of, out of school and there could just be a little bit more of that. And in that, you know, be able to build healthy relationships with people as well.

The participant made the point that the streamlined structure of alternative programs can "take the fun out of school," and by doing so, sacrifices opportunities to meet people and develop healthy relationships. From this understanding, the participant suggested that alternative schools should develop greater opportunities to bring the fun back into school, through clubs, groups, or other social gatherings. As the participant explained, these opportunities would benefit students by fostering personal connections, healthy relationships, and social engagement with the school.

Recognizing the nuance involved in supporting students who have been marginalized in and in relation to school, one participant also recommended greater training for staff:

> I feel like they should also prepare the teachers for things like that, like they should be, I don't know. I don't know what they learn when they go to university to be a teacher. But I feel like they should be taught more about neurodivergent kids and how to accommodate for them.

This participant emphasized the learning difficulties they experienced in a traditional classroom, and that teachers were often unable or unwilling to accommodate their needs. While this improved at PACE, it was not perfect. Throughout the interview, the participant explained that they felt pressured by teachers at PACE to access online learning modules. These online systems did not work for the participant, who often had to ask for their assignments on paper. The participant described some of the difficulty of this process:

> I would definitely change the way to do work, though, like, maybe make doing work on paper a lot easier to access, because for the teachers, they just have to go and take all their documents and print them out for me and then go bring them back to me, but I think they should just have that available already.

From the participant experience, the ideal school would recognize the individual learning requirements of neurodivergent students, particularly around assignments and learning material is formatted.

One participant provided a detailed description of their ideal school system, which they called an "evolving school." From the participant's description, this school would be constantly changing, and quick to adapt to the shifting needs of students. This idea was based on the participant's argument that schools are slow to change and constantly behind the changing realities that students experience. The participant provided the following description:

> Humans are very flexible and nuanced and change day by day. But I think the ultimate school system would be forever changing and molding. I don't know what that looks like, though. Or like, how that could be successfully done. But I think always trying to do better would definitely be one of the pillars.

Moreover, the participant's idea of the evolving school would be able to adapt to the changing needs of students:

> It's not in plain sight, or it's not within my field of view, even like, I don't even know, the- the future possible needs. And so when we're so disconnected from the next generation of students, we don't know if they're still facing the same problems that we have.

For this participant, the ideal school would include students in the decision-making process; student needs would be actively sought out and used to evaluate how the school

is functioning. By doing so, the participant's evolving school would be shaped by student feedback, and molded around the unique needs of each student cohort.

Chapter Five: Discussion

From this exploration of emergent themes, a clearer picture of alternative education emerges; students who faced marginalization, isolation, and disengagement in traditional high schools benefit from the increased support, flexibility, and respect offered in an alternative school program. While the experiences of six participants cannot be generalized to alternative education as a whole, their stories are, nonetheless, important to consider. These narratives offer a glimpse into the process of marginalization within schools, particularly in the lack of support and understanding for students with marginalized social identities. Despite the ongoing process of marginalization within schools, when students are provided with a learning environment conducive to their needs, they can thrive.

Based on these findings, the initial research questions posed at the beginning of this project can be evaluated. Participant narratives are discussed, focusing on how counter-narratives of student success may challenge the normative assumptions of student trajectories through high school. Returning to the conceptual basis that framed this research, critical pedagogy, anti-oppressive practice, and radical humanism are used to better understand the findings and implications present within participant stories. Finally, suggestions for future change in education are explored, based on the ideal schools described by participants.

5.1 What Motivates a Student to Attend an Alternative Education School?

Students are motivated by their desire for better prospects in terms of employment, income, personal satisfaction, and social acceptance. Of the participants interviewed, all described a motivation to graduate; a motivation which often was not

present during their time in a traditional school. For students who have experienced marginalization, isolation, and disengagement in a traditional high school, alternative programs offer a supportive environment that is willing to meet their individualized learning needs. The benefits afforded by alternative education programs are a motivating factor for students, whose poor experiences in school may make them hesitant to return. Beyond extrinsic rewards and the internal benefits provided through alternative education, students are often motivated by important individuals in their life. Participants described the support of friends, family, counsellors, and teachers, who motivated them to continue their education despite past difficulty. In general, participants were motived by a combined effort of supportive social relationships, the desire for better employment and access to higher education, and the benefits offered through enrollment in an alternative program.

