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Are You Listening: What Students with High-Incidence Disabilities Can Tell Their Teachers about School Engagement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the school experience of students with designations and their level of engagement in school. This phenomenological study examined the students’ feelings about school engagement and the supports and adaptations that they received. The six participants, who were either recent graduates or students attending an alternative school and who had a Learning Disability or Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health designation, were interviewed. These designations were categories assigned to the student by the School District Psychologist following a psychoeducational assessment. The lived experience of students who required behavioural and academic support was essential because they had greater struggles, were at a greater risk, and required greater understanding of their individual learning needs when compared to other students. Even when a motivating learning environment, learning support, and opportunity for social engagement were in place, students often found it challenging to be successful. The qualitative data was analyzed to determine common themes about school engagement. Autonomy, purpose and mastery were common themes that arose as a result of the insights provided by the students. This study hoped to address the reasons why students with designations continued to struggle and what the education system could do to effectively support them.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Student Voice, Engagement, Motivation, Students with designations
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my friends and family. Their encouragement and support have been invaluable over the past two years. I also dedicate this to my mother and father, Barbara and Dennis, who have encouraged me every step of the way. I’d like to thank my administrators, without whom I would have never taken the plunge to apply.

Epigraph

“Passion for knowledge, motivation for continuous learning.”

Lailah Gifty Akita
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Often teaching a lesson to a group of students in a classroom is referred to as ‘herding cats’; students minds and bodies are going in multiple directions at all times. The teacher has the difficult task of managing many different and diverse personalities at the same time as well as the responsibility to deliver the lesson. In addition to this, the teacher wants to engage and motivate all students while drawing on their individual strengths in order to facilitate lifelong learning, promote humanitarianism and encourage a feeling of sustained success.

A body of research (Kortening & Christenson, 2009; Lee, 2012; Maclellan, 2008; and McInerney, 2008) has examined student engagement. While this research provided evidence that teachers were interested in how to engage and motivate students, they did not ask the students what was engaging or motivating for them; there might be important information that the students could add. The attention to student engagement and motivation recognized in this research reinforced teachers’ continued investigation into various methods creating and maintaining a captivating learning environment.

I have had the privilege of observing students in a variety of classes and grade levels. I have observed that many students who have been identified as having learning differences are present in class but are not actually engaging in their learning. It seemed to me that they were not interested and appeared to be just going “through the motions”, even though they had a connection with the teacher who has created an excellent lesson. Many times, the students had their heads down and were pretending to listen. Many students are attending their classes because their parents told them to. Every student I have asked knows that getting an education is important, but they are unsure of why. What can change to engage these students to make them want to learn and find greater satisfaction in school and learning across the
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curriculum? By incorporating student opinion, what changes can be made? The aim of my research was to find out from students with learning differences what they felt would be engaging. I did this in order to develop strategies with teachers to improve classroom engagement for all students.

Literature/Research Background

Researchers have looked for the keystone areas that influence student engagement. The following studies highlight some of these keystone areas. These include, but were not limited to; choice, perceived purpose, and relevancy. The results were consistent within and across cultures.

Copsey-Haydey (2011) suggested that choice was a motivator, as it allows students some control over what they are doing (i.e., they can choose the learning experience that will be the most successful for them). She continued to state that a teacher’s understanding of student choice will then create lessons that were motivating and engaging. Students were less motivated to work on things that they perceive as pointless or meaningless (Doucet, 2006). McInerney (2008) supported this when he stated that “teachers should emphasize mastery goal orientation and a strong sense of purpose” while de-emphasizing performance (p. 878). Students who were engaged in their learning built their sense of autonomy and initiative and were able to make connections between what they were learning in the classroom to the real world (Copsey-Haydey, 2011).

Smith and Hepworth (2007) discussed the importance of emotional support, the need for regular feedback, and an appropriate learning environment in order for students to develop writing skills and confidence in literacy. Copsey-Haydey (2011) support these findings and state that:

Students who are engaged in learning read to understand the text, being motivated to learn more or find the answers to their questions. While reading, their focus is on the meaning of the text, as they read to extend their knowledge or understanding. These readers actively apply strategies to assist in their comprehension of the text, which includes stopping when their comprehension breaks down or summarizing their understanding along the way (p. 48).
Students required an opportunity for discussion and reflection at regular intervals in the writing process; Smith and Hepworth (2007) cautioned that a lack of structure in the assignment or project could have led to challenges which will “demotivate students and reduce the opportunity for learning” (p. 11).

Hampton and Roy (2002) found similar results in their research that looked for themes involved in constructing “positive learning environments for First Nations students” (p.1). They identified these themes as “culturally relevant, appropriate and sensitive” (p. 23): professor-student relationship, relevant cultural content in curriculum, flexible teaching methods, culturally appropriate teaching style, and understanding of the individual’s life (Hampton and Roy, 2002). Student-teacher relationships accounted for “39-45% variance of school performance” in first year secondary students (Moreira et al, 2013, p. 118). In a cross culture study in Australia, McInerney (2008) found commonalities in each of the four cultures were achievement goals, sense of self and facilitating factors, and the four cultures similarly recognized these features.

**Statement of Problem**

Researchers and teachers are using student voice to inform education practices. Student voice as defined by the “Glossary of Education Reform” (2014) is the “values, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students in a school, and to instructional approaches and techniques that are based on student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions (edglossary.org/student-voice). Student perceptions of classroom structures are important to their motivation (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, and Akey, 2004). The purpose of this study was to enhance engagement by examining the student voice of secondary students with the following high-incidence designations: behaviour, emotional, and learning disabilities. These designations were categories assigned to the student by the District Psychologist following a psychoeducational assessment. Many of the secondary students with learning disability designations who participated in this study had good attendance, strong connection with their teachers and used class time appropriately. However, their work output did not accurately reflect their understanding and knowledge as they continued to struggle with
engagement. McNiff and Whitehead (2009) stated that by increasing our learning and improving our practice, we change our behaviour, and thereby we increase the contribution to the learning of others and influence changes to their behaviour.

**Personal Context**

While attending a professional development seminar on “Reading Power” by Adrienne Gear, I began reflecting upon my own learning needs and successes I experienced in the education system. At the time of the aforementioned seminar, I was a teacher enrolled in a master degree program that had not learnt decoding and word retrieval until working as an education aide in a kindergarten class. I graduated with a “B” average from high school and went on to obtain bachelor degrees in Kinesiology and Education. Throughout my education experience, I struggled with my own learning disabilities. I developed skills and strategies to compensate for these deficits and sought out resources which allowed me to be successful. By conducting this research, I hoped to be able to utilize my findings in a way to give my students new skills and strategies they can use to compensate for their educational struggles and find success.

This study took place at a rural community. As Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, and White (2007) stated, “rural remoteness may produce social isolation and influence learning outcomes” (p. 248). Rural remoteness may influence relevance of academic goals and thus influence post-secondary choices and employment opportunities (Hardre et al., 2007). I chose to focus on engagement and motivation because I wanted all students to achieve success. It was much easier to motivate and engage students to initiate their math work rather than do their humanities essay. I believe the math homework was less daunting than the essay. I wondered if this was because the students I worked with could see the purpose to the math problems and understand the real life applications; that the problems were scaffolded and the student could break down the homework into manageable chunks; and that math questions tended to be more concrete concepts.
I travelled into the classrooms to co-teach with teachers within the collaborative model of support. We developed a cohort of predominantly First Nation students, many with low literacy and numeracy skills, which allowed them to find success to pass grade ten provincially examinable courses. This raised many concerns of why we have thirty students in these courses: Communications versus English 12, Workplace and Apprenticeship Math versus Foundations or Pre-Calculus, and Year Long Science 10 versus Semester Long. I wondered how the education system is supporting students with designations to motivate and engagement them effectively.

While I was teaching Math 9 Essentials, I had to specifically state the purpose of the lesson before I could teach a new skill; I had to explain the reason behind every lesson. I also connected the material to concrete real life examples and explained why the skill was necessary. I often asked the students I worked with “What do you need?” Not only do I feel that I was validating their needs; it allowed me to gain a clearer perception of the student in that moment. It opened communication, which I found decreased their frustration level and allowed learning to happen.

I had a personal investment in the lived experience of my students and how to connect, engage, motivate and inspire them to reach their personal potential. I chose to do a phenomenological research study because as a teacher, I am constantly trying to support all students more effectively. My own lived experiences and observations were interwoven within the student responses.

I have had the opportunity of working with a variety of extraordinary students and being a part of their educational journey. Before moving to my current school, I made the transition from being a Special Education Aide and Behaviour Support Worker to Learning Resource Teacher. I have worked with students with an extensive range of diverse learning styles including challenges ranging from organizational problems, learning disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, designations of severe behaviour disorders, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. The ultimate challenge was fostering a connection built on mutual respect with each student. I felt you need to know the individual in order to
engage and motivate him/her, recognize their individual needs and adapt their academic supports accordingly. A genuine mutual respect was necessary to relate to each student as he or she existed in the moment, no matter their background or socio-economic status. All students were capable of learning, and teaching entailed uncovering and applying the techniques that allowed the student to engage and be motivated to learn the new concepts.

Rationale of the Study

By allowing students to voice their own personal experiences and perceptions, I hope that educators will gain relevant insights into “greater engagement, community and success in schools” and then use the themes that emerge as “a powerful tool for school improvement” (DeFur and Korinek, 2010, p.15). Students with designations received specific adaptations according to their Individual Education Plan (IEP) which focuses on strategies to enhance level of success or achievement. The voices of students with designations are essential because they have greater struggles, are at greater risk, and require greater understanding of their individual needs than neuro-typical students.

Autonomy, mastery, and purpose were required in order for an individual to be motivated and engaged in the task (Gillard, Gillard, and Pratt, 2015). Gillard et al., (2015) stated that “challenging students to reach higher and investigate deeper into possible outcomes and higher level thinking can engage students, building their self-esteem, and leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of success” (p. 2). Figure 1 demonstrates how autonomy, mastery and purpose interact together to create optimal student engagement. Each aspect of engagement plays an important role in determining the level of engagement the student experiences. The optimal level of student engagement is located where the three circles intersect.
McInerney (2008) described motivation as sense of self, achievement goals, and facilitating conditions. In my experience, the individual should have choice within the assignment that accentuated his/her strengths; he/she had the opportunity to practice the skill in order to develop confidence and build upon previous skills, and understood the reason behind learning the material or skill.

There seems to be a natural streaming that takes place in secondary school. Students who have an aptitude for math may take Pre-Calculus or Math Foundations, whereas students, who struggled in Math 9, were more likely to enroll in Apprenticeship and Workplace Math 10. Likewise students who struggled in English 10 were more inclined to take Communications 11 and 12, instead of English 11 and 12; university bound compared to trades school bound. Students who were enrolled in Math Foundations and English 11 tended to choose more academic electives than those enrolled in Apprenticeship and Workplace Math and Communications. Therefore, it was important to support students to achieve success in earlier grades, so they would have the confidence and motivation necessary to challenge themselves in more academically focused classes.
Literacy, specifically reading comprehension and written output, appeared to be a critical factor of a student’s engagement and motivation in academic courses and therefore, his/her success. According to Guthrie (2008) there were four main factors involved for students to engage in literacy: a motivating learning environment, learning support and application of learning strategies, focus on acquisition of knowledge, and an opportunity for social engagement (as cited in Copsey-Haydey, 2011). This study hoped to address whether or not these four factors in place from the student perspective and why the students with designations continued to struggle with literacy.

Class size, composition and support available were also important considerations for the success of a student with a designation. The converging of many factors contributed to the success of the student. Kortering and Christenson (2009) described engagement as “not conceptualized as an attribute of the student but rather an alterable variable that is highly influences by contextual factors, such as policies and practices of the school, teachers, or family influences” (p. 9). During my time as an education aide, behaviour support worker, and now as a learning resource teacher, I have often wondered what particular factors play a role in my student’s success. Some of my questions were: How many students with designations were in the class? What types of designations were there? What supports were necessary? Was there an Education Assistant (EA)? Was the EA one to one with a specific student or did he/she provide class support? Was there an Aboriginal Support Worker?

Generally, from my observations at the school, there were a greater number First Nation students enrolled in the Apprenticeship and Workplace Math and Communications; this led to questions of :“Why this is the case?; Did more First Nations students have lower literacy skills, or did our school systems not effectively supported them to find success and felt motivated to develop literacy skill in the way we were teaching?; Could this be due to parental involvement and views of education, as Moreira, Dias, Machado Vaz & Machado Vaz (2013) suggest? In my experience, many First Nations students found greater success in courses that allowed for a greater opportunity for hands-on learning.
Research Questions

As previously described, researchers have suggested strategies to improve engagement, motivation and success. However, it is not clear that those general theories necessarily reflect what the students themselves felt they needed. It seemed important to involve them in the process of finding solutions. Therefore, this study investigated the following question: What can students with learning, social/emotional and behavioural designations tell teachers about their lived experience regarding engagement and motivation in academic courses? Some questions that guided the research were the following:

- How could teachers make students’ learning more meaningful?
- What did students see as the purpose of this learning?
- What needed to change for students to be more engaged?
- How did students feel that teachers support them?
- When did students feel success in school?

