

Fostering Social Capital Among At-Risk Students in an Alternative Education Program:

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to look at social capital formation among at-risk students in an alternative education program. Social capital has been applied to a broad range of fields to highlight the benefits that individuals, organizations and communities accrue from supportive relationships and networks. However, to date no research has looked specifically at social capital formation among at-risk students in a Canadian alternative high school. For this reason the author decided to examine the lived experiences of twelve Canadian at-risk students currently attending Sunnyside Alternative High School, with the aim of describing how social capital was fostered. The mainstream school and alternative school experiences of the students were compared based on the research questions and a conceptual framework of social capital formation. The findings of the research confirmed the importance of affective bonding social capital, as well as an inclusive learning environment at the alternative school.

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Introduction

Schooling is not only a rite of passage into adulthood for young people but has increasingly become a source of exclusion for many youth around the world. Today, at-risk students are excluded from mainstream schools because of the lack of supportive relationships with others, especially with teachers and peers. Once youth have no meaningful relationships with others at school, not only does learning and school engagement erode overall, but their personal self-worth diminishes. The multifaceted problems facing at-risk students in mainstream schools cannot be reduced simply to a lack of student motivation or insufficient school resources— although these two factors play a huge role in student disengagement. Rather, it is the absence of supportive relationships within the mainstream school that largely exacerbates the sense of alienation and disconnection felt by marginal students. Yet, the mainstream school— similar to alternative school— has the potential for social capital mobilization in fostering positive and mutually beneficial social relationships between staff and students. The main stakeholders for students in accessing social capital such as teachers, parents, peers and school administrators are interconnected and present within the mainstream school. Unfortunately, the mainstream schools that I attended and those that the student participants of this study have recently left often relegate at-risk students as problems. At-risk students who struggle academically and socially at the mainstream school— in many cases due to language and cultural barriers— are usually automatically stereotyped and treated poorly as underachievers. For this reason, at-risk students who come to the alternative school generally perceive teachers as only “figureheads” and “strangers” who have no interest in inspiring them to reach their educational and individual potential.

As a former alternative school student I have personally experienced multiple suspensions and formal expulsion from mainstream schools, both elementary and secondary. In fact, mainstream schools were little more than prisons where I felt powerless to change my situation. Likewise, staff members and peers at the mainstream school were invisible to me. Routine interactions with staff— even the mundane request to use the washroom— were always tainted by a sense of rejection, incessant conflict over classroom procedures and mutual incomprehensibility. In such an environment learning became constrained and the only way out for me was disengagement from school altogether, followed by formal expulsion from the school

district. Sadly, the love of learning that had been fostered in me from an early age by parents and peers was deeply scarred in the process. Transitioning to the alternative school from such a traumatic experience was not easy. As an at-risk youth I came to the alternative school without many credits and limited social ties. Moreover, I was also a young offender who was labelled as “dangerous and violent”. Predictably, my admission to an alternative school was vigorously challenged at every stage by mainstream teachers, police officers, probation officers and guidance counsellors who cited my persistent failures in the mainstream school as reasons for not admitting me to Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS).¹ Indeed, the alternative school staff members who were present at the time have since shared their recollections of police officers and former principals arguing strongly against my admission. However, after being admitted to the alternative school, not only did I find much needed emotional respite, but it became a refuge where I could freely pursue my learning and hobbies, as well as access educational resources. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to prosper and transform my hitherto troubled schooling and life into a success at the alternative school. At a difficult time in my schooling, alternative school teachers represented important values such as fairness, hard work, and personal success. In essence, they were for me supportive adults at school when I saw nothing good in authority figures, especially teachers in mainstream schools. My success as a student at the alternative school owed a lot to the benefits I gained from my interactions with staff members at the school.

Currently, I am fortunate to be both a former student and staff member at this same alternative school; someone who is relied upon by students as a mentor and role model. Just as staff members in the past freely shared their personal life challenges and experiences with me, I now do the same with at-risk students who come into my classroom. Poignantly, it was teacher mentors at the alternative school who saved me from a path of hopelessness by modeling a better way of living and learning. My decision to pursue a teaching career at university was directly inspired from the interactions that I had with teacher mentors as an alternative school student. Consequently, it has become clear to me that supportive relationships are critical to the success of at-risk students. The key to a successful transition for at-risk students today from hopelessness in mainstream school to a future of possibilities at alternative schools are the teachers and other staff members who strive to build supportive relationships within an inclusive learning

¹ A pseudonym.

environment. As a staff member at SAHS I have worked hard to provide as much emotional and academic support for at-risk students. Understanding the complexities involved in an at-risk students' transition from mainstream school to the alternative school I have been able to reflect on my personal and professional experiences at the alternative school. Having been labelled "at-risk" for much of my own schooling I have an instinctive bond with at-risk students attending Sunnyside. It is also my professional view that a young person who has been systematically institutionalized from elementary school until high school as an "at-risk student" requires adult mentors to overcome marginalization and negative labels. Therefore, it is vital for at-risk students that they benefit from the intervention of caring adults (e.g. parents, teachers, and community members).

In light of these reflections, I decided to conduct my M.A. research into the issue of relationships developed in alternative schools and how these ties can facilitate the transformation of students who have had unhappy experiences in mainstream schools. This also led me to consider the notion of social capital – the benefits derived from supportive social relationships – as a basis for understanding the connection between student relationships and benefits from these relationships. While there have been many studies on alternative schools, limited attention has been devoted to the role of social capital formation among students in alternative schools. A key starting assumption of my study is that alternative schools offer more social capital for at-risk students than mainstream schools. Accordingly, my research dissertation is focused on understanding how social capital of at-risk students is fostered and expanded in Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS) where I currently teach. Specifically, my research questions were as follows:

1. What have been the mainstream school relational experiences of students who are now in an alternative school, and how were they affected by these relationships?
2. What are the relational experiences of these same students in an alternative school, and how have they been affected by them?
3. How has student social capital acquisition differed in mainstream and alternative school settings for these students?

Along with the research questions I have developed a conceptual framework to analyze the dynamics of how social capital is developed within mainstream and alternative schools. Using a qualitative and comparative methodological approach, I adopted three forms of data collection to examine these comparative school experiences of twelve alternative school students (six male students and six female students) in terms of their individual relationships and the personal effects of these relationships in their mainstream schools and subsequently in their current alternative school. In particular, a questionnaire was first used where student participants answered questions about their mainstream and alternative school experiences. In the questionnaires the student participants indicated the level of comfort and connection with others at both SAHS and their previous mainstream school. After the student participants completed the questionnaires, in-depth interviews were conducted where they could individually elaborate further on their mainstream school and alternative school experiences. Furthermore, throughout the research I conducted participant observation at SAHS as it related to my duties as a staff member. My observations were based on my involvement during regular events at SAHS, as well as intimate classroom interactions with student participants. In this respect, the participant observation data forms a crucial piece in the overall understanding of the experiences of student participants attending SAHS.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One discusses the characteristics of at-risk students (i.e., those who feel alienated in mainstream schools and are at risk of dropping out before completion), and the rationale for, and characteristics and forms of, alternative schools. Chapter Two offers an overview of youth social capital theory and its constituent parts: affective and cognitive assets, and bonding and bridging social capital. The chapter also consists of a review of literature concerning the different contexts of mainstream schooling and alternative schooling, and how these contexts affect social capital formation among at-risk youth. The chapter concludes by reiterating the research questions. Chapter Three elaborates on the methodology of the research study by including a brief description of the twelve student participants and the data collection methods (questionnaire, interviews, and participant observation). Chapter Four presents a brief profile of each of the twelve student participants, as well as their descriptive accounts of their mainstream school experiences and the effects of these relationships. Chapter Five then presents students' perspectives of their social relationships at

Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS) and the benefits they accrue from these relationships. On the basis of the differentiated nature of relationships and benefits in the two types of school, as well as drawing upon the key points of the social capital conceptual framework, Chapter Six consists of an analysis of social capital formation in the alternative school. The chapter concludes by juxtaposing this analysis with current scholarship on alternative schooling and youth social capital formation.

Chapter 1: At-Risk Students and Alternative Schooling

Introduction

This chapter discusses the characteristics of at-risk students and the various risk factors associated with the difficulties and alienation these students' experience in mainstream schools. This then leads to a discussion of alternative schooling – the rationale for alternative schools, and their essential role in meeting the needs of at-risk students. The purpose of this chapter is also to provide relevant information on why at-risk students frequently end up leaving mainstream school, as well as the services and supports found at the alternative school.

1.1 At-risk students

Defining at-risk students

Many students in Canada and elsewhere in the world find themselves alienated in mainstream schooling (i.e., public schools with large student populations, uniform curriculum and organized forms of instruction and learning, few individual learning options, and limited personal relationships between staff and students). Such students generally encounter academic, social and personal barriers in schools that they are unable to overcome. Collectively, these students are regarded as being “at-risk” because of the difficulties they experience at school that are likely to result in their decisions to drop out prematurely. However, there is no one uniform demographic background of at-risk students. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has defined at-risk students as those children and youth who are in danger of failing at school or who are unlikely to make a successful transition from school to work (OECD, 2012). Implied in this definition is that at-risk students are more likely to experience educational problems than others, and this will diminish their capacity to have fulfilling lives and to make a full contribution to society (OECD, 2012; Watson, 2011; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

At-risk students can be identified by many different attributes –disruptive behaviour, poor grades, suspension, and truancy (Quinn et al., 2006). However, a common perspective of at-risk students focuses on their lack of academic progress. A study conducted by Jones (2011) concludes that at-risk students demonstrate a lack of commitment to learning in mainstream

school (Jones, 2011). Likewise, Holloway and Salinitri (2010) have defined an at-risk student as “[o]ne who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and relationships” (p.383). Similarly, James (2012) defines an “at risk” student as “one whose past and present characteristics or conditions are associated with a higher risk of probability of failing to obtain desired life outcomes” (p.465).

While academic difficulties are commonplace among at-risk students, there are other identifying attributes. As Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) have explained, at-risk students are more likely to be depressed and feel isolated than other students, often have difficult home lives, and are more prone to abuse drugs and alcohol. The reality of risk itself may fluctuate over time, shifting according to circumstances and contexts, rather than being a fixed quality (Holloway & Salinitri, 2010). Generally, however, exposure to multiple risk factors increases the likelihood of long term developmental problems. Likewise, the impact of exposure to risk factors at a young age may be more detrimental than exposure later in life (Ibid).

The definition and use of the “at-risk” designation can itself be potentially problematic. Identification of such students in mainstream schools tends to focus less on their specific learning needs than it does on their assumed deficits that are seen to be diminishing their engagement in school and hindering their learning abilities and academic performances (James, 2012). This is often the case among visible minority students who may be struggling in mainstream schools and who often experience stigmatization associated with their race, language, or religion particularly when they are identified as being “at risk”. Many such students are immigrants or refugees and must struggle with English or French as a second language. Indeed, some scholars assert that the term “at-risk” can be offensive, particularly when it emphasizes personal characteristics over which individuals have no control (Edwards et al., 2007, p.32). Many at-risk students, for example, live in poor neighborhoods, in publicly subsidized housing projects, and quite often in single-parent families (Schinke et al., 2000). Unfortunately for these students, too often mainstream schools lack the necessary resources and wherewithal to best accommodate their differences and serve their varied needs (Schinke et al., 2000; James, 2012; Munoz, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Foley & Pang, 2006; Quinn et al, 2006). Consequently, despite their vulnerability and disadvantageous situations, at-risk students in mainstream school are often regarded as either a nuisance or as a disruptive threat to

the established order of school environments (James, 2012; Munoz, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003).

At this point I should acknowledge that the term “at-risk”, unlike “marginal youth”, tends to focus on the individual experiences of marginalization as opposed to the societal and institutional sources of their problems. In this thesis, however, “at-risk” is an appropriate designation for students who attend an alternative school because each of these students is, in fact, at risk of long-term marginalization and difficulties as adults unless they receive support. Moreover, the term “at-risk” is inclusive of a broad category of marginalized students (e.g. visible minorities, young offenders, female students, religious minorities, street-involved youth, etc.) who find themselves in alternative schools facing personal, institutional and societal difficulties.

Factors of risks

Despite the varying definitions of at-risk students, the problems they face in mainstream schools are generally associated with a combination of internal and external factors. Edwards et al. (2007) have highlighted specific detrimental factors related to academic achievement that often result in adverse school and life outcomes. Crucial external risk factors associated with low academic achievement include poverty, inadequate housing, child abuse, ethnic minority status, low parental education, and types and geographic location of schools (Edwards et al., 2007). Some scholars have pointed out additional negative predictors—both external and internal— such as elevated levels of delinquency, higher incidents of violent and aggressive behaviour, teenage pregnancy, greater degrees of psychological problems, and low educational and occupational expectations (Edwards et al., 2007; Munoz, 2004; Foley & Pang, 2006; Quinn et al, 2006; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Morrisette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Although such students are usually at risk of formally abandoning school, many who physically attend school are socially and psychologically disconnected from the overall school environment and many are likely to have experienced periods of suspension or expulsion from school (Munoz, 2004; Foley & Pang, 2006; Quinn et al, 2006). Because of the isolation and acute marginalization that many at-risk youth experience in schools, they are often less likely to seek and receive guidance and support than their more well-adjusted counterparts. This places them at an even greater risk of further problems, such as associating with more deviant peer groups

(McWhirter et al., 2002). Compounding these difficulties, many at-risk students have drug dependencies and are subject to being charged with criminal possession or trafficking of drugs and therefore are susceptible to punishment as young offenders. Unfortunately, decisions by school authorities to have students stay away from school for relatively brief periods of time often has the effect of exacerbating delinquent behaviour to the point where the students will decide to voluntarily abandon school before completing their formal education (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Morrisette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Of course, dropping out of school altogether is particularly problematic because it almost inevitably has a negative effect on students' long term educational and occupational prospects (Edwards et al., 2007; Schinke et al., 2000). This in turn tends to have a detrimental lifelong effect on the self-confidence necessary to pursue meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and social relationships (Holloway & Salinitri, 2010).

Kolara et al. (2012) found that youth who are homeless or living on the street often lack alternative resources to prevent victimization and experiences of violence, self-harm and suicidality, and therefore strive to cope through social distancing. In such cases, they remove themselves from certain social groups or persons, and develop anti-social coping mechanisms such as a non-discriminating and intense distrust of others so as to avoid hurtful experiences (Kolara et al., 2012, p.749). Likewise, as Maclure et al. (2003) have shown, at-risk students who come into conflict with the law are often inadequately dealt with in the criminal justice system, in particular in circumstances where they are unable to access diversion programs that are intended to minimize their risks of stigmatization and recidivism for minor crimes (Maclure et al., 2003).

In Canada, there are certain segments of at-risk students who encounter cultural barriers related to race and gender within school. Evidence reveals that school-related risk factors in Canadian schools are most heavily concentrated among visible minorities, individuals with low socio-economic status, and linguistic minorities (those students who are not fluent in the dominant language employed at school). At-risk students who are visible minorities, especially Black youth and Aboriginal youth, often consider themselves to be strangers in mainstream Canadian public schools (Morrisette, 2011; James, 2012; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). As Ozer, Wolf, and Kong (2008) have observed, immigrant students from ethnic minority backgrounds are often likely to experience social exclusion in school as a result of the cultural

and linguistic barriers they face, particularly because of the challenges related to dealing with “multiple worlds” of school, family, and neighborhood settings. Within mainstream schools themselves, the situation of at-risk low income and minority students can be very difficult when teachers emphasize students’ deficits and demonstrate little sense of responsibility for student learning (Diamond et al., 2004). It is also clear that many visible minority students face internal barriers, one of the more detrimental being a lack of self-esteem and motivation at school. A recent study by James (2012) revealed that many parents of black male students in Canadian schools demonstrate concern regarding their sons’ disengagement from the formal education system (James, 2012).

Codjoe (2007) has likewise observed that much of conventional scholarship has tended to emphasize the poor academic performance of Black students, or issues and problems related to their academic failure, or to present them in terms that are stereotypically negative and simplistic. In contrast, in a study conducted in Alberta, Codjoe found that Black students achieved academic success despite considerable adversity in integrating in the local community. Two factors were important in the academic success of the students: a positive home environment and parental encouragement (Codjoe, 2007). In contrast, however, Kanu (2008) identified ten barriers that African refugee students in Manitoba faced, namely: 1. lack of academic support at home ; 2. separation from family; 3. cultural dissonance, including academic culture dissonance; 4. acculturation stress; difficulty with academic skills; 5. limited English language proficiency; 6. academic gaps due to disrupted schooling; 7. fast-paced curriculum; 8. fear and distrust of authority figures like teachers; 9. fear of speaking out in class; and 10. grade placement based on age and English language assessment tests rather than academic ability (Kanu, 2008, pp.923-924).

Similar to Kanu’s findings, Dei (2003) found that Black/African, Aboriginal, and Portuguese students in Toronto were experiencing higher dropout rates and disengagement within mainstream schools. Even though Ontario schools have become more diverse, especially in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), there are persistent institutional barriers that mitigate against school achievement among many minority students, especially a propensity to blame the youth themselves and their families for educational failure and school disengagement. As Dei has argued, for Black/African and minority youth in particular, the disengagement from school carries additional stressors besides the physical absence from school. These include doubts and

questions related to self-identity, cultural history and social esteem – all factors that need to be addressed (Dei, 2003).

Muslim students often face similar constraints – peer antagonism, racism and Islamophobia within mainstream schools (Zine, 2001). Female Muslim students are particularly affected by these constraints because they are located as Zine (2001) says at “...the nexus of social difference based on their race, gender, and religious identity” (Zine, 2001, p.399). In his study of at-risk Chinese Canadian students, Li (2003) found that, in contrast to the “grand narratives” of the model minority myth, his cohort of students encountered difficulties with schooling. As Li thus observed, at-risk minority school failure can be explained through multilevel interactions, including cultural differences, modes of incorporation, and differential power relationships between school and home (Li, 2003, p.182. As is well known, the education of First Nations students in Canada has been consistently marginalized and underfunded for many centuries (Saunders & Hill, 2007). According to Saunders & Hill (2007), legal and political systems continue to marginalize First Nations students and other minorities while the social, political and economic systems maintain the status quo (Saunders & Hill, 2007).

For young people in school, relationships with peers and with teachers constitute a critical factor with regard to not only self-esteem and motivation, but also sense of wellbeing in school. In their study of at-risk students, Lee and Ip (2003) found that lack of encouragement from teachers and counselors, often exacerbated by student resistance to teachers and school administrators, contributed to young people’s alienation and propensity to drop out of mainstream schools (Lee & Ip, 2003). They also revealed that students who had dropped out of school generally complained that their teachers only showed interest in their academic grades, but rarely showed any appreciation for, or understanding of, the difficulties they were having in their schoolwork (Lee & Ip, 2003). These students thus felt stigmatized in class because they did not meet academic expectations. Teachers’ lack of empathy hurt their self-esteem (Lee & Ip, 2003). Booker (2006) has likewise highlighted the significance of social relationships and the value of positive interpersonal interactions among children and adolescents at school in fostering a sense of belonging and connection within the school environment. While at-risk students in mainstream school contexts may recognize the value of formal education, the accumulation of negative interactions and experiences with teachers (e.g., low teacher expectations or conflict with teachers) can prevent feelings of true connection or belonging to the school (Booker, 2006).