Throughout the interviewing process, participants displayed a variety of goals, desires, and ideas for the future. In general, participants held substantial thoughts about the future, rationalizing their school-related decisions in terms of what would best meet their future needs. Whether the day-to-day focus on completing coursework or the desire for systemic change, participants were focused on future outcomes. This so-called 'future-thinking' is a significant aspect of the student narrative; considering that most participants had previously held little regard for the future, the movement towards constructing clear goals, desires, and ideas for the future signals a change in thinking. Moreover, this change helps portray individuals in alternative education as capable and motivated students.

Participant's conceptualization of the future offers an opportunity to explore the counter-narrative that challenge dominant perceptions of students who experience marginalization. According to Bamberg (2004), counter-narratives are "guided by a deep concern with power and hegemony" (p. 353). In terms of education, dominant narratives surrounding student success create a hegemonic understanding of what it means to be a 'normal' student. Simultaneously, narratives of the 'normal' student imply narratives of an 'abnormal' student; one who does not conform or meet the characteristics imposed by the normative discourse of student trajectories through school. These narratives use many names for such students, including at-risk youth, urban youth, disadvantaged youth, and troubled youth (te Riele, 2006; Watson, 2011; Follesø, 2015; Slaten et al, 2015), however each term suggests the same deviation from the norm. Problems arise when young learners do not meet the characteristics of a 'normal student' and are perceived through the lens of 'abnormal' student narratives. These narratives are dominated by negative assumptions of family instability, risk-taking behaviours, and a lack of motivation or productivity (te Riele, 2006). The abnormal student is "perceived as a 'risky Other,' are seen not only as different from 'most of us' but also as a threat to both themselves and society." (te Riele, 2006, p. 133). Te Riele (2006) further emphasizes that this distinction between so-called normal and abnormal students – referred to by te Riele as the mainstream and the minority – implies that problematic experiences of education are relegated only to the abnormal minority of students, and the normal majority do not experience such challenges. These narratives are harmful to all students, regardless of their social identities, as educational policies need only to address "the small number of young people who are 'at risk, disconnected or in vulnerable circumstances" (te Riele,

2006, p. 139). This conclusion implies that risk, vulnerability, and marginalization are static, and do not change or evolve over time. Counter-narratives, like those told by the participants in this study, offer an opportunity to challenge the dominant discourse by exploring stories that contradict inaccurate assumptions of student experience.

So, how then do the counter-narratives described by participants challenge the dominant discourse? Contrary to narratives of early school leavers that emphasize student deficits (te Riele, 2006), participants displayed considerable motivation towards completing their high school education. Similarly, while family instability and risk-taking behaviours certainly were a factor in the stories described by some participants, they were by no means the single defining factor that contributed to marginalization. Participants described a multitude of concurrent factors that influenced their experience of isolation and disengagement from education. Several participants also noted that they were, for a time, high achieving students, challenging the mainstream/minority dichotomy described by te Riele (2006). Moreover, participant narratives explored how risk, vulnerability, and marginalization shifted over time and between contexts. Health, income, housing, social relations, and motivation all changed over time, for better or worse. While more permanent social identities did not change, the marginalization associated with such identities did; one participant, for example, who experienced homophobia in their former high school, described greater acceptance and support at PACE. In a different environmental context participants experienced a lesser degree of marginalization, challenging the static notions of risk, marginalization and vulnerability portrayed in dominant narratives of mainstream students.

Together, participant stories provide a more nuanced understanding of non-traditional students. These stories offer counter-narratives to the dominant discourse that surrounds student trajectories through education. The transitory and ever-changing nature of risk, vulnerability, and marginalization identified in these counter-narratives challenge the inaccurate or contradictory assumptions of the normative school experience. In the counter-narratives described by participants, non-traditional students are motivated and capable of achieving their goals for the future, and while they may experience unique challenges and systemic barriers to success, they should not be characterized solely by these challenges. Expanding the dominant discourse to include these counter-narrative serves both traditional and alternative students alike, as any youth could find themselves moving between the social conditions that dictate the mainstream/minority dichotomy of student identity. Consequently, to reject the expansion of the dominant discourse to include the counter-narratives of alternative students is to risk misrepresenting the student experience in its entirety.