Methodology and Knowledge Created

Phenomenological research was the method I used to explore this question. In my case, phenomenological research was the researcher’s interpretation of the lived experience of the students. The data was collected from interviews with a small sample of students with designations and examined in order to identify common themes. The aim of phenomenology is “to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflective re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (Van Manen, 1991, p. 36). As a researcher, I was involved as I have connections with the former students and want them to be successful in all their endeavors.
Overview of Study

This study aimed to examine student voice and discover common themes that emerged from student interviews. My goal was for the students to become proactive, self-directed learners with the confidence to acquire information and resources they needed to be successful. What supports did students with designations feel they needed in order for them to be successful not only at school but in life? What changes could be made in the classroom to create engagement and motivation for students with designations? This study took the perspective of the students with designations who struggled with engagement in order to create recommendations for strategies and interventions for classroom teachers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review focused on current research on student engagement, specifically pertaining to engagement and motivation of secondary students with high-incidence designations. The importance of engagement and motivation in academic courses and the current interventions are discussed. The literature review revealed the importance of student voice, the students’ own thoughts, experiences, and opinions, to influence teaching practices. As common themes were identified in engagement and motivation research; however, individualization was required in order for the interventions to be truly successful. Common themes which emerged through the literature review were a sense of belonging, supportive teacher relationships, self-regulation, choice and aspirations for the future.

The Study of Student Engagement

Many teachers hope to engage their students in their learning and encourage them to find success in their lives postsecondary. Student engagement is a foremost concern for educators as “disengaged students are more likely to struggle academically, to drop out of school and to have problem behaviours”
(Lee, 2012, p.330). Kortening and Christenson (2009) reported that the majority of students with high-incidence conditions leave high school as an “official drop out” (p. 5). Students identified as having “high incidence conditions” are those who have been designated as having learning disabilities, behavioural or emotional disability or other health impairments (Kortening and Christenson, 2009, p. 5). These students often had a difficult time in school, and many of the interventions involved student engagement, which was described as a “commitment to and investments in learning, identification with and belonging at school…, participation in the school environment and initiation of an activity to accomplish an outcome” (Kortening and Christenson, 2009, p. 7). These students shared “similar histories of underachievement and academic failure” (Fulk, Brigham and Lohman, 1998, p. 302). They needed explicit and direct support from caring adults as students with high incidence designations were more likely to “experience depression, anxiety, conduct problems, delinquency, school dropout, incarceration and poor post high school outcomes” (Murray and Pianta, 2007, p. 106).

Engaged students were connected with the academic and social aspects of life (Kortening and Christenson, 2009). Although educators often used engagement and motivation synonymously, Lee (2012) defined engagement as “to do something” and motivation as “to be moved to do something” (p.333). Motivation was intertwined with a magnitude of factors. Motivation affected and was affected by “providing greater autonomy, more frequent experiences of competence and elevated positive social interactions…” (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012, p.30). Motivation was dynamic and dependent on many constructs that facilitated or constrained student learning; these constructs “include goal orientation, volitions, interest and attributions” (Maclellan, 2008, p. 413). Personal interest was the key factor associated with increased attention, persistence, and motivation for continued engagement in learning (Maclellan, 2008).

**Difficulties found within student engagement.**

Students with learning disabilities had common difficulties. Their experiences, strengths, and needs are unique and are determined by their individual personalities and profiles (Butler, 2003).
Students, who believed “effort alone [could] make a positive difference [were] more likely to persist and succeed” (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012, p.31). Lee (2012) explained that student engagement was influenced by various individual and family factors, such as gender, grade level, race, ethnicity, language (spoken in the home) and socioeconomic status. She continued to explain that “there [had] been a consistent and significant achievement gap among race and ethnic groups and emotional disengagement of students of colour” (Lee, 2012, p. 331). Moreira, Dias, Machado Vaz, and Machado Vaz (2013) stated that the students’ learning approaches, cognitive styles, motive, and goals predicted academic performance and engagement with motivation factors being one of the greatest predictors of performance. Cognitive engagement was an indicator of extrinsic motivation, control and relevance of school work and future academic goals (Moreira et al, 2013). The engagement process was cyclical: determines learning task, student attends to task, student completes task, and teacher provides performance feedback (Maclellan, 2008). As these studies showed, many students with learning disabilities not only had problems within the tasks themselves, but ultimately struggled to keep engagement and be motivated to complete the task.

**Phenomenology and Student Engagement**

Phenomenology explores the unique lived experience of students. Through this exploration, teachers and researchers discovered common themes among students with high-incidence designations. Lee (2012) stated that the students needed to invest in their own education and “do something” and needed to “be moved to do something” in order to develop the ability to become persistent in their own learning (p.333). This persistence could be achieved by understanding the unique support, connections, and personal context that these particular students required for success. Through studying engagement and motivation via student voice, phenomenological research revealed the specific needs of struggling students.
Theoretical Understandings of Student Engagement

There were several theories promoting student engagement and motivation. Some of the most pertinent theories with respect to student voice, literacy, and students with designations included: social constructivist theory, personal investment theory, and self-determination theory. These theories have foundations based on Maslow’s theory of motivation and attachment. Maslow’s (1962) theory of motivation suggested that, “meeting the needs for belonging is a necessary precondition to higher needs such as the desire for knowledge” (Goodenow and Grady, 1993, p.68). According to attachment theory, students entered school with pre-existing expectations about how available and supportive adults were (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991; Anan and Barnett, 1999 as cited in Toste, Bloom, and Heath, 2014). Toste et al (2014) explained that these predispositions influenced students’ perceptions and behaviours that confirmed and maintained their prior expectations and relationship patterns. A model that supported attachment theory was the check and connect model, which “promoted student engagement through relationship building, problem solving and persistence according to learning connections that enhance academic and social competencies” (Kortering and Christenson, 2009, p.8). Christenson (2003) theorized that student engagement involved academic, behavioural, cognitive and psychological components (Kortering and Christenson, 2009). By exploring the different theories, I hoped to bring forth an understanding of what was required by the students in order to increase their engagement in the classroom environment.

Social constructivist theory.

Social constructivist theory provided an explanation of how learning occurs through active participation and interaction between students, peers, and teachers (Copsey-Haydey, 2011). The social constructivist theory promotes scaffolded learning and collaborative experiences in order to facilitate the construction of knowledge, and therefore, increased student engagement, motivation and empowerment (Copsey-Haydey, 2011). Higher order learning, the ability to develop and apply new concepts based on pre-existing knowledge, takes place when the “learner’s underlying schemata is changed to incorporate
new understandings” through reflection and discussion (Smith and Hepworth, 2007, p.6). Gurthie (2008) identified four main factors to enhance student engagement and motivation when learning to read: the learning environment, the development of reading strategies, the acquisition of knowledge, and the opportunity for social engagement through reading (as cited in Copsey-Haydey, 2011). Gurthie (2008) theorized that when the factors suggested are used optimally, teachers were able to build the students’ capacity to learn. Social constructivist theory suggested that to increase student engagement lessons should contain opportunities to build upon the students’ prior knowledge through classroom discussion.

**Personal investment theory.**

Personal investment theory referred to “how an individual chooses how to invest his or her time, energy or talent in particular activities” (McInerney, 2008, p.870). According to the personal investment theory (Maheer and Braskamp, 1986), three key components needed to be present for motivation to occur: achievement goals, sense of self, and facilitating conditions (McInerney, 2008). McInerney (2008) described components of achievement goals as mastery, performance, social and extrinsic; sense of self involves a sense of purpose, self-reliance, self-concept (negative and positive); and facilitating conditions were parent support, teacher support, and peer support. Social and cultural context were important contributing factors in motivation and performance (McInerney, 2008). Personal investment theory contributed to engagement and motivation by suggesting the student had to choose to spend their time on the task.

**Self-determination theory.**

Similarly, self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000b) suggested that when an individual’s psychological needs (competence, relatedness and autonomy) were supported, his or her willingness to perform desired actions increased (Lee, 2012). The individual was able to internalize the values and expectations of socializing agents; therefore, positive connections and relationships with teachers encouraged students to be motivated to persevere in their learning (Lee, 2012). Metacognitive knowledge of self (self-efficacy, perceptions of competence and attributional beliefs) contributed to understanding
students’ motivation in school or lack thereof; if a student lacked confidence in his or her ability, he or she may be at risk for developing “learned helplessness” which further diminishes their own expectations, efforts and problem solving abilities (Fulk et al, 1998, p.301), and may decrease the “students’ need to think” (Maclellan, 2008, p. 418). Self-determination theory suggested that the student’s belief in self was a critical factor in his or her engagement. Self-awareness needed to be present and encouraged by teachers in order for the student to be engaged in the task.

**Recent/Related Research**

The research on student engagement and motivation identified common themes of sense of belonging, supportive teacher relationships, self-regulation, choice, and aspirations for the future. DeFur and Korinek (2010) studied the perspectives of rural and suburban adolescents on the nature of schools, teaching, and leadership that influenced student learning. They investigated the insights that students with and without disabilities had regarding engagement, community and success through student voice. Through asking students how to improve their learning and education, DeFur and Korinek (2010) identified common themes of belonging, teacher-student relationships, classroom and school structures, and collaborations and co-teaching. They reported that “listening to students’ opinions promoted community, a sense of belonging and increased student engagement” (p.19). Smyth (2007) suggested schools should implement the following strategies: student ownership of their learning; connections to supportive teachers; fostering an environment of caring, respect and trust; relevant curriculum (including cultural relevance); and assessment that is authentic to learning. DeFur et al (2010) and Hampton and Roy (2002) studies were contextually different, but both illustrated that the needs of the specific students shared the commonalities of belonging and understanding of the individual. This research provided valuable insights into the importance engagement.

**Conditions for learning.**

Hampton and Roy (2002) suggested possible strategies for facilitating the success of First Nation Students, enrolled in postsecondary institutions in Saskatchewan, by means of creating more positive
learning environments. Through interviews with professors and students, Hampton and Roy (2002) summarized five main areas of improvement: enhancing the professor-student relationship; including relevant First Nation content in the curriculum; implementing flexible teaching methods; utilizing culturally appropriate teaching styles; and gaining an understanding of the First Nation students’ life at postsecondary.

Kortering and Christenson (2009), who agreed with Hampton and Roy (2002) findings, stated that students’ perception of belonging, competence and relevance of school work played crucial roles in their academic success and future endeavors. This included task persistence, participation, and attendance (Goodenow, 1993, as cited in Kortering and Christenson, 2009). They reported similar findings with the addition of engagement in non-academic aspects of school. Kortering and Christenson (2009) noted that “effective interventions must account for more than attendance and academic skills; equally important for intervention design were students’ commitment to learning, perceptions of academic and social competence, achievement motivation and sense of belonging” (p. 8). Moreira et al (2013) reported that a multidimensional approach, where students were exposed to material through a variety of modalities, was essential in promoting student engagement as it related to study skills.

Likewise, McInerney (2008) discovered that a sense of purpose, emphasis on mastery, and positive feedback enhanced engagement in low-achieving students. For academic and behaviour engagement to occur, cognitive and psychological needs of the students were required to be addressed (Kortening and Christenson, 2009). Kortering and Christenson (2009) stated that a shift to school completion, academic engagement, social aspects and development of student competence needed to occur to meet the environmental demands; “engagement is the primary theoretical model for understanding dropout and is, quite frankly the bottom line in interventions to promote school completion” (p. 7). The aforementioned research suggested that in order to increase engagement, and ultimately graduation rates, of students with disabilities, students should be regarded holistically.
Students’ sense of belonging.

Student sense of belonging had important influence on academic motivation; engagement, especially in terms of expectancy of success; valuing school work; and self-reported effort regardless of cultural differences (Goodenow and Grady, 1993). Students’ perception of belonging to the school culture was vital to their engagement in learning. Smyth (2007) stated that by cultivating a ‘sense of belongingness’, where the students believed that the school supported and cared for them and their future enhanced engagement through connection (p. 639). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) echoed Smyth’s statement; “there is a high prevalence of students who can be considered disaffected from school in terms of their sense of belonging or their participation” (as cited in Smyth, 2007, p. 651). Goodenow and Grady (1993) also reported the significance of students’ culture and perception of belonging and its effect on motivation and academic success (work and persistence in difficult tasks). Further, they suggested that there exists a reciprocal relationship between belonging and motivation (Goodenow and Grady, 1993). A student’s sense of belonging played a crucial role in the student’s engagement in academic courses.

Choice.

Choice was an important factor for engaging students in project activity as it evoked curiosity (Smith and Hepworth, 2007). Effective student choice influenced performance and behaviour by “decreasing inappropriate behaviour and increasing task engagement” (Skerbetz and Kostewicz, 2015, p. 15). It increased probably of task completion to a higher quality of work (Von Mizener and Williams, 2009, as cited in Skerbetz and Kostewicz, 2015). Students learned to self-regulate performance across a range of tasks (Butler, 2003). When students were able to develop their own attribution to work, there was potentially greater attention to task and greater accuracy of judgements on academic achievements; this may decrease ‘learned helplessness’ (Maclellan, 2008, p. 417). The research showed the necessity to have a degree of choice present within an activity in order to increase motivation by means of creating ownership, and therefore engagement.
Studying student voice.

Smyth (2007) studied student voice in his research that focused on disengaged students, predominately with behaviour designations. He wrote “young people themselves are powerful and insightful analysts of what works and what does not work for them in school and the conditions that need to be brought into existence for them to have a meaningful education” (Smyth, 2007, p. 635). Smyth (2007) stated that knowing about and acknowledging the importance of students having a voice in shaping the conditions of their learning required a context of application in their schools. Low engagement and early leaving is “more complex than family-related risk factors” (p.652); schools could influence the success of learning through the “school culture, pedagogy/teaching/learning and school structure” (p. 653). Students were able to provide valuable advice to school personnel and families about how to promote student productivity and achievement when teachers were willing to listen and implement suggestions (DeFur and Korinek, 2010). Through student focus groups, DeFur and Korinek (2010) reported that students believe, “all [their] teachers should know about [their IEP] and what it says” (p. 18). These conversations with students increased “their sense of self-worth, efficacy and membership in the school” (DeFur and Korinek, 2010, p. 15). Student voice provided valuable insights into students’ beliefs concerning their belonging, general education, and engagement in courses.