For students experiencing unsupportive or negative relationships in mainstream schools, the results will likely be lower levels of belonging, and hence lower academic achievement (Holt et al., 2008). Such students are in need not just of sustained academic assistance, but as well of supportive relationships. As Codjoe (2007) observes schools must give more emphasis to finding transformative ways to increase the involvement of Black parents in the education of their children and of developing closer ties between schools and the communities they serve. Instead of falling back on deficit theories and continuing the practice of blaming Black students, their families, and their communities for educational failure, schools must develop a model of parent and community education and advocacy that works with parents, communities, and students to advance the education of students. Furthermore, schools need to focus on areas where they can make a difference through fundamental changes in their policies and programs. For example, schools should be restructured to become open places where parents and others can feel that they are welcomed and valued. Black parents, like White parents, have a right to be treated with respect by school staff (Codjoe, p.150).

Kanu (2008) has called for improvements both at the level of the macro system (federal and provincial governments) and the microsystem (the school, families). At the national level, the federal government needs to put policies in place to minimize the educational, economic, and psychosocial challenges that African refugee students in Canada face (Kanu, 2008, pg.935). Specifically, Kanu (2008) believes that mainstream schools in Canada should do a better job in connecting with at-risk minority students, especially African refugee students. For their part, schools, as the microsystem identified as a key element in the socialization and acculturation of refugee youth, have already undertaken several initiatives in response to the needs of refugee students but must do more to live up to their rhetoric about diversity and inclusiveness and reduce some of the academic and psychosocial challenges. For example, inclusive practices such as expanding the cultural bases of the recreational sports and cafeteria food items in schools, and providing prayer rooms for Muslim students, will validate and affirm cultural diversity (Kanu, 2008; Zine, 2001). Better practices in initial assessment and grade placement, and continued monitoring of placements, can reduce frustration among refugee students and increase motivation for learning. A better understanding of refugee parents' situations (e.g., parents' preoccupation with economic survival and cultural differences in expectations about parental involvement with the school) can reduce misunderstanding between parents and teachers and

administrators and develop better community relations. Patterns of segregation affect social networks, which in turn affect educational access and achievement. Consequently, desegregation of EAL students from Canadian-born peers can increase inter-group interaction, enhance African refugee students' social capital, and increase their confidence (Kanu, 2008, p.936).

Kolara et al. (2012) urge that academics and policymakers should avoid painting at-risk youth as one-dimensional 'failures' or 'deviants' by questioning the normative assumptions in definitions of resilience and coping strategies, and thus facilitate practical investigation of how their strategies can be made more effective, even if these strategies may be double-edged. In turn, this is indicative that resilience research addressing other marginalized or non-status-quo populations can benefit from adaptation of assessments of coping strategies to be made congruent with evaluative contexts (Kolara et al., 2012).

Broadly speaking, it is clear that educational developments in Canada have been characterized by growing recognition in recent decades that mass public schooling has to meet the challenges of integrating varied groups of learners, ranging from those with disabilities and special needs to those from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Given the multiple factors that can create difficulties related to academic achievement, which in turn can lead to adversity in later life (Edwards et al., 2007), the population of at-risk students, of which there are many in large urban centres in Canada, has become a significant challenge for schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). As James (2012) argues, there is a need in Canada to identify and thereupon assist students who are at risk because of their failure to attend school, to earn passing grades, to comply with school discipline, and to productively engage with educational expectations. Such identification ideally should be regarded as a means of helping instructional and classroom management practices that are in tune with the needs of at-risk students, that will assist them educationally and, in the long run, help them to make a successful transition from school to the adult world (James, 2012; Watson, 2011). From the perspective of Canadian schools (both mainstream and alternative programs), such identification ideally should be regarded as a means of helping to plan instructional and classroom management practices that are in tune with educational needs of at-risk students and, in the long run, help them to make a successful transition from school to the adult world (James, 2012; Watson, 2011). Equally important, it is incumbent on individual teachers and the larger education system in Canada to recognize the significance of relationships, and the benefits that students can attain from positive

relationships, particularly in school settings. As Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) have argued, without the benefit of key relationships with resourceful and caring adults in the school or community, too many minority students are subject to conditions of risk (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). In light of the substantial challenges and constraints of large mainstream schools, dealing with these problems has become the particular function of alternative schools.

Filling the Gaps on At-risk Students

In my view, scholarly discussions on at-risk youth and risk factors have overlooked highlighting the agency of at-risk youth, as well as systemic/institutional causes for their marginalization. At-risk students are generally not passive failures or victims of their own making. Instead, they are reacting to institutional pressures and actively searching for solutions from the social learning environment to the problems within these large institutions, foremost among which are mainstream schools (Dei, 2003; Zine, 2001; Kolar et al. 2012). Therefore, there is a gap that is not being addressed, namely, the perspectives of at-risk students themselves and their experiences. In fact, within the Canadian context scholars (Dei, 2003, Maclure et al., 2003, Kolar et al, 2012, Li, 2003, Saunders & Hill, 2007, Zina, 2001) have shown the need to change our views on at-risk youth, as well as to initiate meaningful reforms of the existing institutional responses to at-risk students, from schools to housing to the juvenile justice system.

From my experience as teacher and former student at SAHS, the needs of at-risk youth can only be addressed once we have heard their “voices” within schools. This can open up avenues to co-construct solutions to their marginalization. Yet, there is very little of “student voice” in the research reviewed above. Instead, what is prominent are the voices of researchers, educators and adults—reflective of institutional interests such as control—resulting in the “silencing” of at-risk youth. These studies are limited by their excessive focus on the individual risk factors and not on the institutional practices that contribute to excluding and pushing out at-risk students. Important institutional factors that marginalize at-risk students include the failure to foster supportive relationships; strong reliance on punitive measures in response to student disengagement and resistance (e.g. suspension and expulsion); and the lack of promoting diversity/inclusion. Ultimately, the voices of at-risk youth themselves must be heard in schools to deepen and enrich

our understanding of them beyond the labels and stereotypes that accompany their “at-risk status”.

1.2 Alternative Schools

Rationale of Alternative Schools

The very term “alternative school” is suggestive of a school that is deliberately differentiated from other mainstream schools. The main rationale for alternative schools and programs is the need to reach a growing number of at-risk students who for numerous reasons are not successful in mainstream schools (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Many such students tend to fall behind academically and experience multiple failures. Such repeated experiences often lead them to engage in disruptive behaviours in the classroom and or to absent themselves altogether from school. Often, students are referred to alternative programs as a result of behavioural difficulties, suspension, being a pregnant or parenting teen, experiencing academic failure, or having a disability. Similarly, studies have shown that many at-risk students who attend alternative schools have also been identified as being a member of an ethnic minority group (Foley & Pang, 2006). In response, the purpose of alternative schools is to provide a different atmosphere from conventional mainstream schools, one that accommodates the needs and interests of at-risk students who have experienced difficulty in a mainstream setting (Souza, 1999). By extending more individualized attention to students, alternative schools are designed to emphasize skills that will enable these at-risk students to be successful in the world (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). For many at-risk students, an alternative school can be the last opportunity to earn a diploma before dropping out or being expelled. Other at-risk students see alternative schooling as a chance to turn their lives around and perhaps re-enter the mainstream school, recoup credits and get back on track for a timely graduation (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Although various forms of alternative education have emerged over the years, there are two common characteristics that have remained consistent. First, alternative schools have been designed to meet the needs of individual students who have discontinued their enrolment in mainstream schools by offering them specialized instruction (Munoz, 2004). Second, alternative education has represented varying degrees of departure from standard forms of school organization by offering more flexible schedules and by maintaining small enrolment programs,

with student populations of approximately 200 students or less, and with small teacher-student ratios that enable more scope for creativity in instruction (Foley & Pang, 2006; Morrisette, 2011; Wilkins, 2008). In fact, due to their small size, alternative schools can engender “community” which results in more active student participation, as well as a sense of belonging and greater academic and social success (Saunders & Saunders, 2002). Limited enrolment levels are an important aspect of alternative schools since in these less populous circumstances students often feel safe and more at ease. Many students have spoken about their teachers at alternative school in positive terms, referring to them as non-judgmental, adaptable and flexible in their interactions with students, and keen to find creative ways to help each individual student succeed and feel a genuine sense of belonging (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). This is in contrast to the lack of support from teachers that many at-risk students feel characterize their relationship with mainstream school teachers (Morrisette, 2011; James, 2012; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; Holloway & Salinitri, 2010). As Wilkins (2008) has argued, the inclusive nature of alternative schools is a key factor in their effectiveness vis à vis students (Wilkins, 2008). In school environments where they receive more individual attention and support from their teachers, both their behaviours and their grades often improve (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

The main orientation of alternative schooling is to foster a strengths-based approach that enhances the capacities and self-esteem of students, enabling them to believe that they can do well in school and ultimately become contributing members of society. In particular, alternative schools are intended to play an important role by providing effective mentoring in a caring and supportive learning environment. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) have shown that adult mentors play a key role in offering counselling and positive interaction with students. This is often done through individualized instruction using a variety of teaching and learning techniques, social skills development, and regular feedback regarding student academic progress (Saunders & Saunders, 2002). Effective mentors deliberately encourage students to express themselves and concurrently seek to listen to their students. By working to ensure a learning environment that offers physical and emotional safety for their students, mentors strive to overcome the stigma that many students have come to feel is associated with the epithet of “at-risk”. By focusing on the future and downplaying the negative past histories of their students, mentors can challenge their students to aspire to specific goals, and teach them to cope with challenges and to

independently take advantage of key resources and opportunities (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003).

As Kim and Taylor (2008) have observed, alternative schools have generally been successful in filling a gap left by mainstream schools by engaging, and thus retaining, at-risk students through to completion of their formal secondary education. Through individualized teaching and learning approaches that meet the educational needs for youth identified as mainstream school failures (Foley & Pang, 2006), alternative schools are seen as “educational nets” that are intended to catch potential dropouts before they become a burden to society (Souza, 1999, p.91). Evidence indicates that alternative schools are often successful in augmenting both students’ attitude to school and their general academic performance, in part because these schools offer a more conducive social environment for at-risk students. Unlike regular or normal schools that tend to teach large numbers of students, alternative schools generally offer a more personalized pedagogical approach, allowing at-risk students the opportunity to learn in their own style and at their own pace (Morrissette, 2011), and celebrating small steps of success (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The psychosocial climate of alternative schools is often one in which students perceive rules to be reasonable and fair, and equitably enforced, and their teachers considering them with dignity and being open to helping them solve personal as well as academic problems (Quinn et al., 2006). Through flexible structures and teaching staff ability to forge good relations with students, evidence suggests that alternative schools in Canada have helped students overcome serious obstacles to their schooling such as mental health or drug related problems, teen parenthood, and homelessness (McWhirter, 2002). In addition, alternative schools tend to connect classroom studies with real-world skills and provide students opportunities to explore occupations and interests (McFadden, 2010). As a result, as Vadeboncoeur (2007) has observed, most at-risk students who attend an alternative school perceive themselves differently than they did when they were in mainstream school, largely because they believe that the alternative schools offer support for them, and are focused specifically on enabling them to graduate successfully from school.

Other studies have indicated that students in alternative schools have spoken of learning environments that promote self-regulation and encourage them to play an active role in their learning, thus leading to feelings of belonging, academic confidence, and hopefulness about the future (Jones, 2011; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Souza, 1999). Lagana-Riordan et

al. (2011) have reported that students attending alternative school frequently earn more credits in a more flexible manner and tend to achieve higher rates of graduation than many of their peers who continue to struggle in mainstream school. The provision of specialized instruction in conjunction with flexible and enriched academic programs has thus contributed to a reduction in the numbers of at-risk students who abandon school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Munoz, 2004; Izumi et al., 2015). In a recent study by Izumi, Shen, and Xia (2015), looking at determinants of the graduation rate of public alternative schools in the United States, found school processes (e.g. offering summer academic assistance and enrichment) were statistically significantly associated with the graduation rate in alternative high schools. Moreover, they argue that the educational system adopted at mainstream schools is an ineffective practice for alternative high schools for at-risk students, in particular "... that the needs of the students in alternative high schools require a more flexible structure" (Izumi et al., 2015, p.319).

As studies have all shown, alternative schools have generally been successful in accommodating many students who have been considered at-risk in mainstream schools and would otherwise have abandoned or failed their formal education. Relationships have been key factors both in explaining student difficulties in mainstream schools and in student reconnection with education in alternative schools. In a nutshell, given the benefits that accrue from positive social relationships, a key distinguishing feature of alternative schools is that they provide at-risk students with social capital.

In Canada, alternative schools accommodate at-risk students who face different stressors in mainstream school. From religious minority students (Zine, 2001) to African/ Black students (Codjoe 2007; Kanu, 2008; Dei, 2003) find themselves isolated and struggling. They often rely on themselves and their families for purposes of solidarity and resistance to cope with the negative social pressures within mainstream schools. For this reason, Li (2003) urges policymakers to become more sensitive to the needs of at-risk students from minority backgrounds (e.g. Chinese Canadian students). Mainstream schools must begin a broader community outreach as well as work with the families of at-risk students (Li, 2003, p.199). As Dei (2003) has shown, partnerships between at-risk youth, families, schools and communities—strategies that are common to alternative schools—are vital to foster more inclusivity and success for all at-risk youth. Educators and policymakers, and all those who are working in alternative school and mainstream school, should be concerned about the well-being of at-risk

youth, and should strive to foster mutually beneficial relationships. As the studies reviewed in this chapter have shown, at-risk students can achieve success if there are supportive relationships, dedicated educator-mentors, and the existence of “cultures of openness” within schools that enable for sustainable solutions for youth disengagement.

Alternative schools in Canada, of course, are limited by the scope and extent of meeting homelessness and unemployment facing at-risk students. Yet by providing a more inclusive and individualized learning environment, they can counter the stigma of being just “dumping grounds” and “warehouses” for at-risk students. At this study will show, the persistent negative image of the alternative school can be evidenced by how students often commented that “alternative school wasn’t such a terrible place after all” or “they told me this was a school for druggies, but it isn’t”. The use of alternative school in Canada is a form of accommodation and also admission that not all students can be successful in mainstream school. Yet, the experience of students in alternative school and their teachers—the front-line workers— remains obscured and hidden in discussions around school reform, standardized testing and classroom sizes. For these reasons my intention is to present the social learning environment, organization/scheduling and curriculum delivery in one alternative school to fill the gap in the literature about alternative schooling in Canada.

While many studies have acknowledged the significance of social relationships in school, few have examined the role of social capital formation *per se* in enhancing student adjustment to alternative school learning environments. This, then, is the purpose of my study. In the next chapter, therefore, I will examine the phenomenon of social capital prior to discussing the methodology of my field research in one alternative school in Ottawa.

Chapter 2: Youth Social Capital

Introduction

This chapter consists of a review of youth social capital theory, followed by an overview of four dimensions of youth social capital formation: social bonding and social bridging, and affective and cognitive assets that result from bonding and bridging. The chapter will then discuss the connection between schooling and social capital formation, particularly with regard to at-risk students. Finally, the chapter will conclude with why I want to focus on student social capital formation, in particular the logic of my research design.

2.1 Theories of social capital

The notion of social capital originates from the work of L.J. Hanifan, an early 20th century American school reformer, who first referred to social capital as consisting of “goodwill, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (cited in Barry, 2011, p.525). Today social capital has become a widely recognized and used concept that refers generally to the resources and wellbeing that individuals and groups accrue from enduring social relationships. Over the years numerous scholars in varied fields such as sociology, education, political science, and organizational studies have examined social capital both theoretically and empirically (Grenfell, 2009; Barker, 2012; Barry, 2011; Bourdieu, 1997; Coleman, 1990). As a result, scholars in different disciplines frequently regard social capital in somewhat different ways and through different disciplinary lenses. In general, however, the concept of social capital derives from two sociological traditions. The first is a liberal tradition that considers social capital as consisting of a set of shared values and behaviours that are fundamental in achieving social integration and cohesion. Scholars such as Coleman (1990), Fukuyama (1995), and Putnam (2000) have identified characteristics such as reciprocity, trust, and cooperation that simultaneously develop from and reinforce social structures such as family, community, and school. As Woolcock and Narayan (2000) have observed, for individuals social capital generally originates from family, friends and associates. Together these assets “...can be called on in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and leveraged for gain” (p.226). Viewed in broader terms, Putnam (2000) has argued that in dynamic civil societies social relationships often assume ‘bridging’ characteristics among diverse groups of

people and associations (Putnam, 2000). From this perspective social capital enhances not only the wellbeing of individuals, but as well helps to ensure social solidarity in forms such as organizational collegiality, community collaboration, and democratic governance (Field, 2003; Portes & Mooney, 2002).

The second tradition of analysis related to social capital is rooted in critical studies that focus on issues of social inequity and injustice. Notable here has been the work of Bourdieu (1997) for whom social capital is generated through social networks and group membership. In addition, social capital is associated with sociability— a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed (Bourdieu, 1986). These exchanges, however, are influenced by powerful historical, cultural, and economic forces. For Bourdieu, therefore, the nature and quality of social capital are strongly influenced by structural externalities. From this perspective, considerations of social capital must take account of factors underlying the dimension of power differentiation and social inequality. Social capital thus consists of resources such as information and skills that enable individuals and social groups to reproduce and strengthen their positions of privilege and power. Social capital is therefore neither equally available, nor does it generate the same benefits equally. Instead, it is produced in institutions and social environments that affect the nature of human relationships, the allocation of resources, and the availability of opportunities for different social groups (Earls & Carlson, 2001; Flores & Rello, 2003; Lin, 2001). Consequently, social capital is directly related to differences in power and access (Robinson, et al. 2002). For those who must contend with difficult and disadvantageous circumstances, access to social capital is often much less than it is for those who are in positions of privilege (Bourdieu, 1986; Koniordos, 2008; Portes & Landolt, 2000). It is this second tradition of critical analysis of social capital that guides the perspective of this study of at-risk students and the role of alternative schools in fostering student social capital.

