In The Face Of Adversity:
Factors Affecting Dropout, Re-engagement and Resilience among At-Risk Youth at an Alternative High School

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Abstract

This action research examined the factors contributing to dropout, re-engagement and resilience among at-risk youth in an alternative high school. The population participating in this action research were male and female students ages 16-21 who were enrolled in the SD70 Alternative Programs in Port Alberni, British Columbia at the time of the study. Participants in the study had dropped out or left school for a period of time, but had re-enrolled in school and were currently attending the Vast Education Centre in the SD70 Alternative Programs. Through quantitative and qualitative research methods, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The researcher hoped to learn more about the factors contributing to the decision to drop out, re-engage and how youth cope with life’s challenges and stressors. The researcher also hoped to gain knowledge and to provide her alternative school more information about how to better support at-risk youth around preventing dropout and developing student resilience. The research also hoped to give youth a “voice” to share their experiences.
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Chapter One: Problem to be Investigated

If at-risk students had a chance to tell their stories, share their experiences and opinions on how they could be better supported in the school system, would educators listen and really hear what they had to say? If educators want answers as to how to understand and better support their at-risk students, they must go to the source. After all, who knows better about student experiences than the students themselves?

By the time students enter high school, they bring with them a complex set of life experiences and levels of personal resilience that can either guide them towards graduation and school completion, or serve to hinder their chances of high school success resulting in eventual dropout. Many of these vulnerable students see little purpose for school, are disengaged, alienated and have entered the high school setting having had little success. Unfortunately, not all students who enter a mainstream or alternative high school leave with a diploma or completion certificate.

Historically, efforts to understand patterns of school dropouts have focused on family, individual, and school-related risk factors (Barclay & Doll, 2001; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990). While there is much data around issues of high school dropout, there has not specifically been research conducted on youth enrolled in the School District 70’s Alternative Programs at the Vast Education Centre in Port Alberni, British Columbia. While the current data around dropout reflects issues that face many at-risk youth throughout North America and other parts of the world, the stories and issues facing the Vast youth specifically was needed in order to understand their personal factors affecting dropout, re-engagement, and resilience.
Over the past nine years working in the alternative education system in Port Alberni, British Columbia, the researcher has had the opportunity to meet many special students from a variety of backgrounds. She has been fortunate to work with many of them in one-on-one circumstances and has built relationships with them that have lasted beyond the school experience. The researcher has seen many of them persevere in the face of adversity and challenges, while some, unfortunately, crumble and falter under similar circumstances. She has found it heartbreaking to see vulnerable students experiencing tragedy and heartache at such a young age and the researcher often wondered what other events and circumstances have occurred before they came upon the Alternative Program’s doorstep and how these events have impacted their lives and school experience.

The issue of dropout is not new, nor is it something that can be ameliorated overnight. In order to better understand the complexity of dropout, it is important to understand is the multitude of factors that can impact a person’s eventual decision to drop out. The researcher hoped to learn from her students about their experiences and factors that went into their decision to drop out, and also the reasons they chose to re-engage and continue their education. If educators could learn from students themselves, perhaps they could find a better way to hold on to the many at-risk youth who slip through the cracks and do not complete high school.

**Purpose of the Study**

This specific study may be the first of its kind in School District 70. The purpose of the study was to explore the factors contributing to the decision to drop out of school, and the experiences of at-risk local youth who re-engaged in their education despite facing significant adversity. This research aimed to better understand students’ complex lives, how they came to leave school prior to completion, and subsequently choose to re-engage in their education. The
researcher also aimed to provide the participants with an opportunity to reflect and voice their experiences to an audience of educators and professionals. One hope for this research was that educators would be better able to understand what some students bring with them when they enter the school doors and to understand that it is no longer acceptable to expect students to just “leave their baggage at the door” (T. McEvay, personal communication, October 2011) and focus solely on their academics. Furthermore, another hope from the research was that educators might be better able to design not only academic, but social-emotional program interventions catered to individual needs within the SD70 Alternative Programs in order to help keep vulnerable students in school and support their diverse needs in a better way.

**Justification of the Study**

Many educators will agree with Wilson, Stemp and McGinty (2011) who found that there are a significant number of students who are at risk of being early school leavers. The lack of a high school diploma remains a significant predictor of negative outcomes, including poverty and unemployment (Brownwell et al., 2010). As Robinson and Lamb (2009) explain, “early school leavers who do not continue in education are disadvantaged in the labour market and are less likely to be in full-time work and more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour market” (p.33). When families are not in the work force, this can mean a greater likelihood of reliance on government assistance and social programs (Peace, 2006). What may be missing in this statement is the possibility that poverty and unemployment, among other factors, are predictors and influences of these negative school and life outcomes. This can increase the risk of continued social dislocation, as well as the incidence of physical and mental health problems (Mission Australia, 2006). There is also research indicating a strong link between “failure to complete high school and criminal activity” (Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011, p. 34).
Students do not become disengaged from school in a short period of time. Finn (1993) described dropping out as a process and not an instantaneous decision or discrete occurrence. According to Davies & Lee (2006), there is considerable research in support of a set of common general patterns that can be traced and which place certain students at greater risk of not attending school than is the case with others. Socio-economic status, parent or guardian’s own school experiences, background and level of support can have an effect on their support and attitude toward their child’s education (Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Miller, 2010; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). It was also found that children from neighbourhoods with the lowest socio-economic status have been found to be almost eight times more likely to withdraw before completing high school compared with their peers from higher socio-economic status neighbourhoods (Brownell et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2006).

Individual factors such as gender, academic and cognitive ability, social skills, mental health status, are a few examples of factors that have been shown to affect school performance and drop out occurrences (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Students who suffer mental health issues often demonstrate poor academic performance and if mental health concerns are ignored often this can interfere with a student’s relationships, development, learning and physical health (Kalashian, 2009). Kalashian (2009) explains that “students whose mental health problems are left untreated have a high risk of school dropout” (p.6).

Research has also shown many school factors that can affect youth and their educational success such as attendance, school climate and engagement, and support from teachers (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Studies show that poor attendance in the elementary years was a significant risk factor of future dropout (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). It is important to look at the reasons behind issues such as poor attendance and examine the factors around the complex lives of
individual circumstances. It is also extremely important to recognize that there are local contexts and circumstances that make each community unique. Port Alberni is no exception.

**Regional Context**

This research focused on at-risk youth in the Alberni-Clayoquot region, specifically in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island, British Columbia where issues facing members of the community are unique and complex. According to the Socio-Economic Profile from BC Statistics (2011), the Average Employment Income for Port Alberni in 2005 was $28,378, which was $6600 less than the provincial average. According to the Vancouver Island Health Authority Statistics (2011), 10.2% of the population aged 0-64 was receiving income assistance from a provincial program, compared to the provincial rate of 4.5%. It was also reported that in 2006, 57.5% of 18-year olds graduated from high school, while the provincial rate was 70.2%. When considering high school completion of people aged 25-54, 20.1% of Port Alberni residents did not have high school completion compared to the BC rate of 11.1% (VIHA Statistics, 2011).

Port Alberni also has a significantly higher teenage pregnancy rate than the rest of BC. Between 2008 and 2010, Port Alberni had 52.3 pregnancies per 1000 women ages 15-19 versus the provincial number of 23.3 pregnancies. Port Alberni also has the second highest Infant Mortality Rate, and ranks fourth highest out of 57 school districts in British Columbia for number of children living in the foster care system. There were also significantly more cases of child abuse per 1,000 in Alberni (18.1) than BC (7.0) (VIHA Statistics, 2011). Further alarming statistics show that Port Alberni ranks 12th highest out of 57 districts in terms of years of life lost due to suicide or homicide (BC Statistics, 2011). According to VIHA (2011), the serious juvenile crime rate per 1,000 for Port Alberni (8.8) was higher than BC (4.2). These statistics support the
need for better in-depth understanding of the serious challenges facing at-risk youth in the
Alberni-Clayoquot region in order to create better interventions to support young people.

Adding further risk factors are issues facing Port Alberni’s Aboriginal community, some
of whose family members were forced into residential schools (Law Commission of Canada,
2000; Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). It is also a significant fact
that Port Alberni was one of the last communities in BC to close its residential school and the
impact of these experiences still affects Aboriginal students and families. Many family members
are just beginning to communicate about the trauma of their experiences (R. Watts, personal
communication, October, 2012). It is also understood that Aboriginal students’ perspectives have
been influenced by their parents and grandparents who were taught to distrust Western
education, which has further hindered the academic progress of many Aboriginal students
(Battiste, 2005).

Educators in the SD70 Alternative Programs strive to do an effective job of supporting
students when faced with social-emotional challenges, which reflect school-related protective
factors, but students also require a level of individual protective factors on top of school supports
(Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Siemens & Audrey, 2008). Some students in the alternative programs
do not seem to have the resilience or skills to cope with the challenges they face; while,
contrarily, some students facing multiple challenges are attending, progressing and making it to
school completion. Schools that focus on creating a “village of attachment” (Neufeld & Mate,
2004, p. 34) seem to have a better chance of retaining at-risk youth who seem to lack the coping
skills necessary to deal with life’s challenges and setbacks.

Schools play a very important role in the lives of students (Bernard, 1995) and educators
working within the school system need to continue to reflect on their practice and determine how
programs, mainstream and alternative, can better meet the needs of so many at-risk, vulnerable youth in their community. If schools are to create this “village of attachment”, they need a better in-depth and current understanding of the challenges facing all of the at-risk youth in schools.

The statistics and current research clearly support the need for understanding and awareness if educators are to develop better supports and interventions as well as to help build protective factors for young people. The above statistics of the Alberni-Clayoquot region give general information about issues facing the district and community, but they cannot accurately describe the lives of the individuals behind the statistics and the hardship and stories they have experienced on a personal level. Perhaps through the process of this research, the students with whom the researcher works will be able to reflect on their own risk and protective factors and what affected their own dropout experiences, and what it took for them to cope with their challenges and re-engage in school.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

The question for this research was as follows: *What are the factors affecting dropout, re-engagement and resilience among at-risk youth at an alternative high school?* This mixed methods action research study aimed to explore these experiences from the perspective of the youth themselves looking specifically at their reasons for leaving school and subsequently returning, as well as the individual risk and protective factors around resilience. Drawing on research from a wide variety of sources, in particular: Benzie and Mychasiuk (2009), Bernard (1995), Neufeld and Mate (2004), Payne (1994), Search Institute (2003), Siemens and Audrey (2008), and Vestal (1997), the contexts within the family, individual, peer and school community were considered. It was hypothesized that there would be emerging themes around specific risk and protective factors such as attachment and relationship to adults in the students’ lives, and that
those students who were successful at re-engaging in school had a level of personal resilience and self-worth despite their challenges that helped guide them towards fulfilling their school goals.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the term **at-risk or vulnerable student** is defined as a student enrolled in an alternative program who faces multiple barriers to success and whose challenges relating to family, individual or school has affected their progress, attendance, performance/attitude and behaviour in school. **Aboriginal** student refers to a person who has self-identified as having First Nations (status or non-status), Metis, or Inuit ancestry.

**Alternative schools** are institutions within the BC public school system that provide a different way of learning for students as opposed to traditional or mainstream school settings. The specific alternative program within the context of this research is described in greater detail under the section “Research Context.”

The term **drop out** means to leave the school system before completion whether the student chooses to stop attending despite multiple interventions and strategies for an extended period of time, or when the school deems it time to withdraw them from the alternative programs after significant attempts to re-engage. It is important to note that in the alternative program setting, because staff already has a strong awareness of the multiple family, individual and school factors that can impede school progress and attendance; the school will often retain students for longer than a traditional school would. The staff looks at these cases on an individual basis, and there is not a general rule for all students in the program.

For the purposes of this research and in keeping with the SD70 Alternative Programs definition, **school completion** is defined as completing the BC Ministry of Education
requirements with a regular Dogwood Diploma, Adult Dogwood Diploma, or Evergreen School Completion Certificate.

**Risk factor** is defined by Bernard (1995) as “disabling, cultural, economic, or medical conditions that deny or minimize opportunities and resources for a child and place him or her in jeopardy of failing to become a meaningful member of the home, school, and community” (p.1). Risk factors can be *internal* - meaning within the individual, or *external* – meaning within the family, school, and community. Risk factors can be biological in nature (eg., being born with a physical disability), or environmental in nature (eg., living in poverty and family conflict) (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). **Poverty** is described by Payne (1996) as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (p.7).

Bernard (1995), aimed to explain **resilience** as, “the presence of ‘protective factors,’ those qualities or situations that help alter or reverse expected negative outcomes” (p.1). Bernard (1995) also explains that resilience is “the term used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk. An innate capacity for resilience helps children develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose” (p. 2). According to Desetta (2000), a resilient person is “someone who keeps going despite hardships and setbacks, who learns powerful lessons from these experiences” (p.3). When discussing the concept of resilience with students, the researcher has often explained that resilience is the ability to ‘bounce back’ in the face of adversity to overcome life’s challenges. With the researcher’s students, she will often use the concept of an elastic band as a metaphor to describe resilience and the tension of life’s struggles, twisting and stretching a person to the breaking point, but having the ability to return to our original form with the presence of such protective factors, or resources.
**Protective factors**, like risk factors, can be external or internal. Bernard’s (1995) research found themes involving external protective factors that apply to each of the above environments which are: (1) caring relationships, (2) positive and high expectations, and (3) opportunities for meaningful participation. Internal factors are those residing within the individual, such as self-regulation and self-concept (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Payne (1994) uses the term **resources**, similar to protective factors, which are types of protective factors that include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models and knowledge of hidden rules.

According to Neufeld and Mate (2004), **attachment** is defined as “the pursuit and preservation of proximity, of closeness and connection: physically, behaviourally, emotionally and psychologically” (p.17). The attachment relationships discussed in this research can be regarding students’ positive or negative attachments with family, peers, school or their community. The term **self-worth** means the feeling of value a person sees in him or herself.

**Research Context**

The unique context in which this research was conducted is important to describe as the school alternative program is significantly different from a mainstream high school. The Vast Education Centre is an alternative public high school in School District 70, in Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The school provides individualized, self-paced programming for students ages 16-adult. Students enrolled in these programs need a different learning environment as opposed to the mainstream school setting for a variety of reasons and typically are either referred by a school within the school district, or self-referred from out of district. The Vast Centre has an open classroom setting with a lower teacher-to-student ratio than a mainstream school setting. This school has one-on-one support and small group instruction.
available to students. The program allows flexibility in student arrival and departure time, as each student may be on a different schedule that aims to meet their educational and social-emotional needs. Some students may be considered a “shared student” meaning they are also taking courses at the local high school while attending Vast.

Each student is assigned a Teacher Advisor and Youth Care Worker, a staff Advisor System where this team works with the student to develop their grad plan and supports the student to stay on track. In the researcher’s experience within the alternative programs, this Advisor System provides students with at least one key adult in the school with whom the student can form a proper “hierarchical attachment,” meaning healthy giving and care-seeking roles between adult and student (Neufeld & Mate, 2004, p.60). At the Vast Education Centre, the researcher’s role was one of two Special Education Teachers, English Skills Development Teacher and International Program Teacher. The researcher has a group of advisees with whom she works and monitors progress on their individual graduation plans. The researcher supports students with their English courses and provides one-on-one instruction as needed, as well as offering differentiation support to other Teacher Advisors.

**Biases and Assumptions**

Action research requires the researcher to be the “primary instrument of inquiry” (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). It was important for the researcher to identify her own experiences, assumptions and biases in regards this study and let them be known. At the time of this research, she had been working mainly in the Alternative Education setting for her entire teaching career; therefore, the primary researcher’s assumptions and biases are as follows:
Assumptions.

- If schools are to contribute more positively to student’s personal development and high school achievement, they must understand and be aware of the societal, family, individual as well as school-related risk factors that can affect an individual and contribute to academic struggles in school, alienation, disengagement and eventual dropout.

- Finishing high school is an important step in a person’s life that most students hope to achieve.

- All students want to be “successful” and feel a sense of belonging and safety in school.

- Students who say “I don’t care” are “defending themselves against vulnerability” (Neufeld & Mate, 2004, p. 99) and are feeling quite the opposite of not-caring.

- Most educators in the mainstream setting care about the social-emotional well-being of their students, but lack the time and flexibility to work with students in the way some educators are able to in an alternative learning environment.

Biases.

- While the current mainstream school system works well for many students, for some it is ineffective in many ways, especially around supporting the social-emotional needs of individual at-risk students with complex challenges.

- The researcher values all forms of “graduation”; completing school with either a Dogwood Diploma, Adult Dogwood or Evergreen School Completion grad plan and values the opportunity for all students, regardless of ability, to feel a sense of school success.

- Providing alternatives for students that focus on their individual strengths in order to be more successful at school is crucial for educators to value and consider.
• There are many ways for students to show their learning, and schools should be allowing for adjudication of prior learning equivalencies where applicable.

• The social-emotional well-being of students must be a priority before any educational learning can be initiated. Building positive relationships is essential to positive experiences between the student and the school.

• The current BC Ministry of Education method of analyzing graduation rates, by calculating the six year-graduation rate, misses the many students who face challenges that may delay their school completion in the standard amount of time. The current grad rate, according to the BC Ministry of Education is calculated by the proportion of students who complete a Certificate of Graduation within six years from the time they enroll in Grade 8 (BCTF Education Facts, 2012). The researcher believes that it should not matter how long it takes to graduate.

• People need to be better informed of the number of at-risk students who manage to graduate in their own time despite significant adversity and these students’ accomplishments should be celebrated.

Brief Overview of the Study

The participants for this research were males and females ages 16-21 of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal ancestry who are enrolled at the Vast Education Centre. The participants invited into the study had varying levels of academic and cognitive abilities and were completing school on varying graduation plans depending on ability, need and educational and personal circumstance. Some of them, at one point or another, had dropped out of school, but had re-enrolled and were working towards finishing high school.

