Honouring their Stories: Designing schools that work for students

By

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Abstract

“The way I see it is that the problem with [the current model of secondary school] is that it was clearly not designed by people who understand teenagers.”

Seth-Grade 10 student at a traditional secondary school

This study investigates the learning experiences of students with learning and behavioural challenges in both traditional and alternative secondary school models through narrative inquiry. The data was collected in semi-structured interviews with students with exceptional needs, and the staff who work with them. The data was then organized into themes from which fictionalized stories of possible student experiences were developed. Issues of connections with school, student teacher relationships and programming possibilities, with particular focus on the cohort model from a particular alternative program, are explored through stories of student experience. By representing student voice the intention is that the stories may inform our planning of school organizational structures to best meet the needs of all students.
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It is appropriate that I acknowledge the importance of connections as I prepare to submit a major project that sheds a bright light on the significance of connections to the success of all students. On my journey through the Master of Education in Special Education Program many people have provided me with ongoing support and guidance. It is their belief in me that helped to propel me forward.

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Chapter 1-Learning from experiences

Driving home the night of July 13, 2013, I was only half listening to the radio. Hearing that Cory Monteith was found dead in his hotel room shocked me back into awareness. Although not close friends, he and I went to middle school together and found ourselves at many of the same parties during our secondary school years. Upon arriving home I immediately went on the internet to check the news to confirm whether or not I had heard correctly. I had.

Over the next few days my mind wandered back to the stories of my teenage years including some of those parties and my secondary school experience.

**Experiences happen narratively**

I believe that our experiences are our narratives of life. They are real; they are personal, and as such others can relate and connect to them on an emotional level.

Hearing the unfortunate news of Cory’s passing caused me to wonder where along the narrative of his life did his so called ‘demon’ take hold, and more importantly why? Knowing that he was good at and passionate about drumming and music, were there opportunities early on for Cory to let drumming and music define him? Is it possible that he was struggling with an unmet need and did not have an effective strategy to meet that need? Did he have a respected and trusted adult championing for him? As a teacher, it is the answers to these types of questions, the questions that consider why a situation happened and where there is room for improvement that I am most interested in because such data allows us to be reflective and appropriately responsive.

Seeing the potential for such data to inform best practice program planning, support and intervention in our schools I began to wonder how I might explore the experiences that secondary school students have in different learning models in order to inform our decisions.
Statement of purpose

By comparing and contrasting the stories and experiences of students with exceptional needs both in a traditional secondary school and an ideal alternative secondary school I hope to highlight what is working for our students and where there is need. It is my hopes that we can find a way to improve the experiences for our students with exceptional needs in an effort to identify weaknesses in pedagogy or programming within a given model. Through such careful examination, we will know what to strive for in both models.

Personal context

From October 2008-2012 I worked as the Integration Support Teacher at an alternative secondary school in a B.C. suburban community. We had an innovative and dedicated team that collaborated to make it a safe and respectful learning community. The results were apparent; students whose records indicated that they had been chronic non-attenders were attending, students whom I had observed as wall flowers at other schools were engaged and blossoming, and students who had files filled thicker than an encyclopedia with incident and suspension forms had me thinking that maybe there was a past filing error. There were even students with severe learning disabilities who had been enrolled in a modified program at their catchment middle and/or secondary school that were transitioned back to an adapted program with great results. Most exciting for me perhaps though was that the students had a voice and were using it. And through their use of voice within a supported community they were re-identifying themselves as capable students. These students’ needs were being met and as a result school was an effective place for them.
Having exceptional needs

Secondary School is challenging for many students but can be especially daunting for students with exceptional needs. Dr. Ross Greene (2008), psychologist, states again and again that kids do well if they can. So what happens when a learning disability or lagging skills prevents them from doing so within the current model?

I have met many students who act out, put little effort into their work and even skip class in an attempt to create an identity that is more socially accepted and ‘cool’ to their peer group than being a struggling learner (Becker, 2009). For example, Connor laughed about how “being the class comedian allowed him to socialize and be popular enough that all his friends were willing to ‘help him’ (wink wink) with his school work.” Tanner talked about how he always had his ear buds in because if something overwhelmed him he “would just pretend that he was listening to his music rather than trying anyways.” Jenelle would stop attending altogether whenever she felt behind or that the content of a lesson was over her head. Connor, Tanner and Jenelle all have identified learning disabilities and have all struggled at school for the majority of their schooling career. The common theme, better understood as function of behaviour, for Connor, Tanner and Jenelle is they were avoiding the work, task or expectation. Connor avoided having to do the work himself as he would simply copy his friends’ answers, Tanner would completely shut down and disengage pretending that he was disinterested when the expectation was too high and Jenelle avoided the whole building.

If secondary school can be challenging to someone who has the required skills and who learns in the way that the current school model teaches, imagine how it may be for someone who does not. Perhaps we need to change our lens from how can we fix the student to how can we fix
the curriculum and the organizational structure to best support all of our students. Then perhaps students like Connor, Tanner and Jenelle will not have to rely on avoidance strategies.

**Research question**

My research question is "What are some stories of the learning experiences of adolescent students with learning and behavioural challenges in traditional and alternative secondary schools? In what ways can these stories inform our planning of school organizational structures to best meet the need of all students?"

**Overview of study**

This study will focus on the experiences of adolescent students with learning and behavioural challenges within the learning environments of traditional and alternative secondary schools. For the purpose of this study a traditional secondary school is defined as the catchment secondary school that most students are enrolled in and where a generic academic program is offered. An alternative school, however, may or may not be a student's catchment school and is another option to schooling that offers increased flexibility with regards to program planning. Alternative schools have a lower teacher and staff to student ratio.

The study followed narrative inquiry procedures, collecting data from semi-structured interviews with both staff and student participants.

Findings have been developed into fictionalized narratives that amalgamate experiences within the organizational structures of each context through constructed characters. Though some stories and experiences from participants may be recognizable to those who know them, the constructed narratives will not represent any single participant or learning experience.

By exploring the learning experiences of students with identified special needs through the medium of fictionalized stories, this study will utilize perspectives of student and school staff...
participants to contrast experiences in traditional and alternative school environments, in order to consider school organization possibilities and potential.

While there has been literature dedicated to both 21st Century Learning (Beetham & Sharp, 2013; Breivik, 2010; Hume, 2011) and student voice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Loutzenheiser, 2002), there has not been much if any research where student voice is being heard in relation to program planning and organizational structures specifically in relation to secondary school. Therefore, in the fictionalized stories that will follow, I invite you to think about how a school’s organizational structure appears to impact a student’s secondary school experience and how we can make learning an effective place for all students.

**Chapter 2-Research Methods**

**Providing a framework**

*Narratives-here, there and everywhere*

Narratives are inescapable. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) confirm this in their statement that “humans are storytelling organisms who individually and socially lead storied lives” (p. 2). People use stories to connect to others, to entertain, to learn, to teach and to remember. Sometimes these stories are all truth: non-fiction; sometimes they are created from imagination: fiction, and sometimes they are a combination of the two.

*What is fiction?*

Fiction in its broadest sense of the term, as defined by The Free Dictionary online, is “a literary work whose content is produced by the imagination and is not necessarily fact”. Specific to this study, while the stories are fictional, they are representations of true experiences.
What is the purpose of fiction?

Fiction is a source of entertainment but can also be a valuable tool to learn from and to use to teach others.

Fiction, Taylor (2011) explains, “allows us to experience emotions in a safe place, training us to understand ourselves and others” (para. 12). Keith Oatley, a Canadian novelist and professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto, calls this process emotional training and believes that it occurs for the reader as he is on the path to arrive at the same understanding as the character, a process which occurs as the story unfolds (as cited in Taylor, 2011, para. 13).