2.2 Youth Social Capital: Four dimensions

Most research on social capital has focused on relationships within the world of adults. Over the last two decades, however, there has been growing interest in examining the dynamics of youth social capital and how young people's identities and the opportunities available to them are shaped by their personal relationships and their socialization within permanent social groupings such as family, peers, teachers and mentors (Holland, et al., 2007; Sokal, 2003;

Kahne, et al., 2001). In contexts of rapid urbanization and socio-economic change it has become increasingly clear that youth relationships have a major impact on their long-term development (Helve & Bynner, eds., 2007; Holland et al., 2007). This is especially significant when their relationships are either reinforced, hindered, or undermined by structured environments such as schools, recreation centres, sports leagues, and places of work (Bassani, 2007; Gillies & Lucey, 2006; Kahne et al., 2001; Seaman & Sweeting, 2004; Sletten, 2011). Yet despite this acknowledgment of the significance of youth social capital it is susceptible to ambiguity or misunderstanding, often because of the tendency to consider the existence of supportive social relations with the forms of social capital that are generated by these relations. For the purposes of this study, there are four significant dimensions of youth social capital.

For young people the processes of bonding and bridging are important—have particular salience for youth development. Bonding social capital consists of the benefits that are generated from close homogeneous social connections such as family and communities ties. Bonding is generally regarded as key to fostering a sense of belonging and security (Putnam 1993; Woolcock and & Narayan, 2000). For example, family bonds often serve as critical foundations of support for youth development (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2008; Coleman, 1990). In contrast, social bridging constitutes relationships that are outward oriented, connecting young people with social networks beyond the proximity of family and other immediate communal ties (Catts & Ozga, 2005; Holland et al., 2007). Through relationships with heterogeneous “others”, youth can capitalize on opportunities that might not be possible through social bonding. This is particularly valuable for youth for whom the benefits of social bonding may be limited (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Phillips, 2010; Sokal, 2003).

Two further aspects of youth social capital can be characterized as *affective* and *cognitive assets* (Bassani, 2007). *Affective assets* consist of perceptions and feelings such as love, trust, and friendship that emerge from close supportive ties. These are sentiments that are highly beneficial for youth who are in developmental stages of their lives. *Cognitive assets* consist of knowledge and skills that are learned from informal social interactions or in more formally structured settings such as school classrooms or organized sports (Maclure & Sotelo, 2013)². These are resources that together can enhance youth talent, interests, and abilities and enable

² As the work of Balatti and Falk (2002) has shown, the line between cognitive assets in social capital and human capital can be blurred since they may have “co-evolved” (pp. 282 – 84). However, I will refer to cognitive assets as a function of social capital, since human capital is conceptually distinctive from social capital.

their effective exercise of agency (Edwards et al., 2007).

Although the processes of social capital acquisition for adults and youth are generally similar, since they involve supportive social relationships, are nonetheless different in nature and scope. Youth social capital arises mainly from bonding relations that young people have with adult mentors, often those outside of the immediate family context. For example, a young person may emotionally connect with a teacher mentor at school. That emotional connection or bond with the teacher mentor will then facilitate the student to not only gain affective assets (e.g. counselling, validation, and solidarity) but also cognitive assets such as academic skills (e.g., resumé writing, and mathematical problem-solving). In addition, for the student the relationship with the teacher mentor can lead to bridging social capital where he/she gains access to wider social circles such as membership in sporting clubs, literary and art programs, etc. Youth social capital therefore requires the active involvement of adult mentors to facilitate the psycho-social development of young people and their access to wider social circles. This is precisely why for young people non-familial adult mentors within social institutions such as schools are crucial in accessing most social capital assets. On the other hand, adults can access social capital assets from relationships with colleagues, managers, family members and other adults in the community. In other words, adults generally do not require mentors for social capital acquisition in the same way as young people depend on adult mentors for bonding and bridging social capital. This is an important distinction when discussing how social capital acquisition varies for youth and adults.

Yet just as with adults, youth social capital is neither equally available nor does it emerge in a common manner. In line with Bourdieu's (1986) observations concerning the connection between social capital formation and prevailing power arrangements, the skewed distribution of social capital tends to be beneficial for young people who are established in privileged circumstances while ensuring the marginalization of others (Bergsgaard & Sutherland, 2003). In order to compensate, marginalized youth may seek security and reward through actions that contravene mainstream norms and thus, ironically, will further diminish the possibilities of accumulating valuable social capital (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004). This is a dilemma that is especially acute for thousands of children and adolescents who find themselves alienated from mainstream school systems and are therefore deemed to be "at-risk" students.

2.3 Schooling and Social Capital Formation for At-risk Students

Formal education has long been recognized as a key factor in the development of human capital (i.e., the skill sets that enable individuals to eventually become productive workers). In addition, however, for children and adolescents schooling is second to the family in terms of its influence on their socialization and overall development. In fact, from the perspective of the vast majority of young people, it is the major institutional focal point of social relationships, and therefore is a singular source of both cognitive and affective social capital. In addition, not only is schooling instrumental in the formation of social capital among individual youth, in a broader sense formal education is widely regarded as a key factor in fostering communal social capital. This underscores a main rationale for compulsory universal education – its purpose in promoting societal cohesion and a sense of common citizenship among children from different socio-economic backgrounds. This, however, is based on a simplistic assumption of education as a neutral unifying force. In fact, as Coleman (1986) argued, while schooling is a key force for social capital formation, it does not generate social capital uniformly.

Similar to Bourdieu's critical perspective regarding the inequitable distribution of social capital, in Coleman's (1988) view schools are institutional extensions of prevailing socio-economic and ideological structures that are rarely, if ever, equitable. Rather than functioning as a force for social leveling, schools function to reproduce prevailing societal inequalities. This is reinforced by the differentiated norms, values, and social attributes that students themselves bring to school. For many students these are fortunately aligned with the prevalent norms and values of school environments, and then schooling serves to reinforce these values and norms. For other students, however, their socio-economic status and the associated cultural capital available to them outside of school environments (e.g., family norms and values, parent's educational levels, and maternal language or dialect) often do not mesh with the prevailing norms and values of schooling. These differences frequently result in difficult relational experiences for students within school settings that limits their acquisition of cognitive and affective benefits.

In such circumstances, as Coleman (1988) further observed, rather than accommodating student difference, schooling entails an investment on the part of students to adjust to the established norms and expectations of the formal school system. The onus is on the students to adjust, not on the school system. If students fail to do so, this often results in their social

marginalization, thus impeding the acquisition of cognitive and affective benefits, and ultimately exacerbating the risk of failure or, before this actually occurs, their outright withdrawal from formal education (Barker, 2012; Garcia-Reid; Portes, 1998; Sletten, 2011). This has been borne out by numerous empirical studies of students for whom the predominant cultural, linguistic, and (often) ethnic characteristics of mainstream schools are different or alien to the characteristics of their own family and community backgrounds. In consequence, students' perspectives and experiences of schooling may range from unhappiness to outright resistance (Bottrell, 2007; Jewett, 2006; Loewen, 2004). These are the students who are widely regarded as being "at-risk".

For concerned educators and policy-makers, in order to reduce the alienating effects of schooling on young people and to enhance its role in fostering affective and cognitive benefits for students, there are generally two options. The first is to undertake efforts to reform mainstream schooling in ways that will ensure greater inclusiveness and foster a greater sense of belonging among students of varied characteristics and backgrounds. While certainly strides have been made in this direction in Canada, the numbers of at-risk students remain a national concern as I have noted above. Therefore, a second policy option has been to establish alternative schools that are capable of accommodating students who have essentially been "pushed out" of mainstream schools. A key aspect of this process of accommodation is to create learning environments for at-risk students that will generate consistently supportive school-based relationships that will expand the possibilities for social capital acquisition.

As I have noted above, while there has been substantial research on alternative schools, and while much is known about the connection between education and youth social capital formation, there is little empirical research that highlights relational experiences of "at-risk" students in alternative school settings, and the connection between these experiences and the nature and quality of student social capital formation that accrues from these experiences. By examining the personal relationships that at-risk students have with teachers/staff and peers in both mainstream and alternative schools, my research aim has been to assess the extent to which these relationships facilitated or hindered social capital formation. However, at the same time, being cognizant of the fact that not all personal relationships in school lead to social capital acquisition, I wanted to deepen my understanding of the role of environmental factors in facilitating bonding and bridging social capital. I am equally aware that the social learning environment—consisting of a school's organization, scheduling, programs and curricula,

pedagogical approaches, and general atmosphere regarding learning and social interaction—plays a huge role in the experience and perceptions of students in school. In order to examine the social capital benefits of bonding and bridging for at-risk students, I have conducted a study in one Canadian alternative school, namely, Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS).

The main purpose of this study has been to examine the social capital that emerges from bonding and bridging among a cohort of twelve students in the alternative school in comparison to their earlier mainstream school experiences that compelled these students to enroll in alternative schools.

Social Capital Theory and My Research

Reflecting closely on the social capital scholarship discussed above, principally the works of Bourdieu (1986, 1997), Putnam (2000), Portes (2000), Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) and Coleman (1986, 1988, 1990), it is clear to me that these scholars have examined social capital from their own disciplinary perspectives. They offer divergent angles to examine social capital. Bourdieu (1986, 1997) was an anthropologist and sociologist concerned with examining social capital within the interplay of historic forces, power dynamics and the marginalization of groups (e.g. the Berbers of Algeria). Putnam (2000) studied social capital among civil groups and networks that provided cooperation and bridging social capital for individuals in society. Portes (2000), a leading US anthropologist, looked at social capital and inter-group competition in the United States. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) emphasize the significance of mentorship (one-on-one connections between older and younger youth, especially in community settings). The work of Coleman (1986, 1988, and 1990) is perhaps the closest to my study of social capital among at-risk students in alternative school. Coleman was interested in how social capital (which for him was located in the family) could help minority students adjust and cope with the pressures of schooling. He emphasized the connection between family, students and efficacy in schools.

Yet what has not been covered by these scholars is social capital formation within the relatively enclosed environment of alternative school, and the roles of teachers and other adults within the school, as well as the lived experiences and voices of at-risk students. This is a gap which I intend to fill in this study by examining how the alternative school itself generates social

capital for at-risk students who do not have strong familial and community ties. What is lacking in the literature on social capital are the following: how the alternative school can become a substitute for the family; the role of staff and peers in fostering bonding and bridging social capital; and how the institution (alternative school) itself can serve to engage at-risk students much more deeply than the mainstream school. For these reasons I have decided to conduct a qualitative study using narrative inquiry to better understand the relationship between experiences of at-risk students and the formation of their social capital within an alternative school. This I will now expand upon in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: The Study: Research Questions, Design, and Methodology

Introduction

On the basis of scholarship on at-risk students, and the purposes and functions of alternative schools, as well as my review of youth social capital formation, in this chapter I will present my main research questions and the conceptual framework that I have adopted as a guide for my qualitative inquiry into student social capital formation in one alternative high school, (SAHS). I will then discuss my research design that consisted of a narrative life history approach with twelve students, followed by a description of the methodology that I adopted for data collection and analysis. The chapter will conclude with some comments regarding the challenges that I faced in conducting the study.

3.1 Research Questions and Conceptual Framework

Research Questions

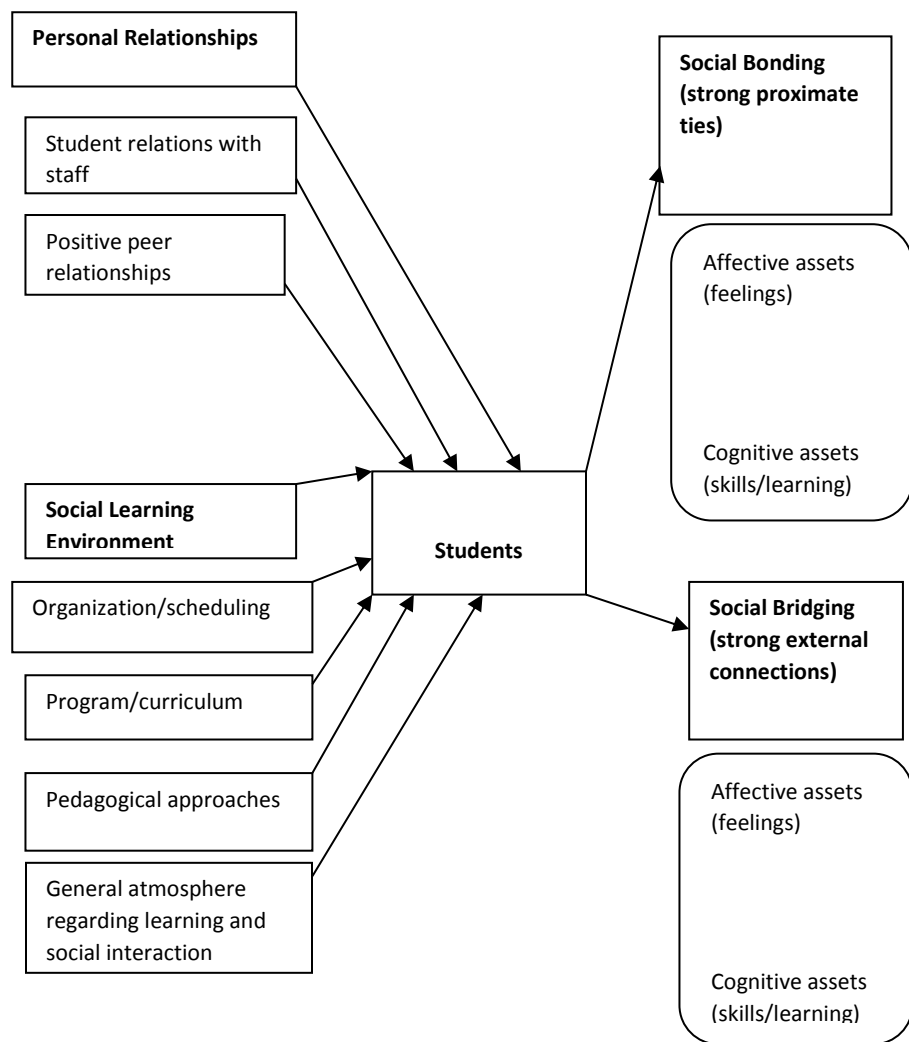
Following my review of youth social capital formation, and my earlier discussion in Chapter 1 regarding at-risk students and the purposes and function of alternative schools in responding to the cognitive and affective needs of students who have withdrawn from mainstream schooling, my main research questions have been:

1. What were the mainstream school relational experiences of students who are now in Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS), and how were they affected by these relationships?
2. What have been the relational experiences of these same students in SAHS, and how have they been affected by them?
3. How has student social capital acquisition differed in mainstream and alternative school settings for these students?

The articulation of these questions is relatively open-ended so as to limit potential bias in terms of the inquiry that I undertook and the possibility of skewed responses from my participants.

Accordingly, because the focus of the research has been on the connection between the relational experiences of students in both mainstream and alternative schooling and the formation of social capital, I adopted the following conceptual framework as a guide for my inquiry generally, and for the subsequent analysis specifically.

Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework of my qualitative research study highlights the connection between student relationships in school and the specific attributes of youth social capital formation that I have described in Chapter 2. Two types of relationships are relevant to this study. First, there are the direct personal relationships that students have with individuals or identifiable groups of people in the school setting. These people can be characterized generally

as school staff and peers. School staff consists of teachers, school administrators, and other adults who work in the school (e.g., secretarial staff, technical assistants and custodians). Peers consist of other students, ranging from close friends to those who are known only in passing. The second set of relationships are associated with what can loosely be termed the institutional environment. These refer to ongoing exposure to the structure and social dynamics of a given institution or organization. Working as I do in an alternative school, I have identified four categories of the social learning environment that have a tangible effect on students' sense of attachment and purpose in school. These are: a) the organization and scheduling of the school (e.g., timetables, daily routines, rules and regulations); b) school programs and curricula (e.g., courses offered, activities undertaken, and subject material studies); c) pedagogical approaches (specifically the instructional methods of teachers, their classroom management styles, the forms of assignment required, and their methods of assessment); and d) the general atmosphere regarding learning and social interaction (relating specifically to the amorphous "culture" of the school that students invariably feel in classrooms and in the overall school environment).

Drawing upon my discussion of youth social capital formation in Chapter 2, four dimensions of social capital emerging from students' personal relationships and from the social interactions indirectly experienced with the institutional environment of the school are identified. Social bonding refers to the strong proximate social ties that develop from these relationships and interactions. In the context of schooling, bonding essentially refers to the close attachments that are established within those in the school environment itself (e.g., teachers, other school staff members, and peer friendships). Social bridging refers to the strong external connections that are created beyond the school, but nevertheless constitute the fruition of the relationships established within the school setting (e.g., through teachers referrals to mentors or social groups beyond the school, or as a result of expanding peer networks that develop initially from within the school). For alternative school students in particular, social bridging can facilitate additional learning opportunities, employment prospects, and memberships in social circles or organizational settings outside of the immediate school context.

The quality of both social bonding and social bridging can be subdivided into affective assets and cognitive assets. As discussed in Chapter 2, affective assets are associated with positive feelings such as happiness, trust, and friendship. For students in alternative schools who have generally experienced significant obstacles that led to their identification as being at-risk in

mainstream school settings and have negatively affected their self-esteem, affective assets are highly important for them. To feel confident and positive about school attendance is, for a student in an alternative school, a tangible benefit. Likewise, cognitive assets refer to the skills and knowledge that are acquired through the social bonding and bridging emanating from personal relationships and exposure to the institutional environment of the school.

By the time students arrive at SAHS, they are generally disconnected from the schooling and are substantially behind in academic skills and credit accumulation. This is often exemplified by limited proficiency in reading, writing, oral communication and mathematics. Given my deep connections to SAHS as a former student and current staff member, I have developed certain assumptions and presuppositions with regard to social capital formation for students attending the alternative school. A key assumption upon which this study is based is that through their relationships with teachers, peers, and the administration at SAHS, students are likely to gain appreciable social capital in contrast to their earlier mainstream school experiences, and that this can be identified across these four dimensions of social capital formation. I will now turn to discuss the research design and methodology adopted for this study.

3.2 Research Design: Narrative life history

The main underlying assumption of this study has been that a key advantage of alternative schooling is that it offers at-risk students more scope for social capital formation than mainstream schooling, and that this is in large part a reason for the relative success of alternative schooling in enabling at-risk students to reverse the trajectory of a downward educational slide. The research therefore necessitated a comparison of students' previous mainstream school relational experiences and their relational experiences at SAHS. Designed as a qualitative study using a narrative life history approach, the focus was on depth rather than on breadth (Robson, 2011). To this end, a group of twelve students (six females and six males) at SAHS, all of whom had attended SAHS for a year or more, were selected as research participants. By comparatively examining these students' earlier experiences in mainstream schools and more recent experiences in SAHS through narrative life histories, my intention has been to assess the extent to which alternative schooling fosters youth social capital formation.