5.2 What Benefits do Students Find in Attending an Alternative School, Rather Than a Mainstream School?

The benefits of alternative schools include increased flexibility, positive teacher-student relationships, and supportive learning environments. Flexibility was the most frequently cited benefit by participants, particularly in the willingness of teachers to form the curriculum requirements around student interests. Flexibility also extended into evaluation, assignment format, and attendance. This flexibility encouraged positive relationships between teachers and students. Teachers were portrayed as being kind, caring, and non-judgemental, which was particularly meaningful for students who had poor relationships with teachers prior. These themes are consistent with the research

literature, particularly the emphasis on positive relationships with staff, and curriculum flexibility (te Riele, 2006; Watson, 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2011; Morrissette, 2011). Moreover, participants described the important material benefits of attending an alternative school, including access to city bus passes, hot meals and snacks, and other ad hoc costs that were deemed necessary for the student's success, such as application fees for college or university. Overall, these factors contribute to a supportive learning environment which integrates with students' broader life situations to provide a low barrier re-engagement in learning.

The positive experiences in alternative education were a significant departure from traditional education. As described by McGregor and Mills (2012), students become disengaged from school through a lack of social supports, family functioning, emotional and social capital, and experiences of marginalization resulting from non-dominant social identities. Meanwhile, the institution fails to meet the needs of disengaged students through poor teacher-student relationships, a lack of student agency or choice in curriculum, and limited or irrelevant support services for students (te Riele, 2006; McGregor & Mills, 2012). Applying this understanding of traditional education to the narratives described by participants, several connections can be made. First, most participants confirmed that they did not feel as though they had proper support in a traditional high school setting. Thus, the services offered to students (often through guidance counsellors) were limited at best, and often did not adequately meet the needs of the student. This was particularly relevant for participants who were experiencing life situations that were outside of what is considered the normative high school experience. Second, participants described their disinterest in the curriculum offered in traditional

high schools. The dissonance between student interests and the material being taught contributed to a lack of motivation and a cynical perspective towards school. Finally, poor teacher-student relationships dominated the narratives of traditional education that were described by participants. Their relationships were often adversarial and acted to further disengage the students from their learning environment.

When compared to their experiences of traditional education, participants found alternative education to be a better means of obtaining their high school diploma. The approach to education offered through alternative programs created a fundamentally different learning environment for youth who had experienced isolation and disengagement within traditional school systems. At the center of this difference was respect for the students; participants noted that teachers and staff within alternative programs held a clear respect for their responsibilities outside of school. This respect seems to be embodied in the very foundation of the alternative programs identified by participants. Examples of this respect were present in the efforts made to offer paid co-op credits, encourage flexible learning requirements, and separate student attendance from their grade. By removing the barriers to learning within school, participants were better able to negotiate the challenges they experienced outside of school.

While not explicit, the efforts made within alternative education to offer a low barrier means for secondary education to students experiencing marginalization contain several principals of anti-oppressive pedagogy: namely, the acknowledgment of structural oppression within education. Burke and Harrison (1998) emphasize that "the driving force of anti-oppressive practice is *the act of challenging inequalities*" (p.133). By allowing individuals to pursue secondary education on their own terms, and therefore

acknowledge that traditional schools do not meet the needs of students experiencing marginalization, alternative programs challenge the inequalities present within traditional structures. While alternative education is not devoid of systemic inequalities itself, it still offers opportunities for change. As Burke and Harrison (1998) describe, “opportunities for change are created by the process of the challenge.” (p. 133). In the process of challenging traditional structures of education, alternative programs offer real opportunities for change in the lives of students who experience marginalization, disengagement, and isolation in traditional schools.