We have all heard of, seen and maybe even been in those situations where a teacher is stuck in a power struggle with a student. It can be emotional. It can feel personal. I remember one colleague saying after a particular power struggle with a student how she does everything for that student and just cannot help but take the words that he says to her personally and that it hurts. Now what if this teacher had the opportunity to study fiction that presents examples of power struggles including relevant background information? It might help her to realize that she is not alone. It may help her to come to a more holistic understanding of a student with a similar profile including his needs, setting events and antecedents. It may cause her to reflect upon the actions that contribute to the power struggle and consider what she could do differently in a similar situation. It may help her to realize that it is not personal.

Fiction can also be used to present challenging scenarios to guide professional development much like how a “flight simulator allows [a] pilot-in-training to quickly and safely encounter all sorts of contingencies that might happen in the air” (Taylor, 2011, para. 12).
Fiction may have been the answer for a past colleague of mine who commented that it is often hard to find a mutual time to talk through challenging situations with her mentor. Imagine if she had access to a library of fictional stories compiled from truths of real life experiences to turn to when needed at a time that was convenient for her.

Fiction, therefore, has the potential to bring the reader to a more holistic understanding by presenting him with other points of view and additional background knowledge. This is valuable as personal experience has reaffirmed for me that the best plans are made when an individual and/or team has a holistic understanding.

Fiction can also be used to guide group professional development. Reading groups, according to Oatley, multiply the effect of the emotional training (Taylor, 2011, para. 15). He writes that “when you read the book yourself you have a particular understanding, but it is always very partial, so the moment you start talking with someone else about it, you are increasing the amount of brain power and coming at it from all these different directions” (Taylor, 2011, para. 16). He also offers a personal example of how “he has participated in the same book club for 20 years and finds its discussions often deepen his understanding not just of the book, but also of his friends in the group” (Taylor, 2011, para. 16). Would it not then be a valuable professional development opportunity to provide time for teachers to collaborate over how to address challenging scenarios presented in the form of fiction?

Fiction has also proven to be a valuable tool in teaching others. A past colleague of mine, in fact, relies on First Nations legends to teach her children life lessons and morals. Rather than lecturing them, she quickly crafts a story that teaches the specific needed lesson which allows her children to draw their own conclusions. Teaching through story telling is common practice in the First Nations culture with “each group of First Nations [having] its own legendary
hero through which much learning [is] transmitted” (Kirkness, 1992, p. 6). I believe that teaching others through stories has multiple benefits. First and foremost, by providing children with an authentic learning opportunity rather than a list of rules they are able to come to their own conclusion. This increases ownership and the actual learning of the lesson while fulfilling a basic human need-power. Diane Dawson (2013) explains in her work on Restitution that someone who is “power” orientated will struggle with being asked to perform a certain way simply because someone says to whether it is a rule or not (Diane Dawson, personal communication, February 2013). Natural learning opportunities, however, are not always feasible. Luckily stories, whether crafted or passed along, are.

**What is research?**

The word research is associated with numerous definitions, most of which are within particular definitions of the scientific method. On a Harvard University webpage titled ‘foundations of qualitative research in education’ a much broader definition is provided. There, research is defined as being “a systematic inquiry into aspects of our world” (Kuttner & Threlkeld, 2008). It explains that research is systematic “because, whatever the method, we proceed through specific and purposeful steps in designing research, data collection, and analysis. Research is inquiry [the site explains] because it invariably involves questioning-though definitive answers may be elusive or not even the goal” (Kuttner & Threlkeld, 2008).

**Fiction as a form of research**

In ‘Fictional writing, educational research and professional learning’, John Spindler (2008) argues that fiction “has the potential to resonate with practitioners so that they discover new ways of thinking and feeling about professional dilemmas that go beyond ‘mere truisms’ to a deeper understanding of the significance of their professional actions” (p.28). People are
naturally social and empathetic creatures. By adding the element of emotion to our business decisions we provide those in positions to make important decisions with invaluable information, information that cannot be gleaned from mathematical equations or accounted for by following a prewritten manual. Relating this to my experience as an Integration Support Teacher, I think of the students for whom secondary school is not effective and are left to struggle because the level of support or equipment needed is not on par with what the manual says that they are entitled to. From a business perspective it is just numbers. But for those of us who work with these students every day, we become emotionally invested. Knowing and caring about our students we take it upon ourselves to strategically manage and marshal all available resources, human and otherwise, often sacrificing personal time and money hoping that it is enough to get each of them by. Surely there must be a better way! So what might it take to get those who have the power to make these decisions to budget based on need?

Spindler (2008) believes that “fiction may deepen [educators’] appreciation of how the educational issues that they are grappling with are played out in the lives of those directly involved and their critiques might illuminate some of the possibilities and limitations of policy in relation to issues that have been highlighted” (p.28). Learning through fiction, therefore, is functional and transferable. Taking it one step further, if fiction has the “capacity to create knowledge that integrates feeling and cognition through the engagement of readers with particular narratives that illuminate particular questions” (p. 26) as Spindler (2008) argues it does, then according to Harvard’s definition of research mentioned above, narrative inquiry is a viable research method. So what is narrative inquiry?
Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a way of thinking about and studying experiences or narratives involving questioning otherwise known as inquiry. As Clandinin and Huber (in press) elaborate, “Narrative inquiry follows a recursive, reflexive process of moving from field (with starting points in telling or living of stories) to field texts (data) to interim and final research texts” (p. 1). Providing field text or narrative created to highlight the themes discovered in the field provides the reader with a holistic understanding to consider as he asks questions in search of new knowledge. For educators this means analyzing a particular challenge through real, documented experiences and then considering how it could be better. Further, narrative inquiry “highlights ethical matters as well as shapes new theoretical understandings of people’s experiences” (Clandinin & Huber, in press, p. 1). So I ask, if our experiences are our narratives of life, should we not study experiences and in this case educational experiences narratively?

Methodological understandings

I believe that narratives are well suited to addressing the complexities as well as the subtleties of human experience making them a fit for my study. Further, Webster and Mertova (2007) have stated that “narrative allows researchers to present experiences holistically in all its complexity and richness” (p. 2) allowing for maximum understanding and learning.

Theoretical understanding

The aim of this study was to explore stories of the learning experiences of adolescent students with learning and behavioural challenges in both traditional and alternative secondary school. The very use of the word ‘explore’ suggests a methodology without pre-constructed theories and hypotheses. Rather, this project attempts to gain insight into the unique perspective of young people. Thus, this study is qualitative in nature, using semi-structured interviews and
focus groups as a method of data collection in order to answer my research questions: "What are some stories of the learning experiences of adolescent students with learning and behavioural challenges in traditional and alternative secondary schools? In what ways can these stories inform our planning of school organizational structures to best meet the need of all students?"

**Participants**

The participant population was recruited from one traditional secondary school and one alternative secondary school in suburban B.C. I recruited the voices of three students, two Classroom Teachers, one Integration Support Teacher and one Educational Assistant from each school for a participant population of fourteen.

Gender, race, age, and/or years of experience was not considered in the selection process of staff participants. When recruiting student participants I sought and acquired equal representation of male and female students between the ages of fifteen and eighteen who either self-identify as having learning challenges, or who are designated in the district as a student with exceptional needs. I also limited my selection pool to students in the above categories who had not been granted exceptional hours of support by the district or who do not have a dual designation that provides additional hours of support. Students with an identified intellectual disability were not considered. Race did not play a factor in the selection process.