Positive student-teacher relationships.

The research of Toste et al (2014) emphasized the importance of the need of students with learning disabilities for positive student-teacher relationships as a protective factor. This connection influenced academic competence and school satisfaction. Lee (2012) stated that the “teacher-student relationship was a significant predictor of reading performances” (p. 330). Additionally, Murray and Pianta (2007) found that students with high incidence disabilities responded positively to teacher-student relationships, especially regarding socio-emotional adjustments. Supportive teacher-student relationships were related to self-concept, school adjustment, and grade.
Teacher-student relationship was found to be the foundation for First Nation success in postsecondary institutions by Hampton and Roy (2002); “it validates traditional aboriginal pedagogy that describes teaching as an act of love which takes place within a trusting relationship” (p. 23). Supportive teachers helped and guide their students, kept students on track, took an interest in students’ work and offered encouragement and feedback (Smith and Hepworth, 2007). They scaffolded learning, set clear guidelines and expectations, and used collaboration to increase student motivation and engagement (Copsey-Haydey, 2011 and Toste et al, 2012). This was especially important for students with learning disabilities (Fulk et al, 1998). Murray and Pianta (2007) reported research that teacher-student relationships were “positively associated with students with high-incidence disabilities and their socio-emotional adjustment and lower levels of delinquency” (p. 107). Teacher-student relationships enhanced student engagement and helped to enhance student outcomes (Lee, 2012). Toste et al (2012) added that a “trusting relationship is one of the primary reasons for school persistence” (p. 136). The research suggested that student engagement was greatly affected by the relationship with the teacher.

**Self-advocacy.**

The purpose of Fulk et al (1998) research was to investigate the motivational characteristics of students with learning disabilities, emotional or behavioural disorders, and average achievement. The results indicated that students should advocate for themselves and be involved in the development of their Individual Education Plans (IEP). This, paired with an involvement in extracurricular activities and vocational training, would help improve their sense of belonging. Butler (2003) and Maclellan (2008) discussed the significance of strategic content learning and student centered learning respectively. In strategic content learning, students acquired knowledge through meaningful experiences; this content was socially relevant, co-constructed, and based on reflective practice and discussions (Butler, 2003). The central idea of student centred learning, according to Maclellan (2008), was that students take “responsibility for the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of their learning”; students determine what, how, and when to think (p. 411). Maclellan (2008) suggested that for students “to retain control of their
learning and advance it through help-seeking, they needed to be willing to acknowledge personal difficulty and desire interactions with more knowledgeable others” (p. 416). Students would have an increased responsibility for their learning; they would become self-monitoring and independent when given the opportunity to be proactive in task determination, continuation, and completion (Maclellan, 2008). Butler (2003) found similar results with students who participated in strategic content learning. She stated that there were observable gains in the students’ independence and self-directedness; self-confidence, pride, and sense of control over learning; and awareness of the value of their individualized learning strategies to their academic success. Butler (2003) reported that the students would “take turns leading discussions and supporting one another’s strategic activities” while working in small groups applying reading strategies (p. 41). Students who felt control over their “own success or failure have a greater potential for higher achievement”, and therefore, were frequently more motivated (Maclellan, 2008, p. 417). Both studies demonstrated how the approaches empowered students to evaluate their own learning and practical experiences to enhance engagement and motivation.

**Conclusion of related/recent research.**

By analyzing the commonalities of the lived experience of the rural high school students with high incidence designations, there was the potential for teachers to be able to engage and motivate more of their students. Through discovery of what propelled students to find purpose and mastery for academic success, teachers would be able to incorporate this information into their classes. Many teachers have already experienced this when their students feel a sense of belonging, have supportive relationships, and have choice, the students performed better in class. The intension of the study focused on enhancing this concept.

**Gaps in the Knowledge**

Although research involving student voice and student perceptions continued to increase, gaps still existed, especially regarding students with designations and their perceptions on motivation and engagement. While DeFur and Korinek (2010) and Smyth (2007) examined student voice of students with
and without designations and with behavioural designations respectively, to promote engagement and success, they made no mention of cultural subtleties. Kortering and Christenson (2009) reported on strategies to engage students with high-incidence designations and high school completion, but lacked student voice. Copsey-Haydey (2011) suggested using scaffolding to increase engagement for students, but students without designations and student voice were not considered.


There also seemed to be limited research reporting on First Nation students and engagement. Hampton and Roy (2002) suggested strategies for facilitating success of First Nations in university, but university students all had self-concept and academic competence. How should we increase engagement of First Nations students in high school in order to increase high school completion? It was generally accepted that to enhance school engagement and achievement teachers should emphasize goal mastery, a strong sense of purpose to aid in self-defined improvement (McInerney, 2008 and Maclellan, 2008). However, how would this research specifically apply to students with learning, behavioural, and socio-emotional designations? How would this apply specifically to First Nation students with high-incidence designations? This study hoped to address information on high school students in a rural setting with high-incidence designation on engagement, motivation, and academic success.

**Significance of Issue**

Student voice has been developing into a powerful research tool as student perceptions had major implications for educational programming (Crowley, 1993). Students could learn to be self-advocates and
communicate when they did not understand the overall process, what should be done and when, and the purpose of the activity (Smith and Hepworth, 2007). The students could communicate to their teachers about their specific aspects of their IEPs to increase potential academic achievements.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Methodological Understandings

This study used qualitative research utilizing a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology is the lived experience of the students; it is a “human science since the subject matter of phenomenological research is always the structures of meaning of the lived human world” (Van Manen, 1990, p.11). Van Manen (1990) described phenomenology as “the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (p. 10). It provided the researcher with a detailed and in depth description of the students’ authentic experiences, specifically regarding engagement and motivation in literacy courses. Qualitative research focused on “discovery, insight and understanding from perspectives of those being studied” (Merriam, 2009, p.1). Using individual descriptions, the intention was an increased understanding how people interpret their experiences, and constructed meaning to these experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Phenomenological research, of the lived experience and student voice, was relatively new style of research. Van Manen (1990) stated that phenomenon describes the meaning of the experience as perceived by the individual. Although the knowledge was personal, subjective and unique to the individual participant, from these personal descriptions of lived experiences, “the phenomenologist knows that one's own experiences are also the possible experiences of others” (Van Manen, 1990, p54).
As a researcher and a teacher, I was personally involved with the participants, as Van Manen (1990) explained “the human science researcher tries to enter the lifeworld of the persons whose experiences are relevant study material for his or her research project”; he continued to state that “the best way to enter a person's lifeworld is to participate in it” (p. 69). Within phenomenological research, humans were products of their environments and produce their own perspectives based on this environment; the researcher constructs “a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p.42). Van Manen (1990) explained phenomenology “...somehow capture[s] a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytic, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (p. 39). I investigated the commonalities among high school students in a rural school, personal lived experience around engagement, and academic success. I wondered, “What can students with learning, social/emotional and behavioural designations tell teachers about their lived experience regarding engagement and motivation?” As “phenomenological approaches are good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard,” and “cutting through taken-for-granted assumptions, prompting action or challenging complacency” (Lester, 1999, p.4), I used qualitative and phenomenological research to convey the student lived experience on engagement and motivation in the education system.

Participants

The participants were six high school students with designations who volunteered to partake in the interview. This study focused on students with designations of Learning Disability, and Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health. Through complete psychological assessment administered by the District Psychologist, a student’s designation was determined, and these students received special education services through Individualized Education Programs. Criteria for student participants are:

a. Individual was not currently attending high school which I taught at
b. Individual had ministry designation of behaviour, emotional, or learning disabilities in the last three years and had an Individual Education Plan
c. Individual self-identifies with having difficulty engagement or motivation in class

d. Individual was 16 to 21 years old

Recruitment.

The participants were recruited from the local community; they either had attended the secondary school or the alternate school. The majority of the students attending the alternate school had a ministry designation of Intensive Behaviour/Mental Health. They were of mixed gender, ages 16-21 and mixed race (predominantly Caucasian and/or First Nations). Recent graduates were requested to apply through recruitment posters which were placed around the community at the grocery store and community centers. The recent graduates responded to the recruitment posters by contacting researcher. After a brief explanation of the study, the participants were given letters of consent (Appendix C). If the participants were 18 or under, they were instructed to take the consent forms home to their parents/guardians (Appendix E) to sign and return, if they consented to allow participation in the study.

There were two forms of recruitment instruments: a recruitment poster (Appendix A) and direct verbal contact through a recruitment script (Appendix B). A pre-arranged on-site visit was conducted to present the recruitment script to the students attending the alternate school. The recruitment script was used to explain the purpose of the study with the alternate school during the meeting with their class. The meeting took place after both the teacher and principal had approved the interviews as both the meeting and interviews were during class time.

I contacted and spoke with the participants as a group during school hours at the alternate school. The students who were interested in participating in the interview contacted the researcher individually or through their classroom teacher. After a brief discussion explaining the study, the participants were given letters of assent (student, Appendix D) and consent (parent/guardian letters Appendix E). The participants were instructed to take the consent forms home to their parents/guardians to sign and return, if they consented to allow the student to participate in the study. The participants were provided with a copy of
basic interview questions with the option of listening to the interview before it was transcribed. Once
permission was granted, dates were scheduled for the interview session with the participant. The students
could withdraw from the study until the time that I began data analysis.

**Ethical considerations.**

All interviews were confidential in order to protect the student’s privacy and to protect the
student from risk and harm. The students and parents/guardians were aware that they could withdraw
from the study up to the time of analysis.

There was a potential for mental distress, stress or embarrassment as the participants were
discussing personal information, observations and lived experiences. Although every effort was made to
protect participants’ identities (e.g. real names were not used, etc.), they could be identified indirectly
through sharing their personal experiences as these through directly quotations or paraphrasing. As a
result, participants’ anonymity could be guaranteed. On-site counselling, however, was be available upon
request or if distress was perceived by the researcher. I encouraged confidentially through the design of
the research in order for the students to not be identifiable through their personal experiences.

Some of the participants recognized me as the Learning Resource Teacher at the secondary
school; however, I was not the current teacher of any of the participants. Participants’ names were
initially known by me. All names were removed and replaced with a code number or pseudonym. Only I
had access to the code record that identified participants and their assigned code numbers (or
pseudonyms). The participants could have been indirectly identified through direct quotes and sharing
their personal observations and experiences. Quotes from participants were used as evidence to support
findings or common themes. Although, real names were be used in research results, there was a
possibility that the participant could be identified based on the information provided or the incidents
described.
Another issue in phenomenological research is researcher bias. There existed the possibility that I could have interpreted the participants responses based on my own lived experiences, opinions or perspectives and misrepresent the participants. I was aware of the potential for this bias and attempted to analyze and be objective of opinions and interpretations.

**Data Collection**

As a researcher, I conducted an open ended question interview. Each interview was to be one on one with the participant and the researcher. It was approximately 10 to 15 minutes. The participants, recent graduates and alternate students, were asked the following questions, respectively (Appendix F and G):

**Questions for recent graduates.**

The following questions were asked to recent high school graduates:

a) Where did you attend school?
b) Why did you choose to come to school?
c) What courses did you take?
d) Did you enjoy your courses?
e) What was your favourite subject and why?
f) Are you currently attending post-secondary? Trades?
g) If so what are you taking? If not are you working? Do you enjoy your job?
h) What does it feel like when you enjoy a particular subject or topic? What does it feel like when you don’t?
i) How often did you attend school? 5 days a week, 4 days a week, 3 days a week, or 1-2 days a week?
j) What is the reason when you miss school? What brought you to school?
k) What do you think the definition of school/in class engagement is?
l) What did it feel like when you are engaged in class?
m) On a scale of 1 to 10 please indicate your level of engagement in high school? Can you give me some examples? (How that changed now that you are at post-secondary?)
n) Did you feel that relevant engaging material was provided?
o) How could your learning have been more meaningful in school?
p) What did you see as the purpose of this learning?
q) Did you feel supported in the classroom?
r) How did you feel supported?
s) What specifically made you feel supported?
t) How did supports and adaptation help your learning? When do you feel success? a) Success in academics and b) success in life? Either or?
u) Did you ever feel success in your classes or in school?

**Questions for alternate students.**

The following questions were asked to students attending the alternate school:

a) Where do you attend school?
b) Why do you choose to come to school?
c) What courses are you taking?
d) Do you enjoy your courses?
e) What is your favourite subject and why?
f) What does it feel like when you enjoy a particular subject or topic? What does it feel like when you don’t?
g) How often do you attend school? 5 days a week, 4 days a week, 3 days a week, or 1-2 days a week?
h) What is the reason when you miss school? What brings you to school?
i) What do you think the definition of school/ in class engagement is?
j) What does it feel like when you are engaged in class?
k) On a scale of 1 to 10 please indicate your level of engagement in your current courses? Can you give me some examples?
l) Do you feel that relevant engaging material is provided in your classes?
m) How could your learning be more meaningful in school?
n) Do you feel supported in the classroom?
o) How do you feel that you are supported?
p) What do specifically makes you feel supported?
q) How do supports and adaptation help your learning?
r) When do you feel success? a) Success in academics and b) success in life? Either or?
s) Do you ever feel success in your classes or in school?

The data that was collected was qualitative data taken during the interview. Each participant provided information on attention, motivation, engagement, and feelings on academic success and abilities. The interviews were recorded to a password protected laptop using the webcam and then transcribed for data analysis. The interviews were video-taped in order to ensure accuracy of the participants’ response. Only the researcher was visible in the video. Van Manen (1991) explains that “to interview as a means to gather and explore narrative data serves as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of lived experience,” and acts as a venue to “develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience.” (p. 66).