5.3 What Challenges do Students Experience in Alternative Education?

While participants spoke highly of their experiences in alternative education, not all experiences were positive. Based on these negative experiences, participants discussed changes they believed would address their negative concerns. Students explained that while alternative education programs are an effective means of graduating high school, this effectiveness often sacrifices the social aspects of school. For students who desire social connections and friendly relationships, the general programs offered by alternative schools are limited in their ability to meet these needs. As such, a greater effort toward social connection was a suggestion given by participants. Further, students described limited opportunities to engage in higher-level learning. Several participants emphasized that most classes that were offered were at the applied level. This was difficult for students who excelled in a particular subject and were unable to take academic or university level classes. Other suggestions built off the existing features of alternative programs that were beneficial for students. These included greater opportunities for project-based learning, paid co-op credits, and student-driven curriculum.

The stories described by participants portray a system of challenges, barriers, and adversity. Despite these difficulties, students are able to successfully re-engage in school. While these challenges are not ideal, students are capable of navigating them if the proper support is given. However, external supports are not the only factor contributing to success. The students themselves portray a great deal of strength and courage when overcoming seemingly impossible challenges. Homelessness, poverty, addiction, and mental health crises influenced the stories of several participants. Yet, these participants were able to navigate these challenges and successfully re-engage in school. While the external supports provided to students through alternative education were helpful in the process, the difficult choice to re-engage in school despite past trauma displays the considerable strength of the students. These choices were not made on a whim, rather the participants' decisions to return to school were conscious, calculated, and motivated by clear goals. This is an important consideration, as it emphasizes students as active participants in their education.

This is not to say that students who overcome challenges and return to school are infallible; participants described the ongoing difficulties that continued to affect their lives while they returned to school, and the challenges they faced as they obtained their diploma in an alternative program. Rather, participants appeared to be more comfortable with failure, and did not allow these minor disturbances to discourage them from achieving their goals. In fact, an argument could be made that students who successfully navigate these challenges and return to school of their own volition are more motivated than students who do not experience such challenges. While the concept of resilience has been critiqued for its neo-liberal focus on the individual as the site of change (Joseph,

2013; Garrett, 2016), it does offer a useful understanding of the strength found in those who overcome challenges. Resilience theory emphasizes that individuals who successfully navigate an adverse experience – through both individual and social processes – and achieve better-than-expected outcomes become more capable of handling future adversity (Ungar, 2012; van Breda, 2018). Applying this concept to the stories of participants, they were able to successfully navigate the adverse experiences of homelessness, poverty, addiction, and mental health crises with better-than-expected outcomes, thus contributing to a greater capability to manage future adverse experience.

The strength and knowledge of participants was also displayed in their nuanced critiques of the education system. Participants provided a high-level understanding of how the education system failed to meet their needs, connecting their personal struggles to the systemic issues in education. Moreover, participants provided broad critiques on capitalism, neo-liberal educational policy, racial discrimination, gender identity, oppression, and privilege. In general, participants displayed their wealth of knowledge on subjects that they considered to be important to their story. The critical analysis and wealth of knowledge displayed by participants can be connected to Freire's (1968/2018) idea of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness can be defined as the process by which individuals experiencing marginalization develop a critical awareness of the social conditions that impact their lives (Freire, 1968/2018; Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). According to Weffort (1967; as cited in Freire, 1968/2018) "the awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation." (p. 36). For the participants of this project, the experience of marginalization, and the challenges they

faced in education, appears to have been an informative process that contributed to an awakening of critical consciousness. Experiencing the 'oppressive situation' of traditional school, students have become more aware of the social conditions that negatively impacted their experience in education, thus leading to the expression of discontent captured in participant interviews. This is made explicitly clear by several participants, who emphasized that their future school and career choices have been a direct response to their marginalized experience in education; recognizing the social conditions that contributed to their negative experience, these participants have consciously chosen to work towards change.