**Ethical issues**

Anytime that a study requires the involvement of human participants there are ethical issues. It is required to make sure that participants are in no way coerced or believe that their involvement will serve any other purpose other than providing data for the study. Even after initial consent is provided, participants must be aware that they can choose to not answer a given question or discontinue their participation at any time and feel safe to do so. (REB)
If an individual chooses to participate in the study it is imperative to make sure that each individual’s voice is represented correctly and that the data is kept in a safe place for only as long as it is needed so that identities and information cannot be used in any other way other than how it was intended. (REB)

Specific to my study I had additional ethical considerations because I worked with adolescents with exceptional needs. Adolescent students are a vulnerable group because of their age. Students with learning or behavioural challenges are a vulnerable group because of the challenges that they face in life both inside and outside of school. These challenges are a result of the stigma of being associated with learning or behavioural challenges and because they have to work extra hard when performing certain skill sets.

To accommodate potential learning challenges I tailored the language of the consent form and interview to the ability level, directly contacted parents to explain the study, and supported the student in understanding the study and consent process. Special Education is my field and I have worked at a secondary school in the capacity of an Integration Support Teacher for three years and so have experience in supporting adolescent students with learning and behavioural challenges in understanding material.

For ethical reasons we cannot use our students’ experiences for research without careful planning and consent. Nor should we share confidential experiences with other educators. Strategies such as fictionalizing and blurring identities and places are often used in narrative inquiry. Fictionalizing truth and blurring identities within narratives serves two purposes: it allows the identity of participants to remain anonymous and also allows for the gleaning of one theme from any number of experiences.
Data collection

“Almost anything can be data- an overheard conversation, an e-mail, a feeling, a photograph. In some senses, ‘data’ is defined by the perspective that one takes on it” (Kuttner, P. & A. Threlkeld, 2008).

Types of data

The data collected in this study is qualitative data which can be observed but not measured because it is not in numerical form. I obtained data through semi-structured interviews that I audio recorded and then transcribed. After transcribing the interviews I listened again to make sure that I had recorded my participants’ words as they spoke them.

Semi-structured interview

Whereas structured interviews do not deviate from predetermined questions, unstructured interviews are more like flowing conversations with the goal of eliciting story (Seidman, 2006). A semi-structured interview falls somewhere between the two extremes. Using semi structured interviews allowed me to predetermine questions that would get at the root of what I am studying while still having the freedom to deviate when an opportune moment for more in depth information presented (refer to Appendix). The data produced is reflective of each participant’s narrative of experience.

Applicability of data to question

The qualitative data produced is applicable as it provides insight into the experiences had by students with exceptional needs in the current secondary school system. While a generalizable conclusion cannot always be drawn from qualitative data, it does provide insight into the specific challenges and obstacles faced within the current secondary school model, as outlined by the students themselves.
Data analysis and interpretation

Theoretical framework of analysis and interpretation

McLeod (2008) advises that “analysis of qualitative data is difficult and requires accurate description of participant responses, for example sorting responses to open questions and interviews into broad themes” (par. 4). He also states “Expert knowledge of an area is necessary to try to interpret qualitative data and great care must be taken when doing so” (para. 4).

For this study I recorded the data that I obtained through semi-structured interviews onto a chart and then worked to group similar experiences into themes. Once I had the themes identified I began looking for appropriate research as well as exploring how personal knowledge of the topic fit. With my combined information I crafted stories that resembled experiences of students with additional needs for each of the identified themes.

Issues arising (representation, subjectivity)

As well as the researcher’s expert knowledge being of importance, the reader’s background and experiences impact the meaning that is interpreted from the fictional account. The personal experiences of the participants providing their stories should also be considered when working with narrative inquiry. As all of our experiences and therefore stories are our own, it is important to respect that the created fiction that follows does not represent every individual student but tries to highlight themes and truths. To represent the themes and truths the best that I could I have also counted on personal experiences and current research.

My subjectivity is evident in the interpretations because of the questions that I asked, my own previous experiences and my own context and beliefs. Despite this, I made every effort to include and represent the views of the participants through the characters that I created.
Chapter 3- Walking a mile in other shoes

This study will engage in narrative inquiry and the characters and stories presented are fictional amalgamations of the experiences of the six students and eight school staff who participated in this study.

Studying organizational structures through narrative inquiry

To fully understand how to structure our secondary school systems to meet the needs of all learners it is important to study the secondary school experiences of our students, specifically those with exceptional needs. I feel that it is only through studying the experiences of students who struggle that we will learn where the current organizational structure is ineffective for them and what makes it so. Such data can then guide organizational planning. I have chosen to present fictionalized compilations that depict how a student with exceptional needs may be impacted within the current organizational structure to encourage emotional connections with their experiences. As the reader understands and relates to the struggles experienced by the character there is an increased likelihood that said reader will begin to question how she could be more effective in meeting that student’s needs. I have also used fiction to represent themes that emerged when focusing on what all students need to be successful in secondary school.

…not good at school

Some of the first words Alexia always said to a new teacher is that she “is learning disabled and usually does different assignments because she is not good at school”. She saw herself as ‘stupid’, ‘less than her peers’ and ‘just not capable’ despite her cognitive scores falling, unbeknownst to her, in the above average range. Alexia, and students with a similar profile are not stupid, less than their peers or incapable. It is school that is not an effective place for them.
There are capable students whose academic program has been limited to specific courses because they are seen as “more of a Science and Tech kind of student than a Biology student” because of having a learning disability. Some students with learning disabilities even find themselves being placed on a modified program despite their cognitive scores not warranting such a program change. Proof that secondary school is not an effective place for all can also be seen as one walks through the halls peering into the classrooms. One might observe students looking bored and disengaged, but perhaps that is because their needs are not being met. One might note empty seats in classrooms but a full learning center, full because their needs were not being met in the classrooms.

Alexia’s story is a fictionalized compilation of a number of students who participated in this study, as are the other stories you will read. I hope that, through these fictionalized accounts, you will recognize and respond to the experiences shared.

**Taking a closer look at the structure of traditional secondary schools**

*Organization*

*Toby’s story-*

*Deciphering the class rotations and navigating the school should have been a class credit in itself I figure. Getting to my first class on time was not so bad as I had time to check my schedule and clarify and confirm where I had to be with either friends or my case manager. Also, the mornings were not so chaotic yet. It was kind of like the calm before the storm. But that calm never lasted long. Anxiety about where I had to navigate myself to next would begin to creep in midway through my first class taking my full attention away from the lesson and important announcements. I cannot tell you how many assignments were late or missed entirely simply because I missed the instruction. Transitioning from one class to the next was hell. During*
transitions the hallways were jam-packed, fast moving and loud. When I was lucky I could tag along with a friend making a chain but there were many times when I was not so lucky. During those times I have gone to the wrong classroom not realizing my mistake until other students point it out, arrived at classes late having to walk in with all eyes on me usually accompanied by a comment from the teacher to let me know that I was late because clearly I had not figured that out. I have even been locked out. Once a teacher even initially locked me and another student out and then invited us in expecting us each to sing ‘I am a little teapot’ complete with actions. I was shocked to realize that we were actually not welcome in, not unless we were willing to sing. I did not sing and instead went home. I also later dropped that course as there was no way I was going to face that teacher and those students again! The following school year I went from having one block in the Learning Center to having four blocks in the Learning Center. Spending more time in the Learning Center made school less stressful for me. It reduced the amount of ‘navigating’ the halls that I had to do and meant that I had a few less teachers to figure out. But it also left me feeling ‘othered’. Man I wish that I was ‘normal’ and could handle taking my classes in the classroom with the ‘normal’ students.

Meier (1996) states in her article, ‘Transforming Schools into Powerful Communities’ that

“No other institution we know of, even the army or prison, is organized so mindlessly. In no other institution do we change supervisors and peer groups every forty-five minutes, or engage in a totally different activity every time the bell rings, without any particular sequential order” (as cited in Hynds, 1997, p. 274).

Note: Toby dropped out of school part way into his grade 11 year. He, like so many of the other students who the secondary school model is not effective for, found the segmented days
fragmented and isolating and felt that the formalistic secondary school curriculum bore little relevance to his life (Hynds, 1997, p. 274).