This study comprised of a 26 question Student Questionnaire (see Appendix A) collecting quantitative and qualitative data, as well as a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview with a
small number of willing participants who completed the questionnaire. All questionnaire and interview questions were created using significant previous research, as well as the researcher’s personal experience in the Alternative Programs around risk factors for drop out, re-engagement, protective factors and components for resilience. All of the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed for patterns and emergent themes. Triangulation between individual questionnaire answers was also used as part of the data analysis. All students participated voluntarily and assented to the research process knowing that they could withdraw at any time.

This research aimed to explore the experiences of at-risk youth and gain better understanding of the factors affecting their decision to drop out of school and what impacted their choice to return to school. This research hoped to make meaning of the experiences of an extremely vulnerable set of youth whose stories deserve to be told and listened to. The researcher felt privileged that she could be a small part in the self-exploration journey of resilience in these special individuals.
Risk Factors to School Dropout

Much of the current literature around student dropout focuses on a series of risk and protective factors that can be grouped thematically relating to the family, peers, school, and the individual. A more in depth exploration of some of the current research around this complex issue is outlined below in relation to these themes.

Family-related risk factors.

Research by Marvul (2009) showed that, the greatest barriers to school attendance were family factors, with poverty being a very strong risk factor. While poverty can be viewed as a societal risk-factor, other factors such as socio-economic status, as well as parent or guardian’s own school experiences, background and level of support can have an effect on their attitude toward their child’s education (Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Miller, 2010; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Low-skilled parental occupation and parental non-completion of post-secondary education and training are also considered to be factors of student disengagement, which can lead to drop out (Wilson et al., 2011).

Research also indicates that youth living in the foster care system have a higher likelihood of not completing school versus their non-foster care peers (Sheehy et al., 2001; Wolanin, 2005). According to Blome (1997) and Courtney, Terao & Bost (2004), youth in foster care are also more likely to drop out of school, be suspended or expelled, or repeat a grade. They also have higher rates of changing schools which can affect academic achievement and whether or not they achieve high school completion (Blome, 1997; Pecora et al., 2006).

Research conducted by Thomas (1990) explored reasons for dropout among an Adult Basic Education literacy program in BC which aimed to look at reasons for nonparticipation and
dropout rates and to suggest ways to improve these rates. Thomas (1990) interviewed 66 participants and conducted telephone interviews of non-attenders and withdrawals from two different Adult Basic Education programs. Thomas (1990) found that family-related reasons for dropout were among the top three reasons that participants had left their respective program. Transience and low-socio-economic status were also found to be significant factors during Thomas’ (1990) research, as indicated by the fact that 21% of the people could not be reached for the phone interviews. Thomas (1990) inferred that the family had either moved or the phone had been disconnected supporting his interpretations that transience and low socio-economic status were issues facing the participants in his research.

Peer-related risk factors.

A key issue that cannot be denied or ignored regarding factors affecting dropout is the impact peers have on one another and the decisions they make. Neufeld and Mate (2004) state that, “for the first time in history young people are turning for instruction, modeling, and guidance not to mothers, fathers, and other responsible adults but to people whom nature never intended to place a parenting role – their own peers” (p. 7). Neufeld and Mate (2004) explain the societal impacts of what they term, “peer orientation” and the loss of hierarchical structures among adults and children (p. 7). The effect is that many children and adolescents are not taking cues from the adults in their lives, but from friends and this has significant implications both in and out of the school setting (Neufeld & Mate, 2004).

What is also alarming in Neufeld and Mate’s research on this issue is the parallel increase in peer orientation and suicide rates among North American adolescents. In Neufeld and Mate’s (2004) book, “Hold on to your Kids”, Neufeld describes his research and practice working with young offenders who had attempted suicide. He discovered that parental rejection was not the
main precipitating factor in the suicide attempt, but in fact, a “key trigger for the great majority was how they were being treated by their peers, not their parents” (p.11).

In addition, research conducted by Schulz and Rubel (2011) that examined the experiences of five male non-completers, showed that peer pressure was a significant factor regarding the amount of time given to academic and school responsibilities. “Peer influences became a path on which each participant withdrew further from the mainstream while at school. They believed the consequences of choosing social acceptance and belonging over academic progress were the less hurtful of the two options” (Schulz & Rubel, 2011, p. 8).

While peer orientation and peer pressure continue to be an issue, what can also affect a student’s school experience and a feeling of connectedness to school is whether they are making healthy relationships with peers. As Brown, Higgins and Paulsen (2003) describe, “a student’s level of identification with and participation in the goals of schools has been impacted by a loss of or inability to form bonds with peers and school adults” (p. 2). This can create a feeling of alienation from school and it is important to acknowledge the impact of social forces on students in and out of school (Brown et al., 2003). This is a very crucial component in understanding the power of peer influence and relationships in schools and the impact they can have on the student experience.

**School-related risk factors.**

Research has also shown many school factors that can affect youth and their educational success such as attendance, school climate and engagement, and support from teachers (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). As Schulz and Rubel (2011) demonstrate, many of the students in their research felt teachers treated them differently, ostracized them, or misunderstood their needs. “Each felt a combination of rejection, inferiority, humiliation, or resentment. They had failed to
navigate the system, felt they had been unjustly treated, and were abandoned as ‘high school dropouts’” (Schulz & Rubel, 2011, p.9). Studies also show that poor attendance in the elementary years was a significant risk factor of future dropout (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). It is important to look at the reasons behind issues such as poor attendance and examine the factors around the complex lives of individual circumstances.

Extensive qualitative and quantitative research was conducted by Upex (1999), with a sample size that included 122 interviews of 85 adult students, 27 staff, 7 community members and 3 whole-class groups. Her research attempted to explore the factors of success in goal achievement within adult learning centres, as well as if there were commonalities of experiences among students who had been successful. Results of this extensive research conclude that the most important factor in determining student success at school is the development of positive relationships between teachers and other students (Upex, 1999).

**Individual-related risk factors.**

Individual risk factors such as gender, racial minority status, mental health status, academic and cognitive ability, social skills, and behaviour are a few examples of factors that have been shown to affect school performance and drop out occurrences (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Research indicates that males have a higher probability of becoming non-completers than do females (Educational Testing Service, 2005; Greene & Winters, 2005). According to Statistics Canada (2010), in 2009–10, 8.5% of Canadians aged 20 to 24 years were non-graduates, not attending school. This rate is higher than average for young men (10.3%) and lower than average for young women (6.6%).

In terms of racial status, statistics show that Aboriginal students have a higher rate of dropout than non-Aboriginal students. 25.8% of First Nations youth living off-reserve and 18.9%
of Métis youth, 20–24 years of age, are non-graduates, not attending school, compared to 8.5% of non-Aboriginal people (2007–10) (Gilmore, 2010).

Students who suffer mental health issues often demonstrate poor academic performance, and if mental health concerns are ignored, student’s relationships, development, learning and physical health (Kalashian, 2009) can be greatly affected. Consequently, “students whose mental health problems are left untreated have a high risk of school dropout” (Kalashian, 2009, p.6).

The researcher concurred with the sentiment from her colleagues that schools seem to be seeing a larger number of students with mental health issues in local schools and staff is not necessarily equipped with the training or expertise to deal with these issues (J. Ansell, personal communication, November 2013).

Related to individual mental health and well-being, Dweck (2006) describes the power of individual mindsets and success in life. She describes the difference between people with a “fixed” mindset and “growth” mindset. People with a “fixed” mindset believe that ability and skills are fixed and “carved in stone” (Dweck, 2006, p. 6). People with this mindset believe that who they are is defined by their fixed abilities and inabilities and these are set for the rest of their lives. According to research conducted by Dweck (2006) on the relationship between mindsets and depression, it was found that students with a “fixed” mindset had higher rates of depression. Dweck (2006) explains, “this was because they ruminated over their problems and setbacks, especially tormenting themselves with the idea that the setbacks meant they were incompetent or unworthy” (p. 38).

Connecting individual risk factors to family-related risk factors, many studies have also used the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score to determine the likelihood of negative outcomes such as drug and alcohol dependency, teen pregnancy, mental health issues and suicide.
attempts in relation to experiences such as abuse, neglect and family mental ill
ess early in life (Dube et al., 2001). Researchers, such as Dube et al. (2001) describe of their research using an ACE score: “The overall objective is to assess the impact of numerous adverse childhood experiences on a variety of health behaviors and outcomes and health care use” p. 3090). They found that ACE greatly increased the risk of attempting suicide later in life (Dube et al., 2001). The issues of youth who have experienced trauma in their lives are certainly complex and alcohol or drug dependency is no exception.

Mate’s (2008) research focuses specifically on addiction and its root causes. He describes the risk of addiction in people who have experienced pain and trauma in childhood. While Mate (2008) claims that “not all addictions are rooted in abuse or trauma…they all can be traced to painful experience” (p. 36). Many of the lives of at-risk youth could certainly be described as painful and the researcher has observed many unhealthy behaviours affecting school success, such as drug and alcohol abuse, in the young people with whom she has worked. Mate’s (2008) work explored the effects of early stress and adverse experiences and how they directly shape both the psychology and neurobiology of addiction in the brain, which ultimately affects choices and behaviour (Mate, 2008). Research such as this, as well as the plethora of research that uses Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores, can help educators understand the root causes of issues such as addiction. These types of research can help advise educators on how to better support these extremely vulnerable youth in changing their harmful coping mechanisms and dealing with their emotional trauma.

It is apparent through the research, as well as through the researcher’s personal observation with students, that the risk and protective factors affecting dropout are extremely complex and are inter-related, but that there are a number of protective factors outlined in current
research that can make a positive difference in the lives of individuals facing adversity. While some of the issues described above go beyond the scope of a school’s capacity, the need for understanding is critical in order to attempt to re-engage young people who have either dropped out, or are at-risk of dropping out.

**Protective Factors**

From the researcher’s observations within the Alternative Programs, it was apparent that some students do not seem to have the resilience or skills to cope with the challenges they face; contrarily, some students facing multiple challenges are attending school regularly, progressing in courses, and making it to school completion. It was important to explore the research around protective factors to better understand why some youth appear more resilient than others.

Murray and Naranjo (2008) conducted a study consisting of youth from low income, racial minorities, who also had a diagnosed learning disability. These youth managed to complete school despite facing significant challenges. Based on trends in previous research, themes around protective factors relating to assets of the family, peers, individual and school were examined. The data collected were from tape-recorded interviews, as well as field notes and file searches of the students’ special education file.

**Family-related protective factors.**

Family factors themes that emerged from Murray and Naranjo’s (2008) study included: parental involvement and parental structure around studying, routines and home responsibilities. All participants felt that their “families played a critical role in helping them complete school” (p. 152). The researchers described a persistent theme that the students had at least one parent who monitored their child’s progress in school. Participants in this study also described that many of the parents consistently came to the school to talk to teachers and were regular
advocates for their children’s needs. Other structure-related theme components in this study were described as parent restrictiveness in terms of an awareness of where their children were, and the requirement to communicate with parents regarding their children’s whereabouts. These were all indicators of family-related protective factors and contributors to student success in Murray and Naranjo’s (2008) study.

According to Resnick et al (1997) on findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, family assets protected adolescents from a young age from early sexual behaviour, emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, violence, cigarette use, alcohol use and marijuana use.

Building on research from Resnick et al (1997), Hillis et al. (2010) examined the relationship between protective effects of family strengths in childhood against adolescent pregnancy, risk behaviour and its long term psychosocial consequences after adolescent pregnancy. This research considered Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) among participants which examined the number of negative childhood experiences such as verbal, physical and sexual abuse, household substance abuse, violence against one’s own mother, mental illness, an incarcerated family member, and parental separation or divorce (Hillis et al., 2010). In addition to ACE, the researchers used seven questions to assess family strengths, which should protect against adverse outcomes in adolescence. These questions examined the following aspects of protective factors within the individual’s family lives: family closeness, support, loyalty and protection of feelings of being loved and important, as well as the responsiveness of parents to the needs for health care. The results of this study showed that “childhood family strengths are strongly protective against adolescent pregnancy, early initiation of sexual activity and long-term psychosocial consequences” (Hillis et al., 2010, p. 18).
While family assets are extremely important protective factors for youth, peer-related factors are also very important to consider.

**Peer-related protective factors.**

Murray and Naranjo (2008) found one significant peer protective factor, which they termed “isolationism”. They described the fact that many of the youth studied chose to disengage themselves from their peers who they felt were not positive influences on them. According to the research, isolationism could be seen as a risk factor since a lack of peer friendships can be viewed as such; however, in this context, the researchers viewed this behaviour as a “somewhat disturbing protective process” based on the fact that research shows an affiliation with deviant peers can contribute to students dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson, 2000; Murray & Naranjo, 2008).

Supporting the claim that healthy peer interaction has a positive effect, is research conducted by Prins, Toso and Schafft (2009) who found that social interactions of students with other students help to initiate and develop friendships, and this helps to further develop an atmosphere that is conducive to positive learning experiences. What also seems to be apparent from this research is that these positive experiences are largely initiated by the effective coordination of opportunities for peer interactions, which indicates the importance of school-related protective factors.

**School-related protective factors.**

School factors can play a key role in student success. The importance of teacher-student relationships is a key factor to schools creating a “village of attachment” (Neufeld & Mate, 2004, p. 34). “The relationship dynamic in the school setting is related to the strength of the students’
connections to their peers and adults as well as to the overall school climate, which has a significant impact on the academic investment of at-risk students” (Wilson et al., 2011).

The research conducted by Murray and Naranjo (2008) discovered four major school protective factors that included: caring, persistence, ongoing involvement and support, instrumental support and having a powerful presence in the classroom. Neufeld and Mate (2004) discuss the “teachability” of students in that it is “the outcome of many factors: a desire to learn and to understand, an interest in the unknown, a willingness to take some risks, and an openness to be influenced and corrected” (p.166). Neufeld and Mate (2004) also state that “this requires a connection with the teacher, an inclination to pay attention, a willingness to ask for help, aspirations to measure up and achieve, and, not least, a propensity toward work” (p. 166).

In terms of the concept of relationships with adults, the work of Halbert and Kaser (2013) around one of “The Four Key Questions that Matter” can assist educators in discovering whether students feel they can name at least two adults in their school who believe they will be a success in life. “Every young person needs to believe that they can get better at just about anything with effort and support” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p. 38). These researchers discuss the need for students to have at least two dependable adults, whether in their homes or schools, who believe that they can learn (Halbert & Kaser, 2013). This process of asking the key questions is simple, yet a very effective method of educators determining how they are doing in communicating with students around their beliefs in their students. This process can identify those students who are at-risk and do not feel they have adults who believe in them. This has the potential to prevent future dropout by taking proactive measures to ensure each student feels supported.

Schools also strive to do a great job of supporting students when faced with social-emotional challenges, which reflect a variety of school-related protective factors, but students
also require a level of family, peer, and individual-related protective factors on top of school supports (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Siemens & Audrey, 2008).

**Individual-related protective factors.**

In terms of individual protective factors, having self-determination, a willingness to seek support and the belief in the societal value of education were among the main themes discovered in research from Murray and Naranjo (2008). All of the students interviewed believed in the potential of a high school diploma and most of the participants discussed the issue of unemployment when thinking about not completing school.

Neufeld and Mate (2004) would maintain that while some of these factors appear to be individual-related, all of the above factors are either rooted in or affected by attachment. Schools that foster this attachment have a better chance of retaining at-risk youth who seem to lack the coping skills necessary to deal with life’s challenges and setbacks and who need to feel supported and cared for. Research shows that consistent, caring adult-student relationships are paramount for drop-out prevention. The presence of a caring adult who monitors student progress over time can reduce the likelihood that students will drop out of school (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lever et al., 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005).

A study conducted by Hess and Copeland (2001) looked at the relationship between stress and coping strategies among at-risk Grade 9 youth and high school completion. Their research showed that the factors around individual protective and coping strategies have a much greater impact on school completion than external family factors such as socio-economic status, parental school graduation and single-parent homes. The researchers found that “individuals who dropped out reported a lower capacity to cope with stressful events in their lives” (p.390). While the individual factors are very complex, Hess and Copeland (2001) state that in order to feel
better about themselves, students generally engage in a variety of behaviors and adopt attitudes to protect themselves from these negative feelings, which then leads to eventual withdrawal from school to restore self-esteem.

Returning to research by Carol Dweck (2006) on individual mindsets, in opposition to the “fixed” mindset, which can be a risk factor for achieving life’s goals, she describes that people with a “growth” mindset believe that skills and abilities can change and grow over time, and “your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). According to Dweck (2006), in the face of adversity, people with a “growth” mindset tend to persevere strive to overcome challenges. In her study examining mindset and depression among students, the more “depressed people with the growth mindset felt, the more they took action to confront their problems, the more they made efforts to keep up with their schoolwork, the more they made efforts to keep up with their lives” (p.38). These two opposing mindsets are important to consider when looking at risk and protective factors among at-risk youth faced with complex challenges and can explain how individuals have different levels of resilience when faced with adversity.

Although some of the factors affecting students are not within the school or educator’s locus of control, such as family income levels or family structure, the awareness, compassion and value educators put into each student’s individual circumstances are absolutely within the control of the educator. Developing an understanding of the risk and protective factors affecting dropout is crucial in order to better support students. As Murray and Naranjo (2008) state, “until public policy initiatives significantly reduce or eliminate the environmental risks affecting low income youth, it is important to develop further understanding about protective factors in the lives of youth who are exposed to high levels of stress (p. 146).”
Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods

Research Design

This mixed-methods qualitative study aimed to explore the factors surrounding school dropout, re-engagement and personal resilience among at-risk students at an alternative high school in Port Alberni, BC. Qualitative methods involve researchers and those studied describing routine or unique moments in their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It was important to hear from the youth themselves and give them a chance to share their experiences, reasons for their past dropout, current ways of coping with stress and their current thoughts around their education.