Interview transcriptions were derived from “purposeful conversations” that the researcher had with the participants (Burgess, 1988, as cited in Smyth, 2007, p.636). Qualitative analysis on the
transcriptions, using data analysis software (NVivo), and the transcriptions were coded in order to develop common themes from the participants’ lived experiences.

**Interpretation Analysis**

The students’ opinions and answers were transcribed and then coded in order to determine common themes. Codes were developed from the transcriptions to categorized information from the students. As Van Manen (1990) stated, researchers are “trying to determine what the themes (structures of experience) are” when analyzing phenomenological data (p. 106). He further explained that important questions to consider were: “What is going on here? What is this example an example of? What is the essence of (research questions) and how can I capture this by way of thematic reflection?” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 86).

Several values and issues were associated with phenomenological research as it explored engagement through student voice in order to enhance academic success for students with designations. Lester (1999) stated that “the ‘problem’ for many researchers with phenomenological research is that it generates a large quantity of interview notes, tape recordings, jottings or other records all of which have to be analysed” (p. 2). He continued to explain that “analysis is also necessarily messy, as data doesn’t tend to fall into neat categories and there can be many ways of linking between different parts of discussions or observations” (Lester, 1999, p. 2). Although Qualitative data software (NVivo) required prior coding, it was used to code the information to make the analysis of the data more efficient. Software, like NVivo, “helps people to manage, shape and make sense of unstructured information”. It has “tools for classifying, sorting and arranging information” to allow for the researcher to “identify themes [and] develop meaningful, evidence based conclusions” (http://www.qsrinternational.com/what-is-qualitative-research.aspx). Phenomenology “prioritizes how we see over what we see—this is at least because what we see, despite all the data we can assemble, is ultimately unknowable” (Whittemore, 2014, p. 301).
The results of this study involved descriptions of experiences, both positive and negative, and recommendations for teaching practices and strategies that the students found to be engaging. The difference between this research and previous research was these common themes were developed from the students’ lived experience; “one can only find meaning when looking back on one’s lived experience; people must identify the purpose of the goal they seek” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 19). Finlay (2005) stated that “the researcher aim is to stay with the participant’s description, becoming ever more open to what is being communicated” (p. 278) and an “intersubjective relationship between participant and researcher” developed (p. 277).

**Application of Understandings**

The potential application of knowledge created could be used to reform current teaching practices and learning environments by influencing how teachers design their lessons according to the students’ lived experience. Although it was specific to the student’s perception, common themes could be applied to other students with learning, social/emotional and behavioural designations as tools for engagements. It could also influence student teachers’ education to broaden their understanding of students with learning, social/emotional and behavioural designations. Phenomenology provided “a belief in the importance of the primary subjective consciousness, an understanding of consciousness as active and as meaning bestowing, and a claim that there are certain essential structures to consciousness of which we gain direct knowledge by a certain kind of reflection” (Cohen et. al, 2007, p.18). According to Levin (1988), “If one’s identity is intertwined with that of others, there is hope that, through compassion, humanity can build a new society based on cultivating, learning, and teaching this reciprocal sociality” (as cited in Finlay, 2005, p. 274).

**Limitations**

Limitations of the phenomenological method included a small sample size. Due to nature of open line of questioning, questions may have been misunderstood or misdirected. Some of the questions were taken literally. The themes of what engages these students could be specific to the region and difficult to
generalize (also specific to the individual participants). This study would be difficult to replicate as my own lived experiences was incorporated into the study. As I am a teacher, there exists the potential of research bias. The interviews were voluntary, so the effective representation was limited due to the population size of the rural school.

Significance

The value or significance of phenomenological research was its rich description, inclusion for student voice, and potential for capturing lived experience for building understanding. This could provide teachers with information and themes regarding engagement from the students’ lived experience in literacy classes. Husserl (1952/1989) stated, “One’s experience of the world is intersubjective, full of people who are similar to and different from oneself, perhaps offers a compromise” (Finlay, 2005, p. 285).

CHAPTER 4

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE SECONDARY STUDENT

Introduction

As Van Manen (1996) stated “in pedagogy, we are often guided by what we “feel” rather than rational considerations” (p.12). Phenomenology is the “descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning” (Van Manen, 1991, p. 38). This study describes the lived experience of students living in a rural community. As the researcher my role in phenomenological research was to “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain experience” (Van Manen, 1991, p.42). The insights the students reveal through interviews allows the research to develop common themes from their diverse perspectives. This chapter presents the themes derived from six interviews with a brief description of the participants. The results from this study
reinforce the themes in current research of autonomy, mastery, and purpose. When these three ideas are present the students will be more likely to be engaged and therefore successful in school. This study included three students who currently attend an alternative school and three recent graduates from a public secondary school, two were seventeen years old and four were eighteen. Three of the participants were male and there were three females. Three of the participants were First Nations and the other three were Caucasian. All of the participants had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in secondary school; three had a designation of Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health, two had a designation of a Learning Disability and one had a designation of Chronic Health with a Learning Disability (See Appendix H).

Since the six participants were all from the same geographical area, their names were changed in order to protect their identities. The following is a brief description of each of the participants: Wyatt was an eighteen year old graduate from the local secondary school. He was currently pursuing Level 2 in Mechanics at University. He is Caucasian and was a self-described visual learner because reading and writing were more difficult for him. Wyatt claimed that his learning disability only moderately affected his learning in school, “I didn’t have to take French that was nice and it made shit a little harder like reading and writing and all that, but it didn’t affect me a huge amount I’d say.” Katie was a seventeen year old who was attending the local alternative program. She is First Nations and enjoyed art and projects. Katie had a designation of Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health because at her previous school she stated “I used to love the other schooling before….I became a teenager and explored different kinds of things, and school was just not something I was up for.” She did not state what she wants to do after graduation. Peter was an eighteen year old who was attending the alternative program. He was First Nations and enjoyed Physical Education because he was a “hands on learner”. He was working on completing Socials 11 in order to complete the Dogwood diploma requirements. Peter wanted to attend BCIT for plumbing as soon as he graduated. He had a designation of Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health and previously suffered from addiction. Mary was an eighteen year old who was a graduate from the secondary school. She was upgrading her Grade 12 courses in order to go to University. She is First
Nations and wanted to pursue a career working with animals. Mary had a Chronic Health designation with a Learning Disability. Her favourite course was Math because “it’s straightforward” and English was difficult for her. Sophia was a seventeen year old emancipated minor who recently enrolled at the alternative school. She is Caucasian and was very excited to start learning again. She wanted to be a stewardess or an English teacher. Sophia had a designation of Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health. She preferred that alternate school setting to that of the “big school”. Mark was an eighteen year old graduate from the secondary school. He is Caucasian and was unemployed at the time of the study. He was not sure what he wanted to do; he liked manual labour jobs and did not feel like post-secondary was an option for him. Mark had a designation of Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health. He was referred to counselling following his interview, but refused. An overview of the characteristics of the participants was shown in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High school Graduate</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health</td>
<td>First Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health</td>
<td>First Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High school Graduate</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>First Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High school Graduate</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three major themes surrounding engagement for students with designations, which emerged from the six interviews, were autonomy, mastery, and purpose; these were congruent with current research. When these three themes were present and overlapped, student success through engagement was expected. Secondary themes were revealed intertwined within the major themes. The following were
secondary themes that surfaced: independence (both thinking and performance), small class size, support and strategies for learning, and connections to teacher and peers. As shown in Table 2, the students’ responses were summarized and categorized. Each student answer was categorized as a positive or negative response. Positive responses (√) were defined as a favourable feeling whereas negative responses (X) were an unfavourable feeling. When the students’ felt that it did not have an effect on their learning, it was classified as no effect (~). The non-applicable response (N/A) was used when the student did not respond to the question. For example, Wyatt, Katie, Sophia, and Mark felt that they positively experienced choice in their learning whereas Mary didn’t feel like it affected her current courses; she just had to get the work completed. Wyatt, Mary, Peter and Sophia all reported having future goals whereas Katie and Mark didn’t have any definite goals, yet. If the student response contained both positive and negative attitudes towards the questions, it was labelled as both √ and X. For example, Wyatt disliked Socials 10 but enjoyed Socials 11 and his current program. Similarly, Sophia dislikes Math but enjoys English. Wyatt and Mark responded positively to supports and strategies they received in their courses. Peter felt that at the alternative school, the supports he received were helpful; however, he did not feel that the high school provided appropriate supports for him.
Table 2

Summary of Student Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading</th>
<th>Wyatt</th>
<th>Katie</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effects of IEP</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment of courses</td>
<td>X, √</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X, √</td>
<td>X, √</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful material</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>√</td>
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(*didn’t feel supported in high school)

The Difficulties Students with Designations Experience

All of the participants had a designation of Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health and/or Learning Disability and expressed difficulty in school. The participants felt they struggled with the effects of having a learning disability, not enjoying the course, not attending, or the course was not meaningful to them. Wyatt reported that his current program in the trades was difficult because it’s different than he thought it was going to be; “Ya cuz it’s a lot different than I thought, it wasn’t really teaching you how to fix things or do things. It’s a lot about learning the whole subject of something.” He continued to state that his Level 1 course was difficult because in “post-secondary, they want everything and went in depth.
They have the schedule all lay out and they follow it no matter what. If you’re not there, they won’t stop. It’s like it screws the whole day up or something. They just keep going because they got to get through it.” Wyatt continued to struggle with reading in his current program; he was watching videos to compliment his learning after the first day. He reported, “They showed us something in class and I’m like read through the chapters and you have four. You read through one and have no clue about it still, and you go on to the next one and go do questions at the end weren’t very helpful, but the videos definitely helped.” Katie voiced her difficulties with having multiple teachers in the alternate setting; she stated, “But having this one full-time teacher and one half time teacher is kind of sporadic. I don't like it” She felt that it was too much change for her. Sophia felt that she had a difficult time at her previous secondary school because she felt lost. She continued to explain, “... like I was hazing through classes not caring. I didn’t really see the point. Like I did not really want to go. So it was so busy and so uninteresting. Learning was so blah; it’s not interesting. I just wasn’t focused on it at all. It’s a lot easier to focus when people are more one on one.” Mark stated it was difficult for him to try in courses that he wasn’t interested in or found difficult; he said, “Well when I was doing other courses I would just shut off and not really care about it.” However, when he was interested in a course, he would be more likely to “listen more pay more attention and take in the information.” He further commented that when he wasn’t interested in a course, it felt boring and unneeded. When asked, “So you were more motivated to do the ones you were more successful at?” He responded, “Ya...It clicked. I was doing better.”

**Effects of IEP.**

Wyatt reported that he felt that the IEP didn’t affect his ability to learn; he said, “I didn’t have to take French that was nice, and it made [learning] a little harder like reading and writing and all that, but it didn’t affect me a huge amount I’d say.” Sophia voiced that “Science kinda goes in one ear and out the other. I am a little bit dyslexic” Mary revealed that Math is easier because it’s straightforward, but she has difficulty in English. When asked, “When you have to write an English essay what does that feel like?” she responded simply with “Boring.”
Not enjoying a course.

Wyatt stated that the reason he did not enjoy Socials 10 was because he didn’t like his teacher at the time and he was a mess; however, this changed the following year in Socials 11 when he had the same teacher and liked her, he enjoyed the course more. Whereas, Peter felt that Socials 11 is a tough course, but he has to get through it. He reported that it’s difficult for him “because of the history part and having to know all the times and stuff happened and I just can’t remember all that stuff.” In response to the question “What does that feel like? Do you get frustrated? He responded by saying that, “I get frustrated and mad and angry and sometimes I don’t want to work so you just take 10 minutes and take a breath” Sophia has a similar response to the question of “What does it feel like when you don’t enjoy a course?” She said:

“I get grumpy and stuff. Obviously I get frustrated. I don’t really know ‘cause I really do not enjoy anything. I get a little frustrated with maybe math but it is not like I don’t enjoy it. I just don’t really want to do it right now. And then I take a break. My mind blocks it out right now. I don’t want to do it and like my mind can’t absorb the information. It is decent. I just sit down or I go for a walk or go outside and breathe fresh air. I work on the computer or do something.”

She continued to explain that the alternate school was better suited to her individual needs as “it is not like you are confined to thinking about something you don’t want to think about. The worst part of public school is thinking about something when you are forced to be thinking about it.” Mark said that he would do “a bit of both” when asked, “Or do you feel that you just gave up on it and you just walked away?” Many of the participants expressed feeling of frustration in courses that they were not engaged in.

Reasons to not attend.

Only one of the participants stated that he missed school for work, while the others gave reasons of outdoor activities or family obligations, such as snowboarding or hiking a mountain. Katie said that she only usually attends school two days a week because she has something to do with her family or she just can “be really lazy and really just ... not up for anything.” Katie continued to say that some of her courses are a little rough; I don’t show up a lot of the time. That’s why it just becomes a little hard, but...”
ask why she missed school, Sophia stated that, “well I just started, but I missed on Tuesday because I was sick and sad, and I didn’t really want to be sad at school so I went to hike the mountain.” Mary and Mark reported that they did not have unexcused absences and they usually attended every day. Although, Mark revealed that occasionally he “just slept in or didn’t really feel like going.”