Course load/expectations

Trish’s story-

It is never actually a certain assignment or even a certain class that makes high school overwhelming. Rather, it is being enrolled in six courses a term because added together the list of assignments from all of the classes is MONSTROUS. At times it feels as though teachers think that their class is the only one that I am taking and that I do not have a life outside of school. (These days I do not.) I am always behind in my assignments and racing to catch-up. Even in English which is a course that I am kind of good at, or at least used to be kind of good at. I know that a lot of what I end up submitting is not my best work and that is perhaps the most upsetting part because I do work very hard. Why is school so hard for me?

People only really need to be good at one or two things to be successful in life because that is what the world of work expects of us. But in secondary school, students have to pass all core academic subjects as well as a number of electives whether or not they have any personal interest or skill in a given area. For Trish, whose story was shared above, assignment after assignment -especially the dreaded math assignments- meant that she did not have the time or energy to put into her creative writing, something that she loved to do and was naturally talented at. So if people only really need to be good at one or two things to succeed at life, is it important or even fair to force students to take courses that they have zero interest or natural skill in especially when taking those courses is at the expense of developing areas of personal strength and interest?
In a conversation with Mel Levine, Scherer (2006) asked him why he felt that knowing the strengths of a child is the most important thing to know. He answered that “adults who are leading worthy lives are doing so by mobilizing their strengths and affinities” (p. 1). He continued by arguing that “we should seek a consonance between a student’s education and his future career” (p. 1).

While the argument can be made that the current secondary school model provides exposure to a wide variety of potential interests and prepares students for the demands of life, many students, especially those who have exceptional needs, find it overwhelming. What if program planning for all students was individual and based on what each individual student needs to get to where they want to go. Can you imagine it? I wonder what steps would be needed to get to that point.

*Alternative secondary school*

For those students for whom the current secondary school model does not work, there is another option: alternative education.

An alternative school may or may not be a student’s catchment school but rather another option for schooling other than the traditional K-12 model. Alternative schools may offer increased flexibility with regards to program planning and have a lower teacher and staff to student ratio. For the purpose of this inquiry I am going to explore the programming and organizational options offered at an alternative secondary school in a B.C. suburban community, with particular attention to its use of the cohort model.

This particular alternative school offers online or distributed learning (DL) classes for grades 8 through 12, paper based courses, tutorial classes, storefront support, and teacher led courses with classes being offered both in the day and at night for the grades 10 through 12. It is
also possible to mix and match, choose the number of courses enrolled in each term and take longer than a term to complete a course if needed. There is also a cohort program. My study will be referencing the cohort model as it is the model where I have witnessed student after student, including those with exceptional needs, thriving.

The cohort model was developed to provide a vehicle to build community, develop lifelong skills, foster collaboration and allow the students to explore the person they want to be and what it means to be a member of society. The cohort model is a ten month linear program offered for the grade 9s, 10s and 11s with plans to expand to include a grade 12 cohort September 2014. The grades 9 and 10 cohorts are also looped, meaning that the students have the same two teachers, one teaching the humanities and the other teaching math and science two years in a row. With the addition of a grade 12 cohort the same system of looping would be applied for the grades 11 and 12 cohorts. Electives have typically included Personal Awareness, Leadership, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), PE, Planning, Foods, Art, Business, Media and Digital Literacy. Having minimal teachers serves two purposes. One, students and teachers get to know one another better and two, teachers can interweave course content, making connections to overriding themes, allowing students to learn in context and more easily assimilate new knowledge and skills. One of the students who I interviewed mentioned that having the different classes intertwined works in their favor for another reason. He explained how many of the assignments are cross curricular which means that they “get to do more involved and more exciting assignments which are actually interesting and fun rather than just jump hoops which some classes and assignments feel like”.

Dewey and Vygotsky have both written that education is a social rather than individualistic process (as cited in Osterman, 2000, p. 32) stating that it is “through collaboration
that learning occurs” (Osterman, 2000, p. 324). The cohort model is based on the above view as a cohort is not simply a group of students registered in the same classes for a set period of time, but a collaborative community with an ethos that they are stronger together than separately. As such, collaborative opportunities are constant and diverse: whole class, partners, small groups, structured, unstructured, etc. In addition, students are invited to collaborate in designing the learning space, both physical and pedagogical. Students contribute content they find interesting and/or relevant and discuss, propose and adapt assignments in collaboration with teachers. The Classroom Teachers, Learning Support and Integration Support Teacher, Educational Assistants and Youth and Family Counsellor model community and collaboration each day as they work together in assessing and addressing specific needs and offering in class support. With this approach students’ needs are most often able to be met in the classroom meeting inclusion goals which are crucial to the community development and students’ sense of belonging. Assistance and tools are equally available for all students as they are guided to identify how they best learn and when they need it. This approach is powerful as different learning needs and preferences are normalized and honoured. The program makes a world of difference for the disenfranchised students with significant learning gaps and those with learning disabilities.

Despite the fact that “some education research speculate that one out of every four students entering high school will need an alternative education program” (Richardson, M. & Griffin, B., 1994, p. 109) such schools are still only the alternative to the current model of a traditional secondary school, a model that is not effective for all students.

*Traditional secondary schools are not an effective place for all students*

We live, and therefore teachers teach, in a very diverse world. Students have different interests, learning styles and needs. There is no such thing as an ‘average student’ (CAST, 2011)
on which we can base our curriculum development and equally so there is not one organizational or structural plan that is effective for all students. Yet traditional secondary schools follow a very rigid organizational model, a model that is not an effective place for all students.

**So how do we do better?**

When considering a planned intervention, a school team must ask itself how the new proposed plan is better than current practice making sure to consider how to assess its value. All too often the default ‘go to’ to support the struggling learner is offering more time in the Learning Center or with a Learning Support (LS) Teacher or Educational Assistant (EA) without having a specific plan for how the time will be used to teach skills and independence. In a time when district and school budgets are decreasing and extra support is strained we need to find the most effective and efficient way to make learning accessible for all rather than simply offering more as the ‘more model’ is not sustainable.

So what does our educational system need to offer for it to be an effective place for all students? Why not ask the students themselves what is not working and how it might be made better for them as the “voices-literally the words- of children of all ages can never be heard enough in educational research” (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p. 441). Doing so will help us to come to a better and more holistic understanding of our students and their diverse needs. Sometimes a student’s voice is expressed in the form of behaviour-a silent voice. For example, rather than being categorized as a problem or a failure the boys in Ann Ferguson’s (2000) study ‘troublemakers’ choose to “construct positive identities tied to trouble making and physical power” (as cited in Becker, 2010, p. 62) while the youth in Nancy Lopez’s (2003) study ‘troubled boys’ responded to being placed on low-level curriculum tracks with few expectations with “willful laziness to express their resentment” (as cited in Becker, 2010, p. 62). Our students
will let us know when their needs are not being satisfied. It is our role as teachers and learning support workers to hear what they are telling us and respond.

21st century education

Canvassing what secondary school students thought 21st century is, or should be, produced the following responses: “up to date, easily accessible and working technology”, “making use of digital platforms”, “no more textbooks and worksheets”, “hands on learning”, “not having to sit and listen to a teacher lecturing”, “being able to use our own devices in class as a tool to access learning”, “no more busy work”, “taking courses and doing assignments that have relevance in our world and what we want to do or be in life”, “choice”, “interesting” and “fun”.

People see the need to update the educational system. Books have been written and workshops held dedicated to bringing the current traditional secondary school model into the 21st century. Yet “as we contemplate [the necessary shift to teaching and learning in the 21st century], and how to make it, we continue to encounter the incredible resilience of ideas about teaching and learning that are rooted in the economic, educational, and cultural norms of the early 20th century” (Willms, J., Friesen, S., & Milton, P., 2009, p. 6). Studying the experiences of our students and learning where the system is not effective for them could help us to move forward to a more student and learning centred system.