Whether the experiences of dropout and re-engagement of at-risk youth were routine or unique, the students’ perspectives needed to be explored, and in order to remediate the issue of school dropout educators must first better understand the complex lives of students (Henry, 2009). This specific research design included two methods of data collection. Participants completed one paper-pencil questionnaire consisting of open and close-ended questions. In addition, a small number of willing participants met for individual semi-structured interviews to share their experiences and factors affecting their decision to drop out, as well as their story of resilience and re-engagement in education despite life challenges. Issues surrounding dropout, re-engagement, motivation and resilience are complex and the design for this research aimed to gain insight into the lives of these at-risk youth. The questionnaire was designed to gain data and information from a purposeful sample of the student population in an alternative high school, while the interview was designed to allow individual students’ experiences to be voiced and heard in a more in-depth manner.

The mixed method research design aimed to explore the issue of dropout by gaining important information around current alternative education students who have experienced
leaving the school system early, but also to give students a voice and provide them with a chance to reflect on their own experiences and factors affecting their decision to drop out of school. The research aimed to explore students’ individual coping styles when dealing with stress, as well as the factors contributing to them dropping out, but eventually re-engaging in school. It also aimed to explore motivation and reasons for staying in school, as well as how the students felt about pursuing their education at the alternative high school.

Sample

Participants for this research were male and female students aged 16 to 22 years old, in Grades 10 through 12 enrolled at the Vast Education Centre in School District 70 (Alberni). Students were of Aboriginal, Caucasian or other ethnic backgrounds with varying levels of academic and cognitive abilities. The Vast Education Centre is an off-site, alternative high school that had approximately 150 full time students at the time of the study (Vast Education Centre Enrollment Data, 2013). It was unknown how many of these students had dropped prior to enrolling in Vast. The purposeful, sampling criteria required that the participants a) had been enrolled at the Vast Education Centre for at least three weeks, b) had dropped out or left school early at least once in their educational career, and c) had returned or re-engaged in school. There was no restriction on the specific school, from which the student dropped out, nor a specific grade or age at the time of dropout. There was also a non-specific restriction on the school in which the student re-engaged to as some of the students could have re-engaged at a school other than the Vast Education Centre before enrolling in the Alternative Programs.

Participants were pursuing their graduation plan of a BC Dogwood, Adult Dogwood or Evergreen Grad Plan. Students were made aware of the above criteria for participation. A total of 13 questionnaires were completed. In addition, students were invited to participate in a follow-up
semi-structured interview to share their story and experiences in more depth. Of the 13 questionnaire participants, ten indicated interest in participating in an interview (nine female and one male). Throughout the month of November, interviews were set up and conducted. The researcher aimed to interview five participants for data collection. Originally, four female participants were selected using a random sampling. The sole male who indicated interest to participate in the interview was chosen in order to hear a male perspective.

Three selected female participants showed up for their interview without incident; however one female participant missed her initial interview appointment, as well as her rescheduled follow-up appointment. Another interested female participant was contacted and an interview appointment was set up; however, both this appointment and her rescheduled appointment were also missed by the participant. A final effort to set up a different fourth female interview was attempted; however, this participant missed her appointment as well. Due to research time constraints, the researcher completed the interviews with a total of four participants: three female and one male. Two of the participants were of Aboriginal Ancestry (two female). Two of the participants were Caucasian (one female, one male). The researcher did not take the missed appointments personally as she understood the nature of the clientele in the Alternative Programs and that many of these participants have complex lives that can change drastically from one day to the next. The researcher also understood it was not from a lack of desire to participate in the interview that the interviews were missed. Some of the participants apologized and said they forgot; some had relationship issues that affected their attendance at school. One participant was pregnant and was told by her doctor that she needed to be on bedrest, so she was unable to make the appointment. This showed all the more reason for the
purpose of this research to understand more deeply the complex, and often chaotic, lives of the students in the Alternative Programs.

Because the researcher had worked as a teacher with at-risk youth in the Alternative Programs for the past nine years, she felt her experience, level of comfort and sensitivity in working with vulnerable youth would make the individual interviews an effective method of data collection. The researcher felt her ability to conduct the interviews in a way that respected the students’ privacy and comfort level enhanced the level of information shared by the participants. The researcher’s training and experience working with students with a variety of levels and backgrounds contributed to her level of approachability and sensitivity to the interview process. She felt her friendly demeanour seemed to allow the participants to feel comfortable and at ease and able to share their, at times, sensitive experiences with her during the interview process.

Students were made aware that, if necessary, counseling services were available at any point during or after the interview and contact information for these services was provided to the student on the consent form. The four participants who participated in the interview received a small honorarium for participating in the interview part of the research process in the form of either a gift certificate for a local coffee shop or an iTunes card. The participants were not told about the thank you gift until the end of the interview, in order to avoid any pressure the incentive may have had on volunteering for the study.

**Instruments Used**

This study utilized a mixed methods instrument approach for data collection. Participants were invited to complete a Student Questionnaire (see Appendix A) and those participants were also invited to participate in a follow up interview that consisted of pre-planned questions (see Appendix B: Interview Questions Protocol) as well as informal questions that arose throughout
the 45-60 minute interview. The questionnaire consisted of a combination of 26 open and close-ended questions. The questions were designed from previous studies including research and surveys developed by the Search Institute (2013) around the 40 Developmental Assets exploring how youth are doing personally, socially, and within the family, school and community contexts. Questions were designed based on research to elicit information around family, individual, peer and school related risk and protective factors of dropout, re-engagement, and resilience, experiences of stress, coping strategies and current levels of engagement and support within the school (Bernard, 1995; Hess & Copeland, 2001; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Neufeld & Mate, 2004; Payne, 1996; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

In addition to previous research, some of the questions designed were also created from the researcher’s background knowledge and experiences in working with at-risk youth in the Alternative Programs. Questions surrounding parental education and socio-economic status were added to the questionnaire to gain information around these potential risk factors. Specific school related questions around attendance, school climate, engagement and support from Teacher Advisors were created since research has shown that such school factors can affect youth and their educational success (Murray & Naranjo, 2008).

“Yes or No” type questions such as, “have you dropped out of school more than once?” required a circling of either answer; whereas, other questions such as “please check as many of the following that best describe your situation or reason(s) that contributed your choice of leaving school.” required participants to check answers provided that applied to their circumstance. The option of providing “other” answers was always provided in questions requiring students to “check all that apply to you.” Participants also had opportunities on the questionnaire to “tell me more about…” or “explain…” to give more information after selecting
from a list of provided answers. Open ended questions provided space for participants to write their answers for questions such as “If you were to go back in time and talk to yourself before you dropped out, what would you say?, or “Talk a little about your decision to return and re-engage in school. What were your reasons or motivation?”

Two final questions were included to give participants a chance to give advice to other students who were considering dropping out of school, as well as communicate to educators something they would like teachers and schools to know to better support students at-risk of dropping out. A final space for other comments was included for participants to add any final comments they wished to share. The interview questions followed a similar format in addressing family, individual and school related factors supported by the extensive research described above; however, some questions were worded in a way to elicit a more detailed and in-depth response. For example, students were asked, “Tell me a little about your family life right now.” or “Tell me about what life was like for you before you left school, and “Why did you decide to come back to school?”

Questions designed to look at resilience and coping styles were formulated, such as “What are some things that cause you stress?” and, “What are some things you do to cope with stress?” and “What do you tell yourself when things get tough?” Questions around experiences in childhood and at the elementary school levels were designed to learn about these past experiences, as supported by research from Epstein and Sheldon (2002) around the relationship between poor attendance in the elementary years and future dropout. Such questions pertaining to elementary school experiences were explored during the interview. For example, one question that was asked was, “Describe a memory from elementary school that stands out in your mind.”
Research from Finn (1993) also suggests that most students who drop out are expressing an extreme sense of alienation or disengagement that was preceded by several alterable indicators of withdrawal and unsuccessful school experiences. Such questions followed a who, what, where, when, why format as described by Stringer (1996) who explained the importance of incorporating *key questions* and *specific questions* to extend a researcher’s understanding of the problems and contexts to which participants develop their responses. Some questions arose out of the interview when it was felt necessary to probe further into a specific response for either further information or clarification. Some interview questions were designed to elicit a “memory” or “story” from the participant’s past such as: “*Describe a memory from childhood that stands out in your mind*”. It is known that stories are powerful tools for creating strong emotional connection between writer and audience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). In understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences and life's narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

This research hoped to make meaning of the experiences of an extremely vulnerable set of youth whose precious lives were in the school system’s care. Many of the participant responses, both in the questionnaire and interview, “came to life” as they described memories that were important turning points or anchors in their life experiences.

**Procedures Followed**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Board, School District #70 (Alberni), and the Vast Education Centre. The questionnaire was distributed over the period of four school weeks in the month of October 2013 to willing students who met the participant criteria. The semi-structured individual interviews
were conducted over the course of four weeks in the month of November 2013. For participation
in the questionnaire portion of the study, recruitment consisted of brief announcements in the
main classroom of the school made five minutes prior to scheduled classroom break times at
10:00am, 11:30am, 2:00pm and 3:00pm daily. Announcements gave a brief introduction of the
researcher, description of the research topic and invitation to participate if students met the
research criteria (see Appendix C: Recruitment Script).

The timing of the recruitment announcements was selected for three strategic reasons. Firstly, this was an attempt to recruit as many participants as possible and avoid a selection bias. Because this alternative school is a flexible, self-paced environment, students can arrive at school at varying times throughout the day. For a variety of reasons, some students attend only certain days, whereas some students attend only mornings or afternoons. This method of recruitment aimed to capture as large a sample as possible. Secondly, the recruitment times attempted to limit the disruption of students during regular class times and coursework. Thirdly, giving students the opportunity to hear about the project and questionnaire just prior to break times allowed a more confidential manner for students to have access to the questionnaire. Many of the students took the questionnaire as other students were mingling at break times and chose to complete the questionnaire once class time resumed. The questionnaire was strategically photocopied on plain, white, letter sized photocopy paper, since much of the paper-based coursework at Vast is provided to students in similar photocopied booklet form. Participants were instructed to not write their name or identify themselves in any way on the questionnaire. Two of the questionnaire participants were supported through a scribe from two staff members; however, the researcher was not made aware of the identity of these participants and their questionnaires were completed in a private and confidential manner.
Participants were informed that there would be a chance that other students would see them completing the questionnaire, so that aspect of anonymity could be compromised, but that the information they provided on the questionnaire would be kept strictly confidential and no one would be able to identify them based on any information they provided. Participants were informed that they were not required to complete the questionnaire and that participation was completely voluntary. They were informed that they could choose to discontinue participation by simply not submitting their questionnaire into the drop box set up at the school office. They were also informed that submitting their questionnaire implied consent to the study, since individual questionnaires could not be differentiated between others once submitted. Participants were invited to drop completed questionnaires, pages 3-6 into *Dropbox A* at the main office at Vast, and to tear off page 7 to indicate their interest in participation in the individual follow up interview. They were invited to place this portion of the questionnaire into *Dropbox B*, also located at the main office.

Each participant had the option of choosing “Yes” or “No” to take part in the follow up interview. Students indicating “Yes” to the interview option were invited to leave their name and contact information on the last page to be contacted for further information regarding the interview process. The researcher contacted the students either in person in a private manner, or via phone or email to request that they come and see her to discuss the interview and consent procedures. Specific details of the study were not mentioned if the communication was via email, or if a phone message was left on the students’ answering machine. Once connected, the researcher and participant agreed on an interview date and time that best suited both of their schedules. All participants were also given an Interview Participant Assent Form (See Appendix D) and asked to either sign for themselves at that time or to bring it signed to the scheduled
interview. All of the participants interviewed were either under the age of 19, but living on their own or over the age of 19; therefore, parent/guardian consent was not required for any of the participants.

All of the interviews were conducted in a private staff office at the Vast Education Centre, in a quiet, locked hallway of the school. All of the interviews were conducted during school hours; however the reason for meeting was unknown to others in the building as the researcher met with students in such a way on a regular basis. Therefore, such an occurrence would not have been seen as out of the ordinary.

At the interview, the researcher went over the purpose of the research once again and discussed the interview process and types of questions the participant would be asked using the script from the Interview Questions Protocol. The researcher answered any questions the participants had and made sure they understood the assent details. Participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, and their participation was strictly voluntary. They also were asked permission for the interview to be recorded, but were told that they could stop the recording at any time. All four participants assented to the tape recording. Participants were also informed that they could choose to not answer a specific question if they did not feel comfortable or preferred not to answer. Two copies of the consent form were prepared, a signed copy for research records, and the other for the participant’s records.

The interview began with the participant choosing a pseudonym in order for their personal identity to remain confidential and anonymous. The researcher also advised them not to give any identifying information throughout the interview in terms of names of family or friends in order to maintain anonymity. The researcher then began with some initial “warm up” questions in an attempt to ease nervousness and establish rapport with the participant (Douglas,
1985). All interviews were taped-recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed using Microsoft Word 2010 for coding and analysis. Each interview ranged between 30 and 55 minutes in length, depending on the participant. Some participants took longer to answer specific questions, and gave more detail, while others tended to give shorter, simpler answers. As an acknowledgement of their time, at the end of the interview, participants were invited to choose a small honorarium. Participants were also invited to return to meet with the researcher for a short follow-up meeting to receive a copy of their transcribed responses, and a short discussion of the interview that took place. They were invited to read their transcription and if necessary, make any clarifying changes or additions.

Validity

The risk of data collector bias was minimized by creating an anonymous questionnaire for participants to complete. Throughout the interview, the researcher attempted to follow the advice of “talk a little, listen a lot” (Wolcott, 1994). The trustworthiness of the conclusions made increased with the purposeful process of attempting to avoid prompting answers from the students, and increasing wait time for student responses. The researcher attempted to be patient and wait for the participants to respond before prompting or clarifying the question (Wolcott, 1994). Researcher biases were also explained in Chapter 1 as fully as possible in order to increase validity prior to research. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe, trustworthy qualitative methods of validation include credibility. Credibility ensures that the inquiry was conducted in such a way as to ensure that participants were appropriately identified and described (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Through the process of member-checking (Guba, 1981), where individual interview data were shared with the participants to ensure accuracy of their responses, increased credibility was created. The data collected were also shared with two
research assistants who assisted in ensuring consistency in the data interpretations regarding categories and themes. This aided in providing increased validity to the research analysis process.

Maxwell (1992) describes Interpretive Validity, as the meaning attributed to behaviours by the people who have been studied, or the “participant’s perspective” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 289). Where necessary, if the participants’ response in the interview posed a threat to interpretive validity, and their response could be misconstrued by the reader, the account of the participant was not included in the results section. This research also aimed at maintaining Evaluative Validity, meaning the ability of the researcher to present the data without being evaluative or judgemental (Maxwell, 1992).

Analysis Techniques

The researcher used Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) seven phases of qualitative data analysis: 1) organizing the data; 2) immersion in the data; 3) generating categories and themes; 4) coding; 5) development of interpretations; 6) identifying alternative explanations; and 7) presentation of the study. The questionnaires were gathered and compiled and a database of participant responses was created using Microsoft Word 2010. Each participant’s response to an individual question was recorded on a master copy of the questionnaire. Written responses were entered exactly as participants wrote them in their questionnaire and grammatical and spelling errors were not corrected if they were a direct quote.

Interview data were organized by the creation of a verbatim transcript of the interview. The researcher was the sole transcriber of the data. After the data were transcribed, the researcher listened to the interview again while reading the transcript to ensure accuracy of what was said. Transcript revisions were made and when required, replaying sections of the interview
audio file were necessary to accurately capture words spoken by the participant and interviewer. The interview transcripts were read and reread to identify emerging categories and then themes of responses by the participants. The rereading of the transcripts provided credibility to the established categories, which led to the formation of themes (Henry, 2009). Each written response on the questionnaire was reviewed and summarized by one word or short phrase that described the essence of that response. The short phrases or words were categorized according to similarities and themes emerged from this method. Once again, in order to improve credibility and provide additional perspectives and verification on the data identified, the transcripts were also reviewed by two research assistants, both teachers and colleagues at the Vast Education Centre. These two professionals provided feedback and input regarding the categories and themes identified in the data.
Chapter 4: Results and Findings

Participant Demographic Data

According to the questionnaire results, the average age of participants in this study was 18.53 years. Of the thirteen questionnaire participants, eleven were female and two were male. Ten participants were of Aboriginal ancestry, while three participants were Caucasian. One participant claimed to be both Aboriginal and “Other”. Based on responses, the average length of time the participants had been studying at Vast ranged between 1.5 to 3 years; however some responses included “a couple of weeks to one month” to “on and off since 2009, just recently started attending regularly…”

The participants were asked to indicate what their current family financial situation was while going to school. Participants were invited to select as many options as applicable to them. In the instance where two participants selected that one parent/guardian was employed, one participant indicated that it was a foster parent as the guardian. At the same time, in the instance where one of two participants indicated that both parents/guardians were employed, one participant indicated that she lived with her “aunty and uncle” and they both were employed and supporting the family financially. The responses indicated on the questionnaire are outlined in Figure 4.0 below.
In regards to the education level of the participants’ parents or guardians, Figure 4.1 outlines the frequency of responses regarding the highest level of education completed. The participants could have indicated more than one selection, as some may have indicated both mother and father education levels. One participant indicated that both parents had “dropped out in Grade 9”, and another participant specified education levels for “mom”, “bio-dad” [biological] and “dad”. It was observed that two of the participants did not know the highest education level for their parent or guardian, but the reason was not explained as there was no additional comment section for this question.
When asked whether the participants had dropped out more than once, 77% of respondents indicated “Yes”. According to the questionnaire results, the average age of the first drop out occurrence was at the age of 14.6, at the Grade 9/10 level. The youngest age indicated on the questionnaire for first time dropout was 12 (Grade 6), while age 17 (Grade 12) was the oldest age indicated as first time of dropout. The results for these questions are outlined in Figure 4.2 below.
Dropout Risk Factors

The questionnaire participants were encouraged to indicate as many reasons as needed that best described what may have contributed to leaving school early. They were given a list of possible reasons, with an “other” option included. The top ten most frequent responses are shown in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3 - Top 10 Reasons for Leaving School

Analyzing the questionnaire data, as well as data from the personal interviews, the following themes emerged as major risk factors to dropout for the research participants: Family Conflict/Dysfunction, Drug and Alcohol Issues, Teenage Pregnancy/Family Responsibilities, Mental Health Issues, Relationship Issues/Conflict, and Teacher and Peer Conflict. The first six themes relate to Family and Individual Factors, while the final theme is related to School/Peer Factors. It is important to note that these risk factors are inter-related and although separated into themes for data explanation purposes, these factors are inextricably linked and ultimately affect one another. They have been simplified into category form for the simplicity of reporting the research results. The researcher acknowledged that the participants will have experienced these
factors in different circumstances, with varying levels of severity and at different points in their lives.