**Make it more meaningful.**

In response to how teachers could make their student more meaningful, many of the participants felt that either most of the information they were learning was useless or repetitive. Wyatt reported that he has yet to use most of the math he learned in high school. When he was asked to provide an example he stated, “Like say in math, useless all of it. You go through Precalc. and a bunch of that stuff, equations covering the whole board. But realistically, I haven’t done any of that stuff. I haven’t learned any of that at all.” Wyatt continued to explain that he would have preferred if his teachers added more relevant material, such as “taxes or stuff like that where you actually need that stuff.” He felt his teachers could have added “stuff that you want to learn about more like good stuff cuz a lot of the stuff you learn here is useless”. Whereas, Katie felt this was a difficult question to answer. She felt that more projects and essays were needed in order for her to see the purpose for learning a particular topic. Katie reported that “I guess I don't know having more projects to do something that can work through a whole project not just papers to write stuff like that I guess a whole project based on learning around 1 things I guess you know like an art project or maybe an essay.” Katie continued to explain that she “think[s] they just have a goal for the end of the project; they're giving us this knowledge and telling us ‘well think about it’. They're making a few small projects on it, but there's really no accomplishment at the end of it.” She agreed when I asked a clarification question of whether she would like a wrap up assignment to see the big idea of the lesson. She also voiced that “and maybe it’s because I’m native maybe it’s because I’ve heard it too much but I’m done learning about it so…” in regards to learning about residential schools. Peter felt that his teachers could have helped him more; he did not feel that he got help when he was attending school at the secondary school. Peter stated, “It was more individual thing by me.” Mark felt the responsibility of
learning fell solely on the student. He stated, “Probably not. I mostly done it myself….Mostly I did not understand it. I just didn’t try hard enough.” He did not feel that the teachers could have made his learning more meaningful, that it was up to him to understand it. Each student had a different request or need in response to the question, “how could teachers make their learning more meaningful.” Many of the difficulties that the participants felt they had revolved about interest in the course content, connection with the course or the teacher, or the purpose of learning the topic.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is “often used in reference to instructional approaches and techniques that take into consideration student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions” (http://edglossary.org/autonomy/). Through student voice, students have an opportunity to have an active role in their education. It is believed that this approach may “encourage students to be more interested in school, more motivated to learn, and more likely to take greater responsibility over their education” as they have greater responsibility for their learning (http://edglossary.org/autonomy/). For the purpose of this phenomenological study, sub themes of autonomy include the following student preferences: attendance, enjoying courses, choice and self-regulation, support and strategies, one on one support, independent learning, small class size, and positive connections to peers and teachers.

**Attendance.**

When the participants were asked, “Why did you choose to come to school?” they replied with answers like ‘I had to’ or ‘It’s the law’, ‘so I can be successful” or ‘to graduate’. Katie said it was her peers. She liked to have friends ‘and people to talk to and you know have a smoke with and just chill out.” The participants, who graduated from the secondary school, didn’t feel it was their choice to attend or not, they had to. Wyatt stated he attended school most of the time because he had to in order to graduate, but in the winter, he would miss a day to go snowboarding. He now attends class every day so he won’t get behind in his post-secondary trade courses. Katie said she found it hard to go to school. She
didn’t show up most of the time, which puts her behind in her courses. She explained that she is late every
day, and she makes it to school two out of the three days (the alternate school was in session Tuesday to
Thursday). Peter attended every day except when he was working. Mary explained to me that she
attended every day from 9am to 4pm because she needed some classes. She also explained that she got an
allowance if she didn’t miss school and came every day. Sophia was optimistic about attending everyday
as she described how she liked to be occupied and could hike the mountains on the days off. Mark stated
that his mother made him come to school every day, but “it was better than just sitting at home doing
nothing”. He admitted that he would miss at least one course every day.

**Enjoying courses.**

The courses that the participants enjoyed were varied. Common trends were being outside,
working with their hands, or topics they were successful in. The participants’ favourite courses catered to
their individual strengths. Wyatt enjoyed the Outdoor Program because “we got to go out and do
stuff we weren’t stuck inside all day.” Katie decided her favourite courses were art or social studies. She
stated that she was artistic: “I love to do art and it’s really an addiction for me.” Peter chose PE because it
was physical, and he liked to do physical and hands on activities. Mary enjoyed Math because “it’s
straightforward.” Sophia enjoyed Foods because it is the most probably applicable to her life as she
enjoyed cooking and eating. She also likes gardening because she enjoyed being outside as much as
possible. Mark thought social studies was his favourite because he was good at it, and he would “listen
more pay more attention and take in the information.” Mark specifically stated that he enjoyed “taking in
information like that especially information from maps.”

**Choice and self-regulation.**

Choice was particularly important to the students who attended the alternate school. Katie thought
her learning would be enhanced if she could do more whole projects or essays. Peter liked how he could
work at his own pace. Sophia believed that her opinion mattered at the alternate school. She stated, “It is
not even about freedom or choice…. Like what you actually want matters….Here you still have to do the same courses like you just have to do math and sciences and all that but you do it so it is comfortable for you.” She didn’t feel this choice existed at her old school. Mark stated that he would “probably feel it is my decision. Making my own success.”

**Independent learning.**

Independent Learning was a common sub theme, especially for the three students who attend the alternate school. Peter felt was because “you get to work at your own pace. And it is far easier, instead of teachers just putting too much homework on you.” Whereas Katie enjoyed it “because it takes time with my learning and... it forms around my schedule and things that I need to get done. I do it in my own time.” She continued to state that she enjoyed independent learning “because it's not like... it doesn't expect much you know and it expects you to be here and to know what you need to do but with anywhere else it'd be like they expect your scheduling to be done they expect your work to be completed at a certain time.” Sophia was behind in her courses, so independent learning was allowing her to catch up. She also felt that since the learning was individualized the successes were bigger and more personalized; she explained, “It’s way more individual so it makes your success feel bigger because it is not like …the teachers are like “well done class.” ...But it is actually like “Denny” did cool on that or wow “Tyler”, you did cool on that. And then someone else did cool on something else.” Wyatt appreciated that he was able to use the resource room as a separate space away from the classroom. He explained that “the resource room definitely helped when I got sick of the class. I could just come here and don’t have to deal with the teachers.” Since she is upgrading her Grade 12 courses, Mary didn’t have a classroom teacher delivering lessons, all her learning was independent. She stated, “We don’t really have a teacher in class. They don’t really give lessons they just tell us what to do if we need help.”
Support and strategies.

Many of the participants reported that they felt support through personal touches their teachers would do for them or how in smaller classes they were comfortable to ask questions or for help. Mary found her teachers quite supportive. She stated that “they are always there if you need them and if you don’t need them they don’t hover over you...They explain it in a different way [or] do it with you.” Some of the participants also provided specific examples of supports and strategies used in the classroom. Wyatt thought having access to the laptops supported him. It explained that typing wasn’t necessarily easier for him because he was at slow typing, “but it was easier to have the computers there so you could look up stuff online quicker.” He further explained that he would look up correct spelling or definitions of the vocabulary he didn’t know; he stated, “I don’t know they just said words you don’t understand you could look up definitions and all that.” He watched video to facilitate his learning in post-secondary. Peter reinforced how the support from videos helped him learn as well, he explained, “Watch a lot of videos because I am a visual learner so that really helps.” Mark thought it was easier to learn when the class had an education aide as support.

One on one support.

Three of the participants commented on how they felt having one on one support with an adult helped their learning. Wyatt thought it helped him with the Resource Teacher would help him with his work. Peter thought that if he had more one on one support it would have made him feel that you were being more successful when asked the question directly. He believed it was “because sometimes I don’t get things. I just get frustrated and quit and just walk away and don’t do it. If I got more help…. I would have gotten more of it learned more and not skipped. But I did not get that much help in school so that is why I am here [at the alternate school].” Peter further explained that at the alternate school teachers made me feel welcomed; he expressed, “My thing is that making me feel welcomed. Listening to me.” As previously described Sophia felt lost and uninterested at the other school; she explained, “It’s a lot easier to focus when people are more one on one.”
**Small class size.**

Many of the participants commented on how smaller class sizes facilitated their learning because they felt their teacher had more time for them. Sophia stated that the alternative school was able to direct personal learning. She felt that she would not be successful at the secondary school because she was too far behind in her education. She advocated for the alternate school by stating that:

“It is not even about freedom or choice. Well I guess it sort of is. But it is more about you being treated like a person. Like what you actually want matters. And you can still like the school system is just so weird how they forced you to do things. Here you still have to do the same courses like you just have to do math and sciences and all that but you do it so it is comfortable for you.”

Mark echoed this statement by saying that it was a lot easier for the teacher to teach small class sizes. He stated in “Science 10 with ... there were only about 8 of us in the classroom. It is a lot easier for the teacher to teach 8 than it is to teach 30….If it is a numbers game, it makes sense.” Mark further explained that, “Just because it was a lot easier like there was more time. It would be like spending two minutes with 30 people then spending 10 with 8 people.” He added that this particular class had an education aid as well. Mark thought it was “easier to learn in that situation…. I had more time. If I didn’t understand something, then I could get more help. And it would be a small amount of time I was able to ask some questions and get some help if I didn’t understand it.” He expressed that he felt more comfortable asking questions in a small classroom. Peter had similar feelings. The alternate school, he believed, had more time for him in class “because it is a small class.” There are usually twelve to thirteen people in his class with one and half teachers and a First Nations Support Worker. When he was asked how many teachers he had, he said three.

**Positive connections to peers and teachers.**

Although this question was not asked, two of the subjects commented on negative connections with previous teachers. Wyatt stated that the reason he did not enjoy Socials 10 was because he didn’t like his teacher at the time and he was a mess; however, this changed the following year in Socials 11 when he
had the same teacher and liked her, he enjoyed the course more. Mark felt that “to some extent, most teachers would rather focus on students that they would see who were going places than those not towing the line,” Sophia enjoyed the personal touches she felt her teacher was able to do because he knew her interests; she stated, “Lots of times I like to be explained things or I like to think about it in my life and I to know how I am going to use it in my life. Because I like to know how I am going to use it in my life. It is like a mental wall that I have to get over sometimes.” She continued to explain how her current teacher was able to describe Pythagoras in a real life example that she could relate to:

“I was getting frustrated with [the teacher] with our math yesterday and I was like why can’t you make it like so it’s more relatable to my life because I feel like I never will use this and it is so dumb. He totally shoved it in my face. He was like you want to do trees, like tree planting thing my mom does. My mom does a lot of forestry. You stand however far away from the tree and you look at it from this angle and you can tell if you are that far away and you can measure it with your camera and you then you can do Pythagoras theorem and see how tall the tree is….And today he comes up with a workbook of a bunch of relatable things and used himself and [another teacher] like totally made out an eight question long workbook of relatable questions.”

I then asked her if she felt that he had listened to her grievances. She replied that the teacher had created the booklet for the next Math class. When I asked her how that made her feel, she said, “Like my learning matters to someone. Like it is important that you know I am learning in a way that is actually learning. ‘Cause in a big classroom I didn’t feel like that all the time. It was kinda like I didn’t want to pay attention so I didn’t. They didn’t care so why would anyone care so it did not matter. Here it matters.” She felt that in the larger classroom the teachers did not have time for the personal touches or time to make all of the students feel comfortable in the manner they learn best. As stated earlier, Peter thought his teachers made him feel welcome and listened to him as well. Although Katie did not like having a part time teacher, she felt supported when her teachers would do check-ins. She described it as “checkup things to check up things once every two weeks or once a month or so like how are your courses going do you think we need to change anything up and like what is making this unambitious.” Sophia enjoyed how her teacher asked questions regarding the student's’ understanding and comfort level.
Purpose

Students need to understand the rationale behind an assignment in order to fully comprehend what it is they are being asked to do. Some students prefer to know the direction of the lesson in order to see the big picture or main idea, so they can apply theories from the classroom to universal knowledge: how these concepts apply to real life scenarios. The purpose of an assignment can be also referred to as authentic learning. Authentic learning was a “wide variety of educational and instructional techniques focused on connecting what students are taught in school to real-world issues, problems, and applications” (http://edglossary.org/authentic-learning/). When students understood the purpose of the concepts, they were “more likely to be interested in what they are learning, more motivated to learn new concepts and skills, and better prepared to succeed” in postsecondary. They were able to practically apply the theories outside of the classroom. Sub themes that were intertwined in purpose were understanding the purpose of learning, future goals (academic and non-academic), engaging material, and meaningful material.

Understanding the purpose of learning.

Many of the participants understood the purpose of attending school in order to graduate and obtain employment. They understood that it was a necessary ticket that would lead to different avenues. It was my sense that most of the interviewees felt like it was a necessary evil. When I ask the participants if they saw a purpose to their learning, the trend was ‘yes to graduate’. It was necessary for Sophia to know “the point” of learning Pythagoras. She needed a real life application; “why can’t you make it like so it’s more relatable to my life because I feel like I never will use this and it is so dumb?” Later on in the interview, Sophia alluded to being more motivated in her learning. She said she enjoyed “the fact that I feel like I am doing things for my life more. I am actually interested. It has given me more time to think. I want to do stuff.” Mark had yet to see the value in his learning. He thought it was “pointless [and] he stated, “I don’t see any purpose in it”, especially regarding French as he didn’t plan to attend post-secondary. Wyatt didn’t feel he had many options still even though he was in his program of choice at
post-secondary. He answered flippantly that the purpose of his education was to “get smart…and have a brighter future. Wyatt thought his mother ‘definitely enforced’ post-secondary education, especially in a trade. He later said that he definitely wanted to go to school in order to “get it all over with so I can make more money…basically that had a lot to do with it.” Katie explained that “there’s always purpose for the projects we do;” she wished that her teachers would move on. She vented, “we are learning about residential schools over and over again in every different kind of way…and maybe it’s because I’m native maybe it’s because I’ve heard it too much but I’m done learning about it so…” Peter was very focused on completing his Dogwood requirements because he wants to go to college; he explained very matter of factly, “To go to BCIT… for plumbing.” The interviewees seemed to need goals in order to understand the purpose of their learning.