The experience of living in and overcoming adverse social conditions related to education provides students with the resilience necessary to navigate future challenges, while also cultivating a greater critical awareness of the social structures that contributed to such adversity. While they are separate concepts, resilience and critical consciousness are intrinsically linked; through a greater critical awareness of oppressive structures, an individual is better equipped to navigate future adversity. Moreover, resilience and critical consciousness both offer a greater understanding of student outcomes by explaining how participants achieved success despite the barriers and limitations imposed on them by an oppressive school system. Together, these two concepts provide a nuanced understanding of the strength, motivation, and knowledge captured in the participant interviews. Further, these concepts contribute to the creation of new narratives of students in alternative education; rather than being simply 'dropouts', these students are motivated, capable, and have a keen awareness of oppression.

5.4 What Outcomes do the Students Expect Upon Graduating From an Alternative School?

In general, participants expected to be able to improve their social conditions by graduating from an alternative school. Most participants emphasized that they likely would not have been able to graduate without attending an alternative program. By achieving their high school diploma, participants expected to be able to improve their employability, as without having completed high school, their employment options were limited. Moreover, by graduating, participants expected to be able to attend further education, and most participants emphasized that post-secondary education was an important reason for completing their high school diploma. Expectations of employability and further education were related; participants expected to be able to attend post-secondary education after graduating from their alternative program, thus opening up more specialized career fields (ie. teaching, nursing, social work) once they completed college or university.

Outside of the bounds of normative educational practice, alternative programs offer a means of re-engagement in learning, even though some students continue to bear resentment for toward the system of learning that they continue to engage with. By cultivating a learning environment that is conducive to individual learning needs, students experiencing marginalization can thrive. However, the dichotomy of traditional and alternative programs raises a question – one that was also identified by participants: are the alternative programs developed by our education system a solution to problems created by the education system in the first place? This question was raised by a participant who held an appreciative yet critical opinion of alternative education. While alternative learning has allowed them to obtain their missing credits, the participant

criticized their enrollment as an apology for the abject marginalization they experienced in their traditional high school for many years before an alternative was made available.

This participant's critique calls into question the legitimacy of alternative education. If it is largely the issues in traditional education that result in students leaving school and enrolling in alternative programs, shouldn't the primary focus be resolving these issues directly, rather than expanding remedial solutions through the provision of alternative schools? From this perspective, alternative schools are a temporary solution to broader systemic issues. Azzarrello (2017) offers a similar critique of alternative education in Ontario, emphasizing that modern alternative schools "emerged from the system itself, as responses to outcomes of massive cuts, reactionary legislation, and bureaucratization." (p. 55). In contrast, Azzarrello (2017) explains that the real purpose of alternative education is to offer a democratic model of teaching and learning, rather than a system of "control, compliance, and credit accumulation" (p. 55). With this critique in mind, what is the purpose of alternative schools in Ontario's education system?

The answer to this question depends on one's theoretical framework for understanding the nature and purpose of education. This project, however, explores the question based on the idea of radical humanism. As described in this project's conceptual framework, radical humanism is a critical theory of change which is primarily concerned with addressing the direct needs of individuals (Mullaly, 2007; Dean, 2020). This concern is described by Dean (2020) as a "needs-first ethos"(p. 360) which "prioritise[s] the protection, realization, and enhancement" (p. 360) of immediate needs. One such need, is the necessity of work. Under the capitalist structuring of society, access to stable employment is often a necessity for positive wellbeing across the lifespan. Thus,

alternative programs in general, and PACE specifically, place a significant focus on employability. From a radical humanist perspective, ensuring young people are able to obtain stable employment (and thus the benefits associated with it), is necessary to meet the immediate needs of students who have experienced marginalization in the traditional school system. However, meeting the needs of students who have suffered under an oppressive system also demands an effort to change such systems to avoid future oppression. Dean's (2020) wording of a needs-first ethos (rather than a needs-only ethos) implies that meeting basic needs is beneficial and necessary, but not sufficient in and of itself. Therefore, a radical humanist approach to understanding marginalization within education would be concerned with the broad social change necessary to eliminate structural inequality, while acknowledging the immediate needs of students by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to survive economically within the current capitalist system. This, however, should not be a bare minimum approach; rather, employability for students within alternative education must strive to afford opportunities for diverse careers, rather than poorly paid jobs that are often coded for individuals of a low-income background. By doing so, alternative education programs can provide students with the ability to obtain meaningful employment, while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives associated with low-income career trajectories.