**Family dysfunction/conflict.**

Figure 4.3, based on the quantitative questionnaire data, outlines many issues relating to various factors at the time participants dropped out. However, the written comments from the 13 questionnaire participants and the stories from four participant interviews showed the real underlying issues that started to emerge, and they proved to go much deeper than the information the data tables could provide. Many of the school-related issues started with family conflict, and for some, extreme family dysfunction and trauma.

“Elizabeth”, a young mother of one, explained that she left home at 16 due to family conflict, which included being abused by her father. She described this contributing to her leaving school: “I left school because my dad, he, he, he, um [sic] physically abused me, and that’s why I left home… he tried forcing me to stay, but he couldn’t, he couldn’t keep me there.” She also described her relationship with her mother as being unhealthy: “She just never did those… what a mom’s supposed to do, supposedly… is to have a good mother-daughter bond, but she sort of just stopped talking to me… and when she did stop talking to me, she started supporting me in drinking.”

Elizabeth ended up moving in with her aunt, but also spent some time in foster care. Three participants spent some years living in foster care and when interviewed, Elizabeth described her memory of the experience:

The last year in elementary school, I got tooken [sic] out of… my auntie, she, my mom’s sister, she sort of, not kidnapped me, but she took me for a while, so I wouldn’t get tooken [sic] away to foster care. I was in foster care for a year, because um, when my
auntie stole me when I went back to school I got tooken [sic] from the school to go into foster care.

“Sunny”, another young mother of one and pregnant with her second child, described not having a supportive family life growing up: “I never really had much family at all. Um, I actually just started talking with my mom a couple of days ago and I hadn’t talked to her in a couple of months….my step-dad, he’s pretty much my only support system with my family.”

“Mike”, a young father, described in his interview his relationship with his father: “I’ve never had a good relationship with my dad’s side. At this time my dad and I have nothing to do with each other, it’s uh, better off that way.” When prompted to explain further, he described the relationship in more detail:

He’s a hard guy to get along with, and I figure, the more you just let it go, you know, ignore it, let him get away with it, eventually it’ll get better. But I was just always frustrated and just pissed off and finally he pushed my buttons and I just let him know it’s not ok. And he didn’t take it very well. You know, but it’s no loss really, I’ve, I’m actually happier cause I don’t have to deal with all that crap.

The stories relating to family dysfunction also led to disclosure about issues with drugs and alcohol and the impact this had, and continues to have, on their school experience.

**Drug and alcohol issues.**

Many of the questionnaire respondents also describe issues with drugs and alcohol, as well as peer influences: “My ex-boyfriend forced me into drugs and alcohol. And my boyfriend at the time I left school to be with him. And I wasn’t liking [sic] school anymore, got tired of it.” Another respondent explains her situation as, “I moved in with my friends and partied everyday
“I didn’t like working, and I had a really bad drinking problem.” One respondent explained: “I…had drug and alcohol issues”.

Elizabeth talked about her drinking problems she was experiencing at the time she left school:

I guess I sort of got emotional damage from like my mom and my dad, because, like…my mom never talked to me and I had like no friends to talk to anymore and I was like losing everything that I had, mainly because of drinking at the time. And…it all just sort of goes back to drinking because I lost everything because of that and I dropped out of school because of that and…it’s not because of that, but like…it also now comes back to that.

Sunny described her experience with drug addiction and the life it made for her: crime, homelessness, violence and broken relationships, and time spent in a juvenile detention centre:

Ya I got into partying a lot with my friends and drinking and the drinking got way out of control, drinking of course led to doing the hard drugs again, and um, it was just, I would do drink and do drugs, and drink and do drugs and then um, not go to school (laughs), and uh, ya I just dropped out for a while there, but I would come back whenever I felt like going back and the ya [sic], I was in foster care at the time, and uh, ya I left foster care to do drugs for like a whole month, and um, ya I did a lot of crime and uh, ended up going to juvie…

The “emotional damage” that was described by Elizabeth was echoed by other participants and mental health issues were ultimately factors that affected students’ eventual school dropout experience.
Mental health issues.

It was noted that although eight out of thirteen participants chose “Mental Health Issues” as reasons affecting dropout, many of the comments on the questionnaire related to alcohol and drug issues. Not many participants described in detail their struggles with mental health issues; however, “October”, a young mother of two and expecting her third child, did go into detail about both her mental health issues and abuse while discussing a significant death in the family and not dealing with the grief:

I was uh…depressed teenager and, and on my downfall, rebellious stage that started when I was like 12, and it just kept progressing to worse and worse and worse. And…it basically all started when uh, I lost my dad, and, it just, I never really dealt with it.

Both Elizabeth and Sunny also talked about their struggles with anxiety. For Elizabeth, being in large groups of people is ok for her, but she struggles with smaller groups or being with individual people: “I get nervous with one person. I just, and when I’m in a crowd, like everyone’s looking at me and I’m talking, like, if I’m walking and talking I’m fine with that, but if everyone’s like staring at me and everything, I talk too fast, or I hesitate…”

Sunny described getting anxious in large groups of people. “I’m pretty sociable once I get to know people and feel comfortable in a place, but…I don’t like to be around large groups of people that I don’t know, or people, I just, I don’t know, sort of an anxiety thing for me.” She also talked about her summer after a bad year in middle school and getting off of drugs: “…and summer came and I had stopped doing ’e’ [ecstasy] because I had a lost a lot of weight and my mom found out and um, I was really depressed, and it made me really depressed, so that whole summer I kinda [sic] just isolated myself at home in my room and then it was high school…”
While mental health issues still affect some of the participants, another risk factor that emerged from the data was the fact that many of the students at Vast ended up having children and other family responsibilities at a very young age.

**Teenage pregnancy/family responsibilities.**

Eight out of thirteen participants in this research were young parents, and the ninth participant was pregnant, but had lost her child due to a miscarriage. Two participants described becoming pregnant, specifically, as a reason for leaving school. “I got pregnant, and after getting bigger I felt uncomfortable and always being tired, sore and crabby I didn’t come.” Another questionnaire participant described a similar experience in point form: “I got pregnant - wasn’t comfortable - couldn’t keep up.” The issue of being “uncomfortable” was interpreted as both physical and emotional discomfort for the participants. For example, after moving out of her abusive home life, Elizabeth described not attending school very often, meeting a boyfriend and getting pregnant shortly after. She explained her feelings after coming back to school for two months and finding out about the pregnancy: “When I found out I was pregnant I didn’t want to be judged by everyone because I was really that good type of person that everyone looked up to because my parents had high expectations for me, too…”

A questionnaire respondent explained a factor for leaving school being due to having to “get a job and support my family.” Two other respondents selected having to take care of family members as one reason for dropping out of school. In this questionnaire context, the term “family” was indicated as siblings, parents or grandparents. These relationships and the relationships with boyfriend and girlfriends also proved to be significant risk factors for the participants.
**Relationship issues/conflict.**

One of the questionnaire respondents described her lifestyle with her boyfriend prior to leaving school: “I wasn’t ever home. I stayed with my boyfriend at the time and drank. I registered for Vast then moved back home [on reserve] with a different boyfriend.”

Mike described his relationship at the time as being very unhealthy and that in the relationship he, “wasn’t allowed to like people…it lasted 5 years, it shouldn’t have lasted 2 weeks, but…it happens, uh we ended up having a kid…then we had to deal with all this court stuff.”

Sunny also explained the dysfunctional relationship she was in with a drug-addict boyfriend.

Well, I met this guy. He was like way [emphasis added] older than me, like almost twice my age, but uh, I was absolutely in love with him. He was a heroin and crack addict and um, I already had like to do crack all the time, and uh, I don’t know, we just started like doing it together and uh I was absolutely obsessed with him and uh, he just got, I dropped out of school and we just did drugs and crime and horrible things to my friends…

Sunny explained further about how the drugs and her codependent relationship evolved into crime, assault, arrests, and homelessness:

…He got me to like convince me to like rob all my friends and some stuff. I got beat up a lot because of it, we both got beat up together and stuff, but, I got arrested and kicked out. I was staying at different youth shelters…this relationship went on for like, 3 years, just doing dumb stuff with this older guy convinced me to do and um, ya, I don’t know, I just loved him so much *(laughs)*, so it was weird, but ya, I didn’t go back to school for a while.
October described her abusive relationship while she was out of school and the issues that arose from that relationship: “…all through that relationship was like abuse, and verbal, physical, and emotional, but I stayed with him for some reason.” She explained about him going to jail and her getting pregnant:

…I told him that I was [pregnant] and he’s happy at first and the next day he called and…when he called, we were talking and I don’t know where he goes and says that the baby’s not his and everything. So I contacted one of my friends and his dad came to get me and I went for an abortion because I was not going to do it on my own. I had no intention of being a mother on my own, so I ended it.

As described by the participants above, spousal relationship had significant impact in complicating life for these young people; however, other issues also emerged as participants described their experiences with school and interactions with peers.

**Teacher/peer conflict.**

One participant blamed leaving school because of “racial issues with principal”, while interview participant, Mike, explained, “Well I didn’t like the teachers or students and they didn’t like me.” Mike was forthcoming in describing that he didn’t have the best attitude towards people and he admits that he “wasn’t a very nice person.” He also described conflict with teachers and a lack of support as main reasons for leaving school, as early as elementary school. “Grade 4 was awful. I actually almost got expelled from elementary school in Grade 4. I just didn’t have a very good teacher and…I let him know I didn’t like him. I just started to get into a lot of trouble in Grade 4.” He continued on to describe some negative teacher experiences and a feeling that the school system did not care:
Ya, my Grade 4 teacher wasn’t very nice, and uh, no matter what my mom brought up, it’s just the school board, and the principals and all that. The principals didn’t seem to care, they were like, “ah, it’s his problem, his fault”. Which some of it, ya probably was, but when you call a chunky kid whose 10, fat and stuff like that, and get a little bit aggressive, you know…kid’s gonna [sic] not like you and he’s not gonna [sic] respect you and anything like that…so…

Mike went on to describe the lack of support he felt while at school as he struggled with math: “I just didn’t feel I was getting the help I needed, in math. I was just super frustrated, and I had more fun hanging out with my friends and playing ‘Call of Duty’[electronic video game], and getting mad at math and school, so I just left.” He went on to describe a lack of caring of some teachers and just overall negative experience at the high school perceived negative teacher qualities: “I think it was a lack of support, and…just not caring, like I had uh, a [names subject] teacher; he was a real dink. There wasn’t [sic] too many good experiences at [names school].”

The researcher observed that from the questionnaire and interviews, a few respondents did not see themselves as ‘dropouts’. Two questionnaire respondents chose “I didn’t “drop out” I was “kicked out” as reason for leaving school. This could be due to the lack of perceived support or relationships at school at the time. The two respondents who selected this reason also chose many other selections as reasons contributing to dropout. Attendance, lack of progress and a lack of belonging were three common factors to both participants who indicated they were “kicked out” of school.

Elizabeth explained that she didn’t know what supports were available when she was dealing with her abusive father: “I just didn’t know what help I could get from the school. I just started, sort of started not going…”
Sunny describes leaving school after being embarrassed by her teacher in a new high school:

I lasted like two weeks, and uh *(laughs)*, well the teacher embarrassed me in front of the whole class, um with this math question she wanted me to do on the board in front of the self-paced class, and I didn’t know how to do it, so I went up, she made me go up there and I wrote ‘f-you, bitch’ up on the board *(laughs)* and I didn’t go back after that…

Sunny described the issue of transience and being at a new school almost every year growing up and the struggles with making friends, some of which she attributes to her family background and being vocal about her regular drug use:

“…they didn’t like me because I was a new person, and like, and I don’t know, they were like rich and stuff, I, I didn’t grow up with a lot of money and uh, nobody liked me cause I did drugs *(laughs)*, and I was quite open about it, like I didn’t care what people…thought…a lot of people didn’t like me, so it was kinda *[sic]*…I was bullied a lot…I was alone a lot at lunch and stuff…”

Two respondents also indicated they moved to other cities and didn’t register for school when they arrived.

After hearing the emotional and often difficult lives that these participants had lived and reasons they felt affected their overall school experiences, they were then asked questions about the factors that impacted their return to school to continue their education.

**Re-Engagement Factors**

The participants were asked to describe their motivation and reasons for re-engaging and subsequently, staying in school. A list of possible reasons was provided, along with a space for participants to write “Other” reasons. Themes that emerged from both the questionnaires and
interviews around re-engaging in school could be described as: Desire to Graduate, Child/Family Influences, Future Employment/Financial Goals, re-engaging in school as a means to Overcoming Personal Issues, as well as Discovering Personal Interest/Talent factors. While the themes are separated in this study, it is clear that the reasons for re-engaging in school were inter-connected, as were the reasons for dropping out. The Top 8 most frequent questionnaire responses about reasons for staying in school are shown in Figure 4.4.

**Figure 4.4 - Top 8 Reasons for Staying in School**

- I want to graduate
- Graduation is important for my future goals
- I don't want to disappoint myself
- I think staying in school is important
- I don't want to disappoint my parents/guardians
- I like my school.
- I enjoy learning
- I would rather be here than at home.
- I feel welcome here and I belong.
- I don't want to disappoint my teachers.
- My friends are here.
- I would get in trouble if I dropped out again.

**Figure 4.4 Top 8 Reasons for Staying in School**

**Desire to graduate.**

Many of the respondents talked about having the motivation and desire to graduate in order to pursue future goals. They described the desire to be financially independent and the young parents saw their children as positive influences. Some had specific goals that would help get them to a level of independence or a desired future job.
When asked about their goals for the current school year, the most common goal related to finishing courses and graduating. Others described wanting to get their driver’s license, and completing certification courses such as Food Safe. Another respondent was focused on graduating and saving money for a trip, apartment and to repay money owed. When asked if they had a school completion goal date, 77% of respondents indicated “Yes”. Three respondents provided comments about completing courses and graduating: “I am hoping to finish English 12 by December and then I will be finished.” and “to grad before March”, and “I hope to finish all my courses by June.” The researcher noted; however, when asked whether they knew what grad plan they were on, three respondents indicated they didn’t know their grad plan, but they still selected “Yes” to having a completion goal date.

Having a desire to graduate was a significant influence over returning to school, but for many participants, their children were their main motivators.

**Child/family influences.**

For many of the participants, the fact that they were now young parents had a significant influence on their motivation to finish school and become more mature and financially independent. Mike talked about how becoming a father affected him greatly: “When I found out I was gonna [sic] be a dad, I totally changed. It’s kind of funny how that happens. I just kinda [sic] wanted to do everything right. I know I couldn’t be a little asshole anymore.” Other participants described similar sentiments: “My motivation was my kids. I want them to have what I didn’t when I was growing up. I want to be able to support my kids, so that means I have to finish all my schooling and get a good paying job. I don’t want to be on social assistance forever.” Another participant explained almost the same motivation: “My son inspired me. I want to be a good role model. I want to support him and not be on welfare”. 
October described the loss of her mother as a motivating factor in returning to her hometown and going back to school:

My motivation was my boys and my mother, but before I could come back to the island my mom passed away a week before I was going to come home, so her passing was very hard, but I slowly started getting the motivation I needed because I started thinking of doing it for my mom and my boys.

Much of the discussion around re-engagement was regarding the participants’ families, but in particular, a desire to improve their financial situation for themselves and their growing families.

**Future employment/financial goals.**

Many of the participants indicated a desire to become financially better off than what they had grown up with. After her older boyfriend went to jail, Sunny ended up meeting another boyfriend, the current father of her children, and her pregnancy was “the wakeup call that we needed.” Separating her from the bad influences of her past, Sunny and her boyfriend moved cities and tried to get their lives back on track. After being supported by her boyfriend and getting on income assistance, she then realized that there was much more to life than what she was experiencing at the time. She describes her boyfriend:

…working to the bone and us being on income assistance, still with all this money coming in. Well it wasn’t that much money at all, but the money coming in never being enough. I could go to school and get, give my daughter the life that I want for her, that I didn’t, you know? I grew up in low income housing and my mom on income assistance, you know, I just didn’t want that for her so…
Sunny also described the life of being a stay-at-home mom “…cleaning and taking care of the baby…” began to negatively affect her and she explained wanting to do something more with her life:

This routine over and over again was driving me nuts. I had all these dreams of like, ideas of becoming this person that I wanted to be so, I just said, you know what, I’m gonna [sic] look up schools in Port Alberni and then I found this one, and found out they had a program for young moms which was even better. So it all worked out and I came and signed up and…

It was apparent throughout the interviews and from the questionnaires that many of the participants have worked through many of their issues that faced them in life. For some, they still struggle with challenges, but the desire to overcome adversity was clear.

**Overcoming personal issues.**

The researcher observed that while teenage pregnancy and alcohol abuse issues were risk factors to dropout, they also served as motivation factors for many of these participants to overcome these personal issues, re-engage in school and pursue their graduation goals. One participant describes re-engaging in school after dealing with her alcohol issues: “Before I went to treatment I tried to go to school because my gran kept bugging me. But I skipped a lot. I went to treatment and started doing full time schooling.” One respondent simply summed up her reasons for staying in school: “to quit drinking, to grad, and my son.”