The themes that emerged from the data collected from both the students and the school staff and explore issues, experiences and aspects of school. The following chapters offer stories that investigate issues and potential for school organizational models, with a focus on connections, student-teacher (staff) relationships and programming in and beyond school.
Chapter 4- Connections

I asked Maddie what was the first thing that came to her mind when she thought about her school. She smiled as she responded “home”. She then went on to explain how her class, or cohort as it is called, is together Monday through Thursday from 8:45 to 2:30 in the same room so they “pretty much become a family and [their] room is like another home.” She spoke about how, as well as the students staying together, her class has only two teachers so the students and the staff also get to know one another very well and become very close. However, Maddie’s sense of belonging at “home” is in stark contrast to how she felt at her previous school. When describing her former school she commented that it was “big, cliquey and kind of lonely.” Maddie felt connected to her school, her peers and her teachers in one school but not in another.

So what may contribute to whether a student feels connected or not?

Community

What does it mean for a student to be a part of a ‘caring school community’? At the heart of a high-community school is an inclusive web of respectful, supportive relationships among and between students, teachers and parents. We learn best from, and with, those to whom we relate well (Schaps, 2009, p. 9).

Maddie’s story-

Before enrolling in the cohort program I did not attend school much because I just did not feel comfortable there. It took so much of my attention and energy to stay somewhat on top of my assignments that I never got the opportunity to really get to know anyone in any of my classes, or the teachers for that matter. Recess and lunch is an incredibly lonely and boring time when you do not have any friends. I wanted desperately to find where I belonged but just did not seem to fit in with any of the groups even when I tried, and boy did I try! I tried out for the dance team only
to find that I am not as good of a dancer as I had thought. I even went to one tryout for volleyball but after getting knocked down by a spike to the face and having everyone laugh at me I realized that I did not belong there either. Once trying to belong even cost me three months of babysitting money! Some of the popular girls in my class were talking about how they desperately wanted to see The Hunger Games but that they did not have any money. I offered to pay. They stopped being my ‘friends’ at exactly the same time my money ran out. After a few more failed attempts I stopped trying to fit in. I would eat my lunch in the stairwells alone and wait for the time to pass. Eventually I just chose to stay home; after all, who would miss me? After skipping a month straight the school counselor suggested another schooling option for me. By this point my parents really just wanted me back in school so agreed to send me there.

I was initially torn about the idea of enrolling in a cohort. I liked the idea of spending each day all year with the same group of students so long as they were going to be students who I was happy to be “stuck” with. But what if they were not?

Right from day one things were different. It was a smaller, more casual school and the class sizes were also smaller. The staff showed genuine interest in me and what I needed to succeed and actually seemed excited that I had enrolled.

The second week in we got to go to The Boys and Girls Club and do a bunch of obstacles and team challenges. We were there the whole day and even had a picnic together. We all had to leave our cell phones locked in the room where we first gathered. This was not a popular request yet we all did as asked. The funny thing is, is that after the first activity no one seemed to miss their phone anymore. We started by doing a few games and activities with the whole group and were then separated into three smaller groups. Heather was in my group and we worked together really well together. That is where her and I first became friends.
We also do a lot of partner and team work in the class. Sometimes we get placed in groups and sometimes we get to pick our groups ourselves. I never actually mind either way because there is no one in my cohort that gives me a hard time or that I cannot work with. We are also always given the option of working alone if we want to but many of us never choose that option. The neat thing about working in groups is that you can make use of the different strengths that people have. For example, Dalton is amazing with technology so his group always has cool presentations, Iona is super organized and is good at keeping her group on track and Katie is like the student version of the teacher. I am known in the cohort as being one of the best artists so I quite often get to draw the diagrams and pictures on posters or title pages.

School, for the first time ever, is a place that I want to be, a place where I am comfortable and important. I have friends and the teachers like me and make a daily effort to welcome me and support me with assignments or if I am having a rough day. I can grab some food if I am hungry and it is a smaller, more casual school. Most importantly I belong; we all belong!

Denise, one of the classroom teachers, talked passionately about how she works each year to create community within the cohort. She started by identifying the importance of creating a classroom environment that is respectful, safe and inclusive foundationally. In an effort to create such an environment, she and her teaching partner dedicate the first three weeks of each school year to team building activities, teaching the students how to work together and proactively creating the tone for the new cohort of students. Activities include day long team building field trips and opportunities to learn from and about each other. They also teach the students about qualities important to social and civic participation by teaching the students about The Human Rights. Teaching The Human Rights provides a communal lens to look at ethical
issues through which “establishes common ground and shapes the norms that govern daily interaction” (Schaps, 2009, p. 9). Further, the teachers and students practice Restitution a program founded by Diane Dawson that focuses on teaching individuals to handle conflict by working to find mutually beneficial solutions and to restore integrity by considering how to ‘right a wrong’ (Diane Dawson, personal communication, February 2013).

The focus on community and cooperative learning does not end after the first three weeks are over, but rather continues throughout the year with regular opportunities for both partner and group work. When “curriculum materials are arranged to promote positive interdependence as students accomplish learning objectives collectively…higher achievement, increased self-esteem, mutual concern, and peer support for academic performance” (Wolfe, Howell, Charland, 1989, p. 30) results.

Assignments, whenever possible, are arranged to reflect the interests and motivations of the students. This not only increases engagement, she explained but “it is critical that we give students the opportunity to enjoy school and to feel good about themselves within the walls of our classroom communities” (Katz, 2013, p. 113).

The staff at the school is a strong and intact team that helps to complete the community. The Youth and Family Counselor (YFC), Integration Support/Learning Support Teacher (IS/LS Teacher) and Educational Assistant (EA) have a regular presence in both Denise’s and her teaching partner’s classroom and know all of the students very well. Regular communication between team members and having the YFC and IS/LS Teacher presence in her classroom allows the team to deal with any presented situation completely, immediately and appropriately before it has time to percolate and get out of hand.
It also allows them to be more aware of the most basic needs as they relate to each and every one of their students. Maslow’s hierarchic theory is often represented in a pyramid with the lower levels representing an individual’s most basic needs (Simons, Irwin, Drinnien, 1987, para. 10). A student who is hungry, not feeling safe or is tired is not going to be an active participant in the classroom community until after these needs are addressed. In response the school provides bread, pastries and fruit which are readily available for the students before school and throughout the day. There is also regular access to a YFC or a School Based Counsellor and quiet places to rest if needed. As well as access to the YFC and School Based Counsellor the class also makes use of team meetings where those involved work together to solve conflict respectfully.

But it is not just a sense of comfort and belonging that is developed through a sense of community. Osterman (2000) wrote:

A number of studies show that strengthening students’ sense of community in school produces a wide range of desirable effects, including increased academic motivation, social understanding and competence, altruistic tendencies, appropriate conduct in school, and trust and respect for teachers (as cited in Schaps, 2009, p. 9).