Until radical systemic change to the capitalistic structures which perpetuate inequality is achieved, the material needs of all people must be met through waged labour or through social assistance. Ensuring that young people are able to mobilize their educational experiences into opportunities for meaningful waged work thus remains an important educational objective. However, meeting these needs must continue in tandem

with efforts towards radical change in education. It is also necessary to recognize that the focus on meeting immediate needs and the desire for radical change are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the two ideas may be intrinsically linked, for how would radical change occur without knowledge of marginalization based in lived experience? The necessary function of a needs-first ethos in alternative education offers to meet the immediate needs of marginalized students, while also providing insight into the experience of individuals who are directly affected by systems of inequality. Capturing these insights is possible through identifying and responding to the needs of students experiencing marginalization, and consequently providing solutions that actively address their lived experience.

As emphasized by Mullaly (2007), radical humanism offers a rationale for working within structures of oppression; by understanding oppressive systems from within, it is possible to make meaningful change that accurately reflects the lived experiences of those who experience oppression under such systems. In the context of this research, participants offer their stories and experience, which have informed a general analysis of how marginalization, disengagement and isolation operate with systems of education. Themes related to motivation, challenges, and the benefits of alternative education provide a real-world understanding of the lives of marginalized students. Reflecting these experiences in future policy development, teacher education, and provision of student support services are but a few examples of how working within systems of oppression to meet the immediate needs of students offers opportunities for change from within.

5.5 What Changes Would Students Like to see to Better Meet Their Needs?

The portrayal of alternative education, as defined by participants who have existed within it, is complex. Students described processes of marginalization, isolation, and disengagement within a system that values normative experiences of learning. Even within alternative programs participants did not feel that all their needs were being met and emphasized that further change is necessary to address issues of marginalization in education. A story emerged of a two-faced education system; one side privileging students who conform to the expectations of traditional schooling, the other punishing those who diverge. Yet, under the same organizational structure, solutions can be found. When asked what these solutions would look like, participants provided a variety of examples of how education systems could change to better meet their needs.

These solutions largely draw from the theme of ideal schools, which explored numerous suggestions for change. These suggestions addressed the features of schooling that caused difficulty for participants, while building off the parts of alternative programs that were beneficial. While these disparate suggestions speak to the individual needs and challenges experience by participants, together they form a foundation for student-driven change to education. From the ideal schools envisioned by participants, a new idea of school emerges. Based on participant suggestions, an ideal school would maintain the beneficial traits of alternative programs, namely the positive relationship with staff and curriculum flexibility, while further encouraging student-driven learning. Project-based credits would offer students the opportunity to explore their interests across different subjects, while paid workplace co-ops would encourage students to earn essential income, gain workplace experience, and apply their learning beyond the classroom. The

traditional class structure would be maintained, albeit smaller and tailored to individual student needs. Students would be given the choice in what level of classes they attend, with higher level learning opportunities provided to all students who desire them. Opportunities for social engagement between students would be incorporated into the school community through clubs, groups, events, and other gatherings. In general, the ideal school would be low-barrier, have flexible commitment, and provide high-impact teaching and learning experiences. Students would be encouraged to attend as necessary but would not be punished if they were not able to do so. The general student population would be aware that this school is an option, not a last resort for obtaining their diploma.

These suggestions create a school system that is radical, yet familiar. Students would still attend classes, complete assignments, and be evaluated by teachers. However, learning would be done on their own terms; students would be given a certain measure of control over how engage in learning. While these suggestions are based solely on the experiences of six students and cannot be presented as a perfect or complete model for learning, the answers provided by participants emphasized the parts of education and learning that they felt were most important.

Chapter Six: Summation

While it may not be perfect, alternative education schools and the student-centered programs that operate within them provide an essential function in the broader education structure. In an ideal education system, student needs would be met without requiring entirely separate schools; however, this proves impossible in the current structuring of Ontario's education system. Until such a time that radical systemic change alters the structure and provision of education, alternative programs will continue to be necessary. As such, it is important that alternative programs continue to adapt and change to the shifting needs of students who experience marginalization, isolation, and disengagement from traditional school programs. The final chapter of this study will summarize the important details of each preceding section, provide recommendations based on the research findings, discuss the inherent limitations of the research study, and explore future directions for research on alternative education.