One participant explained how experiencing a miscarriage actually inspired her to get her life back on track for the future: “I came back to school because my daughter passed away. I wanted to sober up and get my act together for my future child.”
Once some of the participants began to re-engage in school, or work through some of their personal challenges, they were able to explore their own personal interests and talents. For some, this solidified their motivations to return to school and get their lives back on track.

**Discovering personal interests/talents.**

After spending some time in a juvenile detention centre, Sunny realized she had a love for reading and chose to go back to school after being released: “In juvie I did a lot of reading, and I really found out that I really liked to read in juvie, so uh, I went back to school and did some English and reading lots of the books they had and stuff…” At the time of the interview, Sunny explained that she wanted to become a youth outreach support worker and perhaps earn a degree in Criminology. She also discussed the possibility of becoming an English teacher and working with juveniles in detention centres, as she felt that she would be a good role model for them based on her life experiences.

For Mike, reasons for going back to school was a combination of becoming a father, maturing and finding his interest in carpentry and woodwork: “I mainly want to do carpentry; I want my Grade 12, so that I can go to VIU.” Being in the SD70 Alternative Programs gave him the opportunity to get introduced to the hands-on skills in the woodshop:

I liked it [carpentry] when I started it at [names school program], uh, I started going with [names teacher]. I’d never done anything like that before; I thought that was pretty cool.

And then I dropped out of school for a bit, came back to Vast…signed up for [names program]…

These participants were very candid in their explanations of the factors that contributed to dropping out and subsequently, re-engaging in school. This was also the case when asked about their various stressors in life and the way they cope with these stressors. For most of the
interview participants, their level of personal resilience was evident throughout the interviews and a variety of protective factor themes emerged.

**Stress, Coping Strategies, Personal Resilience and Protective Factors**

**Stress.**

Both questionnaire and interview participants were asked about things that cause them stress and how they cope with stress. The Top 8 Causes of Stress according to the most frequent responses from the questionnaires are shown on Figure 4.5.

![Figure 4.5 Top 8 Causes of Stress](image)

Money was the most frequently-chosen response, and when prompted to explain in further detail about stressors, one respondent wrote, “Money: cause [sic] I barely have enough for my son.” Another respondent wrote, “I mainly stress about not having enough money for my kids and food and my van.”

Respondents also described the pressure of thinking about the future and life after graduation. October explained her self-doubt and uncertainty:
I’ve actually slowed down in my work cause I’m like, ‘I’m just about there, what am I gonna do after?’ That’s like the main thing, but I know what I’m gonna do after. I gonna [sic] go to college and everything, but, now there’s always, there’s always that doubt in my mind. I’ve always had that.

Family conflict, loneliness and lack of high school completion were outlined by one questionnaire participant as she indicated some of her personal struggles: “When me [sic] and my mom fight all the time. Being so far away from home (I moved here). Not being able to see family/friends. Not being graduated yet.”

While ‘mental health issues’ was not an option for questionnaire respondents to select for this question, some of the written comments described aspects of mental health issues as stressors, in addition to other factors. One respondent described a combination of personal issues including childcare responsibilities, relationship conflict, family responsibilities, money, dealing with grief/loss, and mental health issues:

Being a mother and a student is big, also dealing with my spouse’s childish behaviour when time to be an adult on [sic] the situation, alongside helping my dad with my sibling when I can, to being able to buy what my boys need and what’s needed for my place and still going through the loss of my mother…because I have lots to tend to I never tend to my loss till [sic] late at night when it’s just me awake in the dark.

October described her depression as a stress factor for her: “Sometimes I feel really good, one day, and something will go wrong and I’ll just completely lose confidence in everything, and my depression has been a really big issue for my, my being stressful.”

Trauma, loss and grief were common themes among the participants, as the participant who described losing her baby wrote, “I feel stressed because my daughter isn’t here. So
sometimes, I just want to give up and also, my boyfriend and I have lots of problems since we lost the baby.”

The following research results focus on resilience, coping strategies and protective factors among the participants in this study.

**Coping strategies.**

Questionnaire and interview participants were asked to indicate ways they cope with stress. A list of possible coping mechanisms was offered and participants were invited to select as many as currently applied to them. Figure 4.6 outlines the Top 12 Most Common Coping Strategies among the questionnaire participants.

![Figure 4.6 Top 12 Coping Strategies for Stress](image)

**Figure 4.6 Top 12 Coping Strategies for Stress**

While this question and subsequent data table indicates the frequency of responses, this does not rank the most frequent coping strategies for each individual student, or what they tend
to choose more often than other strategies for coping with stress. Results may have been different if the participants were asked to rank their top coping strategies for dealing with stress.

Comments on the questionnaires, as well as the interviews, indicate awareness that certain coping strategies were not as healthy as others. One respondent wrote, “I like to smoke weed, it makes me feel happy. If that doesn’t work I slip and smoke jib.” One respondent admitted, “My coping choices aren’t always the best. But I’m human; I make mistakes.” Another respondent wrote about the lack of trust in others as a reason for keeping things inside: “I don’t really trust anyone where I live so I keep it inside or text my best friend because she gets me. I will ask my aunty if she can get me alcohol.” It was unclear what the respondent meant by “where I live”, possibly meaning her city, or home. The researcher viewed “Keep it inside” as a negative coping strategy; although at times, this could be a positive coping mechanism, or form of self-protection, as mentioned by one respondent around a lack of someone to trust and confide in. It was unclear from the questionnaire whether the other participants viewed this as positive or negative strategy, but it was clear that this is a very common method for dealing with stress for the participants. Further questioning revealed more in-depth information regarding personal resilience.

**Personal resilience.**

When asked on the questionnaire, “what keeps you going when things get tough?”, or reworded for the interview to read: “What do you tell yourself when things get tough?” themes that emerged included relationships as the core component of resilience which included positive relationships with: children, families, significant others, and other adult support systems, in addition to an inner desire to succeed.
Many of the young parents described their children as being their motivation to keep going:

My kidies [sic] keep me strong, not just my boys but my sibling… I want to be that example to show them its [sic] never to late [sic] but the sooner they get their schooling done the better, and just having them around and being able to bug/hug and joke with them is helpful to me.

In her interview, Elizabeth described how communication and relationships with counselors and talking about her problems helps her to choose more positive coping strategies: “Communication is the key to everything. So, I just talk to people instead of taking it out in certain ways, like in anger, or any other emotions that aren’t necessary or appropriate to overreact over my stress.”

For some of the participants, it was an inner desire to succeed, for themselves: “I need to get through it cause [sic] it’s only going to get tougher if I keep in that state, and I gotta [sic] be strong for myself…” Elizabeth explained that when things get tough, she recites the “Serenity Prayer”, a prayer that she learned while in Alcoholics Anonymous. She recited it during her interview: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, and the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

For Mike, he explained that he simply tells himself to, “Remember how things used to be and how better they are now.” He said that by comparing his past to his current situation, he is reminded of how far he has come and where he is going. Similarly, Sunny described that she tells herself:
That this is not the toughest thing \textit{[sic]}. That it’s just a time period and this too shall pass. That it’s not a forever destination, that there’s always more positive things in the future, things to look forward to. That this will pass.

Many of the above examples describe the presence of protective factors, those factors that keep a person moving forward and surviving. Some key School-Related Protective Factor themes emerged as the participants described their experiences at Vast and what keeps them attending and striving for their goals.

\textbf{School-related protective factors.}

Staff and Program Support, Relationships and Flexibility were common themes that emerged around what can be considered School-Related Protective Factors. For example, in her interview, Sunny described a counselor she had at an alternative school she went back to after serving time in “juvie”.

…My counselor was really awesome. She was uh, she would go out of her way for me and do just little things…she’d pick me up from home and we’d go out for coffee then go to school, or she bought me the book I, I wasn’t allowed to take from juvie that I was in the middle of reading, and um, it was a really good book, dear to my heart…she was just great, and then all the teachers there, they were just really good. I don’t know; they fed you. I had a different relationship, like when I was homeless, I would bring laundry in and they’d let me do laundry in the room and \textit{(laughs)} and feed me and stuff, so it was good to know that I had them there.

Elizabeth described her current Teacher Advisor as her role model and a support system:
“She always checks on me, and keeps me on track, gives me the courage, and I guess, well, she believes in me and she’s always happy and smiling, like how I used to be, like I keep myself. I guess she sort of keeps me sane *(laughs)*.”

Mike describes his role model one of his current teachers as well: “He’s a really good guy. He quit drinking; he doesn’t do anything like that. He’s just super nice to everybody; he’s just somebody you can totally use as a role model…”

Participants were asked why they attend the Vast Education Centre. Two individual questionnaire comments stated, “The teachers made me want to be here.” while another respondent wrote, “Vast showed me how to love school again.” Sunny also described reasons for attending Vast: “I like coming in, and just I like all the support…there’s no judgement…they don’t care how old you are, or what you’ve done, no judgement for sure; everyone just wants to help you and welcome you, and it’s a good feeling.” The Top 8 Reasons for Attending Vast in terms of most frequent questionnaire responses are shown in Figure 4.7 below.

**Figure 4.7 - Top 8 Reasons for Attending Vast**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can work at my own pace.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More 1-1 support</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible scheduling</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports for young parents</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am too old for ADSS.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller school setting</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends go here.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer students than a mainstream high school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

 Frequency of Response Selected (max. 13)
Mike also spoke of his appreciation for the support he gets at Vast:

I like how there’s a lot of one-on-one, that’s the biggest thing, especially like I said with math; I’m not very good at it; I can get a lot of one-on-one. I like how it’s ‘work at your own pace;’ nobody’s nagging you to show up to school, like, if you let them know, like, ‘I gotta [sic] go work…for 5 days’, they’re super understanding. I just feel like everybody is just trying to help you succeed, even graduate however you can.

All three female interview participants describe the support of the Young Parent Program at Vast as a main reason for attending the school, and one questionnaire participant wrote: “There is a Mom’s Group which allows me to talk with other moms and my boys have full time daycare when I’m in school.” Another questionnaire respondent wrote about the Young parent program, as well as the flexibility Vast allows: “I have children and being at Vast helps work with my children and schooling I don’t feel as pressured I can work and create my own schedule.”

Participants were also asked whether they had at least one staff person at Vast who they felt comfortable talking with about their problems, and 10 out of 13 respondents (77%) selected “Yes”. Two Respondents selected “No” (15%) while 1 respondent did not answer (8%). When prompted to explain more about school supports, some comments were: “I like my advisor. She’s awesome and helps me out a lot and pushes me forward even when I don’t want to”, and “If staff notices you’re not your self [sic] then will talk and do their best to help you.” While only two students felt they didn’t have much choice in coming to Vast, with one respondent choosing “my parent/guardian made me come here” as the reason for attending, it was apparent that most respondents chose freely to attend the Vast Centre and had much appreciation for the staff and program supports the school offered them.
Many of the questionnaire respondents spoke of their participation in school activities and groups as a positive coping strategy in accessing support, and for some, these groups are a way to stay healthy and connect with others. As one respondent explained, “I need support. I need to stay active. I like being a part of a community.” One young mother described her reason for going to the school’s “Mom’s Group” as part of the partnership with the local day care, “to be the best parent I can be.”

When asked about attendance each week and the length of time spent at school, the respondents’ answers ranged from 2 times per week to 5 days per week. The average time spent at school, as described by the respondents, was between 4 and 5 hours per day. One respondent said “unsure, just started”. According to this participant’s questionnaire answers; however, she wrote that she had been at Vast student for three years, but claimed to have just started. The researcher interpreted this meaning the participant had left school for a while and had just recently returned, or re-engaged.

Another respondent described her reasons for a recent change in attendance: “Usually I come all day everyday but now I only stay till [sic] 11 because I have a full time job.” Another respondent also described attendance being affected by work responsibilities. In terms of school work focus while at school, when asked how many hours per day the participants felt they spent focused on school work, the average response was 2-3 hours per day (46%), with 3-4 hours per day being the second most frequent response (38%).

Participants were also asked about attendance and about what influences their attendance at school and work habits. Some comments reflected personal motivation as an attendance influence: “I feel I need to finish and move forward in life”, One respondent describes what influences her attendance as, “wanting a better life, family, son, myself, teachers and staff at
Vast”. Drugs and alcohol were also mentioned as affecting school attendance: “I still have a hard time with drugs and alcohol, but I still try to come everyday [sic]”. Family responsibilities were also mentioned as factors affecting attendance: “I would come to school earlier but it’s kind of hard because I have 2 babies and a 4 year old to get ready and myself.” Work and sleep schedules were also mentioned as factors: “I work graveyards a lot, so it kind of gets in the way of school cause I have to sleep alot [sic] of the time so I can be focused.” Similarly, influences mentioned by other participants were parents, teachers at Vast, and friends at school.

It was observed that most of the respondents described influences outside of school that affected their attendance and schoolwork habits other than teachers at Vast and friends at school. One respondent mentioned friends as being an influence and wrote, “My friends are in my class now”. The researcher was not clear whether this was a positive influence for attending school, or whether it was a perceived distraction affecting school work habits.

What the researcher found quite interesting was hearing the answers to the final questions in regards to students looking back on their past selves and the personal reflections that emerged.

**Student Reflections**

**Advice to themselves.**

One of the final questions asked participants to think about what they would say to themselves if they could go back in time before they dropped out. Themes emerging from the responses on both questionnaire and interview showed strong personal reflection and regret around some of their choices, including advice in regards to staying in school, having children, drug use, and peer and teacher relationships.


Staying in school.

Many of the participants wrote in a variety of ways that they would tell themselves not to drop out. As one participant wrote humorously, “Don’t do it dumb ass!”, while another wrote that she would tell herself to, “grow up and go to school.” Similarly, one questionnaire respondent wrote, “I would tell myself not to drop out, to continue school.” Another indicated a similar sentiment: “grow up, enroll in Vast. I would explain the relationship at the time is no good but I shouldn’t regret it because I get a son out of it but at the same time stay true to who I am and make my own dicisions [sic].”

Having children.

One young parent explained she would tell herself to “wait to have a baby and graduate first. Don’t ever regret having my first daughter but sometimes I wish I graduated before having kids.”

Drug use.

Upon reflecting on this question, one respondent wrote: “Life goes nowhere drinking and doing drugs.” While this was the only response that specifically mentioned drugs and alcohol, the researcher reflected that a reason could be because some of the participant responses indicated a continued struggle with addiction issues.

Peer and teacher relationships.

Another participant comment was: “I would say that my old friend’s weren’t my real friends, and that I should stay in school to make friends in my age group.” One respondent described how she would tell herself that “it’s so important to be here and it’s only 4 years. People will love you or hate you but that’s life. Love yourself and follow the rules. One day you’ll regret all of this.” Another participant said she would go back and “tell my principal I’m
just as human as her.” Only one participant wrote “I don’t know” in terms of what he or she
would say. One participant left this question blank. While the reason is unknown why these
respondents either didn’t know what they would say, or left the response blank, it was observed
that both respondents did not write much in the way of written responses to other questions
throughout the questionnaire.

Most of the participants showed quality reflection as they look back on their choices and
circumstances. The researcher found it very interesting that during the four interviews, when
asked what they would say to themselves if they could go back in time, three out of the four
participants said they would not say anything. October explained her reasoning for this answer:

I wouldn’t say anything because if, if it wasn’t for me dropping out, if it wasn’t for me
coming back to school, I wouldn’t have met my boyfriend in person. I wouldn’t have
gone through what I did to get more strength to, fight through it. I wouldn’t have had my
kids, I probably still would’ve been on my downfall, but, mmm, I don’t think I would
have said anything to change anything.

Similarly, Elizabeth explained her reasons for not saying anything to her past self:

I don’t think I’d really say anything to myself because I’m, I’m /sic/ really glad for
what I’ve been through because it made me stronger, and it made me who I am today,
and it changed my path, as of today…it’s a better person than who I was before…I no
longer depend on anyone else; I depend on myself because, it’s just better off that way.

Mike had similar sentiments when asked what he would tell his past self: “I wouldn’t bother. I’m
pretty happy with the way things are now. I think things happened for a reason.”

Only Sunny had advice for her past self and explained what she would tell herself if she could go
back in time:
That I, that to love myself and know that I’m worth so much more and that, I’m gonna
\[sic\] do big things \((laughs)\) and that it’s not just dreams. I can actually do it. And um, just

**Advice to schools and teachers.**

Participants were asked what they would like to say to teachers/schools so they could
better support students who are at-risk of dropping out. Themes emerging from responses to this
question were the need to provide more support, increase student respect, and provide more
discussion on future implications to dropout.

**Teacher support and respect for students.**

One respondent wrote: “Be more supportive and less judge mental \([sic]\). Once a student
feels judged they won’t go back for advice.” Another respondent gave advice for teachers:
“Don’t put too much pressure [on students]. Look at the positives.” Another comment described
the need for unconditional support and knowing when to push: “When you know students really
need a push. But don’t push them to \([sic]\) far or to \([sic]\) hard. Always be there for them like a
friend \([emphasis added]\)! Help them out where ever and whenever.” Another respondent wrote a
sentiment around student respect: “Don’t treat your students like they are stupid and will mean
nothing in life.”

These student reflections continued in regards to advice for teachers around discussing
the future with students and the implications of dropping out in terms of employment and
financial consequences.

**Future considerations.**

Other participants described a need for more discussion around future goals and
employment: [By dropping out] “that you can get a job and that you will make no money.” This
response was interpreted by the researcher as meaning that some students drop out and try to find a job, but they soon realize that without a high school education, they won’t make much money. The other possibility is that the student meant to say “can’t” get a job, versus “can”. Finally, one student simply wrote: “Maybe just really talk to the students about their future and tell them how dropping out can affect their future.”