A narrative life history approach has been defined by Creswell (2013) as portraying the lived experiences of research participants. These are often articulated as a series of multiple

episodes obtained through methods “such as interviews, observations, and pictures” (p.74). The key task of the narrative researcher is to “situate individual stories within participants’ personal experiences” (i.e. schooling, jobs, their homes, their cultural or ethnic identification) and relate these to broader contexts of time and place Creswell (2013, p. 74). Hamilton et al. (2008) have defined narrative inquiry as “the study of experience as story” (p. 19), offering researchers a way to think about and explain experience. As a methodological approach to research, narrative inquiry has particular relevance in educational studies because not only are educational experiences integral aspects of life histories, but as well it is an approach to research that appeals to teachers and teacher educators who are often keen to share and learn from one another through exchanges about the knowledge and skills they either possess or have an interest in, and about their own understanding of practices (Connelly & Clandinin,1990). In fact, narrative inquiry has emerged as an innovative means of encouraging educators to internalize key concepts, reflect on experiences, and create applications for theoretical ideas (Summerby-Murray, 2010). While narrative researchers may not share the same views on the relationships between narrative and experience, they generally acknowledge that narrative has a significant role in projecting lived experiences of people and that there is a clear connection between experience and education (Bignold & Su, 2013; Conle, 2000). School experiences in fact constitute a continuous sequence of stories that render narrative inquiry a fitting form of educational (Latta & Kim, 2009).

As Atkinson (2009) has observed, the emergence of narrative inquiry as an interdisciplinary research methodology and a pedagogical tool over the past twenty years has fostered not only interest in “its powerful and compelling possibilities in expanding educational research”, but also debates concerning ways to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings that it produces (p. 91). As Atkinson (2009) further argues, analysis of data elicited through narrative inquiry should be subject to constant questioning and critical conversations among scholars and seasoned practitioners (p.91). Through life histories it is possible to learn about how teachers and students understand schooling (Caduri, 2013). Narrative inquiry can likewise be particularly effective in eliciting insights into the experiences of people on the margins of society – those whose voices are often not heard or recognized in public or decision-making spheres. As Gade (2011) states, it is a way to engage “diverse voices, aesthetic theories, [and] innovative representations” that draw attention to lived experiences that otherwise remain in the shadows and unaccounted for (p.39). It is therefore an appropriate form of inquiry for purposes

of understanding the realities of at-risk youth and those whose formal educational experiences have entailed struggle. In particular, narrative inquiry seeks to bring the contexts in which the experiences of students are situated up close and personal.

Therefore, my research is a qualitative study that is comprised of three main data collection methods : a) the questionnaire survey as a preliminary step to obtain background information on each individual participant; b) narrative inquiry (having the student participants relate their stories to me in semi-structured interviews, guided by my research questions, followed by member checks; c) my own participant observations and subsequent reflective note-taking, combining narrative accounts of what I observed and my role as a teacher, as well as my reflective recollections as a former alternative school student (enabling me to “get into the skin” of some of these students). Moreover, I believe my research is “narrative” because of my unique position as a triple informant, namely, a researcher, a current staff member and a former student at the alternative school. There are many “voices” in this study apart from that of the student participants. In conducting the research I could not help but become sensitive to the words, emotions and experiences of the students while also re-examining my own experiences at SAHS in light of what I was observing. Reflexivity was the key component of my interaction with the students and their “own voices”- experiences and emotions- during the study.

3.3 The Research Site

Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS), one of several alternative schools in the Ottawa region, has been in existence since the late 1970s. In-order to examine social capital and alternative schooling I have conducted a study of the relationships and ensuing benefits from these relationships among a cohort of twelve students. As a former student and current staff member, I chose to conduct my research on social capital formation of at-risk students at SAHS. Sunnyside Alternative High School is place that I am intimately familiar with in terms of its organization, philosophy and treatment of at-risk students. Also, it is an alternative school that has a continuous in-take of at-risk students throughout the school year from mainstream schools.

The school is divided into two large wings with a central courtyard. Approximately 300 students are registered at SAHS, but only about half this number attend school on a daily basis. Although many students are bright and can be consider academically-oriented, all have experienced previous academic, personal, and social difficulties while attending mainstream high

schools and have felt disconnected from schooling, often from a very early age. Many of them are on social welfare and live alone, and some are homeless. Money to pay for rent and groceries is a common source of anxiety. For some students this is compounded by drug and alcohol addiction. Not surprisingly, many students at SAHS drop out because of their stressful living circumstances. In view of these difficult circumstances, although they follow the same core curriculum offered at mainstream high schools and are working towards attaining their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (O.S.S.D.), each student works on one credit in accordance with an individualized learning pathway that has been tailored for them. In addition, because the school has established close links with numerous various government offices and businesses in town, students have opportunities to participate in cooperative education placements and apprenticeships.

The staff of SAHS consists of the principal and vice-principal, 18 full-time teachers, and three support staff. Also working at the school is a part-time social worker, a part-time addictions counselor, and a part-time psychologist. Because of the relatively low student-teacher ratio on any given day, relations between staff and students are friendly and informal. Teachers normally leave their classroom doors open and students are free to come in and out as they please. Trust, flexibility, and openness are thus part of the culture of SAHS. This is an attractive feature of the school for teachers and has helped to foster generally good relationships between teachers and students.

The key aim of SAHS is to improve learning opportunities for at-risk students through beneficial and supportive relationships. Therefore, SAHS unlike any other alternative school, is an ideal location to conduct research on social capital formation of at-risk students.

3.4 The Research Participants

As this was to be a qualitative research study, at the outset of fieldwork I needed to recruit students who would agree to be research participants. I therefore recruited students through verbal announcements in each of my SAHS classes. In these announcements I informed prospective participants about the objectives of the research, the nature of their participation, and the necessity of having been at the school for at least a year and completing signed consent forms (singly if they were 18 years old or over, jointly with parents/guardians if they were under the age of 18). In addition to these orally communicated conditions, I also was intent on ensuring

that the participants would possess sufficient maturity and intelligence to participate seriously and effectively in the study (a criterion that was possible since, as a teacher at SAHS, I was familiar with all the potential recruits). Eventually twelve students between the ages of 17-18 years old volunteered to be my research participants. All had attended SAHS for more than one year, and all were taking Grade 11 or 12 courses and were thus close to completing their high school education. The group consisted of six ethnically mixed female students (one Caucasian, one Black, one Turkish, and three bi-racial) and six white male students. One of the female participants was pregnant at the time. Although they had the option of dropping out of the study at any time if they wished, all twelve of the students remained as participants to the end of the research. In this dissertation, pseudonyms were used as substitutes for their real names for purposes of confidentiality.

3.5 Data Collection

Research fieldwork was undertaken over a four-month period and consisted of three modes of data collection that I briefly describe here.

Participant Observation

As a teacher in the school I was able to chat with and observe my twelve research participants on a regular basis just as I do with other students. For purposes of the research I maintained a journal documenting my observations of the student participants and my reflections as an alternative school teacher and as a previous student at SAHS. I was therefore in a good position to understand the circumstances surrounding the alternative school experiences of the student participants. I walked the halls with the students and participated in school events with them. Having gone through both mainstream school and alternative school myself, I was able to empathize with what the student participants said and felt about their school experiences. In particular, I reflected daily on the interplay between the school environment and my own teaching and the perceptions of the student participants. Overall participant observation and journal writing enabled me to be a reflective researcher.

Questionnaire

Soon after the twelve students had provided their consent to participate, I asked them to complete a questionnaire outlining their experiences in their former mainstream schools and at SAHS. While the questions were presented in language that was easily understood, focusing on their perceptions of teachers, peers, and learning in the different school settings, the main purpose of the questionnaire was to gain insights into the sources and extent of formation of students' social capital in these respective school environments. The questionnaires were completed within two weeks of beginning the research. I booked appointments with each student participant to come to my classroom at a convenient time during the day (either at lunch or after school). However, most students opted to complete the questionnaires after school. I kept an informal questionnaire log where I would try to get a certain number of students to complete them during the week. Often I would approach students in the hallways to remind them about their scheduled time slot to do the questionnaire. As well, the questionnaires were completed individually in my classroom because I wanted my student participants to feel comfortable to ask me questions or seek clarification about terminology.

Before handing out the questionnaires, I usually asked them if they needed water or wanted to go to the washroom. In terms of duration, it took 30 minutes for students to complete the questionnaires. As a data source the questionnaire was very important in answering the first and second research questions. The exact data analysis path that I used was qualitative thematic coding where I separated student responses along the key dimensions of the conceptual framework of social capital formation and then connected and reconnected them to the research questions. This was done after I went through multiple thematic coding starting from general codes (e.g. "mainstream school", "alternative school", "relationships", "social learning environment") to specific codes (e.g. "felt happy", " cliques", "flexible", "helpful" etc.). In the end, I was able to construct a narrative from the questionnaire data.

Interviews

Following my analysis of the questionnaire responses, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the twelve students, each of which lasted 45 – 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted over a month in my class. I scheduled weekly appointments with students based on their flexibility using an informal log (a handwritten paper with student names

and interview time slots). Most of the interviews were conducted after school (1:00 to 3:00 pm). Often I rescheduled interviews at the last minute because a student had to go to work or was not feeling in the right mood. The main focus of the interviews centered on student relationships with peers and school staff in both the mainstream and alternative school settings, and the extent to which they regarded these relationships as beneficial to them. In this regard, the interviews as data sources were very useful in answering all three research questions of the study. In terms of analysis, I also used thematic coding to breakdown student responses and link them to the conceptual framework and research questions. The interviews were audio-taped which proved helpful for the subsequent thematic analysis.

Participant member checks

Upon completing my analysis of the questionnaire and interview data, I met with each student participant to review my preliminary findings and interpretations with them and ensure that I was providing an accurate rendition of their experiences in their former mainstream schools and at SAHS. With a few minor adjustments, all students were satisfied with the findings. Member checks took place at the end of the questionnaire and after the interviews.

3.6 Analysis and Authentication of Findings

The major task in analyzing the data compiled from my participant observation, the questionnaire, and the interviews was to produce a holistic portrait of student social capital formation in the two comparative school contexts. Data reduction and analysis were used to bring order, interpretation, and meaning to the amassed qualitative data. This process was iterative, occurring throughout and after fieldwork. The data were triangulated through an inductive process as I observed patterns and associations within the data. My conceptual framework was especially useful as a basis for ordering the themes that emerged from the analysis. Thematic codes were created from the pre-existing social capital constructs (individual relationships, social learning environment, bonding and bridging, and affective and cognitive social capital), and from on-site observations and my own reflections.

As noted above, in order to ensure the authenticity of my findings and interpretations, I used member-checking with each student participant to verify that what I transcribed corresponded with what the student participants actually said and meant. Member checking

involved sitting down with the student participant after completing the questionnaire and interviews and together going over their responses for approximately 5-10 minutes; as well as, asking them to come back at another time if they had any further concerns. The process of member checking was undertaken throughout the research, since throughout the period of data gathering my task was to make sure that the students understood the questions in the questionnaire and in the interview in terms of what related to the mainstream school as well as the alternative school. I therefore regularly asked students if they understood questions, and repeated questions and information that the student participants did not fully understand. I gave each student participant the opportunity to clarify or add any thoughts that they had regarding their school experiences. When reviewing my preliminary findings with them, I encouraged each participant to add any information they felt that they had not provided so as to ensure that what I was writing was authentic. As a researcher and staff member I was reflexivity-based strategies to avoid any bias in support of SAHS in relation to the previous mainstream schools that the students attended.

My Reflexive Strategies

In particular Pillow (2003) has made a distinction between reflection and reflectivity, and has referred to Chiseri-Strater's (1996) clarification "to be reflective does not demand an 'other.' To be reflexive requires both "an other" and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny" (Pillow, 2003, p.177). In my observational field notes for this research, not only did my notes constitute an attempt to understand the students and the situations they were in at SAHS, but also this reflection served to "center" or "situate" my own role as a researcher, staff member and former student who was interacting with the students within the alternative school. Specifically, I use reflexivity to paraphrase Pillow (2003) as a strategy for "a recognition of self/ 'researcher know thyself"- meaning that the field notes were reflexive notes to myself in analyzing my own experiences in relation to that of the twelve students (Pillow, 2003, pp.181-182).

Reflexive strategies that I used include self-analysis— of what I was observing, feeling and writing down from the questionnaire survey and interviews— before including any material in the research. As well, I used notes to write down my thoughts and key words to remain

mindful of the unique experiences and backgrounds of the students at the alternative school. Therefore, reflexive strategies helped to bring about a greater understanding and sensitivity to all the influences impacting myself and the research (e.g. my own experiences at SAHS and the current research participants' own viewpoints).

Overall, I believe the findings and interpretations regarding student social capital formation in this study are sound. The main limitation, of course, is that empirical data were gathered from a small sample of students in one school, and therefore the results cannot be generalized beyond this study. Nevertheless, I believe this small study does contribute to further understanding of the role of alternative schooling with regard to student social capital formation.

I will now present the findings of my research in the next two chapters. Chapter Four will present the student participants' backgrounds and their mainstream school experiences. This will be followed in Chapter Five with student participants' experiences and social capital formation in SAHS.

Chapter 4: Student Profiles and Mainstream School Experiences

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the personal backgrounds and mainstream school experiences of the twelve student participants. Information for the personal backgrounds of the students was obtained as result of my relationship with them as their classroom teacher and from participant observations that I conducted during the research. The profiles, therefore, help to give a more in-depth portrait of the student participants as individuals, as well as situate their experiences in mainstream school. Data for the mainstream school experiences of the students was primarily obtained through in-depth interviews that I conducted over a month. I scheduled weekly appointments with students usually at lunch or after school in my classroom. In terms of duration, the interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. Before recording their responses, I went over the questions individually with the students so that they could understand the meaning of words like “pedagogy”, “practices” and “relations”. More importantly, it was vital to understand what student participants felt and believed about their time at the mainstream school in-order to answer the first research question of the study and in the process form a holistic picture of them as learners. In this regard I have produced a summative chart highlighting in point form the key experiences of the students in mainstream school based on the conceptual framework categories, as well as an overall discussion related to their collective mainstream school experiences.

4.1 Biographical Profiles and Mainstream Schooling

4.1.1 Andy

“[Mainstream School] Too many students for the teachers to form a strong bond with each individual...only a handful of teachers actually taught and aided students, when they saw them struggling”

Biographical Profile

Andy is an athletic and quiet young man who enjoys the outdoors. He has a particular fascination with chemistry and science. From the conversations that I have had with him at

school it became clear that he very much prefers being alone in the outdoors than in the classroom. He credits his love of the outdoors to camping trips he took with his uncle in the Adirondacks, in Upper State New York. Moreover, Andy also holds a visible distrust for official knowledge, preferring instead to engage in what he terms “independent research” of personal topics of interest. As his teacher, I became aware that Andy did not have a stable family life. Frequently, he came to class upset about confrontations he had with his parents. During the start of my research he was already in the process of moving out of his mother’s house because of disagreements over school and his recreational drug use. More recently Andy’s girlfriend Amber, another student participant at SAHS, revealed that she was pregnant with their child. While happy about the prospect of fatherhood, Andy was also stressed about it at the same time.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

Looking back at his time at a large, suburban mainstream high school in Ottawa, Andy could only see a lack of understanding with teachers. Always an independent thinker and an eccentric, Andy felt that he was not really understood and helped by teachers at the mainstream school. Despite struggling with drug addiction and missing many school days, the guidance counsellors at the mainstream school were “never helpful” and similarly “...only a handful of teachers actually taught and aided students, when they saw them struggling”. In fact, most teachers did not take the time to listen to his academic problems and were not empathetic when he needed emotional support. Equally, he had no positive peer relationships at the mainstream school mainly because of limited interactions with fellow students. However, Andy also did not have a lot in common with his peers and this proved to be another obstacle in socializing with them in class. There were also not many opportunities for him to access social capital at the mainstream school given the absence of supportive relationship with staff and peers. The large student population at the mainstream school worsened his relations with staff, “Too many students for the teachers to form a strong bond with each individual”. In terms of the program/curriculum at the mainstream school he felt that the “assignments in general were problematic” since instructions and deadlines were not collaboratively discussed with students in class. For instance, the science teacher would not discuss and introduce material outside of the prescribed curriculum. Wanting more enrichment of the learning material Andy often felt

frustrated by the teaching methods used by staff at the mainstream school. The whole curriculum delivery for him was top-down with little student input and choice. The teacher usually stood in front of the classroom and assigned homework with little interaction with students.

Consequently, the general learning environment at the mainstream school deteriorated and became completely “disorganized”. Students did not know what to expect from teachers in regards to assignments and this caused confusion in the classroom. Toward the end of his time at the mainstream school it began to feel like a holding tank with limited prospects for advancement. Andy also felt that the mainstream school had “frequently held higher level students back” such as himself by not giving enriching assignments and opportunities for independent inquiry. The combined impact of the tensions caused by a large student population, rigid organizational structure and ineffectual teaching practices pushed Andy out of the mainstream school. Overall, he had a miserable learning experience and was happy that he left when he did.

4.1.2 Sally

“Mainstream school [was] fast paced, stressful- peer pressure.”

Biographical Profile

Sally is an articulate and strong willed student. Along with working full-time at a job she does not like, she has battled substance addiction. In terms of family life and background, Sally identifies as bi-racial and lives with her parents in Ottawa. She is proud of her African heritage and often discusses it with me in class. Academically, she is a high achieving student who does not encounter much difficulty in course work. However, from my observations and interactions with her in class, it was clear the pervasive and debilitating impact of drug addiction remains a severe obstacle to Sally’s schooling and personal health. When not in school, she participates in a drug treatment program. Apart from school, work and the treatment program, Sally regularly does household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and the laundry. Helping out at home makes her feel good since other family members depend on her contribution.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

Sally's experience in the mainstream schools she attended was generally "stressful". Even though she attended various mainstream schools in Ottawa, Sally rarely had thoughtful conversations with teachers and staff. She never adjusted to the routines and procedures of the mainstream school. Within the mainstream school, she felt an intense "peer pressure" from fellow students, especially the popular students, to join cliques. In her view, a student could not be on their own and at the same time be respected at the mainstream school by peers. While she was not totally disengaged from the learning material, Sally did not remember any courses or particular teaching approaches that she enjoyed. One of the reasons why she transferred between mainstream schools was to feel more emotionally connected and comfortable at school. However, the mainstream schools did not offer her emotional support even though she had left other schools because of the lack of individual attention. Increasingly, Sally started to turn to drugs and other substances to cope with the stress of the mainstream school. Even though teachers noticed her lack of attendance, drug use and academic stagnation they did not offer any useful and timely assistance. In Sally's recollection, no one was willing to guide her out of drugs. Yet, at the same time staff members were quick to make her feel guilty for missing school. Similarly, teachers did not inquire about her emotional wellbeing. It was in this context that Sally felt totally cut off from the mainstream school community and eventually dropped out of school. Looking back at her time at the mainstream school, Sally felt it was just too fast paced, stressful and pervasive with peer pressure for her to really flourish as a student. In particular, the organization and schedule of the mainstream school contributed most to her alienation. The mainstream school's routines revolved around students moving from class to class without getting to know classmates and teachers. The attendance or roll call was taken daily by teachers in a hurried fashion with no follow up questions about student wellbeing. Moreover, students at the mainstream school did not socialize outside of their clique. Consequently, lacking a close circle of friends and academically falling behind in her courses, Sally chose to leave the mainstream school.