**Future goals (academic and non-academic).**

Four of the six participants interviewed had post-secondary goals. These goals involved more education either at University or in the trades. Wyatt wanted to get his Level 2 from Thompson Rivers University in Mechanics. He has worked at a shop for the last five years. Peter wanted to go to BCIT for plumbing as previous stated. Mary wasn’t sure on exactly what she wanted to do but it will be something to do with animals. For the first time, Sophia stated that the alternate school changed her mindset around school:

> “Like in high school I couldn’t even think about stuff I wanted to do all I could think about was not wanting to be at school but here I am actually thinking about goals and like school is actually giving me… I ’m viewing school that somewhere that’s getting me somewhere not somewhere that’s waiting my time.”

She was the most expressive about her goals. Sophia wants to be a stewardess so she can travel, have a goat farm, perhaps run a daycare or become an English Teacher. Katie was living in the moment and did not state what she would like to do after graduation. Mark did not believe it was possible for him to go to college; he was unemployed at the time of the interview and did not know what he wanted to do. In ten years’ time, he saw himself “retired and living somewhere nice.”
**Engaging material.**

The material that engaged interviewees was very personal to them; it usually corresponded with their strengths. Wyatt reported that although he still had difficulty reading the assigned chapters in his current program, he thought he was now more motivated to do his homework; Wyatt said, “No like I find it a lot easier to go home and actually do my homework well most days but other than that not really.” Mary was focused on completing her required courses; she didn’t feel that the material itself was meaningful. For example her answers included phrases like “some of it” or “sometimes. Ya, kinda.”

As stated previously, Sophia needed real life examples in order to make the context meaningful to her. When asked “Do you think that if it was explained in a different way could it have helped?” Mark replied, “Possibly.” Katie felt like her teachers tried to provide engaging material to the class by asking what the students are interested in. She also felt her teachers paid attention to her; “they notice what I’m interested in even when I don’t say it...like art they definitely keep feeding me art projects.” Katie agreed that her teachers tried to cater to her strengths.

**More meaningful material.**

Although meaningful material was discussed in the Difficulties section, there is an overlap within the Purpose. If the participants felt that the material was meaningful, they were able to see the purpose in learning it. Mark felt that the onus was on him to make the material meaningful, as he said “Probably not. I mostly done it myself” when I asked how his teachers could have made his learning more meaningful. He said that he “mostly I did not understand it. I just didn’t try hard enough.” Wyatt felt high school teachers could have added more meaningful and practical content. He felt that he had yet to use any of the Math he learnt in high school, but learning how to do his taxes would have been better. As previously stated, Katie would like to know the big idea while working on projects or essays; she would like to know the objective of the project before she begins. Peter liked how his teachers were able to explain the concepts to him individually.
Mastery

For the purpose of this phenomenological study, mastery is achieved where the student felt success based on the assumption that if the interviewee felt successful for a specific content, they would be more likely achieve a level of individualized mastery. Mastery may be achieved through “additional instruction, practice time, and academic support to help them achieve proficiency or to meet the expected standards.” (http://edglossary.org/proficiency-based-learning/). Mastery ensures “that students are acquiring the knowledge and skills that are deemed to be essential to success in school, higher education, careers, and adult life” (http://edglossary.org/proficiency-based-learning/). Subthemes of mastery are how the participants define engagement, level of engagement, feeling of engagement, feeling of enjoying courses, feeling of success, and graduation and post-secondary.

Definition of engagement.

In order to gauge the participants’ prior knowledge regarding in class engagement, the interviewees were asked to define engagement. Wyatt guessed that it was “to be a part of it like to put in your input and output for it type thing.” Katie thought it would be “to acknowledge everyone in the class and their opinions...to see the project that we have to do and know the steps to get done.” Peter felt the definition was “being engaged and working hard on your work...and enjoying it. Making sure you are enjoying it.” Mary defined engagement as “participating like if you’re coming to class but your mind isn’t there you’re not participating.” Sophia thought was “paying attention with something. Like caring about what someone is saying and actually wanting to listen to it. Like interested and actually remember what they are saying. It is like wanting to be focused on something. You can’t just. Not wanting to be focused on something that is the bad part. Being engaged on something is that you want to be focused on something so do, so you are engaged in it.” Mark felt it was “something that schools need to know for statistics...”
Level of engagement in courses.

The participants’ level of engagement ranged from two to ten, with one being the lowest engagement and ten being the highest. Wyatt explained that it depends on the class; if he enjoyed the course, he would rate it a seven, if not a four. Katie stated her level of engagement in general was a four, which explained her low attendance and lates. The level of engagement for Peter ranged from seven to ten: Social Studies 10, Grad Transitions 8, Art 7, PE 10 and Foods 10. Mary felt rated her courses as the following: Career and personal planning 6 or 7, Math 7, English 2 or 3, and Computers 6 or 7. Sophia gave all of her courses a ten; she stated “Everything is pretty reasonable…. I would give everything a pretty high number.” Mark rated his level of engagement as a three or a four.

Feeling of engagement.

All the participants expressed positive statements and interests in the content when they felt engaged in a specific task. Wyatt felt that there were “those odd times it’s fun I guess I don’t know I guess it was fun…” Katie explained that engagement felt “like everyone can hear me and feels like I don’t know I may not understand what we are talking about but I will like you know I can see it …” I guess everyone sharing their opinions with each other or like that.” Peter said it made him “Happy. Um. Just happy I guess like I know what I am doing.” Mary described feeling engaged as “not being bored or something like paying attention and listening.” To Sophia, being engaged felt like, “I am interested in the things that I am learning like I do not want to be on my phone or something like I don’t need to be because I enjoy what we are doing.” Mark felt he was “paying attention maybe, following the class, awake.”

Feeling of enjoying courses.

Feelings of engagement were positively correlated to enjoying courses. Wyatt simply stated that when he liked a subject, it felt enjoyable. He enjoyed his earlier courses in high school: math and some science and a bit of woodwork and metal work.” Katie said “it feels like I feel passion and motivation to
get it done because it’s something I love.” She continued to describe that when she doesn’t like something, she just won’t do it; “I’ll look at it and be like this isn’t what I want to do. And this isn’t what I want to learn or I’ve already learned this so. I won’t put the time and effort into it.” Peter was not enjoying his current courses because it was tough, “because it is courses I need to graduate. It is like my last course Social studies 11 I feel like it is a tough course but got to get me through it.” However, he stated that when he enjoys a particular topic, he felt engaged; “Feels really good. Feels like I know what I am doing. It feels really good to know what to do and stuff.” Mary felt accomplished. Sophia also felt happy; she described it as, “like my life is going somewhere for a change. Like there are good things. Stuff is kinda sad sometimes. It is decent. Nice decent to do some stuff you like.” Mark said it felt “normal, better unless I was down...like I don’t mind going getting up to go do it all of the time like when you have a class you don’t like you don’t want to be there don’t want to have anything to do with it.”

**Feeling of success.**

Every participant was able to recall a time where they experienced success. Wyatt described a feeling “when you get a big job and it takes all day and you finish it and the test drive goes good, you feel pretty good.” He also described that he felt success when he got a passing mark in school. Katie felt successful when she completes a project or when she is living in the moment; “experiencing the sun...feeling nature medication being out in the wilderness that's it...sometimes..... For PE. They take us on these beautiful hikes and I do feel very connected but in class no.” Peter felt success when he completed things; “I feel success every day because I complete a lot of things I do. Because I’m working really hard...work. Homework. Working on my bike. Finishing that up. Working at home.” Peter was finally feeling success at the alternate school opposed to the secondary school. He stated, “I wasn’t getting good grades before. My grades are so much better.” Mary felt success when she completed and handed in her assignments or when she did something right. Sophia had a similar experience to Peter as she didn’t feel successful at her old school, “... no not really. But no I mean no definitely no.” She said she was “good in gym but not really enough to feel good.” At the alternate school, “It’s way more
individual so it makes your success feel bigger...” Sophia continued to describe her successes from learning something in math to climbing mountains; she explained, “I hate math. Just being in school and writing stuff down is a success for me. I haven’t been in school for so long it is just great to be here. Like climbing mountains. Like going outside and like doing adventurous things.” Mark didn’t feel like success was within his control, he stated, “Yes but with success it’s not up to me to decide when I am successful.” He did not feel success at the time of the interview, but with some gentle probing, he remembered a time in Socials 9 where he drew a map, he recalled, “Oh I got the best mark.” Mark felt that achievement was very high on his success scale; he stated, “Ya, that was the only thing I was good at...taking in information like that especially information from maps.”

Graduated and post-secondary.

Four of the participants commented about being a graduate and attending post-secondary. Wyatt and Peter are going into the trades, mechanics and plumbing respectively. Wyatt was about to enroll in Level 2 Automotive. Mary was upgrading her grade 12 courses in order to continue on to postsecondary. Mark was not attending post-secondary. He believed that idea was “inconceivable” for him.

First Nation Participants

There were three First Nation participants. Two were attending the alternate school because the other secondary school didn’t suit their learning styles or personal needs. They commented on the advantages of attending the alternate school such as independent learning and the extra supports, one on one help, and connections to their teachers and peers. One graduated from the secondary school and was attending a learning center to upgrade her courses. Two of the interviewees attended school every day; one was on her own schedule. Two of the interviewees plan to go to post-secondary; one didn’t know what she wanted to do at the time of the interview. The three participants’ strengths varied from hands on activities, to art and the outdoors, to animals.
Summary

The themes and trends that emerged from the interactions with the participants were similar to previous research on student engagement. When autonomy, purpose and mastery were present, the participants stated that they were more likely to feel success in their education. When they felt success, there was a higher probability that the interviewees would attend and actively participate in their learning. Some of the participants stated that they felt comfortable asking for help in smaller classes. Autonomy, purpose and mastery were not exclusive but rather overlapping concepts that promote a student’s success through engagement.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This phenomenological study aimed to examine student voice and discover common perceptions, trends, and themes that emerged from interviews with current students and graduates. Students in the educational system naturally apply their lived experiences in the classroom by attaching new learning to previous knowledge in order to make sense of the content presented. The trends and themes that arose from this research emphasized the importance of autonomy, purpose, and mastery. By incorporating student voice into our daily practice, we, as teachers, can reach a greater number of students, especially the ones who are most at risk of getting overlooked and lost in the educational system.

Implications of the Phenomenological Study

Four out of the six adolescents interviews conveyed an emotional edge in how the standard school system brought about an over challenging environment which failed to take into account their individual needs, educational needs, and emotional needs. The standard educational system recognized
the need for one on one support, smaller class size and connections; and it is given that the majority of students succeed in the secondary school; however, why did it fail these four students with designations? What must be amended in order for all students, including those with designations to feel and be successful, productive, and engaged in their educational platform? What supports do students with designations feel they need in order for them to be successful not only at school but in life? What changes can be made in the classroom to create engagement and motivation for all students with designations? Three of the four participants were experiencing academic success due to an alternative educational system away from the standardized system of schooling. There exists flaws in the education system for students with designations; however, students with Learning Disabilities seem to be able to graduate at the same rate as students without designations.

Many of the participants expressed difficulties in the standard education system. These difficulties included non-effective IEPs, non-stimulating and non-relevant subjects and courses, a need to dismiss attending school, and a loss of purpose, the why, and meaning in their learning or courses. The difficulties each interviewee voiced was specific to their own learning and experiences. They voiced a detachment from their educational needs and an animosity toward a desire to participant, the daily goal became to be in school in person but invisible and to not actively engage in the lesson or learning. As Hardre et al. (2007) explained there are learning goals and performance goals; “students who adopt learning goals tend to focus on task mastery and personal improvement, whereas those who adopt performance goals tend to focus on task outcomes … and on social comparison” (p. 249). The students who participated in this study may have been primarily focused on performance goals.

**Theoretical understandings.**

The themes and trends that emerged through qualitative analysis demonstrate aspects of social constructivist theory, personal investment theory and self-determination theory. Attachment theory acted as the foundation for all three of these theories. The learning connection and student engagement occurred through relationship, problem solving and persistence.
Social constructivist theory provided an explanation of how learning occurs through active participation and interaction between students, peers, and teachers (Copsey-Haydey, 2011). It promotes scaffolded learning and collaborative experiences in order to facilitate the construction of knowledge, and therefore, increases student engagement, motivation and empowerment (Copsey-Haydey, 2011). Higher order learning takes place when the “learner’s underlying schemata is changed to incorporate new understandings” through reflection and discussion (Smith and Hepworth, 2007, p.6). This theory applied to how the students at the alternate school felt. Peter felt supported by a welcoming environment and then his teachers were always around to help him one on one, whereas at the other school, he felt that his was on his own to figure it out. Peter felt more successful at the alternate school because he was getting better grades. Katie stated that she came to school for the peer interactions. As Christenson (2003) theorized that student engagement involves academic, behavioural, cognitive and psychological subtypes (Kortering and Christenson, 2009). Although their needs were very different, Peter and Katie both felt that they were getting their needs met at the alternate school where something was missing at the other school. Both Mary and Mark thought the definition of engagement was pay attention and listening. Reflection and discussion was more comfortable in smaller class sizes, as Mark stated that he was more comfortable to ask questions and ask for help. For most people, learning is a social practice where students are able to work out their ideas in a group and then go home and reflect on what they learnt.