I strongly believe that if we can all learn to program plan with the mindset that schools are communities rather than organizations we will be taking a huge step in the right direction towards making secondary school a more effective place for all learners. The experiences of participants in the study, as represented in these stories, affirm the importance of the connections they found in communities of learners through the cohort model.
Chapter 5-Student/teacher (staff) relationships

“Student-teacher relationships are a key feature of student life” (Pomeroy, 1999, p. 468; Wallace, 1996; Garner, 1995). Further, Deborah Stipek (2006) claims that “the key to raising achievement is connecting students with teachers who support them not just as learners, but also as people” (p. 1). Adolescents themselves have reported that “they work harder for teachers who treat them as individuals and express interest in their personal lives outside of school” (p. 1). Their words are in line with Stipek’s observations which “confirm a broad body of research that has demonstrated that students function more effectively when they feel respected and valued” (p. 1). So how do we demonstrate that we respect and value our students? As well as showing genuine interest in them as people we need to provide support while holding them accountable, we need to provide opportunities for autonomy and choice and we need to keep clear lines of communication (Stipek, 2006). The students explained how the teachers who they were connected with made an effort to get to know them on a personal level and supported them both with school and personal challenges. They were careful to stipulate that this did not mean that the teachers made excuses for them, lowered any expectations or made a problem go away for them. Rather they spoke of how the teachers who they were most connected to were ones who had high expectations and held them accountable but supported them in the process. Being given autonomy and choice was also mentioned as being important. One student mentioned that in a classroom where he was not given choice he “felt like an insignificant drone.” But with choice he feels seen, heard and respected. Communication was also mentioned as playing a significant role in whether a student felt respected or not. Students want teachers to clearly communicate expectations and tell them where they stand. They also want to be heard. Jess said there was nothing that a teacher could do that would get her as mad as when it is made clear to her that her
side of the story does not matter and that she was not heard. (Pomeroy, 1999, p. 470) Anthony looked down shamefully and said that for him the inaction of a teacher was worse. He then explained how some of his peers were messing around with him in his English class. He thought that his teacher must not have been aware because she never made an effort to stop them. But then one day as the students were filing into the classroom the teasing became out of control. He told his teacher what had been going on and asked for help. He was dumfounded when she told him to “stop complaining and go sit down”. For Anthony, learning that his teacher did not see his social and emotional needs as worth her time was worse, way worse (Pomeroy, 1999, p. 470).

Public humiliation, especially shouting, not listening to them, and not affording them enough attention were also ways that students mentioned as ways teachers demonstrated that they were not respected or valued (White & Brockington, 1983; Woods, 1990; Chaplain, 1996; John, 1996; Rudduck et al., 1996 as cited by Pomeray, 1999).

Research claims that a strong teacher-student relationship can also positively impact a student’s resiliency (Correa, 2005). Correa (2005) defines resiliency as “the ability for those exposed to risks to be able to avoid the negative outcomes often associated with exposure to such risks” (p. 16). The factors said to be leveraging this resilience are called protective factors (Correa, 2005).

*Alicia, whose story follows, is an example of a student for whom a caring teacher acted as a protective factor helping to shield Alicia from external stressors.*

*Alicia’s story-

*Alicia was honoured to be graduating as the class valedictorian. As she thought about her speech she began to think back upon the stories of her secondary school experiences and ended up writing this thank-you letter to a teacher who had championed for her from day one.*
Denise,

When I think back over my time here, right from day one I remember your smile and encouragement being there every step of the way. As I graduate tonight I want you to know that three years ago I wouldn’t have imagined any of this, yet here I am, thanks in large part to your belief in me. When we first met I had little confidence in myself or my abilities. I had never really fit in before and nobody had ever taken an interest in me. But you did. You noticed that I was creative and helped me to see it too. I will never forget that you encouraged me to enter one of my stories into a contest. I will also never forget the tear in your eye and humungous hug when I told you that I had won. But not all of my days were contest winning days. I had a lot of tough days too. Thank you for understanding that on those days I needed a little more patience. You were a sympathetic ear when I needed you to be and a helpful problem solver when I was ready. If there was ever a situation at school you always asked for and listened to my side of the story which reminded me that you respect and care about me. In grade 11 and 12 I took classes with other teachers and you had another cohort. But even with new relationships you were excited to see me. When I dropped by your classroom to visit you greeted me with a warm hug and checked in with me asking how things were going and what I had been up to. I may be graduating tonight but I will never forget you and I will continue to drop by to visit and let you know how college is going.

Love Alicia

Alicia was true to her word. Two years later she still comes back to the school every few months to visit. Many of the students do. This is because, as David Giles, Elizabeth Smythe and
Debra Spence (2012) recognize, after a course is over the “curricula, lesson plans and learning outcomes are long forgotten, but the impact of relationships lives on” (p. 215).

**Chapter 6-Programming in and beyond school**

Efficient lesson planning with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) enables teachers to more effectively meet students’ individual needs” (Courey, Tappe, Siker & LePage, 2012, abstract) through lessons that are designed to be accessible to all students. This is achieved by anticipating student differences and planning for those differences in an attempt “to meet the needs of all learners at the onset of instruction rather than having to retrofit lesson plans that initially fail some learners” (Casper & Leuichovius, 2005; CAST, 2009 as cited in (Courey, Tappe, Siker & LePage, 2012, p. 10).

“UDL, does not mean ignoring or pretending there are not challenges for the student. [Rather] it means building ramps that allow this student to enter into the learning” (Katz, 2013, p. 115). This approach honours each individual student’s intelligence and capacity for learning “by providing him a way to be successful rather than asking him to do what he cannot do” (Katz, 2013, p. 115). But it is not only “the needs of students with Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) [that are] addressed through UDL, the needs of at-risk, but yet to be identified, students are also addressed” (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008 as cited by Courey, Tappe, Siker & LePage, 2013, p. 8) making it an appropriate framework for designing lesson plans for increasingly diverse general education classrooms and supports co-teaching through the use of the three principles of UDL, advocated by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), which include multiple means of representation, engagement, and action and expression (D. H. Rose &

By pairing lesson plans that follow the UDL guidelines with the monitoring of individual student progress a teacher is effectively able to differentiate the current or future lessons as needed to make the classroom an effective place for all learners. Alternatively, when we ask students to do what they cannot do students like Eliot get left behind.

*Eliot’s story-*

15 minutes into the class and my hand usually kills! To top it off the notes that I do manage to get down are messy and incomplete. I miss a lot of what the teacher is actually saying because I am always rushing to copy the last thing that he has said off of a friend. The teacher must know when I have no idea what is going on because he always manages to ask me at those exact moments. I get the ‘you should have been paying better attention look’ on the days that he is in a good mood and a rude invite to sit closer to the front of the room when he is not. I am not sure if he thinks his intimidating looks or being seated closer to him will help me understand any better or if he just likes embarrassing me.

I do not have a very good grade in my socials class. Our grades are based mainly on our test scores. I do not test well because I find it hard to get my ideas out. Because of this tests make me nervous which causes my senses to become astute allowing me to hear everything! It is tough focusing on a test when everything distracts you.

We are looking into getting me enrolled in a support block for the next term. But for this term my mom just says that I have to hang in there and keep jumping the hoops. I am trying but I seem to be a little further behind each day.
Learners differ in the ways that they perceive and comprehend information that is presented to them. For example, those with sensory disabilities (e.g. blindness or deafness); learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia); language or cultural differences, and so forth all require different ways of approaching content. Others may simply grasp information quicker or more efficiently through visual or auditory means rather than printed text (CAST, 2011).

In Eliot’s story the lessons that were not effective for him were presented orally with only a few key facts being recorded on the board. Further, he could not even focus all of his attention on comprehending the information being spoken as he was required to scribble down the notes from the board before they were erased for the next set of notes.

Eliot’s story continued-

*Socials Studies does not seem as hard as last year. Mr. Taylor makes socials interesting by showing us movies, reading novels and comics with us and role playing. He even invited in a Prisoner of War survivor from World War II to visit us and share personal stories. I do not have to race to scribble down notes as he rarely just talks at us and the few times that he has lectured, Mr. Taylor kept them short. Even then, when a few of us tried to scribble down notes he asked us to put our pens away telling us that he wanted us to be able to pay our full attention and be able to see the visuals that he had to share and that we could not do that with our heads down writing. Mr. Taylor assured us that he would always take a screen shot of any notes with his iPad and then make them accessible to the whole class on his webpage. But we only ever had a few short quizzes anyways as the majority of our marks come from the assignments that we do and class participation. For our assignments we always have choice including how we want to demonstrate our learning and whether we want to work alone, in pairs or in small groups. My*
friend Trevor and I are both pretty good on the computer. We teamed up for one assignment and made a WWII presentation on Prezi that Mr. Taylor loved! He even asked if he could keep a copy to show future classes what an effective project presentation might look like. My mom was pretty impressed. She told everyone that the teacher had kept my project as an example!