4.1.3 Martin

“[In mainstream school] little care was given to those who fell out of place”

Biographical Profile

Martin is a timid and introverted young man. Throughout his schooling, he has battled severe anxiety and depression. For this reason, Martin did not attend the previous mainstream school much. Though an academically strong student with good writing ability, he nevertheless felt worthless and inadequate at the mainstream school. When not in school, Martin often spends a lot of time at home on the internet or babysitting his little brother since both of his parents work late. He also enjoys comic books and brings them to class to read. Other personal hobbies of his include playing video games and occasionally going out with friends for meals.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

At the mainstream school Martin had a difficult time adjusting. He felt an intense pressure to conform. Not only were the teachers rigid in the enforcement of the school rules but the other students would not tolerate “outliers” like him who did not belong to any identifiable clique. Martin was also given a lot of homework without adequate instructions and support from the teacher. As a result, he did not appreciate the demanding schedule of the mainstream school where he had to wake up early and attend for eight hours. During the school day Martin felt forgotten by staff members who passed by him in the hallways without inquiring into his emotional wellbeing. On many days he became so anxious about going to school that he was unable to leave his house. Overall, teachers at the mainstream school seemed to care little for those like him who fell out of place. There was simply no flexibility at the mainstream school to catch up on academic work that he had missed. The message of the mainstream school for Martin was to conform to the school’s idea of normal. Yet, despite how much he tried to be “normal” he found it hard to attend class regularly due to increasing anxiety. It soon became clear to Martin that he could not fit the regular mould of the mainstream school. Not wanting to feel like an outcast, he eventually stopped attending the mainstream school. What Martin

desperately needed at the mainstream school was genuine help from staff for his anxiety and an overall positive change. Yet he was unable to find both at the mainstream school. Consequently, the first step that he took was to transfer from the mainstream school to the alternative school.

4.1.4 Lisa

“[Mainstream school] just drained the fun out of going to school”

Biographical Profile

Lisa is a mature and sophisticated student. She expresses herself with clarity and often stands up for the rights of others. She comes from a mixed racial heritage and self-identifies as “biracial”. Lisa lives in Ottawa with her mother and younger siblings. In particular, she enjoys a strong bond with her mother who often encourages her to strive for the best at school. However, at the mainstream school Lisa strongly felt excluded and uncomfortable with the general learning atmosphere. In particular, she did not make many friends and tended to avoid coming to school. The mainstream school became a huge source of stress for her. She was constantly academically behind and yet could not find teachers who were willing to help her understand the learning material. At the mainstream school Lisa’s minor infractions such as coming late to class were overtly focused on by staff to the detriment of addressing her larger emotional needs. Inevitably, she left the mainstream school because of feeling unhappy, ignored and frustrated with the way staff were doing things.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

Lisa had no meaningful relationships with staff at the mainstream school. Her interaction with peers was marred by the “clique thing”. For example, students would group themselves into disparate cliques. Similarly, there were no positive interactions between students and teachers at the mainstream school. In fact, Lisa did not rely on staff and peers at the mainstream school for emotional support or academic help. Instead, she relied on her mother for moral support while avoiding the mainstream school. Specifically, there were a few instances at the mainstream school which made Lisa feel unwelcome. For instance, she once tried to make friends with some

classmates with little success. After trying to befriend other students, Lisa found it too difficult to interact with her peers. Part of the problem was they wanted her to conform to the way they understood things. However, Lisa was not willing to change her beliefs and tastes for others. While learning and school always interested her, she began to feel that the mainstream school “just drained the fun of going to school”. Throughout her time at the mainstream school, she did not make significant progress in her studies. In fact, Lisa felt teachers did not care about her emotional state because they continuously focused on her lack of academic performance and poor attendance. In the end, she decided that the mainstream school was just too draining to attend. As a result of her negative experiences of feeling neglected and isolated, Lisa left the mainstream school for SAHS.

4.1.5 Billy

“[Mainstream school teachers were] helpful as they had time to be”

Biographical Profile

Billy is an outgoing young man at SAHS. In class discussions and on my weekly supervision duty outside, he shared his life experiences. Due to family crises, Billy was not permanently living at home but shared an apartment with friends. Always perceiving himself to be “an outsider”, Billy struggled academically in the mainstream school. Moreover, his academic difficulties at the mainstream school worsened and often caused conflict with his parents. His parents did not understand the difficulties at the mainstream school. Instead, they thought he was being lazy for not working hard to get good grades. Compounding his housing and school/academic and family problems, Billy was also trying to overcome substance addiction. However, at the mainstream school he felt he would not get the needed help to overcome his academic stagnation and drug addiction problems. One of the overriding reasons he left the mainstream school, other than the lack of credits, was a desire to change his life for the better by graduating from high school. As good fortune would have it, at the end of the research Billy graduated from SAHS with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

At the mainstream school Billy had limited relations with staff. However, he did connect with one teacher playing cards at the lunch break. The reason why Billy did not have strong emotional bonds with other teachers was that the mainstream school was too big and impersonal. Moreover, teachers at the mainstream school in his experience were only “helpful as they had time to be” and this prevented the emergence of any deep relationship between Billy and them. In fact, none of the teachers helped him to focus on his academics or make a postsecondary plan. Looking back at his time at the mainstream school, Billy often wondered if teachers had only taken more time to get to know him what could have been possible. He struggled academically because of the lack of teacher help coupled with poor attendance. Teachers consistently did not offer assistance to him except when he did poorly on their tests. Likewise, there were no reviews and examples provided by teacher to struggling students like Billy other than what was put on the chalkboard. Unfortunately, interactions with his classmates were superficial because of his many absences from school. Besides, Billy was not interested in joining a peer group since he wanted to remain independent. Consequently, after encountering consistent academic setbacks with limited academic credits Billy left the mainstream school for SAHS.

4.1.6 Brad

“Mainstream school felt like a prison”

Biographical Profile

Brad is a thoughtful and reserved young man. His older brother, who is very close to him, attended Sunnyside Alternative High School. Because of his brother’s positive experiences at SAHS as well as difficulties at the mainstream school Brad decided to make the transition from the mainstream school to the alternative school. In many ways, he is not typical of the academically struggling at-risk student. For instance, Brad is well spoken, enjoys reading literature and plays sports. He also does not engage in drug use nor drink alcohol. Yet, at the same time Brad is typical of a particular type of at-risk student at SAHS: the academically gifted

loner. In particular, he is “an outlier” who only participates in school activities when prompted by staff. At the mainstream school, Brad felt completely alone and hopeless. In fact, he often walked alone down the hallways of the mainstream school without any friends. Brad’s isolation at the mainstream school deepened with the departure of his brother for SAHS. At that time, he found himself with nowhere to turn to for help.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

Brad did not socialize much with staff and peers at the mainstream school. On a personal level, this was because he did not want to draw attention to himself by engaging staff and other students in personal conversations. For this reason, Brad qualified his relationship with teachers at the mainstream school as “pretty conventional”. For him, interaction with teachers was strictly academic and nothing more. Among his peers, Brad had no friends because he was seen as a “loner”. Therefore, he mostly relied on his brother for emotional support at school. However, the organization of the mainstream school in terms of program and curriculum for him was a “strict daily regimen”. For example, Brad had to wake up early and attend classes to remain registered at the mainstream school. This meant he did not have a lot of time to engage in social interaction with teachers and peers. In fact, not only was the mainstream school “strict” and “conventional” but at times enduring the long school hours for Brad made the mainstream school feel “like prison”. Although he is a strong academic student who enjoys learning, Brad also did not have an enriching experience at the mainstream school. He found himself unfocused with the departure of his brother from the mainstream school. Frequently, Brad left school early. Ultimately, he left the mainstream school itself despite his love of learning because nothing seemed to be working for him socially. Joining his brother at SAHS seemed like a good idea at the time.

4.1.7 Sophia

“[Mainstream school] was incredibly hard to get back up if you missed a day”

Biographical Profile

Sophia is a fashionable and attractive young woman with a learning disability. She came to Sunnyside Alternative High School from a nearby mainstream school in order to complete her remaining high school credits. Along with attending SAHS, she also works full-time at a large cosmetic store. She takes prides in her Turkish heritage and is very active in her community. As well, she comes across as a sophisticated and mature student. In fact, Sophia is comfortable in talking about her learning disability. She enjoys talking to others generally and this is why she is at ease about discussing her learning needs. At the mainstream school, however, she felt “picked on” by a particular male teacher who refused to make accommodations for her and thought she was not making an effort to get the assignments in on time. When other teachers did not come to her aid in the face of harassment from this teacher, Sophia complained to the school administration. Unfortunately, this only made the situation worse in class when the teacher found out she had gone to the administration. Consequently, Sophia decided the best option would be to leave the mainstream school and its problems for SAHS.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

Sophia had a very negative experience at the mainstream school she attended for four years. Not only did she feel that teachers were not helpful but the guidance counsellors in particular “were not helpful at all”. In fact, one teacher at the mainstream was dismissive about her learning disability, especially when she requested accommodations in class such as extra time. It also became clear to Sophia that she had limited resources at the mainstream school since the teachers were not willing to help her overcome her learning disability. What made the problem even more difficult, apart from her conflict with teachers, was that the mainstream school was fast-paced and students were required to master the norms and procedures flawlessly. There was “no room for slack” and teachers would vigorously enforce school rules. Since Sophia struggled in school academically because of her learning disability, she felt that at the mainstream school, “It was incredibly hard to get back up if you missed a day”. For her, the mainstream school was “very strict” and the experience of attending it for four years was generally “bad”. As result of her negative experience and lack of supportive relationships,

Sophia left the mainstream school with bitter memories of being excluded because of her learning disability.

4.1.8 Amber

“If I didn’t fit the mould I was ignored... [I] fell through the cracks or was ridiculed... teachers seemed apathetic”

Biographical Profile

Amber is a vibrant and active student who is also pregnant. She has been in a relationship for over a year with Andy, a fellow student at SAHS and student participant. Amber’s main reasons for leaving the mainstream school—a place where she struggled to attend— was because of a lack of attention by teachers to her individual needs, as well as weak interpersonal relations with peers. She also had a pervasive sense of not feeling welcome at the mainstream school. Amber’s current pregnancy and relationship with Andy has also strained relations with her extended family in Canada and Europe. It has even caused her stress and anxiety at SAHS. However, at the mainstream high school, she did not get involved with school or volunteer for field trips because of feeling disempowered and voiceless. In fact, Amber avoided socializing with peers because of “cliques” who ostracized her because of the way she dressed. Similarly, teachers rarely asked her for opinions. They did not even smile at her when she came to class. Consequently, Amber stopped attending the mainstream school after she had experienced a series of failures on the part of teachers, peers and the administration to help her adjust and feel included. In particular, none of the staff at the mainstream school took her academic and personal difficulties very seriously and therefore she decided to leave for SAHS.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

At the mainstream school Amber’s relationship with teachers was “difficult”. For example, teachers disrespected her by not listening to her views in class and often she felt “ridiculed” by them. In the mainstream school, she also did not receive emotional support from

staff because the “teachers seemed apathetic” to her situation. For instance, teachers did not want to get involve with her emotional problems and instead limited themselves to teaching the curriculum. Even though Amber did have some acquaintances among the student population, the negative atmosphere of the mainstream school prevented any close bonds from forming with them. She also realized at the mainstream school that “students either formed dependent cliques or ostracized”. As a result, there was “very little help” at the mainstream school for ostracized students like herself who were struggling with academic and social issues. Moreover, Amber felt that the teachers would not make a serious effort to help her adjust, remembering that “If I didn’t fit the mould I was ignored”. By fitting the mould she interpreted it as becoming an academically strong student who followed the schools procedures- two things she had difficulty in doing. Consequently, Amber “fell through the cracks or was ridiculed” during her time at the mainstream school. Overall, she qualified her experience at the mainstream school as one where she was “ostracized” by peers and teachers for being different. At the mainstream school, she was acutely aware of how her academic and personal needs were “ignored” by staff while at the same time she was unable to fix the situation. In many ways, leaving the mainstream school for Amber became the best solution for her.

4.1.9 Veronica

“The counsellors were never helpful and only a handful of teachers actually taught and aided students, when they saw them struggling”

Biographical Profile

Veronica is a high achieving and articulate student. Academically, she can be considered a gifted student. Moreover, Veronica not only stands out as one of a few students of colour within the student population at SAHS but also she does not exhibit any serious drug and alcohol addiction. Yet, she does share with many at-risk students the loneliness and feelings of being unsupported at the mainstream school. In particular, Veronica made a personal choice to attend SAHS after having a negative experience at the mainstream school. Being at the large mainstream school with many other students was de-personalizing and emotionally unbearable

for her. Although succeeding academically, Veronica felt that she needed to leave the mainstream school for her personal wellbeing. At the heart of the problems she faced in mainstream school was feeling invisible as a minority female student while at the same time being racially visible to staff and peers. As a consequence, she always felt the urge to constantly work hard to dispel negative societal stereotypes of being a black female and this began to bother her. As a defense mechanism to feeling isolated and vulnerable at the mainstream school, Veronica behaved with an exaggerated sense of self-assuredness. In this respect, she described having “a big ego” at the mainstream school. However, a “big ego” also created difficulties in making friends with peers and relating well with the teachers. Overall, Veronica was deeply disconnected at the mainstream school with staff and peers and as a result made the decision to leave.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

In the mainstream school Veronica felt aimless and misunderstood by the majority of teachers. In particular, her personal problems, especially anxiety to fit in at school “weren’t understood by teachers”. When she tried to talk to staff about her problems it often became stressful and as a result she avoided doing it. Equally, she had very poor relations with her peers. In fact, she made no enduring friendships at the mainstream school. Even though an academically strong student, she felt that no one at the mainstream school— teachers and students alike— was willing and had enough time to establish a close bonding relationship with her. As a result, on most days she felt isolated and lonely at the mainstream school. Eventually, Veronica concluded no one at the mainstream school could provide the emotional assistance she needed. At this juncture, she had lost faith in the mainstream school as a whole and the guidance counsellors and teachers in particular. She remembers that as a struggling student “The counsellors were never helpful and only a handful of teachers actually taught and aided students, when they saw them struggling”. The majority of teachers at the mainstream school utilized inconsistent teaching practices. In particular, Veronica found that “assignments in general were problematic” since teachers did not offer any personal and creative space for her to demonstrate competency. Overall, her experience at the mainstream school could be summed up in one word “miserable”. In hindsight, Veronica was glad to have left the mainstream school.

4.1.10 John

“[I] felt like a number sometimes, especially at guidance office”

Biographical Profile

John has attended Sunnyside Alternative High School after becoming “stuck” at the mainstream school. In particular, he struggled with anxiety, poor attendance, and depression throughout his mainstream schooling. John also lives at home with his family. His mother is an educator, while his father works in the trades. During the four years that I have taught him, John excelled academically but struggled with depression. At the mainstream school, John’s mental health problems deteriorated and put a strain on his family life, as well as made it difficult for him to attend regularly. On most days John felt exhausted and hopeless at the mainstream school. In particular, teachers did not care about his mental health issues. It took many years at the mainstream school for John to finally identify the symptoms and triggers of his depression there. He found that he became anxious after missing school and not handing in academic work on time; eventually this morphed into long-term clinical depression. For John the mainstream school will always remain a place where he emotionally suffered and felt invisible, as well as academically was unproductive. In light of his negative experiences, John does not regret leaving the mainstream school for SAHS.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

John felt isolated and unwanted at the mainstream. Walking the school hallways and in classrooms he always “felt like a number”. For example, no one seemed to notice him at school, especially the teachers. Even the other students did not welcome him into their circle since he was not into sports and clubbing. Moreover, the whole student population at the mainstream school was divided into “cliques”. Reflecting back at his time there, John remembers that “cliques were much more prevalent” at the mainstream school. Turning inward, he tried to focus on improving his academics but anxiety and feeling unwanted by peers proved too strong. Inevitably, his worsening academic and personal problems came to the attention of staff. Yet, even at this stage John did not have any strong bonding relationship to draw upon with a staff

member or classmate at the mainstream school to share how miserable he felt. Instead, he mainly kept quiet since he "... felt like a number sometimes, especially at guidance office". Part of the problem of reaching out to staff and peers at the mainstream school was that John was "labelled an outcast". As a result not only in the guidance office but throughout the mainstream school he experienced constant "anxiety to conform" to what he thought others expected of him. Unable to satisfy his desire to be accepted by peers and staff, as well as no longer wanting a pariah status as an outcast, he stopped attending the mainstream school and switched to SAHS.

4.1.11 Miranda

"Mainstream school was a rollercoaster and much harder to concentrate"

Biographical Profile

Miranda is an introvert who has a hard time initiating conversations with others at school. However, as her teacher she revealed to me that she came to Sunnyside Alternative High School because of feeling left out at the mainstream school. In particular, Miranda felt out of place and isolated from her peers and staff. Other students frequently made fun of her because she appeared to be anorexic. Miranda was also bullied for her personal beliefs, for example, in supporting abortion. While she struggled with academic work and attendance at the mainstream school, what Miranda resented most was the way that the staff ignored her problems. Even when Miranda communicated her anxiety over school or bullying in class there was no indication of empathy from staff. None of the teachers took her aside to inquire about what was wrong nor did they offer emotional assistance. Instead, the teachers at the mainstream school did very little to help her deal with these pressures in the classroom. In the end, Miranda decided that the mainstream school was not a place she wanted to remain and chose to transfer to SAHS.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

At the mainstream school Miranda found it hard to attend regularly because of the inflexibility of teachers to provide emotional and academic support, as well as the organizational

structure that separated students from one another and from staff. The classrooms in the mainstream school were large and spread out which meant she often had to walk across the building between classes. Often, she did not know what classroom she was in or the students. After missing many school days, Miranda began to perceive that staff had given up on her. At this stage, she was alone in the mainstream school in dealing with her personal and academic difficulties made worse by bullying from peers. Largely, the bullying was because Miranda was of a slim physique and therefore looked younger than her actual age. Being ridiculed in class for her beliefs, she often had to force herself to attend classes at the mainstream school. Eventually it became very hard for her to concentrate in such a negative learning environment. Miranda began to experience acute anxiety about going to school and avoided it altogether. Consequently, the mainstream school in her words was "... a rollercoaster and much harder to concentrate". Ultimately, she decided to leave the mainstream school since she was not regularly attending nor was she making any significant academic progress. Miranda's decision to leave the mainstream school was not a difficult one since she had no real attachments to the institution, staff and students worth losing.