Personal investment theory explains “how an individual chooses how to invest his or her time, energy or talent in particular activities” (McInerney, 2008, p.870). According to the personal investment theory (Maheer and Braskamp, 1986), three key components need to be present for motivation to occur: achievement goals, sense of self, and facilitating conditions (McInerney, 2008). McInerney (2008) describes components of achievement goals as mastery, performance, social and extrinsic; sense of self involves a sense of purpose, self-reliance, self-concept (negative and positive); and facilitating conditions are parent support, teacher support, and peer support. Social and cultural context are important contributing factors in motivation and performance (McInerney, 2008). Many of the participants commented on individualized learning, feeling of success, small class size and future goals. Each
participant enjoyed learning the material in their own way. Wyatt preferred to watch videos over reading chapters as he was able to retain the information. Peter liked working at his own pace with support. Katie liked being able to have her own schedule and not be tied down to other people's' deadlines. Sophia felt that she knew the reason behind her education, she wanted to be there and she enjoyed learning new things. Sophia also appreciated that her teachers were able to correlate the learning to real life context. For the participants, I believe that sense of purpose and facilitating conditions were the more important factors to engage them, according to the personal investment theory.

The participants’ need for choice, independence, real life examples, one on one support were examples of self-determined theory. When their individual psychological needs (competence, relatedness and autonomy) were supported, their willingness to perform desired actions increases (Lee, 2012). The participants were able to internalize the values and expectations of socializing agents; therefore, positive connections and relationships with teachers encouraged students to be motivated to persevere in their learning (Lee, 2012). Metacognitive knowledge of self (self-efficacy, perceptions of competence and attributional beliefs) contributed to understanding students’ motivation in school or lack thereof; both Peter and Sophia felt more confident and successful in the alternate environment compared to their other schools. Their perceptions of themselves changed in the different environment.

There was evidence of social constructivist theory, personal investment theory, and self-determination theory in the participants lived experiences, especially personal investment and self-determination. The participants recounted situations where these theories were apparent in their learning. By examining the participants’ answers, the common themes had components of these theories.

**Autonomy.**

Autonomy was of utmost importance to all of the interviewees. Attendance and enjoying courses, choice and self-regulation, supports and strategies, one on one support and independent learning, small class size and positive connections to peers and teachers were all either positively or negatively commented on depending on the perception of the interviewee. When the students felt like they had
autonomy, they could recall a positive situation, and when a negative situation surfaced they could not. Most of the participants enjoyed courses that emphasize their strengths, for example, Art, Physical Education, Foods, and Math. Two of the participants enjoyed hands on activities and were interested in pursuing further education in the trades. Since the courses accentuated their strengths, the students were able to demonstrate a better performance, and therefore felt a greater sense of achievement; they felt like they had a greater sense of engagement in the courses that they enjoyed.

There is a great deal of pressure placed upon students, and it is constant. The participants in this study expressed that they liked to be able to work at their own pace and set their own schedule. They felt that this alleviated the pressure that teachers put on them. It was also communicated that on an individualized program, the successes were unique, and the compliments felt more genuine. Many felt that one on one support and smaller classes complimented an individualized program because the teacher had more time for the participant and legitimately knew them as people.

**Purpose.**

Understanding the purpose was essential for many of the participants to be engaged in what they were learning. The students’ perception of the relationship between the task and “personally valued future outcome” was a significant component of motivation (Hardre et al., 2007, p. 252). The participants commented on needing to understand the point of the lesson or topic and how it would benefit them. Others required real life examples in order to comprehend what was being asked of them. Personalizing the information was a factor for which the participant felt engaged, as Katie explained, “they notice when I’m interested even when I don’t say it.” If the participants perceived the material as meaningful, they were more likely to engage in the lesson. Setting short term and long term goals seemed to keep many of the interviewees on track with their education.

**Mastery.**

Mastery can be considered achievement or success. When the participants felt engaged in an activity, they described it as feeling happy, paying attention and not being bored, following in class,
awake and fun. Katie alluded to taking a risk by participating without fully understanding the material. The feeling of engagement transferred into feeling like they were enjoying the course. These feelings were portrayed as “feeling passion and motivation”, “like I know what I’m doing”, as “decent”, and that they “didn’t mind putting effort into it”. All the participants were able to convey a memory of success. A feeling of satisfaction accompanied the feeling of success. Many of the memories of success and engagement were when the individual had accomplished a task, for example, achieving high marks, handing in assignments, and climbing mountains.

Applications

The themes and trends that emerged from this study can be used to educate teachers of the importance of utilizing student voice in order to increase engagement in the classroom. Teachers are learning to ask the students what they need in order to learn and grow. Educators can then use this information to increase their own practice and awareness; student voice provides valuable information for reflective practice. The themes and trends of this study can be applied by individual teachers as they develop an awareness of student voice, individualized programs, respect and responsibility of the student and the teacher, First Nation education, engagement, and feeling success. All of these themes overlap and lead into the next. Student voice provides insights into education on all levels in order to deliver a higher quality of education. Greene et al. (2004) stated that when students perceive “classroom tasks as meaningful, relevant, and interesting (motivating tasks), [this can] also influence the extent to which students perceive currently learning as instrumental to their future success” (p. 474). Individualized programs allow the information to be personalized to the students learning needs; the student can then relate to the information and retain it. The information has context and meaning.

Often there has to be mutual respect and responsibility between the teacher and the student. The students trusts the teacher will provide choice, explain the purpose and assess the information to deliver feedback. The teacher also knows the students in order to convey the material in a meaningful way that connects with the student’s strengths. When the students are engaged they will pay attention and actively
participate which then leads to achievement. This applies to First Nation education as well. The teacher connects with the students using culturally relevant material to draw on their previous knowledge. When students feel that they have genuinely earned success, they are more likely to continue with the behaviour. They will eventually become comfortable and start to take risks with their education. For example, putting up their hands and asking questions or thinking outside the box. Greene et al. (2004) reported that student perceptions were very important when designing learning tasks; teachers should consider student’s interests, goals and needs when describing different learning activities to their students. As Finlay (2005) stated, “If one’s identity is intertwined with that of others, there is hope that, through compassion, humanity can build a new society based on cultivating, learning, and teaching this reciprocal sociality.” My personal goal for high school students was to become proactive, self-directed learners with the confidence to acquire information and resources they need to be successful.

**Significance of Findings**

Incorporating student voice into the current research on engagement, results in the ability to provide a greater awareness of what is actually happening in the classrooms. In motivating a greater awareness, therefore promoting change, teachers need to be mindful of their students’ current learning situations and obtain knowledge and strategies. This knowledge would impact how to engage students with designations in order for a change and insight to become common practice. As educators, we have a responsibility to engage all students in the classroom. By investigating student voice, we can identify common problems and therefore instigate change.

Research involving student voice empowers the student. It allows the participants to have their opinions heard. It allows the participants to reflect on their education and themselves. The participants may become more self-aware from the interview process. It shows that their opinions not only matter to their teachers but also the researcher. Individualized education is significant because it allows the student an opportunity to feel important and understand the meaning behind learning the content of the lesson. The students are able to identify their own strengths and challenges. This helps them take more ownership
over their learning and develop strategies to be able to learn more effectively. In particular to this research, two participants stated an increase in value of their education in the smaller setting of the alternate school. Their perceptions imply a weakness in the larger classroom settings to create an environment that was welcoming and comfortable.

It is important to note that there was no significant difference in the perception of the students interviewed. Comparisons between male and female participants, First Nation and Caucasian, graduates and alternative students, students with Behaviour Mental Health and Learning Disability designations did not show significant differences in their responses upon analysis of themes. As consistent with the research of Hardre and Reeve (2003), the themes in this study demonstrated a relationship between autonomy, supports and strategies, purpose, and success and the students’ engagement in learning (as cited in Hardre et al., 2007).

**Limitations**

Several limitations of this study design should be acknowledged. The knowledge gained from this study cannot be extended to generalize the lived experience of students with designations in the standard education system. The insights acquired through the interviews provided perceptions of how these students feel about their secondary experience; it gave specific factors that either increased or decreased student engagement. However, the small sample size may not be a true representation of all students with designations. The research applied to some students with Intensive Behaviour and Mental Health and/or Learning Disability designations. The participants were from the same small community in a rural area. The participants volunteered to be a part of this study and were not from a random sample. If the research was conducted in a large city, the results may vary greatly. The subjectivity of using only student responses to create themes analyzed in this study. Many factors must be considered such as how the student was feeling the day of the interview: tired, frustrated, positive, accomplished. Another limitation would have been the manner that the questions were phrased. I had to rephrase the question “What brought you to school?” as many of the participants answered it literally, “my mother” or “my father”. A
more appropriate question would be “What value do you see in attending school?” Phenomenological studies incorporate the researcher's own lived experiences. My lived experience could potentially affect the interpretations of the data. My personal bias may have influenced how the results were categorized. The themes and trends extrapolated were subjective to my interpretations of the participants’ answers.

**Value of the Study**

The aim of phenomenological research was to interview alternative school students or recent graduates with high incidence designations to discover commonalities in order to develop strategies to apply in the classroom. The research question was, “What can students with learning, social/emotional and behavioural designations tell teachers about their lived experience regarding engagement and motivation in literary courses?” In phenomenological research, the research becomes immersed in the participants experience (Finlay, 2005). Finlay (2005) stated that “the researcher aims to stay with the participant’s description, becoming ever more open to what is being communicated”. There was an “intersubjective relationship between participant and researcher” (Finlay, 2005). I hoped to increase high school students’ engagement in their academic courses.

Some ontological/epistemological grounding of findings was meaningful experiences, and the knowledge obtained was personal to the participants. The ontology was realist where the participants had an independent existence to one another. As Van Manen (1991) stated, “Not concerned primarily with the nomological or factual aspects of some state of affairs, rather, it always asks, what is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced” The participants were not dependant on each other. The epistemology was an anti/post positivist. The knowledge gained from the participants was personal, subjective and unique. As a researcher, I was involved in the study. My object was to “...somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is holistic and analytic, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (Van Manen, 1991). The agency was volunteerist as humans produce their own environments with free will and creativity. As a phenomenological
researcher, my task was to “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain experience” (Van Manen, 1991).

This study had aspects of Transcendental and Existential branches of phenomenological research. As in Transcendental, it looked beyond the everyday experiences to the essences underlying them. It examined how things appeared directly to the students and without examining it through media, cultural, or symbolic lenses (Cohen et al, 2007). Existential was interested in understanding the meaning and structure of the world of everyday life (stream of consciousness) as “one can only find meaning when looking back on one’s lived experience…people must identify the purpose of the goal they seek” (Cohen et al. 2007). Langeveld described phenomenology as a reflective awareness, “the study of pedagogy and play as an experience…It is impossible to reduce pedagogical thinking and acting to mere rational grounds”. Langeveld believed as educators, “we are often guided by what we “feel” rather than rational considerations” (Van Manen, 1996). Phenomenological inquiry, as explained by Beets, is “each phenomenological text is only one interpretation of a possible experience. There can be differences in lived experiences and that one lived experience is not valued greater than another. By understanding other’s lived experiences; the experiences can become our own actual” (Van Manen, 1996).

By investigating student voice, many themes arose that are rooted in theories revolving around what students required for learning. The students felt that the ability to problem solve and persist through the process were the result of the learning connections and engagement that occurred through relationship with teachers and peers. Although learning was an individual experience, other students, teachers and adults were required for construction of knowledge through collaboration, connections and support. Current research examined engagement, motivation, or student voice. This study was of value because it explored the information that adolescent students with designations provided on engagement and academic success.
Issues for Further Investigation

The research presented promotes awareness of the difficulties students with designations encounter. The questions asked in this research study should be applied to students with designations in an urban environment in order to be able to generalize the results accurately. It would be interesting to examine the lived experience of classroom teachers. Today’s teachers have a heavy workload and many demands placed on them. To be able to individualize the curriculum for 30 students is incredibly daunting and unrealistic. Many are too overwhelmed to incorporate the vast amount of strategies that students with designations require. Learning Resource teachers have extremely large caseload which leads to burnout and a high turnover rate.

Further investigation into student voice would provide valuable insights into the educational system. Additional questions surrounding parent involvement and attitude towards education would be interesting to see if it had an effect on the student’s engagement and motivation. Wyatt, Mary and Mark (all of whom graduated from the secondary school) stated that their parents made them go to school. A question concerning the students’ perceived ability would have been an interesting aspect to incorporate into the analysis of the themes as investigated by Hardre et al. (2007). Additionally, the question of how are students with designations learning experiences are otherwise impacted. For example, their socioeconomic status was not investigated in this study.

Inclusion is an ideal philosophy for education in British Columbia. It would be interesting to compare research of student voice with students who attend inclusive secondary schools versus students who attend private schools which specialize in specific designations (schools for children with dyslexia). Research questions could revolve around students’ view of their designation? Do they feel segregated? Do they feel more comfortable in the specialized schools? Do they experience more success? What are the social interactions like? Would the students in private schools take more risks in their classes? Which school would they prefer to attend?
Recommendations

The understandings shared by these students with designations and explored in this study may suggest strategies and interventions for classroom teachers that might improve the lived experience of learning in their classrooms. Small changes have a large impact. These particular findings could influence district policy of responsibility for students with designations’ lived experiences, specifically who is responsible for these students. If more funding is available, these students could receive more direct instruction that addressed their specific learning needs. The school should be more of a community, where the students feel supported in every aspect of their school life. This could possibly increase the students’ sense of belonging and improve their experiences in school. If a greater number of teachers took a moment to greet their students, get involved, or ask questions, these moments would positively impact more students. By increasing our learning and improving our practice, we change our behaviour and influence others around us (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009). Although it may be adding one more thing to an already busy schedule, it would allow the teacher to begin to connect to the students and make the students feel welcomed. As Hardre et al. (2007) stated, “if teachers can create environments in which students feel supported, then they may also feel more able to see instrumental relations between what is being done in school and valued personal goals” (p. 264). These small acts of attention would begin to change the approach and mindset that many teachers have towards students with designations. What is needed is a feeling of attachment to the teacher, the school and the education experience? Small acts of consideration and kindness and attention can stimulate student engagement in their learning environment and target goals of success and feelings of accomplishment. This is precisely what our students need in order to be strong humanitarians and lifelong learners.
CONCLUDING SECTIONS

References
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PARTICIPANTS ARE NEEDED

Are you a recent high school graduate with special learning needs or an Individual Education Plan (IEP)?