The questionnaire participants were asked if they would like to share any final comments. Four respondents chose to write something. These final comments were: “I really like coming to Vast.” and “I hated [names school] and had a horrible experience with teachers who didn’t care and seemed to hate their students and jobs. You couldn’t pay me to go back.” Another respondent wrote: “My advisor takes me out for coffee or lunch, that really helps me. She’s understanding of work scheduals [sic], I trust her (Big thing) [sic].” Finally, one participant simply stated: “If Vast wasn’t here, I would still be a drop out [sic].”

The questionnaires proved to be quite insightful and the researcher was impressed with the level of information shared on the questionnaires. The interviews; however, extended the data to another level, allowing the researcher to delve into the lives of four brave and reflective students as they willingly and openly shared their, at times very personal, experiences. The data collected provided a rich look at the complex lives of 13 students at the Vast Education Centre and provided insightful information for the researcher to analyze and in turn, summarize and provide some recommendations for educators and conclusions around the complex issue of school dropout.
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion and Conclusions

Summary of the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors affecting dropout, re-engagement and resilience among at-risk youth at the Vast Education Centre, an alternative high school in Port Alberni, British Columbia. This mixed-methods action research was designed to hear from students about their experiences and gain insight into the complex issue surrounding dropout, re-engagement and resilience. A student questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were created and the research was conducted during the months of October and November 2013. A total of 13 questionnaires were completed by consenting participants, and of the 13 participants, four private semi-structured interviews were conducted. One male and three female participants assented to take part in 45-60 minute private interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and the data was organized and coded to reveal a variety of themes relating to risk and protective factors of family, individual, peer and school, as well as themes relating to stress and coping strategies and resilience. The research proved insightful and meaningful for the researcher as the complex lives of 13 alternative, at-risk youth were explored and examined.

Discussion and Implications

This study adds to the literature by examining the risk and protective factors of the experiences of 13 Port Alberni at-risk youth who previously dropped out of school. While many of the participants have had negative experiences in and out of school prior to attending the Vast Education Centre, they all had re-engaged and were pursuing their educational goals. While many of the specific family, peer, individual and school related experiences differ with each person, common themes around positive and negative Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACE] were apparent in all cases. Most also described some form of negative school experiences that
impacted their success at school, whether it was with peers or teachers. They all showed varying levels of personal resilience in dealing with life’s stressors and all claimed that, for them, Vast was a supportive environment as an alternative learning setting.

**Family and individual-related risk factors.**

Many complex risk factor themes emerged from this research that may help explain why many at-risk youth end up dropping out of school. While these factors are experienced differently by each individual, some general discussion around these factors can help inform educators about their students and provide a deeper understanding into the implications that these often traumatic lives of their students can have on their school experiences.

**Family dysfunction/adverse childhood experiences and teen pregnancy.**

It was clear from the data around risk factors to drop out that many of the participants in this study experienced significant Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACE] (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention [CDCP], 2013; Dube, 2001; Guijarro et al., 1999; Hillis et al., 2010; Resnick et al., 1997) which seems to have affected their lives in significant ways, one effect being dropping out of school before graduation. Based on the researcher’s experience working with youth in the Alternative Programs over the past nine years, it is clear that most of the youth have experienced some or many adverse childhood experiences. While a school can’t control what happens inside a family dynamic, it can learn and understand the impact that these negative experiences have on youth and how this may affect their behaviour, development and choices in and out of school. Considering the fact that 8 out of the 13 research participants were young parents, it would suggest a connection between ACE and adolescent pregnancy as supported by extensive research (CDCP, 2013; Dube, 2001; Guijarro et al., 1999; Hillis et al., 2010; Resnick et al., 1997).
To further the research on the connection between ACE and unfavourable outcomes such as adolescent pregnancy, it would be very interesting to conduct an ACE study with youth to determine the number of early life experiences that would be considered adverse, as well as the number of family strengths each participant felt they possessed. The relationship between the two factors in terms of adolescent pregnancy, at-risk behaviour and long term psychosocial issues would provide a richer understanding of the impact that family-related risk factors can have on youth.

As some of the female research participants explained, once they became pregnant, they were not inclined to continue going to school for a variety of reasons, including physical and emotional discomfort. Some described not wanting to be judged by others and once baby came, it was difficult to get back into the school routine with the immense responsibilities of sudden parenthood.

As many of these risk factors, such as drug and alcohol dependency, and mental health issues can affect school success and dropout, this would be a beneficial, more in-depth look into the lives of youth in the Alternative Programs. In the case of the four interview participants, they each indicated a number of ACE, and, in fact, all four are young parents. Many of the total 13 participants also indicated family conflict, struggles with drug and alcohol dependency, mental health issues, conflicts with peers and teachers, all supported by earlier research on the impact of ACE and negative outcomes such as described above (CDCP, 2013; Dube, 2001; Guijarro et al., 1999; Hillis et al., 2010; Resnick et al., 1997).

**Drug/alcohol and mental health issues.**

As Mate (2008) explains, “children who have not received the attentive presence of the parent are…at greater risk for seeing chemical satisfaction from external sources later in life” (p.
Three of the interview participants described dealing with drug and alcohol dependency as well as struggling with depression or anxiety at some points in their lives. While the questionnaire did not ask participants to delve too deep into mental health issues, as indicated from some of the respondents’ coping mechanisms to stress in the questionnaire results, it can be inferred that some participants may also struggle with dependency issues. This could also indicate early trauma in life, similar to descriptions given by their peers during the research interview. Mate (2008) describes drug addiction and the “flee from vulnerability” (p. 39). Many people struggling with drug or alcohol addiction have had past emotional trauma that they have tried to escape, or avoiding certain painful senses, and therefore “dull” them by using substances. “The dullness is itself a consequence of an emotional malfunction not of her [the addict’s] making: the internal shutdown of vulnerability” (Mate, 2008, p. 38).

As Mate (2008) describes “brain development in the uterus and during childhood is the single most important biological factor in determining whether or not a person will be predisposed to substance dependence and to addictive behaviours of any sort, whether drug-related or not” (p. 180). This brain development can be negatively affected, which Mate (2008) refers to as ‘maldevelopment’ by stressful situations in early childhood. “When circumstances do not allow the infant or young child to experience consistently secure interactions, or worse, expose him to many painfully stressing ones, maldevelopment often results” (Mate, 2008, p.189). Mate (2008) describes the relationship between this maldevelopment and later susceptibility to addiction and other negative coping mechanisms.

Aside from what could be described as absentee/dysfunctional parenting, parental drug abuse, mental health issues, and childhood physical abuse, other childhood trauma that was discussed in the interviews was being removed from home and put into foster care.
**Foster care.**

Both Elizabeth and Sunny described living in foster care, and one other questionnaire participant indicated living with a foster parent. While the two girls didn’t specifically blame the foster care system on their school experiences and dropping out, being taken away from home impacted them significantly. Sunny described her unhealthy relationship with her mom, her issues with drugs and alcohol, living on the street, ending up in and out of foster care, while still struggling with her addiction issues. She also described leaving foster care for about a month, living on the street and doing drugs.

Elizabeth described a memory of being at school and having people come and take her out of school and put into foster care to live with her auntie. The fact that this event happened at school would be an interesting follow-up conversation to have with Elizabeth and whether she associated school with the negative experience of being put into foster care. Contrarily, if given the chance to have further discussion with Elizabeth, perhaps she saw being removed from her home a positive situation, as she described being abused by her father at a young age, and by being removed, perhaps she was able to escape from continued physical and emotional trauma. Nonetheless, being removed from one’s home is an indication of extreme family dysfunction and will ultimately have an impact on the social emotional well-being of an individual. As research indicates, youth who have lived in the foster care system can experience more negative outcomes compared to the general population including a much higher rate of homelessness, unemployment, mental illness and involvement in the criminal justice system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; McMillen, Vaughn & Shook, 2008; Park, Metraux & Culhane, 2005).

The amount of students at Vast who are in the foster care system was not known for the purposes of this research; however it is a factor that staff in the alternative programs need to be
aware of and consider when working with these youth. These youth’s attachments to their parents and caregivers have been significantly impacted and the struggles facing these youth are unique.

**School/peer-related risk factors.**

**Teacher and peer conflict.**

It seemed from the data results that many of the school-related risk factors occurred at a younger age in the mainstream setting. Many of these experiences have stayed with the participants and changed their views of school, in some ways. As Mike described, “you couldn’t pay me to go back” referring to a mainstream school, indicates that, while he described a staff person who made a wonderful connection with him, the negative experiences with one or two teachers impacted his view of that school. However, it is understood that the “dynamic process of alienation requires more than one negative incident with a ‘bad’ teacher and students reach a point of non-completion after years of feeling less familiar, less considered, less teachable, and less likeable” (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Mike’s general comment “Well they didn’t like me and I didn’t like them”, referring to teachers and peers, is an indication of not just one occurrence, but a long term effect of needs not being met. While Mike’s struggles in school were legitimate and he did not feel he got the support he needed and it could be said that, overall, Mike’s trust with the school system was damaged.

Perhaps because mainstream school settings are not designed to have the flexibility and time to get to know each student on a very personal level, some at-risk students are not able to get the care and individualized attention they require. If students’ social-emotional needs are not able to be tended to, often with those individuals dealing with risk factors outside of the school setting, they can sometimes “slip through the cracks” (Schulz & Rubel, 2011).
Some of the participants also mentioned teachers who embarrassed or alienated them in front of their peers. This had an extremely negative impact on their school experiences and self-esteem and it is apparent that these memories have stayed with them and made them hold certain views of mainstream and alternative settings, respectively. Sunny referred to a time when her teacher made her come to the front of the classroom for a math question. She didn’t know the answer, so instead of wanting to look “stupid”, she chose to write a swear word, which the researcher interpreted as Sunny’s efforts to protect herself from vulnerability and instead, look “tough” and “cool”.

Choices in behaviour such as in the case with Sunny tend to be common among at-risk youth in their escape from vulnerability (Neufeld & Mate, 2004). However, instead of understanding where the behaviour is stemming from, sometimes educators react to the behaviour rather than the root of the problem. As Schulz and Rubel (2011) explain greater levels of distrust can develop when teachers and other school adults engage in forms of intentional and unintentional maltreatment such as making denigrating remarks about physical or cultural attributes or labeling as stupid or slow” (p. 13). This is certainly the case for some of the participants including Mike and Sunny, as well as the participant who felt racial prejudice from her principal.

While some educators may realize that there are other factors affecting their students, they may not have time to deal with the situation effectively with the demands of a mainstream classroom, or for other reasons. Unfortunately, for some of the participants in this study, these experiences left them with a tainted view of school and possibly a lack of self-esteem. Fortunately, for this group of participants, a variety of factors led them to be able to re-engage in school and begin to feel differently about school and themselves once more.
Protective factors.

*Children and young parent supports.*

While adolescent pregnancy would tend to be seen as an unfavourable situation, becoming a parent at a young age did end up having protective factor effects in terms of re-engaging in school for some of the participants. Some described returning to school in order to finish their education in hopes of providing a better life for their children, one which was better than they experienced. For some, having a child was the main reason they chose to “get their life back on track”.

In terms of school protective factors, the Young Parent program offered through the Vast Education Centre and mentioned by many of the young parent participants, has had a significant impact on these youth. Because the program allows for subsidized day care while the students are in school, they are able to continue their education while ensuring that their children are well-taken care of. These students are also given support by a Young Parent Support Worker in the form of weekly groups with other young mothers, given community agency connection, as well as 1-on-1 support as needed. Some of these young parent’s current relationships and home lives are not ideal, and what is also critical with the Young Parent Program is the level of care and attention the children of these young parents receive while they are very young.

The work that programs such as the Young Parent Program as well as other agencies that work closely with the Alternative Programs (Island Health, Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol) are extremely important for the well-being of students with and without young children. While traditional schools would not tend to consider these aspects part of the school’s responsibility, it is imperative that educators develop an understanding of the importance of the physical and
emotional well-being of students in their care and to find ways to meet the needs of at-risk youth if they are to better able to influence students’ lives in a positive way.

Youth-adult relationships.

What was also apparent from the data, are those adults who made a positive difference in the lives of the participants, and have impacted these students for the rest of their lives. Sunny described her support worker in “juvie” who built a relationship with her and helped her find a love for reading. Both Mike and Elizabeth describe one of their current teachers as their role models and people who help them keep motivated and support them. Other participants describe the staff at Vast as reasons they keep coming to school. These relationships were not just described as in school, but some of the participants described people in their family lives who act as role models for them. Sunny described her step-dad as someone who “has always been there” for her and she saw him overcome his own challenges with drug addiction and developed resilience from this strong relationship. As Hillis et al. (2010) maintain “increases in the number of childhood family strengths were associated with progressive reductions in long term psychosocial problems that have been attributed to adolescent pregnancy, including serious problems with jobs, family, finances and uncontrollable anger” (p. 24). These participants need positive adults in their lives, whether it is in school or out of school. Neufeld and Mate (2004) implore the importance of positive hierarchical attachments for children with adults in their lives and this action research showed similar testaments as aptly described by the participants.

School structure and flexibility.

A common theme among reasons why students attend Vast is the level of flexibility the students felt the school provided them. This could be because allowing students to attend when it works best for them shows a respect and value for their individual circumstances. For many of
the participants, having a self-paced learning environment could also show a recognition of individual learning needs and an acknowledgement that there may be outside factors affecting school progress. Many participants also felt the level of 1-1 support they received was extremely important. The recognition that these students have had previous school difficulties and a lack of progress is shown in the structure of the differentiated alternative learning environment.

Research from Schulz and Rubel (2011) explored the experiences of male students who did not graduate high school. One of the results of their study showed “failure to progress” as a main reason while the students did not have success at school. Perhaps the students appreciate the structure of the Vast Education Centre as it provides the opportunity for them to progress at the pace that is comfortable to them, while not being penalized for issues with regular attendance that affect keeping up to more rigid course timetable, as they may have experienced in a mainstream setting.

The researcher would be interested to further explore the concept of regular attendance and school protective factors. Further data analysis could look at the correlation between attendance and coping strategies and whether there is a relationship between the amount of time spent at school, engaging in on-task behaviours and the type of coping strategies or perceived protective factors used by the participants. The researcher has observed that some students attend quite regularly, but the pace of academic progress does not necessarily relate to the amount of time spent at school.

**Stress, resilience and coping strategies.**

As described in Chapter 4, many of the main stressors for participants were related to family and individual factors: money, family conflict and thinking about the future, and they also described the many ways in which they deal with stress. According to the results around coping
strategies, many of the participants indicated that “keep it inside” was a regular coping strategy. The researcher was alarmed by this result and whether this was viewed by the participants as a positive or negative coping strategy, the researcher viewed this as a less-than-ideal coping strategy, and views this as a form of isolation supported by research from Mate (2008). Mate (2008) describes the dangers of chronic isolation combined with stress as a very harmful situation, in neurobiological terms. Mate (2008) describes how premature babies being kept in an incubator for weeks or months display faster brain growth if stroked by another person for just ten minutes a day. He states that a “responsive, predictable nurturing adult plays a key role in the development of our healthy stress-response neurobiology” (Mate, 2008, p. 191). The researcher recognizes the importance of students being able to reach out and talk to someone about their stress and problems and worries about the long term effects of “keeping it inside” as a regular coping mechanism, especially if they have dysfunctional home lives where their caregivers are emotionally unavailable, or worse, abusive.

While the research results on coping strategies indicated the frequency of participant responses, it did not ask students to rank their most frequent coping strategies for each individual student, or what they tend to do first, or most often. Further research would be required and suggested in order to gain a deeper understanding of individual students’ most common coping strategy for stress and how this affects their health, emotional well-being and behaviour in and out of school.

Hess and Copeland’s (2001) research discussed that in order for students to protect themselves against negative emotions and stress, they engage in a variety of behaviors and adopt attitudes. As the researcher observed when working with at-risk youth and as shown in the questionnaire results, many students have a variety of coping strategies, and some of them are
extremely unhealthy forms of coping. Some of the results on coping strategies in this research concur with Hess and Copeland (2001) in that some of these behaviours can interfere with school and may in fact lead to eventual withdrawal and dropout.

**Mindset, re-engagement and resilience.**

It is important to note that a major factor in coping with stress and student resilience is whether or not a person has a “growth” or “fixed” mindset (Dweck, 2006). It would be interesting to do further research on the students and which mindset they currently have according to the work by Carol Dweck (2006). While this research did not directly ask students about their mindsets, it seemed from the conversations during the interviews that some of the participants felt that the challenges they have faced in their lives have made them stronger and more resilient, which could indicate a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006). However, at times, some of the students displayed more of a fixed mindset in terms of their responses. For example, Mike discussed his abilities in math at a young age and decided that he “wasn’t good at math.” This type of statement indicates a fixed mindset in that people believe their abilities are set and are not able to grow and develop with hard work and support. However, as Mike matured and perhaps when he became a father, something changed in him. While he may still believe he does not have a lot of skills in math, he talked about re-engaging in school and working hard towards completing his graduation on an Adult Grad Plan which requires a Grade 11 math course. He is attempting and succeeding at what he once may have believed was impossible. Mike’s mindset regarding his math abilities and other beliefs about teachers could be due to the type of praise he received at school.

As Dweck (2006) describes, when students are praised on their abilities versus their efforts, this can guide them towards more of a fixed mindset. Contrarily, when students are
praised on their efforts for certain tasks or assignments, regardless of their score, this helps promote more of a growth mindset. Sometimes, people with a fixed mindset blame others when they receive negative feedback. “I got a bad score; the teacher must not like me.” Based on conversations with Mike in his interview, this type of mindset could be one factor in what affected his experiences in school.

Many of the students who come to Vast are behind in their courses and have not had success in the mainstream system. According to Dweck (2006), those with a growth mindset are more likely to realize that although they are behind, they need to try harder to catch up. Those with a fixed mindset come in with the view that they are not good at certain subjects and often blame teachers, or other reasons for their current circumstances. While many of them have faced significant challenges, their mindset is crucial for how their experiences in the alternative setting go. The researcher has observed that often students who come into the alternative programs displaying a fixed mindset already have certain labels attached to themselves. “I’m no good at math.” “Teacher’s don’t like me.” “I suck at reading.” These are some of the statements the researcher has heard from students in the past.