4.1.12 Robert

"Overall it just seemed that to most we weren't anything more than students"

Biographical Profile

Robert is a studious and inquisitive young man. He came to Sunnyside Alternative High School after attending a large mainstream high school. In particular, Robert did not like the pressure and structure of the mainstream school. From his experience, there were just too many students in the hallways and this made him feel overwhelmed at school. Robert did not have any friends at the mainstream school. Although he developed a close relationship with the Foods or culinary arts teacher, overall Robert did not connect with most teachers. The school atmosphere was impersonal and this prevented him from establishing any strong social relationships with teachers and peers. After some time, he stopped attending classes altogether. Looking back at his experiences at the mainstream school, Robert believes that things could have improved if there

had been more flexibility on the part of the mainstream school administration. Yet, at the same time he does not have any regrets in switching to SAHS.

Mainstream School Relationships and Experience

At the mainstream school Robert felt “disconnected”. His relations with fellow students were very minimal and insignificant. At the mainstream school, he did not have any emotional attachment with other students. As for staff, Robert remembered that “a handful of teachers that were nice”. Despite the potential to befriend these teachers, Robert could not engage them since there was no opportunity to get to know any teacher personally in class. There seemed to be a separation between students and teachers. For instance, Robert came and left class without much interaction with teachers. Moreover, he did not discuss any of his hobbies with teachers nor did they seem to be interested in sharing their hobbies. He tried many times to reach out to classroom teachers but found that other than the Foods teacher, his overtures were not welcomed. After these experiences, Robert observed that at the mainstream school staff were disinterested in engaging students because “overall it just seemed that to most we weren’t anything more than students”. As far as he was concerned the teachers at the mainstream school did not see their role in intervening and counselling students on their personal problems or hobbies. The mainstream school revolved around one authoritarian norm: students “should sit and be quiet till asked a question”. Therefore, he did not receive any one-on-one academic support from teachers. At the mainstream school, there was simply no flexibility in the enforcement of school rules. If he was late even for a few minutes it was not tolerated by staff and he was reprimanded. He felt very disconnected and alienated from the mainstream school as a result. In the end, Robert decided that attending the mainstream school was not worth it. Moreover, it had become a huge source of personal stress and disappointment in his life. Consequently, Robert left the mainstream school without many credits and a strong sense of failure. The mainstream school and staff failed to help him overcome his emotional and academic difficulties. Similarly, he saw his own failure at not reaching out to teachers to find resources. Overall, the mainstream school for him was not an enjoyable experience.

Students (Mainstream)	Student relations with staff	Positive peer relationships	Organization/ scheduling	Program/ Curriculum	Pedagogical Approaches	General atmosphere regarding learning and social interactions
1.Andy	Unpleasant Too many students for the teachers to form a strong bond with each individual	Did not share many hobbies	too many students		frequently held higher level students back	disorganized
2.Sally	Stressful Made her feel guilty	peer pressure	fast paced falling behind	hurried	Hurried Limited	Mainstream school] fast paced, stressful, peer pressure
3.Martin	Difficult Forgotten	very demanding to conform	Demanding schedule	lots of work	Little care given to those who fell out of place Limited support	conform to school's idea of normal Anxiety Stress
4.Lisa	Difficult	clique thing Difficult	Excluded	Difficult Feeling	just drained the fun out	Drained Uncomfortable

		Peers want her to conform to the way they understood things		Behind Anxious	of going to school	
5.Billy	Ignored very limited	many students that time was very limited	Unhelpful			helpful as they had time to be
6.Brad	Pretty conventional	No peer relationships	Strict daily regimen Fear of negative repercussions	Strict	Isolation	Conventional Not was working Felt like prison Lacked enrichment
7.Sophia	Counsellors were not helpful at all Picked on by teacher Unheard	very limited	no room for slack	It was incredibly hard to get back up if you missed a day	very strict Not helped Excluded No aid	Bad
8.Amber	Difficult was ridiculed teachers seemed apathetic	students either formed dependent 'cliques' or were ostracized Weak impersonal	very little help	didn't fit the mould was ignored	fell through the cracks or was ridiculed Teachers did not want to get involved	Ostracized ignored

		relations			beyond curriculum Teachers would not help	
9. Veronica	weren't understood by teacher The counsellors were never helpful and only a handful of teachers actually taught and aided students, when they saw them struggling Awkwardness in talking to teachers	Miserable Interpersonal pressures	It was hard Pressure to maintain good academic standing	assignments in general were problematic Did not relate well to teachers	problematic Teachers every year that taught differently	it was hard
10. John	Felt like a number Teachers did not care	Cliques were much more prevalent other students	Felt like a number sometimes, especially at guidance	"felt like a number"	"labelled an outcast"	"anxiety to conform" Felt isolated and unwanted

	Felt invisible to teachers	did not welcome him into their circle	office			felt exhausted and hopeless
11.Miranda	Harder Staff had given up on her	Bullied for physical appearance and opinions by classmates				rollercoaster much harder to concentrate in
12.Robert	Disconnected Hard to socialize A handful of teachers that were nice Teachers did not seem interested Teachers did not want to intervene in emotional and personal problems separation		overall it just seemed that to most we weren't anything more than students Not enough time to socialize	should sit and be quiet till asked a question	be quiet till asked a question	Disconnected Sense of failure Unproductive Stress Disappointment

	between students and teachers					
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4.2 Discussion of Mainstream School Experiences

From the above summative chart describing the mainstream school experiences of the student participants, it is clear that student participants lacked strong bonds with teachers, peers, and the institution itself. In looking deeply at their responses common themes emerged: feelings of individual isolation; a lack of teacher and staff assistance with personal difficulties (e.g. substance addiction and family crises); friction with teachers over pedagogical practices in the classroom; alienation from peers because of “cliques”; as well as a general unhappiness with the organizational structure and learning environment of the mainstream school. Key terms that the students used to define the mainstream school were “strict”, “hard”, “stressful”, “disorganized” and “isolated”. Many of them also used self-descriptors such as “outsiders”, “outliers”, and “outcasts” at the mainstream school. These descriptors all point to how much the students emotionally struggled to fit in at the mainstream school.

Yet, what about the teachers who were in a position to mediate the challenges in the mainstream school? The teachers at the mainstream school had the potential to change the learning environment and engage the emotional and learning needs of the students—some of the teachers were even seen as being “nice” and “capable”. However, in reality the teachers were perceived to be unable and unwilling to provide affective bonding assistance. There was a “separation” due to both physical and social barriers between students and teachers. This meant that teachers at the mainstream school were not regarded by students as allies and mentors in overcoming substance addiction, family conflict and learning disabilities. Instead, the students remembered their teachers at the mainstream school as “conventional”, “uncaring”, “unhelpful” at the very least and “bullies” at the worst. As a consequence, student participants avoided discussing their personal concerns such as drug addiction and family conflict, as well as academic difficulties with teachers. Above all, this indicated to me the existence of a wide gap between student needs and the unwillingness of mainstream school staff to provide emotional and mentoring assistance to at-risk students. The at-risk students by virtue of being at school required academic and emotional assistance from classroom teachers. The fact that they did not

access the help they needed with academic and personal difficulties in mainstream school indicates weak instructional practices, as well as a school-wide failure on the part of the mainstream school to reach and bond with at-risk students. I also reinforces the lack of social capital in these schools.

Perhaps the answer to the disconnection between the students and staff at the mainstream school lies with the fact that teachers were seen as being too preoccupied with the curriculum and classroom management. For example, the teaching practices of mainstream school teachers were critiqued as “inconsistent” and “top-down”- not inclusive of individual student needs. Specifically, the student participants felt that their opinions, intellectual ability and inquisitive skills were not fostered by staff in the classroom. Instead, teachers expected them to “sit and listen” to them as they assigned homework without any context and examples. The result was that students were unable to be active in the learning process and developed feelings of being “held back”. Moreover, the students saw the teachers as “unhelpful” in providing enrichment to what was being taught. In placing too much emphasis on content, mainstream school staff neglected to provide concrete examples, learning accommodations and mentoring to at-risk learners who needed to feel welcomed at the mainstream school.

Of equal interest to me was the fact that the student participants described poor peer relationships and felt alienated from peers at the mainstream school. Peers were seen by the students as primarily “cliques” who were very distant from them. The absence of strong peer relationships was largely because the cliques ostracized, bullied and excluded from membership those who were deemed to be different: the loners, outcasts and the “uncool” students. The student participants also did not want to join the cliques not only because of intolerant clique attitudes but as well as a desire by the participants not to lose their personal autonomy. Despite the evidence from student responses, it was nevertheless surprising to learn that student participants had made no close friends during their time at the mainstream school. As a teacher at SAHS I have often observed student participants socializing at lunch with one another and therefore expected they would have engaged with peers at the mainstream school more so than with staff. However, this was clearly not the case with the student participants who were as disconnected from their peers as from staff in the mainstream school. In fact, this finding is also a worrying sign of the breakdown of community spirit among students in mainstream school.

Consequently, it also points to the absence of an inclusive and empowering mainstream school learning environment where all students can be made to feel valued and respected.

The student participants did not enjoy the mainstream school's learning environment. They felt lonely and separated from staff and students in a tense social atmosphere made up of unconcerned teachers, a hectic daily schedule and exclusionary peer cliques. The social learning environment of the mainstream school was seen to be inherently "stressful", "a holding tank", "prison-like" and "hard". The students saw their time there as a "rollercoaster", "unproductive" and marked with "disappointment" and a "sense of failure". Similarly, the teaching methods and pedagogy of mainstream school teachers were criticized as rigid and this negatively impacted the environment. Rather than have a flexible learning environment, the student participants often felt the mainstream school as an institution that was unwilling to be flexible and accommodate their basic learning needs. For instance, the daily schedule and regular hours of the mainstream school did not work for the student participants. As a result, they often felt overwhelmed daily at the mainstream school and would either leave early and eventually stopped attending. Moreover, they perceived themselves to be invisible in the eyes of staff who they had limited contact with in the hallways and classrooms. They all felt deeply uncomfortable at the mainstream school. This sense of discomfort was heightened with a feeling of being personally ignored. Collectively, the students did not feel that their learning and personal/emotional needs were adequately addressed nor were they taken seriously by the mainstream school. Consequently, most of the at-risk students disengaged from the learning process and avoided the mainstream school altogether.

In essence, the lack of affective bonding relationships with teachers and peers at the mainstream school played a huge contributing role in the students' decision to stop attending and eventually leave the mainstream school. As at-risk students they required meaningful personal engagement from mainstream school teachers. This was clear in the failure of the mainstream school staff and administration to curtail the activities of peer cliques that ostracized the student participants. In fact, as Wilkins (2008) has argued, at-risk students who do not attend school feel that they do not belong and their identity as someone who does not belong is reinforced by the lack of meaningful relationships within the mainstream school (Wilkins, 2008). In fact, the quality of social relationships young people experience in school is an important determinant of academic achievement (Kuperminc et al, 2008). Social relationships as Khalifa (2010) highlights

are inextricably linked to school success or failure. However, the overwhelming negative experiences of the student participants at the mainstream school, with respect to the lack of engagement with staff, adds more weight to the key role that social relationships or lack thereof play in mediating school routines, academic performance, and resolving personal problems.

In light of the experiences of the student participants, it is important for mainstream schools and Canadian public school boards in particular to become inclusive and empowering learning centres in-order to reduce at-risk students' disengagement and poor self-esteem. As an alternative school teacher and former student at various mainstream schools, it is clear to me from the mainstream experiences of the student participants that once at-risk students feel isolated in mainstream school, they are less likely to seek and receive guidance and academic support. This in turn places at-risk students, as McWhirter et al. (2002) observe, at even greater risk for further educational and personal problems (McWhirter et al., 2002). Also, when mainstream school teachers are not affectively engaged with at-risk students, their learning suffers. The lack of any strong bonding social capital relationships by the student participants at the mainstream school is in many ways a damning indictment of the failure of current approaches to helping at-risk students in mainstream schools. The general problems faced by student participants in the mainstream school, especially the lack of necessary supportive relationships and benefits that accrue from them, therefore urgently need to be remedied by mainstream schools. The good news from the above findings is that the social learning environment and at-risk students' relations with staff has the potential to be improved. That is, if the mainstream school and staff foster stronger relationships with at-risk students.

Chapter 5: Alternative School Experiences and Current Goals

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the second research question of the study, namely, to put in context the experiences and relationships of the student participants at the alternative school. In so doing, the hopes and dreams of the student participants will become visible through their words and perceptions of the alternative school. I did not collect information on how many years were in-between their mainstream schooling and current enrolment in SAHS. The main reasons were that, first all the students had been at SAHS for more than a year; second, I felt a year was sufficient time to inquire about their experiences at the alternative school. In terms of organization, a summative chart highlighting in point form each student participant's key experiences at the alternative school will be provided. In conducting a deeper analysis of social capital formation at Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS) it was necessary to divide the student participants' responses into bonding and bridging social capital with affective and cognitive assets. Therefore, each student participant has a chart for both bonding and bridging social capital showing affective and cognitive aspects. The quotations and data come from the interviews that were conducted with the student participants. Finally, a selection of my participant observations during the course of the research will be included in this chapter to complement the experiences of the students at SAHS.

5.1 Andy

“... the opportunity to learn rather than simply memorize”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

At the alternative school Andy benefited from close relationships with staff that furthered not only his education but helped him deal with his drug and alcohol addictions. Teachers counselled him when he felt like getting “high” on drugs and not coming to school. In these interactions staff were not judgemental but genuine in their desire to steer him back to school. In particular, he felt that staff did not make him feel guilty for wanting to smoke drugs or leave

school early. Instead staff at SAHS offered him emotional support as well as access to drug treatment programs run out of the alternative school. Teachers wanted him to feel as responsible and in charge of his education as they were. As a result, Andy maintained cordial and productive relationships with staff which helped him to deal with his personal problems. Similarly, he got along well with fellow students at SAHS. For instance, there was no tension and awkwardness in socializing with peers. The positive bonding relations with peers was due to the structure of the alternative school where the student body was small enough that he could “form close personal friendships”. Andy often talked to other students in class about assignments, as well as stressful events happening in his life. Peers would listen and offer their own personal experiences as guides to how he should react to what was bothering him.

At SAHS, Andy was also given choices and flexibility in learning what he wanted. In this regard, he appreciated how teachers allowed him to work at his “own pace”. Moreover, teachers collaboratively discussed with him personal and academic problems he has having in class and outside of school. Often, they would jointly come up with benchmarks and daily goals to keep him focused. Such personalized attention was an intrinsic part of the pedagogical approaches utilized by teachers at SAHS and provided Andy “the opportunity to learn rather than simply memorize”. Some cognitive assets that he acquired at SAHS were physics, chemistry, rudimentary math, guitar; as well as, how to apply for student welfare. In fact, staff members gave him a “thorough explanation of whatever he was asking for” in class. Through his bonding relationship with staff Andy developed the confidence to open up to them about his personal life, especially drug and alcohol dependencies. Consequently, having close bonding relations with the teachers put him in a better mood at school to enjoy and learn what was being taught. Affective bridging social capital benefits that Andy gained from staff were motivation and self-confidence to pursue his passion for chemistry and physics. After he finished the Grade 11 Science course, Andy decided to study architecture at a college in Ireland. Furthering his childhood interest in science and decision to go to college indicated the bridging social capital that he received from the relationships with teachers at SAHS.

Andy's Goals

Since coming to SAHS Andy's interests, activities, and goals gradually changed. Reflecting on these changes, especially his goal to overcome alcohol and drug dependencies, he said:

“When I got here I would usually turn to substances like weed and alcohol...and probably about a year, maybe a year and half after I got here I said “No, enough of this” I have to find a better way to be happy.”.

Therefore, Andy attributed the change in behaviour as a result of internal motivation he developed at SAHS from interactions with staff. It was staff at SAHS who challenged him to set personal and learning goals, foremost, in reducing his drug and alcohol dependency.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Andy	“The staff is friendly” “the student body is small enough that they can form close personal friendships” Staff provided counselling; showed respect and made him feel valued and cared about Felt more confident at SAHS Peers would listen	“I like that I get to work at my own pace” “I actually have the opportunity to learn rather than simply memorize” Foster interest in science “every student gets the attention they need when they need it” He learned physics, chemistry, rudimentary math Accessed student wellbeing

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Andy	“The general atmosphere is better both socially and academically. I love this school, and without it I would have given up on ever graduating.”	Pursuing a science related career He applied for an architecture program at a university in Ireland

5.2 Sally

“...always looking for alternative ways to help each individual get through high school”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

Sally was surprised to find staff at SAHS, unlike at her previous mainstream school, to be more lenient when it came to personal issues she was going through. When interacting with them for the first time, she felt they were “...much more engaging and caring” toward herself and other at-risk students. For instance, staff did not react negatively when she came late to class, but were instead polite to her. In class, they gave her the option to work at her own pace free of deadlines. However, when she needed help teachers were available to answer any questions about the assignments. Generally, teachers at SAHS were very accommodating in helping her to finish courses. Sometimes a teacher would proactively book an appointment for her to see the drug counsellor which helped her avoid the embarrassment of scheduling one herself. In the wider student population she felt comfortable since at SAHS it was “not as stressful” to talk to other students as it was in the mainstream school. Moreover, none of the students bothered her or asked why she was at the alternative school. As well, her peers did not make her feel bad if they saw her in the guidance office waiting to see the drug counsellor. As a result, Sally experienced bonding social capital in the form of being valued and supported by staff. She also felt a common affinity in being at SAHS with peers. Within the classroom, teachers encouraged

her to excel academically in setting personal goals such as finishing courses early and applying for employment.

Teachers offered cognitive bridging social capital when they suggested ways that she could “succeed in life” by pursuing a post-secondary career in nursing. They recommended that she take college and university-level courses. Overall, staff at SAHS were “...always looking for alternative ways to help each individual get through high school”. Even though it was not easy for Sally to connect with the alternative school after having experienced academic failure at the mainstream school, she trusted and depended on advice from staff for her transition. When staff wanted to discuss her drug addiction or academic issues, they would set aside time after class to sit down with her one-on-one. Consequently, she felt her confidentiality was respected in the process. Moreover, the bonding relationship she had with staff provided emotional and academic benefits which together contributed to her seeing “different perspectives” at SAHS. As a result, Sally did not feel that teachers were “out to get her” if they reported her absent. Instead, she knew “their perspective” was for her to overcome whatever was preventing her from being at school. Likewise, cognitive bridging social capital provided by teachers included help with writing a resumé. Staff members volunteered to go over her resumé and interview skills after school. They also agreed to be references for her to obtain work. From the support and intervention of staff, Sally eventually secured a paid cooperative education placement.

Sally's Goals

Sally's goal was to graduate from SAHS and attend university. She wanted to achieve these goals by “trying to spend four hours at least the minimum” at the alternative school to get as much credits as she could. Overall, she felt that she could achieve her goals given the personal successes she had so far experienced at the alternative school:

“... because I know I am going somewhere. I know that sooner or later once when I am done, it can only go up. There is not going to be too much problems, especially if you know what you want. Because it is just a matter of knowing what you want and you start working towards it. There is no other way for it to go. Being here has definitely helped me find that.”.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Sally	Staff is more lenient to personal issues students may be going through. Staff is much more engaging and caring Protected her confidentiality Staff proactively booked appointments to see drug counsellors	not as stressful work at your own pace teachers do encourage setting goals and suggest ways that students can do this and succeed (taking university and college courses) Staff is always looking for alternative ways to help each individual get through high school Likes that SAHS is work at your own pace because it gives everyone a chance to understand and grasp the information without too much pressure of deadlines or losing marks etc.