I am a student at Vancouver Island University. For the purpose of my Master in Education program, I will be conducting a research project on:

*Are you listening?: What students with high-incidence disabilities can tell teachers about school engagement.*

You would be asked to participate in an individual interview regarding questions about your personal experience with school and engagement in classes.

Your participation would involve one session. Each session will be about **30-45 minutes** long.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive $5.

For information to volunteer for this study, please contact:

*Laura Ellwood*
*Learning Resource Teacher*
*604-894-6318 or*
*Email: [lellwood@sd48.bc.ca](mailto:lellwood@sd48.bc.ca)*
Appendix B

Recruitment Script

Hello. My name is Laura Ellwood. You may recognize me as a teacher at Pemberton Secondary. I am currently a student at Vancouver Island University (VIU) completing my Master Degree in Special Education. One of the requirements for my program is to conduct a research study. As I require four to six volunteers, I am here today inviting you to be participants in my study.

I am looking at how to improve student engagement. I want to know what it was like for you in school. What made things interesting and when were you bored? I hope to increase high school students’ engagement in their academic courses. Student engagement can be described as doing your homework, attending classes, being involved in your own learning, being interested in what you teachers are teaching you, and wanted to come to school to learn. I will ask you a series of interview questions about your own experience at school and the supports and adaptations you receive.

If you choose to participate in the interview, your name will be kept confidential and your answers will be destroyed (shredded or deleted) at the completion of the study. If you decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw for any reason up to data analysis (approximately March 2016). I want to make it clear that there is no pressure or penalty to participate (or withdraw). You do not have to decide today. You have until (deadline provided) to decide. I am also going to inform and ask your parents/guardians for permission to interview you. If your parents/guardians say no, then unfortunately you will not be able to participate in the study.

Are there any questions?

I will be sending home two consent forms for you and your parent’s/guardian’s to read and sign if you choose to participate. I will also leave copies with your teachers if you choose to participate at a later date. One copy will be send back to me and the other is for you to have as for your personal records. This is not mandatory and there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate.

(Hand out consent forms and review with students)

Thank you for your time.

Laura Ellwood
lellwood@sd48.bc.ca
604-894-6318
Appendix C

Research Consent Form (for recent graduates)

Laura Ellwood  
Student  
Master of Education  
Special Education  
Vancouver Island University  
lellwood@sd48.bc.ca  
604-894-6318

Gail Krivel-Zacks, Ph. D.  
Supervisor  
Special Education  
Vancouver Island University  
Gail.Krivel-Zacks@viu.ca  
(250) 753-3245

TITLE OF PROJECT: “Are you Listening? What Students with High-Incidence Disabilities Can Tell Teachers about School Engagement.”

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH: I am currently a student at Vancouver Island University (VIU) completing a Master Degree in Special Education. As part of my degree, I am interviewing current high school students and recent graduates with learning needs or an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The purpose of the study is to understand the experience of students with disabilities and their engagement in school in a rural community. These designations include emotional, behavioural or learning disabilities. I am looking at how to improve student engagement. I want to know what it was like for you in school. What made things interesting and when were you bored? I hope to increase high school students’ engagement in their academic courses. Student engagement can be described as doing your homework, attending classes, being involved in your own learning, being interested in what you teachers are teaching you, and wanted to come to school to learn. I will ask you a series of interview questions about your own experience at school and the supports and adaptations you receive. I want the experience of students with emotional, behaviour or learning disabilities in order to tell teachers about students’ engagement in school.

During this study, you will be asked to answer a number of brief questions concerning your personal experiences with school engagement, such as meaningful learning, the purpose of learning, and supports and adaptations in the classroom. You will also be asked for some demographic information (gender, age, etc). Your participation will require approximately 30 to 45 minutes of your time. The interview will take place at Pemberton Secondary School at a prearranged time at your convenience. The interview questions are attached with the Consent form.
POTENTIAL HARM: There is a potential for mental distress, stress or embarrassment as the participants' are discussing personal information, observations and experiences. Although every effort will be made to protect participants’ identities (e.g. real names will not be used, etc.), they may still be identified indirectly through sharing their personal experiences as these may be directly quoted or paraphrased. As a result, participant’s anonymity cannot be guaranteed. On-site counselling, however, will be available upon request or if distress is perceived by the researcher.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: There are no benefits to your participation, except to increase awareness of school engagement by sharing your personal experiences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All records of your participation will be kept strictly confidential, such that only I and my supervisor will have access to the information you provide. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be destroyed by shredding at the end of the study, approximately in February 2019. Electronic files will also be deleted at this time. The results from this study will be reported in a written research report and an oral report during a presentation. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants directly.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time for any reason without explanation and without penalty, prior to the time of analysis and write up (approximately March 2016). You may choose not to answer any question for any reason.

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.

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

Laura Ellwood
Master of Special Education student
Vancouver Island University
lellwood@viu.ca

CONSENT: I have read the above form, understand the information read, and understand that I can ask questions or withdraw at any time, prior to March 2016. I consent to participate in this research study.

Participant’s Signature
Date
Appendix D

Student Research Assent Form

Laura Ellwood  
VIU Masters Student  
Master of Education  
Education  
lellwood@sd48.bc.ca  
604-894-6318

Gail Krivel-Zacks, Ph. D.  
VIU Supervisor,  
Education  
Gail.Krivel-Zacks@viu.ca  
(250) 753-3245

TITLE OF PROJECT: “Are you Listening? What Students with High-Incidence Disabilities Can Tell Teachers about School Engagement.”

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH: I am currently a student at Vancouver Island University (VIU) completing a Master Degree in Special Education. As part of my degree, I am interviewing current high school students and recent graduates with learning needs or an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The purpose of the study is to understand the experience of students with disabilities and their engagement in school in a rural community. These designations include emotional, behavioural or learning disabilities. I am looking at how to improve student engagement. I want to know what it was like for you in school. What made things interesting and when were you bored? I hope to increase high school students’ engagement in their academic courses. Student engagement can be described as doing your homework, attending classes, being involved in your own learning, being interested in what you teachers are teaching you, and wanted to come to school to learn. I will ask you a series of interview questions about your own experience at school and the supports and adaptations you receive. I want the experience of students with emotional, behaviour or learning disabilities in order to tell teachers about students’ engagement in school.

During this study, you will be asked to answer a number of brief questions concerning your personal experiences with school engagement, such as meaningful learning, the purpose of learning, and supports and adaptations in the classroom. You will also be asked for some demographic information (gender, age, etc). Your participation will require approximately 30 to 45 minutes of your time. The interview will take place at Northern Outreach Program during school hours, if another time cannot be arranged. The interview questions are attached with the Consent form.

POTENTIAL HARM: There is a potential for mental distress, stress or embarrassment as the students' are discussing personal information, observations and experiences. Although every effort will be made to
protect participants’ identities (e.g. real names will not be used, etc.), they may still be identified indirectly through sharing their personal experiences as these may be directly quoted or paraphrased. As a result, participant’s anonymity cannot be guaranteed. On-site counselling, however, will be available upon request if distress is perceived by the researcher.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: There are no benefits to your participation, except to increase awareness of school engagement by sharing your personal experiences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All records of your participation will be kept strictly confidential, such that only I and my supervisor will have access to the information you provide. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be destroyed by shredding at the end of the study, approximately in February 2019. Electronic files will also be deleted at this time. The results from this study will be reported in a written research report and an oral report during a presentation. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants directly.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time for any reason without explanation and without penalty, prior to the time of analysis and write up (approximately March 2016). You may choose not to answer any question for any reason.

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.

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

Laura Ellwood
Master of Special Education student
Vancouver Island University
lellwood@viu.ca

ASSENT: I have read the above form, understand the information read, and understand that I can ask questions or withdraw at any time, prior to March 2016. I assent to participate in this research study.

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date ____________
Appendix E

Parent or Guardian’s Research Consent Form

Laura Ellwood  
VIU Masters Student  
Master of Education  
Education  
lellwood@sd48.bc.ca  
604-894-6318

Gail Krivel-Zacks, Ph. D.  
VIU Supervisor,  
Education  
Gail.Krivel-Zacks@viu.ca  
(250) 753-3245

TITLE OF PROJECT: “Are you Listening? What Students with High-Incidence Disabilities Can Tell Teachers about School Engagement.”

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH: I am currently a student at Vancouver Island University (VIU) completing a Master Degree in Special Education. As part of my degree, I am interviewing current high school students and recent graduates with learning needs or an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The purpose of the study is to understand the experience of students with disabilities and their engagement in school in a rural community. These designations include emotional, behavioural or learning disabilities. I am looking at how to improve student engagement. I want to know what it is like for students in school. What made things interesting and when are they bored? I hope to increase high school students’ engagement in their academic courses. Student engagement can be described as doing homework, attending classes, being involved in their learning, being interested in what is being taught, and wanting to come to school to learn. I will ask your son/daughter a series of interview questions about his/her experience at school and the supports and adaptations that he/she may receive. I want the experience of students with emotional, behaviour or learning disabilities in order to tell teachers about these students’ engagement in school.

During this study, your son/daughter will be asked to answer a number of brief questions concerning his/her personal experiences with school engagement, such as meaningful learning, the purpose of learning, and supports and adaptations in the classroom. Your child will also be asked for some demographic information (gender, age, etc.). Your child’s participation will require approximately 30 to 45 minutes of his/her time. The interview questions are attached with the Consent form.

POTENTIAL HARM: There is a potential for mental distress, stress or embarrassment as the participants' are discussing personal information, observations and experiences. Although every effort will be made to protect participants’ identities (e.g. real names will not be used, etc.), they may still be identified indirectly through sharing their personal experiences as these may be directly quoted or paraphrased.
As a result, participant’s anonymity cannot be guaranteed. On-site counselling, however, will be available upon request or if distress is perceived by the researcher.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: There are no benefits to your child’s participation, except to increase awareness of school engagement by sharing their personal experiences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All records of your child’s participation will be kept strictly confidential, such that only I and my supervisor will have access to the information your child provides. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be destroyed by shredding at the end of the study, approximately in February 2019. Electronic files will also be deleted at this time. The results from this study will be reported in a written research report and an oral report during a presentation. Information about the study will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants directly.

PARTICIPATION: Your child’s participation is completely voluntary. He/she may withdraw at any time for any reason without explanation and without penalty, prior to the time of analysis and write up (approximately March 2016). Your child may choose not to answer any question for any reason.

CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR CHILD’S TREATMENT IN THE RESEARCH: If you have any concerns about your child’s 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.

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

Laura Ellwood  
Master of Special Education student  
Vancouver Island University  
lellwood@sd48.bc.ca

CONSENT: I have read the above form, understand the information read, and understand that I can ask questions at any time. I also understand that my child is able to withdraw from the study any time prior to March 2016.

I consent to my child ___________________to participate in this research study.

Parent or Guardian’s Signature                Date
Appendix F

Questions for Recent Graduates

Recent graduates will be asked the following questions in an interview:

a. Where did you attend school?
b. Why did you choose to come to school?
c. What courses did you take?
d. Did you enjoy your courses?
e. What was your favourite subject and why?
f. Are you currently attending post-secondary? Trades?
g. If so what are you taking? If not are you working? Do you enjoy your job?
h. What does it feel like when you enjoy a particular subject or topic? What does it feel like when you don’t?
i. How often did you attend school? 5 days a week, 4 days a week, 3 days a week, or 1-2 days a week?
j. What is the reason when you miss school? What brought you to school?
k. What do you think the definition of school/ in class engagement is?
l. What did it feel like when you are engaged in class?
   On a scale of 1 to 10 please indicate your level of engagement in high school? Can you give me some examples? (How that changed now that you are at post-secondary?)
m. Did you feel that relevant engaging material was provided?
n. How could your learning could have been more meaningful in school?
o. What did you see as the purpose of this learning?
p. Did you feel supported in the classroom?
q. How did you feel supported?
r. What specifically made you feel supported?
s. How did supports and adaptation help your learning?
   When do you feel success?

   a) Success in academics and b) success in life? Either or?
t. Did you ever feel success in your classes or in school?
Appendix G

Questions for high school students

The students will be asked the following questions in an interview:

a. Where do you attend school?
b. Why do you choose to come to school?
c. What courses are you taking?
d. Do you enjoy your courses?
e. What is your favourite subject and why?
f. What does it feel like when you enjoy a particular subject or topic? What does it feel like when you don’t?
g. How often do you attend school? 5 days a week, 4 days a week, 3 days a week, or 1-2 days a week?
h. What is the reason when you miss school? What brings you to school?
i. What do you think the definition of school/in class engagement is?
j. What does it feel like when you are engaged in class?
k. On a scale of 1 to 10 please indicate your level of engagement in your current courses? Can you give me some examples?
l. Do you feel that relevant engaging material is provided in your classes?
m. How could your learning be more meaningful in school?
n. Do you feel supported in the classroom?
o. How do you feel that you are supported?
p. What do specifically makes you feel supported?
q. How do supports and adaptation help your learning?
r. When do you feel success? a) Success in academics and b) success in life? Either or?
s. Do you ever feel success in your classes or in school?