Additional comments that speak to students’ and teachers’ experiences with UDL include:

Ms. Holt- Grade 9 Social Studies & English Teacher-

Colleagues commented when they walked into my classroom that EVERY student was engaged. The Integration Support Teacher was especially pleased. She said that if she did not already know who the students were who struggle academically she would never be able to pick them out just by watching them in my class.

Mr. Innes- Gr.10 Math & Science Teacher-

When they were assessed, they really knew their stuff!

Ms. Sutton- Gr.10 English Teacher-

The other students were turning to Danni for help with how to use Kurzweil. Danni was in her element.

Zoey- Gr.9 Social Studies Student-

It was such a fun unit! We got to pretend that we were the Serfs and Peasants and our teacher was the Lord. Instead of reading about it we got to act it out. My boyfriend wanted to join my class because I told him about what we did and what I learned each day.

Colton- Gr.10 Science Student-

I was nominated as the student of the month. I have never been the student of the month before.
Danni-Gr.10 English Student-

My teacher pulled me aside one day and asked if I could help her teach the class how to use Kurzweil as I was the class expert at it. She wanted the class to be able to have the choice of using Kurzweil as a tool for a project that we were going to be working on. I agreed to help. I still cannot believe how interested the other students were and it was nice to be the one with the answers for once.

The success stories of students whose needs are successfully met through effective program planning offer hope for our goals of educating all our students. Further, such stories offer examples of what effective program planning could look like.

Brandon’s story-

“I made it!” he said. “I knew that you would Brandon” his case manager replied. A tear escaped from her eye as she proudly watched Brandon cross the stage to receive his Dogwood Diploma.

Brandon first enrolled in alternative education after having failed his grade 9 and 10 year at a local secondary school. He arrived with a district designation of student requiring moderate behaviour support.

The flexibility of the alternative school allowed the school team to meet Brandon’s specific needs by tailoring a program that reduced the number of courses taken per term and lengthened the timeframe he had to complete the requirements of the two courses he was enrolled in. The Integration Support Teacher worked with his classroom teachers by adapting his program within what Vygotsky (1962) called Brandon’s zone of proximal development, integrating his personal interests where possible. His classroom teachers worked with the Integration Support Teacher to implement principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
and differentiation and team taught together once a week. The Integration Support Teacher also worked with Brandon once a week for two hours and connected with him on all other school days. The YFC also provided invaluable support. She and Brandon had a scheduled check in each morning to provide him with a supportive ear and something nutritious to eat. This positive start to the day was grounding for him and encouraged success. On particularly challenging mornings the YFC made a point to connect with both the IS Teacher and the Classroom Teachers so that they were aware and knew to give him extra space if needed. On top of that she would also be in and out of the various classrooms checking in with students and offering support when needed.

The school team also arranged for Brandon to have a Psycho-Educational Assessment completed. He was identified as having a learning disability in reading, written output and math. Brandon was screened in the district as a student identified as having a Learning Disability. The Integration Support Teacher spent a lot of time with him explaining just what such a designation means directly related to him and how everyone has strengths and areas to strengthen in life. They also talked about how it is the people who learn to use their strengths and various strategies to compensate for areas that are weaker who succeed. Discovering that he has a learning disability and what that means helped him to understand that he was not “stupid” as prior school experiences had led him to believe.

The team also de-designated him as being a student who requires moderate behaviour support because he was not presenting any behavioural challenges. When the Integration Support Teacher spoke to Brandon about de-designating him from the moderate behaviour category he got a sheepish look in his eye and said that doing so “sounds good”. Then after a
brief hesitation he added that he got into trouble a lot at his previous secondary school because he hated it there.

One of the adaptations explored with Brandon was technology. He quickly opened up to trying any and all presented assisted technology and especially took to using WordQ on his laptop. The assistive technology allowed Brandon to be more independent with his work which positively impacted his already growing confidence. He even began completing assignments at home which had not happened prior. One such assignment was a five-page autobiography. (There was no punctuation but the organization was fantastic!) Most importantly though, he was proud of his work and had even commented within his autobiography how he is “doing well at school and likes it now”.

As Brandon attended he completed assignments, as he completed assignments he passed courses, as he passed courses his belief in himself and his abilities grew. In the beginning Brandon had little interest in graduating. He was waiting to turn seventeen so that he could legally drop out. As the year progressed, however, he began to talk about how “it would be pretty cool to be the only one in [his] family to graduate”. Before long he was talking about his up and coming graduation day as it was going to be one of the most important days in his life.

Brandon was always capable of success. Unfortunately, the traditional secondary school in which he was enrolled prior does not have the same level of flexibility with its program planning. Brandon spoke of how he “kind of just sat in the back of his classes listening to his iPod or walked around the school or school grounds with his buddies” when he was enrolled at the traditional secondary school. He said that he had two blocks in the learning center but that they did not help much because he was already “so far behind and confused that [he] did not
know where to start and the teachers in the room were always back and forth between so many students that [he] could not get the help that [he] needed anyways.

Chapter 7 - Discussion

This inquiry sought to explore the following questions: "What are some stories of the learning experiences of adolescent students with learning and behavioural challenges in traditional and alternative secondary schools? In what ways can these stories inform our planning of school organizational structures to best meet the need of all students?" This was achieved by listening to the stories of adolescent students with exceptional needs through the lens of the students themselves and the staff that work closely with them. I then organized my data into themes which I presented in the form of fictionalized stories. These accounts explore what does and does not make school an effective place for all learners.

Struggling to stay somewhat caught up, not having any friends or adult connections and truancy all indicated that school was not an effective place for Maddie. Messy and incomplete notes and poor grades were two indicators that it was also not an effective place for Eliot. Their experiences remind us to be aware of the multiple ways that students indicate learning challenges. Beyond educational assessments, planning needs to attend to student voice in all its forms, and take seriously our responsibility to respond to what they tell us.

The students for whom school is effective spoke of the importance of connections with staff, their peers and the school community. These connections seem to be missing for those who have given up or feel a lack of success. The cohort model is an effective model in fostering connections and a sense of community. The students have a greater opportunity to connect to
their teachers and peers as they are together each day. But a cohort’s success is more than simply time spent together. A cohort is a collaborative community with an ethos that they are stronger together than separately. In the cohort model represented in this study the school team dedicates time each year towards building classroom community specifically teaching the students how to work together effectively. Learning opportunities, assignments and even conflict resolution are done collaboratively. School staff make every effort to provide opportunities that value students’ strengths and build these connections through interactive learning experiences. Students from the cohorts felt not only more connected to their teachers and their peers but to their classroom and school. This, the students explained, was because they had a classroom and space that they took ownership and pride in. Initiating and leading a school fundraising effort to support a local cause gave them a greater sense of pride in their school.

The students identified the importance of courses and assignments being relevant to them, engaging and not too easy or too hard. Relevance may be as basic as making sure that the students understand that their learning will benefit them in life. Knowing their interests and what they are good at, their background experiences and what they hope to do in life also helps a teacher to target specific interests and skill sets to increase motivation when teaching skills. It may also provide a teacher with additional background knowledge to support the designing of lessons that follow the UDL guidelines. One of the students commented how his math teacher had them do a math project that looked at budgeting for a car or for moving out. This kind of learning, he said, interested the class because it was useful with direct relevance to their life. Other teachers, he said, allow the students to pick their own topics when writing stories or completing projects and always allowed them to have input into how they would present their learning. When lessons are designed using the UDL guidelines a teacher anticipates the needs
within her class and then plans accordingly to meet those needs so that a lesson or assignment is not too easy or too hard for any one student. Lessons that follow the UDL guidelines also offer personal choice which increases student engagement.