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Sally	Mentorship Individual attention Staff agreed to be references for her to obtain work	Accessing community-based addiction counselling Staff helped her with resume writing; recommended that

		she take university courses as a way to be successful in life.
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5.3 Martin

“[At SAHS] . . . doing something on my own initiative, on my own terms and be successful at it”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

At the alternative school Martin flourished academically and personally. He benefited from close bonding relationships with staff that allowed him to feel “more connected at school”. Specifically, through the bonding relations with teachers, he obtained cognitive benefits such as improving math, science and writing skills in a “relaxed, easygoing” environment. Other cognitive assets from these bonding relationships with teachers came from learning about philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. It was in this context that he also received affective assistance from teachers in the form of emotional support and counselling for anxiety. Other students at SAHS were “friendly” and “pleasant to him”. More importantly, they did not bully and intimidate him in class. The alternative school changed Martin’s view of school and himself. Before the alternative school he did not think he was “going anywhere” in school. However, at SAHS Martin gradually developed “a good feeling” that he would eventually graduate. In fact, he successfully graduated from SAHS at the end of the research project.

Apart from staff and peers, Martin benefited from the structure and organization of SAHS. It provided him a flexible start and end dates for courses, which directly contributed to a reduction of his anxiety at school. At SAHS, he felt a lot more relaxed in completing academic work than in the mainstream school. Crucially, “accommodations” were put in place by staff for him to succeed. Teachers who already knew about his anxiety allowed him to attend class intermittently if he felt anxious. He also had the option of sending completed work electronically to them from home. Similarly, the guidance counsellors at SAHS provided a list of courses that

he could choose from, and more importantly, allow him to modify the list at if he felt stressed about a course. This flexible arrangement also allowed him to temporarily “put on hold” a course he had difficulty with so he could start a new one. However, he was still required to finish the course later on in the school year.

Likewise, the social learning environment at SAHS promoted bonding social capital for him through fostering a “community spirit” where “no student” was unnoticed. This greatly contributed to a sense of community that Martin could see in how students and teachers freely engaged in conversations around the alternative school. It was through such conversations with staff that Martin first accessed affective bridging social capital to explore a career in professional writing. Writing was something he had always been interested in, but only at SAHS did he begin to seriously think about making it a career. When he decided to attend college to become a professional writer, staff fully supported his decision and provided writing resources and exemplars. He registered for the professional writing program at college because staff made him feel confident and capable about his own writing.

Martin’s Goals

Martin’ goals were to graduate from SAHS and enrol in a professional writing program at college. These goals emerged at the alternative school with the help from staff. In this regard, he reflected on the difficulties he had overcome at the alternative school in setting his goals:

“You know I have struggled in school and see a course I want to be at, something that I am interested in...I personally picked myself. I have been forced to do a lot of things I didn’t want to; doing something on my own initiative, on my own terms and be successful at it.”

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Martin	Feels more connected with Alternative school staff and	Academics seems prioritized students with all kinds of

	students Relaxed, easygoing. Friendly. pleasant students Staff helped with anxiety and school-phobia	needs care for to get them through high school accommodations made for students who need them calm environment Helped with improving writing skills
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Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Martin	Staff fully supported his decision to attend college He felt staff made him more confident and capable to go to college	Showed him that writing could be a career

5.4 Lisa

“I would have to say the teachers and the courses together gave me a lot of independence. And before I wasn’t independent, but now I am very confident in being independent, being on my own, doing things on my own and having my opinion for things.”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

Lisa’s experiences at the alternative school were positive and beneficial. In particular, she received bonding social capital from her relationships with staff and students. For example, she turned to staff for counselling sessions regarding drug addiction. In these counselling sessions she felt supported by staff who listened to the reasons why she used drugs. Specifically, she

explained to them that drugs helped her to relax and forget emotional problems. The experience of sharing and talking to SAHS teachers about her reasons for using drugs provided affective assets. For instance, despite revealing her intimate problems to staff, she remained on “a friendly/personal level” with them because of a shared bond. Teacher engagement also meant Lisa could call SAHS staff when she was absent from class; as well as to discuss any lack of academic progress. The ability to engage and discuss these matters with teachers on the phone and in-person kept her connected to the alternative school. If there was no willingness on the part of staff at SAHS to engage her in person or on the telephone she would have dropped out. However, the social learning environment at SAHS was “very relaxed” because there were no major conflicts between students and staff, as well as among the student population itself.

For Lisa, the inclusive atmosphere prevented interpersonal conflict at the alternative school. Students had “flexibility and freedom” at SAHS to academically flourish as well as deal with their personal issues with help from staff. The flexible structure at SAHS allowed her to work on one course at a time. This arrangement became a great learning “opportunity” for Lisa to go through school “quickly” by finishing as many courses as she could in a semester. The structure of the alternative school also made her realize what her “furthest abilities” were in terms in what she could cognitively/academically accomplish. Some of the cognitive skills she acquired at SAHS were multitasking and taking notes. Another important cognitive benefit she received from her close bonding relationships with staff was empathy. Teachers modeled empathy to her in the classroom by always looking at a situation from her perspective and not necessarily from the institution’s priorities.

At SAHS there was cognitive bridging, primarily from a yoga instructor at SAHS. The yoga course allowed Lisa to socialize with peers. It also increased her personal independence, especially in seeking out information from the yoga instructor about a social work career. For an hour each day she had the opportunity to reflect on her goal of becoming a social worker, while at the same time learning from the yoga instructor ways to motivate herself in achieving this career objective. As well, she began to practice yoga in the community with other enthusiasts. It was in these ways that the educational programs and staff at SAHS helped to instil personal independence, in her words:

“I would have to say the teachers and the courses together gave me a lot of independence. And before I wasn’t independent, but now I am very confident in being independent, being on my own, doing things on my own and having my opinion for things.”.

Lisa’s Goals

Lisa’s personal goal was to earn as many credits in-order to graduate from SAHS. She also wanted attend university in-order to become a social worker. Her decision to attend university came after coming to the alternative school.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Lisa	“The teachers are more on a friendly/personal level” -Discussed academic problems -Felt she could trust staff with problems and confidentiality	“relaxed” “alternative [school] gives you the flexibility and freedom” “flexibility” “[Alternative school] I enjoy it a lot more.” Learned about her furthest abilities

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Lisa	Yoga instructor talked to her about become a career in social work	“I have the opportunity to go through school extremely quickly” Intends to go to university and eventually get a Master’s

		degree in social work because of her interactions with staff Learned to practice Yoga outside in the community
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5.5 Billy

“This environment is a more independent school experience. The teachers are always there to help you...but it is not like 30 kids being taught the same thing at the same time. It is like you work at your own pace or whatever. If you are not going to do it, it is not going to get done. There is no one forcing you ahead.”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

At the alternative school Billy enjoyed the open nature of his bonding relationships with staff. For him the alternative school was a “flexible” place to learn because he was given autonomy as “an individual” and his opinions in class were respected by staff. The extent of affective social capital could be seen in how teachers were willing to go beyond their official duties to help him maintain good attendance. Each morning the student success teacher would call his home as a “wake-up reminder” so that he would not be late for class. During these phone calls the teacher would motivate and joke with him. The effect this had on Billy was to make him feel good about coming to SAHS. Moreover, his close relationship with staff also made it easier to access bridging opportunities such as employment services outside of school. In the classroom, teachers provided wider resources for him, including referrals to the public health nurse, dental screening drug counsellors and a co-operative education placement.

One of the hallmarks of the alternative school experience for Billy was how teachers modified the curriculum by offering various textbooks for him to choose from so that he had an opportunity to find his “own learning style”. In fact, his bonding relationship with the English teacher at SAHS led to a cognitive benefit, namely, he became a better writer. The English teacher would work on his writing and post copies of his work in class in order to motivate him

and show him how far he had come along with the editing process. Similarly, the English teacher—who also ran a guitar program—provided affective assets when he told him he had “a natural talent” for guitar. As a result of this “judgment” from the teacher, Billy signed up for guitar class twice with this teacher.

The social learning environment at SAHS overall had “a lot more energy” and cooperation between students than the mainstream school. For example, students at SAHS were often willing to socialize with him and be active at school. In fact, he made some good friends at SAHS whom he frequently socialized with after school. The organization and schedule of the alternative school was also very helpful since he was required to attend school for only four hours. This meant that he was able to work full-time and attend school full-time without losing either in the process. Even when he was not attending school, for example, being out on a coop placement, Billy returned to SAHS to ask teachers for advice regarding personal issues such as changing jobs or potential career pathways. He also felt sufficiently safe and cared for at the alternative school to seek help from students. Specifically, the social learning environment coupled with the teaching approaches of teachers facilitated a tremendous change in his schooling:

“This environment is a more independent school experience. The teachers are always there to help you...but it is not like 30 kids being taught the same thing at the same time. It is like you work at your own pace or whatever. If you are not going to do it, it is not going to get done. There is no one forcing you ahead.”.

Billy's Goals

Billy entertained several goals. Using his strong bonding relationship with his girlfriend's father, a plumber, he aimed to take up an apprenticeship in plumbing since there is “good money” to be made in this trade. Yet, he also wanted to work in a drug rehab centre using his past experience with drug addiction at SAHS to help other addicts become drug-free. Becoming a youth worker would be a way for him to give back to others. Eventually, he wanted to go to college after graduating from SAHS.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Billy	Felt respected and appreciated by staff Felt good in coming to SAHS Could count on teacher valuing opinions in class	“flexible” “Individual basis rather than a general consensus” “The ability to change things up to help suit it” “Alternative school] I like that you have an opportunity to get to know your own learning style” “There is a lot more energy focused on individual students” He became a better writer

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Billy	Support from teacher to seek out employment in trades Teacher encouraged him to pursue guitar	Interest in becoming youth addictions counsellor He was able to work full-time and attend SAHS because of its flexible structure

5.6 Brad

“Also I get more time to discuss problems and learn individually from my teachers”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

From his interactions at the alternative school Brad found staff to be “friendly and very helpful”. In fact, teachers at SAHS were “easygoing” and open to conversations about non-academic topics. His bonding relationships with them definitely provided cognitive assets in improving his processing skills in science and history. In these two subject areas, teachers at SAHS taught him critical thinking and analytical skills that were helpful in completing assignments. Within the classroom, teachers also welcomed his perspective on ways to improve assignments. There was also bridging social capital to access opportunities outside of school, mainly through the cooperative education program. Brad’s decision to participate in a cooperative education placement was a result of the good rapport he had with the teacher in charge. As a result, he secured a coop placement at a community resource centre in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood where he acquired some cognitive bridging assets. Working at the community centre allowed him to develop strong interpersonal skills in a stressful environment. He also learned patience in working with diverse clientele, many of whom did not speak English or French as their first language. Frequently, the coop teacher helped him to focus on certain areas of what he was learning, for example the procedures in completing a new registration form at the community centre. She mentored him to be competent in using these skills later.

The coop teacher also gave him the opportunity in class to share what he had learned with other students. Through these classroom discussions and “sharing of information” with staff and peers Brad acquired the skill to socialize and initiate conversations. It also built up his personal confidence at SAHS. Although he did not socialize much with fellow students, they also did not exclude him at school. If he was not sure about something in class he would easily ask another student for help. Overall, the alternative school furthered his learning as evidenced by the fact that his “marks have gone up”. Brad also felt happy to arrive early each day. In the mornings he would stand in the hallway and engage in random conversations with staff about personal interests such as becoming a paramedic. The crucial factor for his academic and social successes at SAHS was the alternative school teachers. It was they who ensured the learning environment was more of an easygoing, fun and engaging setting for him and other at-risk students.

Brad’s Goals

Brad's long term goal was to attend college and become a paramedic. His short-term goal was to finish his last credit at SAHS in order to graduate. He arrived at these goals from all the different courses at the alternative school, as well as discussions with staff.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Brad	"easygoing" Staff were open and had conversations with him Staff "welcomed his perspective"	Improved his processing skills in science and history "I am able to work at a pace that is comfortable and suits my unique style of learning. flexible hours" "Also I get more time to discuss problems and learn individually from my teachers" "Suits my unique style of learning. My marks have gone up as a result of this" "more of an easygoing, engaging experience"

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Brad	Mentorship by coop teacher	Cooperative education

	Emotional support to deal with anxiety Staff guided him to deal with stress at coop placement	placement at community centre Staff shared information with students Improved his interpersonal communication with working with diverse clientele at coop placement
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5.7 Sophia

“I have support in every aspect of my learning”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

Since coming to the alternative school, Sophia accessed bonding social capital from staff members who were “amazing”. In particular, the senior geography teacher made sure he supported her in identifying her learning priorities as well as areas of difficulties. In fact, this teacher on his own initiative made sure that other staff members knew she had an Individual Education Plan or IEP. As a result, Sophia received accommodations when she took courses with them. Collectively, staff at the alternative school showed they wanted her to “succeed”. As a student with a learning disability she liked focusing on “one course at time”. Teachers provided cognitive assets in helping to break down math questions and summarize information from a textbook in history. The bonding relationship with them provided affective benefits to her such as instilling confidence, optimism and dignity. As well, staff talked about learning disabilities, accommodations and resources without any condescending tone and this made Sophia feel empowered about discussing her own learning disability.

The affective bonding support and respectful attitude of staff greatly motivated her to access affective bridging social capital in the form of learning about resources at college where she planned to attend after the alternative school. Specifically, the senior geography teacher took

her on a field trip to a nearby college fair. At the college, Sophia learned about the many resources and supports available to students with learning disability; something that before the field trip she would “have never known” was available. In addition, the flexible school hours benefitted her since she worked part-time at a cosmetic store. Unlike the mainstream school, the staff at the alternative school recognized that she needed her job to pay for rent and other necessities. Therefore, teachers worked collaboratively with her to develop a learning plan that took into account her employment hours. This showed that at SAHS she had affective and cognitive bonding assets from teachers to use “in every aspect” of her learning. Consequently, Sophia felt a part of “a community” and was welcomed as such by everyone at the alternative school. In her peer relationships at SAHS, she managed to renew friendships from the mainstream school. However, she also made new friends who helped her find where to print work. In this respect, she felt that relations with peers at SAHS were “a good social experience.”

Overall, Sophia credited the strong affective bonds with teachers as being the defining factor in her academic success. She used her bonding relationship with staff to earn the required high school credits, receive accommodation in class and ultimately to graduate from the alternative high school. The bonding relations with staff also allowed her to access affective bridging social capital to find resources and first-hand experience of college. Therefore, the relationships with staff at the alternative school provided both bonding and bridging social capital, as well as affective and cognitive assets.

Sophia's Goals

Sophia's personal goal was to attend college. Afterwards, she was interested in opening a cosmetics store which she hoped would secure her financial independence and personal happiness.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Sophia	Relationship with teachers instilled confidence, optimism	“I like the flexibility; one course at a time; block

	and dignity Felt empowered to discuss her learning disability Staff had respectful attitude and she felt part of “a community”, and “was welcomed”. “Staff are amazing here” “People want me to succeed” “I am very welcome here”	courses; staff; people are like me” “I have support in every aspect of my learning” Earned the required credits to graduate
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Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Sophia	Empathy by teacher with overcoming stigma surrounding learning disability	Helped to transition to college Access to education resources through teacher Learned about many resources and supports at college for students with learning disability

5.8 Amber

“The teachers care and want every student succeeding in school and every other part of life”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

Unlike at the other mainstream schools she attended, at SAHS Amber benefited from bonding and bridging relationships with staff. These relationships made her active inside and outside of the alternative school. In particular, she received affective bonding social capital from

teachers who “cared” and “wanted” her to succeed as well as have a much more enriching experience. Teachers often asked her what “she wanted to do after school” and if she wanted help from them on projects. In fact, the senior history teacher at the alternative school became a close mentor who regularly inquired about her mental and physical well-being. This teacher also provided bridging opportunities through an Aboriginal Studies course that she was taking. As part of the course Amber was given the opportunity by the teacher to organize class field trips to the Supreme Court, as well as interact with social justice activists who came as guest speakers to class. Not having done any of these tasks before, she acquired valuable cognitive bridging assets from the relationship with the history teacher, namely, booking guest speakers, arranging transportation to and from important venues and participating in official government hearings as a “public witness”. As well, she learned how to correspond with governmental institutions through a letter writing campaign that she co-organized with the history teacher at SAHS. These were important cognitive bridging opportunities that Amber received from her close bonding relationship with the staff that would have been difficult for her to access at the mainstream school. In particular, the bonding relationship with the history teacher— who also won a Governor General award for a national project commemorating Aboriginal residential schools in Canada— gave her the courage and confidence to organize and participate in these school activities. The teacher trusted her abilities to organize the field trips outside of school and to initiate the letter writing campaign,

All of the staff at SAHS treated Amber as an equal. The close bonding relations with them had a huge emotional impact on increasing her self-esteem. Unlike at the mainstream school, staff and students at SAHS were on a first name basis and this showed how inclusive the learning environment was for students. Moreover, when she found out that she was pregnant, Amber immediately consulted the guidance counsellors and her teacher mentor. They comforted her and provided her useful resources as a new and expecting young mother. Importantly, none of the teachers and peers made her feel “bad” or “different” about the pregnancy, even though they knew she was in a relationship with Andy. Peer relations at SAHS were marked by respect and solidarity where no one bothered her and Andy with personal questions. For Amber this proved that staff and students at SAHS did not “ostracize those outside of their group”.

The bonding relationship with staff allowed Amber to access affective bridging social capital in applying for a public administration program at university. The alternative school staff

encouraged and guided her through the application process as well as in choosing the courses that would enable her to graduate from SAHS. Therefore, Amber felt appreciated and valued by staff and worked hard to finish her schooling at SAHS. At the end of the research project Amber did in fact successfully graduate from SAHS. As well, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

Amber`s Current Goals

Amber goals were to have a healthy pregnancy and birth, as well as to graduate from high school. She achieved both. She also intended to enrol in a public administration program and eventually obtain employment within the Canadian public service.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Amber	“The teachers care and want every student succeeding in school and every other part of life” Had a much more enriching experience at SAHS Teacher mentor and guidance counsellors comforted her on pregnancy “openness of teachers/staff; closer relationships built” “Don’t ostracize those outside of their group”	“The ability to take responsibility for your own education” Finished courses to graduate from high school

	“The support systems are amazing” “The teachers care and want every student succeeding in school” “openness”	
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Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Amber	Encouragement of teacher to apply for university Feeling appreciated by teacher Teachers helped to create sense of courage and confidence to take on new tasks outside of SAHS	Social justice activism regarding Aboriginal rights She learned how to book venues She organized guest speakers Corresponded with government institutions Arrange for transportation for field trips

5.9 Veronica

“Feeling successful is an essence this school gives off”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

Veronica received affective and cognitive benefits from her relationship with staff at the alternative school. Staff members at SAHS were willing to provide affective bonding assets in understanding and comforting her. They gave Veronica space and enough time for her to express

herself in class the way she wanted to without dismissing her ideas. In their pedagogical approach, teachers did not make her feel “hurried” in asking questions but waited until she had finished speaking to give their responses. For this reason, Veronica experienced staff at SAHS to be “empathetic” toward her personal and academic difficulties. She struggled with anxiety and self-esteem issues at the mainstream school because of being a minority female. She also did not have many friends at the mainstream school due to difficult interpersonal communication with peers, made worse by her “big ego”. However, at SAHS she received affective social capital from SAHS staff who made it easy for her to discuss emotions and her post-secondary plans. In particular, Veronica opened up to staff about her anxiety disorder. She also consulted with staff about wanting to become a nurse. Teachers at SAHS listened and did not make her feel insecure. Unlike at the mainstream school where she did not have very close relationships with teachers, at the alternative school the “teachers” offered much more academic help and personal advice.