6.1 Chapter Summary

This project explored the experiences of six students in alternative education, relying on their stories to portray the failings of traditional education, how alternative school programs address these limitations, and the future change necessary to reduce marginalizing experiences in school. Chapter one introduced the topic, providing an overview of the research and the conceptual framework guiding data analysis. Chapter

two explored the literature relevant to the research project, including the importance of quality education, the process of marginalization for youth, and an explanation of alternative schools. An outline of the research base on alternative education was provided, along with a contextual base for alternative education in Ontario. Chapter three outlined the methodological framework for the research process, including narrative inquiry and emergent theme analysis. The method of data collection and analysis were also described, including the process of recruitment, interviewing, coding, and interpreting participant discussions. Chapter four explored the themes that emerged during participant interviews, including the factors that led to participants enrolling in alternative education, the benefits and challenges of alternative education, student motivations, experiences of marginalization and awareness of oppression. Chapter five connected the initial research questions to several topics that arose during the interviewing and analysis process, such as counter-narratives, resilience, anti-oppressive pedagogy, and how the needs-first ethos of radical humanism connects to the purpose of alternative education. Finally, the possibility of change from within was discussed, using the suggestions made by participants in their description of an ideal school.

6.2 Future change

Recognizing the limited scope of this research project, it is difficult to provide broad recommendations. However, based on the student narratives in this study, it is possible to provide suggestions that could be used to help make change in the specific educational context in which the study was situated, namely the alternative programs offered through PACE. Three program development implementations arise from the findings: (1) greater awareness of alternative education programs; (2) more opportunities

for social connection; and (3) opportunities for higher learning within alternative education. These suggestions draw from the ideal schools described by participants, and thus reflect student desires.

6.2.1 Improve Access and Awareness of Alternative Education

The first suggestion for change is to improve access to alternative education programs and develop greater awareness of the programs offered by alternative schools. Several participants noted that they would like to have known about alternative education sooner, emphasizing that they would have likely enrolled in an alternative school at an earlier point. This suggestion echoes participant emphasis that alternative education should not be a last resort for students who are at risk of dropping out; rather, students should be made aware of the options available to them at an earlier time, and be given the agency to choose how the go about completing their high school diploma. A similar suggestion is provided by Stewart (2020), whose recent study of alternative education in Toronto emphasized that access to alternative education should be provided at an early point in a student's high school career. By providing students with clear information about alternative education programs that are available in the area, students who desire placement in an alternative program would be more easily able to do so. Moreover, by providing a greater awareness about the types of educational experiences provided by alternative programs, the stigma associated with alternative education may be reduced.

6.2.2 Greater Opportunities for Social Connection, for Those who Want It

Second, alternative programs should attempt to facilitate greater social connection between students. Several participants noted that they felt isolated from other students in

their alternative program and would still like to be able to engage in the social events that are more common in traditional schools. Participants noted that they should not have to sacrifice their social relationships just to obtain their diploma. As such, alternative programs may benefit from actively supporting social connections between students. This may be achieved through the development of clubs and groups, community events, or group projects and assignments. It is important to note, however, that greater social connection is not desired by all students, and any effort to facilitate student connections should be optional. By providing greater opportunities for social connections, students may be able to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with their peers.

6.2.3 Opportunities for Higher Learning

The final suggestion for change is to provide further opportunities for higher learning within alternative education programs. As noted by several participants, alternative programs often do not provide students with academic level classes. Students who enjoy or excel in a particular subject may find great benefit to exploring their interests at a higher level. Moreover, without these higher-level classes, students may face increased difficulty entering post-secondary education. As such, alternative programs may benefit from providing students with access to academic level classes. By offering more opportunities for learning, alternative programs could move beyond the bare-minimum approach to course requirements, and instead provide students with class levels that match their interests and abilities.