Lastly the students spoke to the challenges of the traditional school organizational model specifically having to change classes and teachers every 45 minutes, the amount of homework that piles up and huge classes where they cannot get the help that they need. The classroom teachers who participated in my study also spoke to how the strict time and class size constraints that exist in their traditional school was limiting. One of the teachers shared that he could see that some of the students in his class needed just a bit more time from him but that slowing down the whole class for a few students would throw his whole term off. In his eyes it just was not an option. Looking at his term overview he explained how it was his job to keep the majority of his class on track so that they were ready for their upcoming provincial exam. Between the number of students he had in his class, the diverse needs and the full curriculum he was at a loss of how to help the struggling learners. He ended up sending them to the Learning Center to hopefully find the help they needed. Another secondary school teacher who had taught grade seven explained that having the students for the majority of the day allowed her to do more creative lesson planning and intertwining of the subjects. She wholeheartedly felt that her lessons were more fragmented now that she was only teaching two subjects to multiple different groups of students. The students in the cohort model have Math and Science with one teacher and English and Social Studies with another teacher Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. The two morning blocks are an hour and a half each and the two afternoon blocks are an hour each. The teachers say that this model works well as they have an equal number of morning and afternoon blocks for their academic courses meaning that they have some longer classes and some shorter classes
and can plan their lessons accordingly. Also, teaching two back to back courses to the same group of students provides even further opportunity to stretch out a lesson if needed. Teaching two courses to the same group of students also makes it possible for the teacher to intertwine learning outcomes which numerous students commented as being an added benefit of the cohort model. Wednesday is an elective day. Most students have a morning elective and an afternoon elective. The teachers feel that the longer class allows them to offer the students meaningful opportunities that they otherwise would not be able to off with shorter classes. The students’ projects also appear to benefit from the longer classes as they provide more time for the students to “dig in and get lost in their work”. Friday is a tutorial day. Rather, than expecting students to finish their assignments at home without support or the needed resources, students are encouraged to attend Friday tutorials. Students see Friday tutorial as an opportunity to catch up on missed work, get additional help as needed and as a further opportunity to connect to both their peers and their teacher(s). Support during these times is led by the classroom teachers and supported by an EA. The students also have the option of receiving additional support in either the Storefront or the Learning Center though most students prefer to be with the teacher who gave the assignment.

Traditional secondary classrooms often have thirty plus students per class. Even with the best intentions, these teachers find it impossible to meet the needs of all of their students. The cohorts have a far lower student to teacher ratio with the class sizes having a limit of twenty-two. There is a fulltime EA in each cohort and additional support is provided by the IS Teacher, Learning Support (LS) Teachers and Behaviour Support Teacher. Students commented that having readily accessible support made them feel valued, connected and more successful.
Our current school system, Harvey White (2010) writes on his webpage STEAM “was formed over 100 years ago in a different time- for a different need- in a different world economy- to satisfy a different life style- using the then available technology” (par. 1). Our world has changed a lot in that time and the changes to the educational system have not kept up.

What is more worrisome is that students accepted this regimen when it began because graduation promised a good job and a chance at post-secondary which would bring an even better job still. This is no longer the case. In fact I know of many individuals with degrees who are working at low paying jobs unrelated to their area of study because of the lack of jobs in their field.

We need to be inquiring about what is working and what is not and start making some true changes for the benefit of our students, for our economy and for our future generations.

The knowledge and understanding that can be gained from listening to our students, in this and other related studies, has the potential to impact future pedagogical choices for all school districts.

**Limitations**

This study explored the experiences of struggling secondary students through fictional stories with the goal of providing insights into organizational planning for students’ success. As in all qualitative research, this study is interpretive, seeking to explore ideas and consider possibilities, rather than attempting to make claims about the experiences of all students.

A limitation of this study is the inability to use the data to make generalizations about a student’s secondary school experience based on whether they attend a traditional or alternative secondary school. An individual brings her own background, values and interpretations to every
experience. Teaching styles and therefore a student’s experiences can differ substantially from one classroom to the next and from one school to the next.

A further limitation of this research may be the generalizability of its findings. These stories are based on the voices of six students and eight staff members from two secondary schools in one school district in British Columbia, so it is possible that the small sample size may not accurately reflect the experiences of all students and school staff throughout the province.

Finally, this study emerges from my own experiences, and as such is limited by my own beliefs and biases. As I constructed questions, interviewed participants, formed interpretations and crafted stories to share the findings, I attempted to represent participants’ beliefs fairly, but recognize that I viewed the findings through my own perspective, informed by my experiences and understandings.

**Significance**

Fictionalizing students’ experience adds value by making student voice more accessible to all. The particular fiction presented in this study offers insight into what students with exceptional needs require for secondary school to be effective for them. The experiences described by the characters through fiction may resonate with the real life experiences of the reader and bring a deeper understanding of student experiences and their relation to the organizational model of their learning.

**Future research**

Potential future research that would be valuable for supporting this change would include expanding the participant pool to include additional schools and additional districts specifically focusing on students who have left the traditional school systems due to it being ineffective for them and who then find success at an alternative school. Researchers may also find it useful to
conduct quantitative, long-term studies to track the benefits of alternative school models for success in and beyond school.

**In closing**

To make secondary school effective for all learners we need to be reflective and appropriately responsive to the experiences of our students as well as their voiced needs. An effective organizational structure needs to offer all students:

- reasonable class sizes
- increased opportunity for connections with at least one trusted adult
- a sense of community within the classroom and school
- learning opportunities that are accessible and offer choice
- flexible and relevant program planning

This can be achieved by designing organizational structures that anticipate student differences and then plan for those differences from a structural level as Universal Design for Learning theories advocate. Referencing the idiomatic expression, ‘trying to fit a square peg into a round hole’, we need to stop trying to force our students into an organizational structure that is not a fit for them and, instead make the necessary changes so that so that our schools are effective for all students.
References


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Appendix G

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
Using Narrative Inquiry to Investigate the Learning Experiences Provided at the Secondary School Level for Students with Learning and Behavioural Challenges.
April, 2014.

Engagement Questions:

1. Think of someone who was influential to you during your high school years and explain why they made such an impact.

2. What factors support a student in being successful in high school?

Exploration Questions:

3. Describe what inclusion looks like at your school.

4. Name some of the ways that you may support a student with identified special needs.

5. What do you feel is the most effective aspect of your school’s program for supporting students with special needs?

6. What aspect(s) of the current high school model do not work for students with identified special needs and why not? How could these aspects be restructured to better support their needs?

7. What is the single most important factor that determines whether a student with identified special needs has a positive high school experience and why?

Exit Question:

8. Is there anything else that you would like to say about how the current high school model either supports or does not support students with identified special needs?
Appendix H

QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
Using Narrative Inquiry to Investigate the Learning Experiences Provided at the Secondary School Level for Students with Learning and Behavioural Challenges.
April, 2014.

1. When you think about your school, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
2. Please describe your best experience in school. What made it work for you?
3. In relation to your high school experiences up until now please tell me what you feel is the best/most successful part of your day or week and why.
4. In relation to your high school experiences up until now please tell me what you feel is the worst/most challenging part of your day or week and why.
5. Think of a staff member (teacher, EA, principal or secretary) who has made a positive impact on you and your school experience. What did this staff member do for you that made them so memorable?
6. Do you have staff members that you feel get you and that you can trust at your current school?
7. Explain how a teacher supports your learning in his or her class.
8. Are there any other supports available to you at your current school? If yes please explain.
9. If you could make changes to the current system to make high school a more positive experience what would you change?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your high school experience thus far?