Whatever circumstances these beliefs stemmed from, Dweck (2006) warns that labels that are given to students with a fixed mindset can have both a positive or negative effect: “When you’re given a positive label, you’re afraid of losing it; when you’re given a negative label, you’re afraid of deserving it” (p. 76). Those with a growth mindset believe that the stereotypes of low ability that are sometimes indicated by those around them, are just someone else’s beliefs, and they don’t let it “invade them – to define them - and take away their comfort or confidence” (p. 78). The fact that all 13 participants had dropped out at least once, but chose to come back and re-engage in school, shows the potential of a growth mindset. Many of the participants’ self-
reflections revealed the appreciation for “failing” and the learning that came with facing significant adversity. Sunny indicated a growth mindset when she explained what she would tell herself if she could go back in time: “People will love you or hate you but that’s life.” She is not letting people’s opinions of her define who she is, or who she will become. October stated that she didn’t regret some of the things that happened to her because if they didn’t happen, she said, “I wouldn’t have gone through what I did to get more strength to, fight through it.” Elizabeth realized the strength of change was within her and said, “I no longer depend on anyone else; I depend on myself.” These highly resilient young adults have shown the power of mindset and belief in one’s abilities. They are examples of the power of the human spirit.

The results of this study indicate that while there are many factors outside of the school’s control, the relationships built within the school building are immensely important. An acknowledgement and recognition of the family-related risk factors and ACE occurring or that has occurred for students are crucial for educators to understand. If students do not feel supported at school or are given the tools to cope with life’s challenges, their likelihood of finishing school and being able to overcome issues is minimal.

Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on specific program implementations, strategies or approaches, as well as professional development suggestions for educators around developing an understanding of the complex lives of at-risk youth.

Organize purposeful professional development.

In order to better understand what is going on for many at-risk youth, there is a need for educators to learn more about child development and the implications of Adverse Childhood Experiences, trauma, stress and addiction, many of the key risk factors to school dropout. These
professional development opportunities should be ongoing and meaningful for the staff working in the alternative programs. With purposeful professional development, educators will be better equipped to work with at-risk youth and understand their needs on a deeper level. Not only will these recommendations help engage staff in important conversations regarding risk and protective factors for youth, it could provide further benefit to understanding human development in general.

Educators need to understand the complexities of addiction and how it affects the brain and behaviour, perhaps let go of their own predetermined views and beliefs in order to continue to find ways to support youth struggling with addiction. For example, when discussing the roots of addiction, Mate (2008) explains, “drugs, in short, do not make anyone into an addict, any more than food makes a person into a compulsive eater. There has to be a pre-existing vulnerability…and significant stress…three factors need to coincide for substance addiction to occur: a susceptible organism; a drug with addictive potential; and stress” (p. 139). The researcher concurs with Mate (2008) when he wrote: “I believe that if we look with an open mind at this phenomenon called addiction, the sense of mystery will be replaced by an appreciation of complexity. We are left…with an awe for the amazing workings of the human brain and with compassion for those mesmerized by their addictive urges” (p. 140).

**Incorporate health care practitioners into the school setting.**

As Kalashian (2009) states, “students’ success at school is unlikely without psychological well-being” (p.12). This stresses the importance of providing regular access for students to health professionals. Whenever possible, having office hours for health care practitioners directly in the school provides students with easy access to support. It is also important to recognize that all students need access to support, and not just students who are expressing outward displays of
erratic or harming behaviours. Kalashian (2009) explains that if schools only use “referral-based” models for providing access to mental health supports with students seen as “special education students”, other, regular education students may be easily overlooked.

It is also important for staff to continue to build relationships with organizations such as drug and alcohol agencies, school police liaison workers, community counselors, violence prevention services, and Aboriginal support agencies within the community. The idea that “it takes a community to raise a child” is paramount when developing supports for students. Having support workers come in to speak to students on a regular basis brings the support to the students and by inviting all students to participate, lessens the stigma on accessing support for sensitive issues such as drug and alcohol struggles, or mental health challenges. “Stigma often results from individuals’ lack of education on the aspects of mental illness; informing the public regarding mental health issues and the beneficial effects of services may minimize the effects of stigma on the community” (Kalashian, 2009, p. 9). If schools begin to teach about mental health issues and overall wellness to the larger school population, this can also normalize the issue and provide opportunities for students to get support without feeling inadequate or by further alienating them.

**Develop a male support group.**

Research has shown that males have a higher rate of dropout than females (Educational Testing Service, 2005; Greene & Winters, 2005; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Providing opportunities for male students to connect with male staff and build relationships is a very important step in developing social-emotional wellness in male students and in preventing further dropout in male students. In Schulz and Rubel’s (2011) research, the males in their study all reported that their level of school engagement was impacted by the nature of the relationships they had with school adults. By providing a safe and exclusive group for male students, this is a
chance for them to share their lived experiences and perceptions on school, learning, male stereotypes, and beliefs that affect their school and life experiences.

**Develop a student “needs self-assessment”**.

One current practice at the Vast Education Centre has been the implementation of a Needs Assessment Practice. This process involves the Teacher-Advisor and Youth Care Worker team to look at each individual student circumstances and identify the possible barriers to school success. Such examples describe some of the risk factors revealed in this study such as: family or relationship conflict, child care issues, learning struggles, transportation issues, drug and alcohol issues. Once these are identified, a plan is then put in place with strategies to support the students around these issues. For example, the Teacher-Advisor may realize that the student is experiencing issues with getting to school and between the staff team, organize home pickups a few times a week to support the student in attending school. Another example would be connecting the student with a Youth Care Worker at school, or a counselor in the community, to discuss relationships issues he or she may be experiencing and how that is affecting emotions or school progress.

The current Needs Assessment process at Vast can be taken a step further by providing the opportunity for students to reflect on their own risk factors impeding success at school, as well as in their personal lives. Developing self-awareness around personal challenges and obstacles is extremely important for personal resilience and initiating change in an individual.

**Teach students about “mindsets”**.

As Dweck (2006) explains, “Mindsets are an important part of your personality, but you can change them. Just by knowing about the two mindsets, you can start thinking and reacting in new ways” (p. 46). This is an important factor in determining whether a student will be
successful at school. Many of the students at Vast have already had many unsuccessful experiences at school and an awareness of their current mindset about their abilities will be extremely important for their future success at school and in life. Providing the opportunity for students to learn about mindsets and helping them realize they can change is critical. As Dweck (2006) explains, a person can have both a fixed or growth mindset, depending on the situation or areas. However, having the knowledge about the mindsets can help people change for the better. Educators want students who are able to learn from failures, rise to a challenge and continue their efforts when life gets challenging.

The researcher also believes that there are many resilient students who could teach educators about having a growth mindset and overcoming challenges through perseverance, so in order to teach students about mindsets, a first step is starting with educating professionals around Dweck’s (2006) work. This is an important step in helping educators realize their own mindsets before being able to support at-risk students in continuing to building resilience and help prevent dropout.

**Allow for regular student feedback.**

Students need to be a part of the discussion around how to better support them. Some recommendations are to provide opportunities for both formal and informal feedback. Formal feedback could include more regular staff-built surveys of students to ask them what they need and what schools could be doing better. It could also give staff a chance to gauge the mindset of students in terms of their feelings on their academic ability, current coping strategies and school protective factors that might need development. As the researcher has learned from this study, it is so important to really listen to what students have to say, as they are often the most knowledgeable in terms of their own circumstances and what they need to be better supported.
In terms of informal feedback, this could take the form of a monthly “Pizza with the Principal” (T. McEvay, personal communication, January, 2012) event where students and staff gather, share food and talk about what is working well and what is not working for them at school. This non-confrontational method can provide an open space for students to feel that their opinions are heard, while helping build relationships with peers and staff. This also will help create a school culture where students feel a part of the system and that they have a voice in their learning environment. Returning to research by Brown, Higgins and Paulsen (2003) they describe the relationship between a student’s identification and participation in the school goals with the ability or lack of ability to form relationships and bonds with adults and peers within his or her school. By providing opportunities to have students form positive bonds with peers and adults in the school setting, this can increase their chances of school success (Brown et al., 2003).

Another important method of obtaining information from students about their learning as well as their relationships within the school is asking them The “Four Key Questions that Matter” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013). The first question asks “Can you name at least two adults in this building who believe that you will be a success in life?” (p. 38) and is a very effective question in regards to the relationships and protective factors that the school is providing. If students cannot name at least two adults who believe they will be successful, this is a very strong indication that staff needs to be looking at how they are interacting with students and the messages they are sending, whether indirectly or directly.

**Provide clear intentions to create a sense of purpose.**

It was noted in the data results regarding students’ knowledge of their graduation plan and goals that some of the students did know what current grad plan they were on. They still
indicated that they had a grad goal date, but the researcher inferred that while they may have a goal to graduate, they did not, in fact, know how they were going to accomplish this.

The other three questions from Halbert and Kaser (2013) ask about student learning more specifically in order to gauge whether students understand what it is they are learning and the purpose of that learning in relation to their future. “Where are you going with your learning? How are you doing with your learning? Where are you going next with your learning?” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p. 38) These questions are crucial in understanding whether students really know why they are at school and what the purpose of the work the school is giving them. As some of the results of this study conclude, one of the factors that contributed to dropping out is students felt “I didn’t see a purpose for school.” This is one of the most important aspects of keeping students in school and preventing dropout, as many do not know what they are doing at school. That, coupled with the many other risk factors to dropout, has the potential for seeing more students on the verge of dropout. Asking “The Four Key Questions that Matter” developed by Halbert and Kaser (2013) can assist educators in helping more at-risk students see a purpose for being in school and keep students engaged and persevering in their learning, even when there are many outside risk factors that have the potential to derail their academic success.

**Make relationships and attachments a priority.**

Finally, the number one recommendation that this researcher would like to emphasize for educators is the continued effort to put building positive relationships and attachments with students first and foremost into their school culture and practice. As Neufeld and Mate (2004) state: “Our educational system must…create a safety net of connection and relationship to keep the attachment-based learners from slipping through the cracks” (p. 174). Teachers must lead their students, but students will only follow those to whom they are attached (Neufeld & Mate,
It is imperative, especially for those students at-risk of dropping out and displaying at-risk behaviours in and out of school, for educators to find a way to connect with students and form the positive adult-student attachment.

By learning and understanding about the complex lives that students come from, taking the time to listen and hear what is not being said, and recognizing the strengths in each individual student, educators will have a better chance of reaching the most vulnerable students. “The moments of reprieve…come not when we aim for dramatic achievements…but when clients allow us to reach them, when they permit even a slight opening in the hard, prickly shells they’ve built to protect themselves. For that to happen, they must first sense our commitment to accepting them for who they are” (Mate, 2008, p. 87).

Many of the participants in this study felt that they were not valued for who they were, and were judged for what they did. Fortunately, these students have chosen to return to school and pursue their dreams. While their resilience is very strong, their experiences continue to shape their lives and they need compassionate educators who are able to open their students’ minds, by first winning their hearts (Neufeld & Mate, 2004). To do this, research has shown that the top most effective activators of attachment are by showing genuine emotional warmth, enjoyment and delight, and as Neufeld and Mate (2004) explain, “when we give children a sign that they matter to us, most children will want to hold on to the knowledge that they are special to us and appreciated in our life” (p. 184).

Limitations

The sample size of 13 students could be a limitation for this study which includes the generalizability of the data results to other alternative settings. It cannot be known without
further research how many current Vast students met this research criteria out of the approximate 150 students currently attending Vast at the time of the study.

In addition to this limitation, there was very small sample size from the Vast male population. However, this could be due to the fact that there are more males than females who tend to drop out (Educational Testing Service, 2005; Greene & Winters, 2005) and therefore the number of students who have actually re-engaged in school reflect more of a female population. This would require further research to justify the claim that more females re-engage in school than males. Nonetheless, the data collected would have been richer if there were more males represented in the results.

The participant population for this study ended up being a high percentage of youth who were young parents. Much of the data collected were related to young parents and teenage pregnancy and the issues relating to their struggles. Whether this is seen as a limitation, the data yielded from a non-young parent participant sample likely would have been different.

Another limitation to this research, specifically in regards to the alternative setting, is the lack of more critical viewpoints in terms of school weaknesses and possible improvements. These participants were willing to share their experiences and opinions and almost all of the comments were positive in regards to the Vast Education Centre and alternative schooling. This limited the data regarding student suggestions about ways to improve the current alternative system at the Vast Education Centre and how better to meet the needs of individual learners. The scope of the questions asked around this topic could be seen as limited as there was only one direct question about what the students didn’t like about Vast. However, the students were given the opportunity to discuss reasons why they attended Vast, further investigation and research specifically around improvement would be necessary to find out what ways Vast is currently not
meeting the needs of students. Opening a topic such as this to all Vast students would likely illicit further suggestions for improving the current program as well as providing an anonymous format for students to feel more comfortable expressing their concerns freely. Perhaps further research with a participant sample of students who have yet to re-engage in school, and/or who have dropped out of Vast, would provide richer information around this topic.

This study explored the experiences at a certain time and place in the participants’ lives. If this research were to be conducted again at a different time, based on the experience of the researcher, she hypothesizes that the results would likely have been different since the complex lives of these students can change so quickly from one day to the next. It would be beneficial to do a follow-up questionnaire, with a box indicating whether the participant had been a part of this study before, as well as follow-up interviews with the four participants. It would be interesting to learn whether their current protective factors at the time of this study are still relevant, whether their coping strategies have changed, possible reasons why, and whether their feelings about school as well as Vast have changed.

Due to the confidential nature of the study, the researcher was not able to examine the learning challenges of each of the participants as factors in their school related struggles and this area was not discussed in depth in this research on the questionnaire or during the interview process. While some of the discussion in the interviews touched on learning challenges, this is an area that requires further research and consideration as cognitive and learning challenges influence school experiences (Murray & Naranjo, 2008).

The scope of the study could be a limitation as the research attempted to host a variety of complex topics. Perhaps limiting the study or narrowing the scope might have enabled the
research to go deeper into a more specific subject versus trying to cover such expansive topics as risk, protective factors, stress and resilience.

**Conclusion**

A special moment for the SD70 Alternative Programs is when each and every graduate walks up to the podium at the annual graduation ceremony and gets a chance to tell a little of their story. They often talk about how challenging it was to keep going with school, perhaps they mention some of the struggles they have had, and almost always they choose to thank those who have helped get them to that point, whether it be a parent, teacher, grandmother, auntie or boyfriend. The pride in graduating students’ eyes when standing on the stage in their best dress or suit, regardless of age, gender or ethnicity, is momentous.

All students should have the chance to experience this, but unfortunately, many students are not on the path to a successful graduation. Some students have been successful at re-engaging in school from previous dropout, but some current students seem to be on the verge of dropout once again as they face complex family, individual, peer or school struggles that are affecting school success. Some do not seem to be connecting with school at all despite the school’s best efforts, and some are not in the school system at all. In contrast, there are many students who seem to have the resilience to persevere, make positive choices and show a commitment to their education, despite hardship.

It is understood that “adolescents are increasingly at odds with their schooling experiences that emphasize a one-size-fits-all model” (Yonezawa, Jones & Joselowsky, 2009). “Youth do not live, work and play in black boxes. Their homes, schools, neighbourhoods, clubs, teams and workplaces help determine how engaged they do or do not become” (Yonezawa et. al, 2009). While each community context, as well as individual student circumstances are unique, these factors need to be considered when approaching the issue of addressing dropout.
It is also understood that schools continue to play a very important role in the lives of students (Bernard, 1995) and educators working within the BC school system need to continue to reflect on their practice and determine how programs, mainstream and alternative, can better meet the needs of so many at-risk, vulnerable youth. The purpose of this research was to hear from these at-risk youth, who at one point left school prior to completion, but chose to re-enroll in school and were currently working towards their pursuit of high school graduation at the Vast Education Centre. The researcher believes that educators can learn from these students by truly hearing their stories and learning more about their experiences, and perhaps then learn how schools can better meet the needs of so many students who seem lost and disengaged. By understanding the complex risk factors to leaving school prior to completion, as well as protective factors that students need to become more resilient individuals, schools can create more effective programs to help make a difference in not only the educational, but social-emotional, lives of the young people in their communities.

Undoubtedly, educators want what is best for their students. They wish for students to become empowered, resilient and skilful individuals who are able to be healthy, happy contributing members of their communities. When educators and schools begin to take their own risks in attempts at understanding the complex issues of dropout, ask difficult questions of themselves and the current school system, as well as seek out programs aiming to increase engagement and resilience, then they will be on the path to making more of a significant positive difference in the lives of schools’ most marginalized, disengaged students. This researcher whole-heartedly believes that students are worth it.
"If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearths of the community, they will burn down the structures of the culture, just to feel its warmth." Meade (1993)
References


(305149295).


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Appendix A: Student Questionnaire

Research Information and Purpose of Study

I am a graduate student at Vancouver Island University in the Master’s in Educational Leadership Program. As part of my course called “Research Methods in Education” I have designed a research project that explores the factors relating to school dropout, re-engagement and the experiences of resilience among at-risk youth at Vast.

Key Terms

At-risk student is someone who faces challenges that can get in the way of completing high school.

Drop out means to leave school for a period of time before completing grad requirements. Some students who leave school may have felt that they were “pushed or kicked out” by the school system.

Re-engage means when a student has chosen to come back to school to finish their individual grad requirements.

Resilience means the ability to bounce back in the face of life challenges and problems.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are someone who has re-engaged after being out of school and I am interested in hearing more about your experiences. By participating in this study, you will complete a questionnaire that contains 26 questions about you, your family, your past and your current school experiences.