6.3 Limitations

As with any attempt to capture and analyze human experiences, there are certain limitations that must be considered when interpreting the outcomes of this research

project. Three major limitations can be identified in this project: (1) the limited number of participants in the project; (2) selection bias in participant recruitment; and (3) the lack of partnership with alternative schools. These three limitations will be explored to better interpret research findings.

6.3.1 Number of Participants

The first major limitation that was recognized during the research project was the number of participants. While the six individuals who participated in the study provided invaluable contributions through discussing their stories and experience, the study may have benefitted from having more participants. By expanding the number of participants, the analysis and outcomes may have captured a broader interpretation of student experiences in alternative education. Having a greater number of participants may have allowed for further corroboration of certain points of discussion that were only brought up by a single participant, and thus difficult to consider a theme or pattern in the broader student experience. Moreover, expanding the number of participants may have allowed for more participants who were currently enrolled in alternative education, as the final group of participants only included two current students. While significant efforts were made to recruit more participants, this was made difficult by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of partnership with alternative schools in the area.

6.3.2 Selection Bias

The second major limitation is the inherent selection bias involved in finding participants for this project. This does not refer to the selection bias in selecting interested participants (as all interested participants were included in the study), but rather the bias of the people who were interested in being participants. As participation in the project

was completely voluntary, and interested individuals reached out to participate rather than being asked, those that did reach out were motivated to do so. Consequently, this project does not include the perspectives of students who were unmotivated or not interested in participating. This may have included participants who held a more critical view of alternative education or had negative experiences attending and alternative program and did not want to talk about it. While the final group of participants had diverse experiences and discussed both the positive and negative aspects of alternative programs, they all wanted to attend the alternative program they enrolled in. In general, the final group of participants had mostly beneficial experiences in alternative education. As such, the project does not capture the experience of students who had primarily negative experiences.

6.3.3 Partnerships with an Alternative School

The final major limitation of this research project is the lack of partnership with alternative schools in the local area. While significant effort was made to connect with local alternative schools, in-school programs, and the governing school board, no meaningful partnership was coordinated. While this lack of partnership was likely due to the increased amount of responsibility placed on teachers and schools result from the COVID-19 pandemic, it had the unfortunate effect of limiting the project's ability to connect with students and staff within the schools themselves. As such, the project had to rely on recruitment methods outside of any of the alternative schools in the Peterborough area. Partnership with these schools would likely have made recruitment easier, thus allowing for both a greater number and wider variety of participants. Furthermore, school partnership would have allowed for the use of in-school data on enrollment and graduate

numbers. Consequently, the lack of partnership limited the inclusion of school specific data, restricted the number of participants involved in the study, and limited recruitment. Successful partnership with an alternative school would likely have lessened the overall limitations of the study, as it would have addressed the lack of participants (by recruiting students directly from the school) and the selection bias of such participants (the greater number of participants would have included more diverse, and potentially negative experiences).

6.4 Future Research

Recognizing the limitations of this project, more research is necessary to better understand student experiences in education. Future research in alternative education would benefit from exploring the access and awareness of alternative programming for students. For example, are students aware of alternative schools, the programs they offer, and the potential benefits? Greater research into the awareness of alternative education may improve how alternative schools are advertised, and the reputations they garner from local students. Similarly, future research could explore the potential for higher learning within alternative education. Is it feasible to have both academic and applied classes in alternative schools? How many students would access academic classes? Would incoming students have the appropriate prerequisites?

For alternative education in Peterborough specifically, future research could address the limitations of this project, and seek partnership with PACE and the KPRDSB school board. Doing so could allow for a larger amount of participants willing to share their experiences of alternative education. Moreover, future research could attempt a partnership with other community agencies that work directly with PACE – such as the

Youth Emergency Shelter, Employment Planning and Counselling, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Works, and FourCAST Addiction Services – to better understand how homelessness, poverty, mental health, and addiction interact within the context of education. Including greater community connection may provide a more clear understanding of the factors that contribute to student disengagement in education, while potentially offering a greater understanding of the supports necessary to re-engage students experiencing marginalization.

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