Potential Risks

Since some of the questions ask about difficult times in your life, you may experience feelings of emotional upset. If at any time during or after completing the questionnaire, you experience any kind of distress and wish to speak with someone, please contact the available counseling services at the Vast Education Centre (250-723-3744) or Central Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).

Potential Benefits

By participating in this study, you could help educators better understand the lives of at-risk youth and the factors that impact leaving or staying in school, as well as personal resilience. You may also experience some positive self-reflection on your own life, your decisions and personal resilience in the face of life’s challenges.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Other students may see you taking and/or completing this questionnaire; however, the information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and remain anonymous. No one will be able to connect you with any particular set of answers you provide since you will not put your name or any other identifying information on the questionnaire. My two research assistants, Diane Best and Saera Michael, will be assisting with this research and will have access to the information you provide. The results of this study will be compiled and reported in a written research report and published at Vancouver Island University. This report may also be shared with my colleagues at the Vast Education Centre. The questionnaires will be kept in a locked cabinet in my supervisor’s office. They will be destroyed by burning in June 2019, approximately 5 years after completion of the research project.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose to stop at any time without having to give an explanation and you will not be penalized in any way. You may also choose not to answer specific questions. Please note that by placing your questionnaire in the designated dropbox in the main office, you will have indicated your consent to participate in this part of the study. Once your questionnaire is submitted it cannot be distinguished from others, and, therefore, cannot be removed.
Please keep this cover page for your reference. This paper and pencil survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Concerns about your treatment in the research
If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer, by telephone at 250-753-3245 (ext. 2665) or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research project, or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at the email address or phone number below:

Lisa Fryer
Master of Education Student
Vancouver Island University
lfryer@sd70.bc.ca
250-723-3744
Student Questionnaire

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME OR IDENTIFY YOURSELF IN ANY WAY ON THIS FORM.

1. What is your age? _______

2. Are you male or female?  Male    Female

3. What is your nationality? Choose all that apply to you.
   □ Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit or Métis ancestry)
   □ Caucasian/White
   □ Other (if you choose “other” please do not write your nationality as this could identify you)

4. How long have you been a student at Vast?

5. Which of the following best describes your current living situation? Check all that apply to you.
   □ I live with one parent.
   □ I live with both parents.
   □ I live with one parent and a step parent.
   □ I live with a friend/boyfriend/girlfriend.
   □ I live on my own.
   □ I live on my own with my child.
   □ I live in foster care.
   □ I am couch-surfing.
   □ I live with my grandparent(s) or other family (eg. aunt).
   □ Other (Please describe): __________________________________________________________

6. Which of the following best describes your current financial situation? Check all that apply to you.
   □ Both of my parents/guardians have jobs.
   □ One of my parents/guardians has a job.
   □ I have a part time job.
   □ My family receives Income Assistance.
   □ I am on a Youth Agreement.
   □ I am on an Independent Living Agreement.
   □ My family has no steady money coming in right now.
   □ Other (Please describe):

7. What is the highest level of schooling your parent(s)/guardian(s) have completed?
   □ Completed up to middle school or less
   □ Some high school
   □ Completed high school
   □ Some college or university
   □ Completed college or university
   □ Graduate Studies at university
   □ Don’t know

8. Have you dropped out or left school more than once?  Yes    No

9. At what age and/or grade did you first drop out or leave school? Age:____ and Gr: _____

10. Please check as many of the following that best describe the reason(s) you think may have contributed to leaving school.
    □ I had poor attendance.
    □ I was having trouble with teachers.
    □ I was having trouble with peers.
    □ I didn’t “drop out.” I was “kicked out”.
    □ I was having learning problems that affected my grades.
    □ I wasn’t handing in my work or progressing in courses.
    □ I had to take care of family (siblings, parents, grandparents).
    □ I didn’t feel like I belonged.
    □ I got pregnant and/or had to take care of my children.
    □ I had transportation issues.
    □ I had to get a job to support my family.
    □ My job/work responsibilities conflicted with school.
    □ I had drug and/or alcohol issues.
    □ I had some mental health issues (eg. anxiety, depression).
    □ I didn’t see a purpose for school.
    □ I didn’t feel comfortable or safe.
13. What are your main reasons for continuing to stay in school now?
- I want to graduate.
- I think staying in school is important.
- I would get in trouble if I dropped out again.
- I like my school.
- My friends are here.
- I enjoy learning.
- I don’t want to disappoint my teachers.
- I don’t want to disappoint my parents/guardians.
- I don’t want to disappoint myself.
- I have to attend school because of Probation/Youth Agreement/etc.
- I feel welcome here and I belong.
- Graduation is important for my future goals.
- I would rather be here than at home.
- I was told I have to either be in school or looking for work.
- Other (Please describe):

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR CHOICES TO STAY IN SCHOOL:

14. Do you know what grad plan you are on? (ie. 2004 Grad Plan, Adult Grad, School Completion)
- Yes
- No

15. Do you have a school completion goal date?
- Yes
- No

16. Talk a little about your goals this year. What do you hope to accomplish?

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR REASONS:

11. Talk a little about your decision to return and re-engage in school. What were your reasons or motivation?

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR CHOICES FOR PREVIOUSLY LEAVING SCHOOL:

12. Why do you attend the Vast Education Centre for school? Check all that apply to you.
- More 1-1 support
- I can work at my own pace.
- Supports for young parents
- My friends go here.
- Flexible scheduling
- I am too old for ADSS.
- I was referred here by ADSS or other school.
- I don’t feel I have a choice.
- Smaller school setting.
- Fewer students than a mainstream high school.
- My parent/guardian(s) made me come here.
- Other (please describe):

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR CHOICES TO STAY IN SCHOOL:

13. What are your main reasons for continuing to stay in school now?
- I want to graduate.
- I think staying in school is important.
- I would get in trouble if I dropped out again.
- I like my school.
- My friends are here.
- I enjoy learning.
- I don’t want to disappoint my teachers.
- I don’t want to disappoint my parents/guardians.
- I don’t want to disappoint myself.
- I have to attend school because of Probation/Youth Agreement/etc.
- I feel welcome here and I belong.
- Graduation is important for my future goals.
- I would rather be here than at home.
- I was told I have to either be in school or looking for work.
- Other (Please describe):

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR CHOICES TO STAY IN SCHOOL:

14. Do you know what grad plan you are on? (ie. 2004 Grad Plan, Adult Grad, School Completion)
- Yes
- No

15. Do you have a school completion goal date?
- Yes
- No

16. Talk a little about your goals this year. What do you hope to accomplish?

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR REASONS:

□ Other (Please describe):
17. Do you know the name of your advisor at Vast?  Yes or No

18. a) Do you feel comfortable going to your advisor for academic support? Yes or No

b) Do you feel comfortable going to your advisor for emotional support? Yes or No

c) Other than your advisor, do you have at least one staff member at Vast who you feel comfortable talking to about problems? Yes or No

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL SUPPORTS:

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

19. Talk about your current attendance at school. How often do you attend each week, and how long do you stay at school when you attend?

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

20. When you are at school, about how many hours do you think you spend focused on school work? (Either participation in classes or self-paced academic work)

☐ Less than 1 hour/day
☐ 1-2 hours/day
☐ 2-3 hours/day
☐ 3-4 hours/day
☐ More than 4 hours
☐ Other (please describe):

TELL ME MORE ABOUT WHAT INFLUENCES YOUR ATTENDANCE AND SCHOOL WORK HABITS (eg. distractions, sleep schedule, work, friends, etc.)

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

21. Are you involved in any groups or activities in or out of school? (eg. Fitness Gym, Mom’s Group, Knee Was, Health Unit, Hockey, Friendship Centre, Youth Council, B-ball, Outdoor Ed., Clubs, Sports Teams, etc.)

Yes or No

If yes, what are your reasons for participating in some of these groups?

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

If no, what are your reasons for why you have not yet participated in any of these groups?

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

22. What are some things that stress you out? Check all that apply to you.

☐ Getting good marks
☐ Money
☐ Some teachers
☐ Boyfriend/Girlfriend conflict
☐ Friend drama
☐ Peer pressure
☐ Fighting with parent/guardians
☐ Family conflict
☐ Drug/alcohol addiction issues
☐ Following rules/expectations
☐ Trying to find a job
☐ My children
☐ Thinking about my future
☐ Other (Please describe):

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR STRESSORS:

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________
23. How do you usually cope with stress?
   Check all that apply to you.
   □ Talk to a friend
   □ Talk to a staff person at Vast
   □ Cry
   □ Go see my counselor/support worker
   □ Talk to a parent/guardian
   □ Just keep it inside
   □ Hit something
   □ Listen to music
   □ Smoke cigarettes
   □ Drink alcohol
   □ Take deep breaths/count to 10
   □ Do drugs
   □ Exercise (eg. go for a walk/workout)
   □ Play sports
   □ Write in a journal or draw
   □ Other (Please describe):

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR STRESS COPING CHOICES:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

24. What keeps you going when things get tough?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

25. If you could go back in time and talk to yourself before you dropped out or left school, what would you say?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

26. What would you like to tell teachers/schools so they can better support students who are at-risk of dropping out?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Other comments you’d like to share:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

PLEASE TEAR OFF THE LAST PAGE AND ANSWER ONE MORE QUESTION (#27)

PLEASE NOTE: BY PUTTING YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE DROP BOX, YOU ARE CONSENTING TO YOUR ANSWERS BEING USED IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY.
27. WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN MEETING WITH LISA FRYER FOR A 1-ON-1 PRIVATE INTERVIEW TO SHARE MORE ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES?

VIU Student Researcher, Lisa Fryer is looking for students who are willing to participate in a private and confidential 1-on-1 interview as part of this research project. The information you give in the interview will be kept anonymous.

Please put a checkmark below indicating whether you are interested.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_______ NO</th>
<th>_______ YES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>____________</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I AM NOT INTERESTED IN MEETING FOR AN INTERVIEW.</td>
<td>I AM INTERESTED IN MEETING WITH LISA FRYER TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW I WANT TO SHARE MORE OF MY EXPERIENCES ABOUT DROP OUT, RE-ENGAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no, thank you for your time! Your questionnaire participation is really appreciated! See below for how to submit your questionnaire. 😊</td>
<td>If yes, thank you for considering an interview with me! Please write your contact information below to discuss the details of the interview and sign the consent form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Writing your name below does not mean you are consenting to the interview right now, but that you are interested in discussing the interview process and consent guidelines with me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name: __________________________</td>
<td>Name: __________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone #: ________________________</td>
<td>Phone #: ________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Address: __________________</td>
<td>Email Address: __________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will contact you to set up a time to meet. 😊</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TO SUBMIT YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE:

✓ Please tear off the cover page (p. 1-2) to keep for your records.
✓ Please tear off this page (p. 7) and put in DROPBOX B at the Main Office
✓ Please put your questionnaire (pages 3-6) in DROPBOX A at the Main Office

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!!
Appendix B: Interview Questions Protocol

“Factors Impacting Drop Out, Re-engagement and Resilience Among At-Risk Youth at an Alternative High School” Action Research Project

Principal Investigator: Lisa Fryer, SD 70 – Port Alberni, BC
Contact Information: 202-4152 Redford St.
Port Alberni, BC
V9Y 3R5
250.723.3744
lfryer@sd70.bc.ca

Action Research Supervisor: Dr. Rachel Moll
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
250.753.3245 ex. 2161
rachel.moll@viu.ca

Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of the study is to explore the factors relating to drop out, re-engagement and resilience among at-risk youth at the Vast Education Centre. It also aimed to explore stress and coping strategies among youth and a chance to share more of their personal experiences of drop out, re-engagement and personal resilience.

Scripted Introduction:
This is a voluntary interview and you may withdraw from the study at any point. If you are ever uncomfortable with a question, you may choose not to answer it without penalty. The information will be audio-recorded and be kept completely confidential. Your real name will never be used in the study, and I would like for you to create a pseudonym, or fake name, right now. You will only be referred to by your pseudonym in my report. In order to keep the interview information confidential, when answering the questions, please do not name others or provide any identifying information about yourself or your family.

Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed. Your participation will help me to better understand some of the reasons that students may drop out of school, and choose to re-engage, some ways students cope with stress and become resilient, and how schools can better support at-risk students before they drop out. Some of the questions may bring up some sensitive memories for you. If at any time you wish to stop or feel the need to talk to someone, I have counseling information available for you. You will also be provided contact information for counselling services after the interview.
Warm-Up Questions
- How long have you been a student at Vast?
- What is your favourite subject right now?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how are you feeling today?

Interview Questions: (Guiding Questions)

Individual Related
1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What are some things that you are good at?
3. What are some things you find difficult or challenging?

Family Related
4. Describe a memory from childhood that stands out in your mind.
5. Tell me a little about your family life right now.
6. Tell me what life was like for you before you left school.

School Related
7. Describe a memory from elementary school that stands out in your mind.
8. Describe a memory from middle school that stands out in your mind.
9. Why did you leave school?
10. Why did you decide to come back to school?
11. How do you feel about school now?
12. What do you like about being a student at Vast? What don’t you like?
13. What are some things you wish schools would do differently to keep more students in school?

Resilience/Coping Related
14. Do you feel that you have control over what happens to you in your life?
15. What are some things that cause you stress?
16. What are things you do to cope with stress?
17. Who is your biggest role model? Tell me about that person and why they are important to you.
18. What do you tell yourself when things get tough?
19. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
20. What would you tell other students who were thinking of dropping out or close to leaving school?
21. If you could go back in time and talk to yourself before you left school, what would you say?

Do you have any final comments that you’d like to share?

Scripted Post-Interview Information:

Thank you for taking the time to answer the questions. I will be transcribing your answers and would like to meet with you briefly at a later date to give you a copy of your responses. You can still choose to opt out of the study at any point before publication of the material in my thesis. I really appreciate you taking time out of your evening to meet with me and would like to give you a thank you gift for participating today.
Appendix C: Recruitment Script

Hi everyone. For those of you who don’t know me, my name’s Lisa Fryer and I am a teacher here at Vast. Did you know that I am also a student? Right now, I am taking a Master’s of Education Program at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo. In one of the courses I am taking, I get to create a research project to find out information on a topic that I care about. This is where some of you might come in. I have designed a research project that looks at the factors relating to leaving school early, or before completing high school. Some people refer to that as “dropping out”, while some maybe don’t see it that way. I am looking at reasons why some students are at-risk of leaving or dropping out of school early, but also the reasons why they decide to come back to finish their education. I also am looking at stress and coping strategies and what’s called resilience. That means the ability to “bounce back” after facing tough times or challenges.

I am inviting students to participate in my research and am looking for students who left school early or dropped out at some point in the past, but came back to school to finish their education. If you are someone who has experienced this and are interested in participating in my research, I am going to leave a questionnaire here on this desk for you to fill out. There is more information about the research and how the information you put on the questionnaire will be completely anonymous, meaning no one will know who you are or what answers you gave. Completed questionnaires can be put in a secure dropbox at the main office. This is completely voluntary, meaning you do not have to participate, but can if you choose to.

The questionnaire will take about 15-20 minutes to complete. It has 26 questions which ask a little about you, your family, your past and your current school experiences.

I will be making announcements about this research over the next 4 weeks, so the questionnaire will be available again. If you feel you meet what I am looking for, feel free to take a questionnaire and complete it at a time that works for you. You can choose to take a questionnaire and then decide you don’t want to fill it out. That’s ok, too! I appreciate your time. Thanks everyone!
Appendix D: Interview Participant Assent Form

**Principal Researcher:**
Lisa Fryer  
Master of Education Student  
Vancouver Island University  
lfryer@sd70.bc.ca

**Action Research Supervisor:**
Dr. Rachel Moll  
Faculty of Education  
Vancouver Island University  
250.753.3245 ex. 2161

**Research Information**
In addition to being a Teacher Advisor at the Vast Education Centre, I am also a graduate student at Vancouver Island University in the Master’s in Educational Leadership Program. As part of my course called “Research Methods in Education” I have designed a research project that explores the factors relating to school dropout and re-engagement as well as the experiences of resilience among at-risk youth at the Vast Education Centre. You are someone who has re-engaged in school after leaving for a period of time, has shown a level of resilience and that is why you have been invited to participate in an interview for this study.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. **You may choose to stop at any time without having to give an explanation and you will not be penalized in any way.** During the interview, you may also choose not to answer specific questions. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**
The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and your identity will remain anonymous. You will be given a pseudonym (anonymous name) to be used in my written report where needed. No one will be able to connect you with any particular set of answers you provide. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed on to a digital computer document. My two research assistants, Diane Best and Saera Michael, will be assisting with this research and will have access to the information you provide. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript and will have the opportunity to review and make changes to your transcript. The results of this study will be compiled and reported in a written research report and published at Vancouver Island University. The report may also be shared with my colleagues at the Vast Education Centre. The transcribed interview files will be deleted from the database approximately 5 years after completion of the research project, in June 2019.

**Potential Risks**
Since some of the questions ask about difficult times in your life, you may experience feelings of emotional upset. If at any time during the interview, you experience any kind of distress and wish to speak with someone, counseling services will be made available at the Vast Education Centre (250-723-3744). If you wish to access support after the interview, you call the Central Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).
Potential Benefits
By participating in this study, you may help educators better understand the lives of at-risk youth, the many factors that impact resilience and the decision to drop out or stay in school. You may also experience some potential benefits through the process of self-reflecting on your own positive coping skills and personal resilience.

Ethical Treatment Concerns
If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer, by telephone at 250-753-3245 (ext. 2665) or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research project after you have completed the interview process, or would like more information, please feel free to contact me, in person or at the email address or phone number below.

Lisa Fryer
Vast Education Centre
202-4152 Redford St.
lfryer@sd70.bc.ca
250-723-3744

Please sign the form on the next page (p.3) indicating your assent to participate in this interview.
Please keep the above information for your records.
□ I assent to participate in an interview for Lisa Fryer’s research.

___________________________________________________
Date

___________________________________________________
Student Name (Please Print)

___________________________________________________
Student Signature