It was not just affective assets that Veronica received from her relations with staff but also cognitive benefits in the form of academic skills and credits that she needed to graduate from high school. For example, Veronica learned to control her speech and as well as improve her written communication skills. With help from teachers she learned to slow down when speaking because her mind would often race ahead of her voice which made her speech muddled. Specifically, her life skills teacher coached her on how to adjust and harmonize her ideas and speech. This was successful because of the supportive environment and attitude of staff. Similarly, Veronica’s writing skills “improved significantly” at SAHS. She felt confident about writing her “resume” as well as the “entrance exam” for the nursing program she intended to take at university. These interactions with staff provided bonding social capital that increased her self-esteem since staff did not ridicule her “academic failures or weaknesses” and she was not “looked down on” by peers.

An example of affective bridging social capital was when staff overwhelmingly nominated her to become one of the Masters of Ceremonies (student hosts) at the SAHS graduation ceremony. During the graduation ceremony she learned new skills in her role as coordinator like organizing and seating guests as well as making sure the event went off smoothly. In recognition of the academic and personal successes SAHS, Veronica was a recipient of a number of academic awards from staff. At SAHS, she did not only benefit from cognitive assets from her bonding relationships with staff such as improved verbal and written

communication and time management, but she also graduated from high school as result of these supporting relationships.

Veronica's Current Goals

Veronica's personal goals were to graduate from high school and begin an applied nursing program at university. She graduated from high school but was still awaiting a response from university regarding the practical nursing program she had applied to.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Veronica	they are understanding of personal difficulties, the teachers offer so much more help and advice My failures or weaknesses aren't ridiculed or I'm looked down on gives enough breathing room for students Peers were welcoming to her	expectations are high enough of a standard to reach I don't feel as if it's being pushed at me Feeling successful is an essence this school gives off Improved verbal communication with help from staff

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Veronica	Nominated by staff as one of the Masters of Ceremonies (student hosts) at the SAHS high school graduation	Learning from staff how to write speeches and organize graduation ceremony

	ceremony	Applied for nursing program at university Graduated from high school
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5.10 John

“Teachers are much more kind and personable, better connection with students”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

When John came to the alternative school his expectations of staff were not high. He really did not enjoy school because of his negative experiences at the mainstream school. However, teachers worked very hard to make connections with him in order to earn his trust and cooperation in the classroom. For instance, the philosophy teacher would always discuss various genres of music and engage him in conversations about philosophers. These discussions made John feel “important” and “knowledgeable”. In his view staff at SAHS were successful in engaging him because they were “much more kind and personable” and had a “better connection with students”. They also recognized the importance of giving John cognitive bonding assets by collaboratively working with him to choose what he wanted to study and learn in a course. As a result, he often had “genuine conversations” with them about the courses he was taking, as well as his career interest in social work.

Affective assets emerged from his relationships and classroom discussions with teachers. These interactions with teachers helped to lessen his anxiety and made him more comfortable in school. In the classroom, the teachers offered more individualized lesson plans and assignments that focused on specific skills like inquiry and reflection. At SAHS John did not feel like “a number” since he had made real-life connections between what he was learning and seeing at the alternative school. For instance, he observed a wide spectrum of people while learning about various perspectives at the alternative school. As a result, he began to feel that there was no fixed path when it came to finishing school.

One aspect of SAHS that appealed to him was the lack of “a student hierarchy”. At his previous school students were arranged in cliques. However, at SAHS he saw that students were focused on doing “their work” and “got along well with one another”. Unlike at the mainstream school, he also did not see students “hassle him” at SAHS. The organization of the alternative school reduced tension and contact between himself and other students since it was “a much more flexible schedule”. Specifically, he benefited from the shortened school hours to look for a full-time job. In the process of looking for work, John received cognitive bridging assets from teachers who offered help him with looking for job and with resume writing. His guidance counsellor also made a referral to a Youth Employment Access Centre- which John had no idea existed until he came to alternative school. Through the coordination of SAHS staff and representatives from the youth employment centre, he eventually got hired at a local grocery store. Overall, he strongly believed that his bonding and bridging social capital relationships with teachers at SAHS benefited him not only to adjust well at the alternative school but to secure employment outside in the community.

John’s Current Goals

John’s long-term goal was to attend college and become a social worker. Since coming to the alternative school he learned there are many roads to post-secondary education.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
John	“[Alternative school] Teachers are much more kind and personable, better connection with students” “Students don’t hassle each other as much” Teachers earned his trust	“Much more flexible schedule.” “Less hours leaves more free time for part-time work. Work at your own pace” “Much more flexible schedule” “More individualized lesson

	Connected with him over music He did not feel like “a number” Staff made feel important and knowledgeable in class discussions	plans/assignments” “Very stress-free in terms of coming to class, better atmosphere” Close bonding relationship with teachers helped with resume writing Learned there is no fix path to finish school
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Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
John	SAHS coop teacher supporting and encouraging him during first weeks of new job	Access to Employment Centre Full-time job at local grocery store

5.11 Miranda

“Staff believe in the students”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

At the alternative school Miranda connected with staff members. As a student who did not attend the alternative school regularly, she was surprised how accommodating staff were with her. In particular, she developed a bonding relationship with the Student Success teacher. He advised her about overcoming school-related anxiety as well as implementing a proper diet. Miranda also felt that the teachers at SAHS were understanding and helpful in providing affective assets in their interactions with her. In particular, they made her feel “respected” at

school. Staff did this by treating her “fairly” even when they challenged her to change her inconsistent attendance. In these situations staff did not lose their temper at her. Miranda used the affective bonding relationships with the staff to seek help regarding work, housing and academic courses. At SAHS, she was not bullied and intimidated by fellow students. From her experiences, students at SAHS were very “accepting” of her. For example, walking down the hallways of the alternative school no one made her feel uncomfortable because of her small weight and physical size. In class, her peers chatted with her and were not rude. As well, the student population at SAHS had no visible divide between students as in the mainstream school.

The alternative school for her was also “much easier and flexible” compared to the mainstream school. Even after missing many school days the teachers were willing to show her how to register for courses. Miranda was able to pick up her course work from where she had last left off. The academic flexibility was available to her because staff members were willing to mark her academic work. Having this flexibility made her re-entry to the alternative school much easier. Similarly, the guidance counsellors were helpful when it came to changing courses. In such a supportive context, Miranda felt better in managing anxiety, and saw an improvement in her academic skills, especially in English. She often borrowed novels from the English teacher for her own recreational use. None of the staff members judged her on past failures. Instead, they were always motivating her to come to school and be productive. In fact, different teachers offered to help her with anxiety and familial crises even when she did not ask for it. Staff also worked with her to reduce academic-related stressors through open-ended submission dates, optional seating in class and chunking or breaking down assignments.

Recently, Miranda also benefited from staying after school in the Student Success teacher’s classroom because she felt comfortable there to catch up on her course work. Since coming to the alternative school she benefited both personally and academically from her affective and cognitive bonding relationships with staff and the flexible structure of the alternative school.

Miranda’s Goals

Miranda’s main goal was to finish high school by completing her remaining ten credits as soon as possible. However, she admitted that at her current pace and lack of regular attendance at

SAHS it could take two years for her to graduate. As a result of accessing social capital from her relationships with staff graduating from high school this had become a top priority.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Miranda	“I like the staff” “teachers are understanding and helpful” “How accepting most people are” “staff believe in the students” Staff did not lose temper in talking to her about absences	“much easier and flexible” “Flexibility, assistance, encouragement” Learn how to better manage anxiety

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Miranda	Teachers encouraged her to attend the alternative school	Learning to register for SAHS courses from guidance counsellors

5.12 Robert

“I love attending SAHS”

Alternative School Relationships and Experience

Robert felt proud to be a student at the alternative school because of his bonding relationships with staff and students. Reflecting on these affective bonding relationships, he felt

they benefited him largely in an emotional way. At SAHS he was in a better mood after socializing with staff in the classroom and hallways. Robert also enjoyed learning from teachers unlike at the mainstream school where he was depressed. At SAHS, he credited the teaching approach of staff at SAHS as being responsible for changing his negative attitude toward school. For instance, teachers at the alternative school did not “pressure” him with assignments. He also did not feel the need to “compete” with others. From his experience there was “deep respect” between students and teachers at the alternative school since everyone used their first names. In fact, he made friends at the alternative school who shared similar hobbies. During lunch and the two recesses he socialized with his peers about graphic novels and video games. Likewise, they gave him affective benefits since it was a good feeling to know that friends were at the alternative school.

The bonding relations with SAHS teachers also provided cognitive assets to him, especially assistance with reading and writing. The English teacher helped him to read and comprehend Orwell’s *1984*. As a result, Robert gained a better understanding of it by simply talking to the teacher. The English teacher also shared supplementary resources with him in order to better understand the author, George Orwell and his views. These cognitive assets actually helped him “to understand *1984* better” and also made him a better student. Teachers at SAHS were also willing to proof-read his written work before submission.

Courses such as Co-op and English exposed him to different viewpoints. For instance, he learned from the coop teacher that there were opportunities for him to secure “paid employment with credits”. Staff also provided guidance and support to him, especially in devising a post-secondary plan. At the alternative school Robert decided that he wanted to become a successful entrepreneur. To assist him, teachers shared information and resources about entrepreneurship, and this showed that there was “respect between students” at SAHS. Similarly, the learning environment was beneficial to him since he was not distracted by fellow students. Robert felt comfortable to finish his work anywhere in the alternative school. Because of the smaller class sizes in SAHS he was able to “focus” on his academic work more effectively than in the previous mainstream school.

Before coming to SAHS he had not been “super serious” about obtaining his high school diploma. School “kinda just bored” him. However, at SAHS he used his bonding relationships with staff to become engaged and interested in what he was doing. In fact, he rarely missed

many school days at SAHS compared to his previous frequent absences from the mainstream school. For Robert, the alternative school was different from the mainstream school because it was a “more respectful and humanizing” place:

“It is much easier to get a teacher to help you in alternative school, smaller class size generally. They seem to have more interest in helping you. Because at a normal school there is many kids and everyone is doing the exact same thing it is kinda hard to make sure everyone is up to the same, where they need to be.”.

Robert's Goals

Robert's primary goal was to finish high school at SAHS and become an entrepreneur. After SAHS he planned to first get a full-time job so that he can move out of his parents' home. His long-term goal was to start a video game developing company with a friend.

Bonding Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
Robert	“Respect between students and teachers since we all use first names” “It just seems to me to be more respectful and humanizing” “I love attending SAHS” He was not pressured Often socialized with staff	“Really helps me focus and get more out of my learning experience” “Helps me focus” Learned to do research on George Orwell Received better understanding of courses

Bridging Social Capital

Student	Affective	Cognitive
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Robert	Encouragement from SAHS to continue reading literature Daily engagement with teacher about reading <i>1984</i> by George Orwell	Learned how to secure a paid coop Staff helped him explore a career in entrepreneurship Entry to world literature “My teacher gave me a few resources to understand Orwell himself and his view which actually helped me to understand <i>1984</i> better”
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Students (Alternative)	Student relations with staff	Positive peer relationships	Organization/ scheduling	Program/ Curriculum	Pedagogical Approaches	General atmosphere regarding learning and social interactions
1.Andy	“The staff is friendly” Staff made him more confident	“the student body is small enough that they can form close personal friendships”	“I like that I get to work at my own pace”	“I actually have the opportunity to learn rather than simply memorize”	“every student gets the attention they need when they need it”	“The general atmosphere is better both socially and academically. I love this school, and without it I would have given up on ever graduating.”

2.Sally	Staff is more lenient to personal issues students may be going through. Staff is much more engaging and caring Staff proactively booked appointment to see drug counsellors Staff agreed to be references for jobs	not as stressful	work at your own pace	teachers do encourage setting goals and suggest ways that students can do this and succeed	Staff is always looking for alternative ways to help each individual get through high school Staff helped her write resumes Recommended what university-level courses to take Looked for ways to support her to be successful in life	I like that SAHS is work at your own pace because it gives everyone a chance to understand and grasp the information without too much pressure of deadlines or losing marks etc.
3.Martin	Feels more connected with Alternative school staff and students Staff supported his decision to go to college Felt staff made him more	Relaxed, easygoing. Friendly. pleasant students	Academics seems prioritized	students with all kinds of needs care for to get them through high school	accommodations made for students who need them Staff provided writing resources for college program	calm environment

	confident about his abilities and capability to go college					
4.Lisa	“The teachers are more on a friendly/personal level” Discussed academic problems with staff Felt she could trust staff with personal problems; confidentiality	“relaxed”	“alternative [school] gives you the flexibility and freedom”	“I have the opportunity to go through school extremely quickly”	“flexibility” Learned about her furthest abilities from courses taught by staff Yoga instructor talked about becoming a social worker Learned to practice Yoga in the community	“[Alternative school] I enjoy it a lot more.”
5.Billy	“flexible” Felt respected by staff	“Individual basis rather than a general consensus”	“The ability to change things up to help suit it”	“Alternative school] I like that you have an opportunity to get to know your own learning style” Able to work full-time because of	“There is a lot more energy focused on individual students” Learned to become a better writer Teacher encouraged him to pursue guitar	“Energy focused on individual students” Felt good about coming to SAHS

				structure		
6.Brad	“friendly staff Very helpful” Staff opened to conversation with him Staff welcomed his perspective Staff guided him to deal with stress of coop placement	“easygoing”	“I am able to work at a pace that is comfortable and suits my unique style of learning. flexible hours”	“Also I get more time to discuss problems and learn individually from my teachers”	“Suits my unique style of learning. My marks have gone up as a result of this” Improved his processing skills in science and history Staff shared information with students Improved interpersonal communication in working with diverse clientele at coop placement	“more of an easygoing, engaging experience”
7.Sophia	“Staff are amazing here” Staff made her feel confident, optimistic and full of dignity Staff had respectful	“People want me to succeed”	“I like the flexibility; one course at a time; block courses; staff; people are like me”	“flexibility”	“I have support in every aspect of my learning” Earned required credits to graduate Learned about many resources and support for	“I am very welcome here” Felt part of a community

	attitude				students with learning disabilities at college	
8.Amber	“The teachers care and want every student succeeding in school and every other part of life” “openness of teachers/staff; closer relationships built” Teacher comforted her on pregnancy Teacher made her feel courage and confidence to take on new tasks outside of school	“Don’t ostracize those outside of their group”	“The support systems are amazing”	“The ability to take responsibility for your own education”	“The teachers care and want every student succeeding in school” Finished courses to graduate from high school Teachers were mentors Learned how to book venues and organize guest speakers; correspond with government institutions and arrange transportation	“openness” Had a much more enriching experience
9.Veronica	they are understanding of personal	My failures or weaknesses	gives enough breathing room for	expectations are high enough of a	I don’t feel as if it’s being pushed at me	Feeling successful is an essence this

	difficulties, the teachers offer so much more help and advice Teachers nominated her as one of Masters of Ceremonies (student hosts) at the SAHS high school graduation	aren't ridiculed or I'm looked down on Peers were welcoming	students	standard to reach	Improved verbal communication with help from staff Applied for nursing program Graduated from high school	school gives off
10.John	"[Alternative school] Teachers are much more kind and personable, better connection with students" Teachers earned his trust Connected with teacher over music Staff made him	"Students don't hassle each other as much"	"Much more flexible schedule." "Less hours leaves more free time for part-time work. Work at your own pace"	"Much more flexible schedule"	"More individualized lesson plans/assignments" Learned there is no fix path to finish high school	"Very stress-free in terms of coming to class, better atmosphere" Did not feel like a "number"

	feel “important”, “knowledgeable”					
11. Miranda	“I like the staff” “teachers are understanding and helpful” Staff did not lose temper with her	“How accepting most people are”	“much easier and flexible”	“Flexible”	“staff believe in the students” Learned to better manage her anxiety	“Flexibility, assistance, encouragement”
12. Robert	“Respect between students and teachers since we all use first names” Was not pressured Socialized with staff	“Respect between students”	“Really helps me focus and get more out of my learning experience”	“Helps me focus”	“It just seems to me to be more respectful and humanizing” Learned to do research on George Orwell Better understanding of school/academic material Resources provided by staff	“I love attending SAHS”

					to help secure paid coop	
					Staff helped him to explore a career in entrepreneurship	

5.2 Participant Observations

As an SAHS insider I was able to draw my own my interactions with the student participants and staff at SAHS. My participant observations revealed a lot not only about social capital formation at SAHS but also put into context the experiences and responses of my student participants. From my participant observations I have selected three examples which I feel shed light on the experiences of student participants as it directly relates to social capital formation at SAHS.

Thanksgiving Dinner

Walking into the brightly lit gym with rows of elongated tables and different dishes of savouring food on the side of the stage I felt relieved to see a familiar sight: colleagues and students mixing and laughing at the annual Thanksgiving dinner. During the second week of October staff and students organized SAHS's own version of Thanksgiving dinner. All the desserts and food were made by students and SAHS teachers. The cooking was divided between the culinary arts students in Lucy's room and Wayne's arts class. Individual staff members made the turkeys in their homes and brought them to school. I brought cookies from Walmart. Knowing my usual job during the dinner, I put the cookies on the dessert table and walked behind the tables to where spoons and spatulas lay waiting. There were covered pots of mashed potatoes on the nearby table. My intention was to serve various types of mashed potatoes to students as fast as I could. Young hungry faces waited in a long line stretching from the stage where staff were standing to the back doors and beyond the entrance of the gym. As I scanned

the room full of students I noticed five students who obviously did not want to wait in line. They seated themselves in the empty tables and were making small talk. Among the students were Andy and Amber who have formed a romantic relationship at SAHS and were expecting the birth of their child. One important unsaid rule at SAHS that I have learned is for staff to never “put students on the spot”. After working at the alternative school for four years I have come to subjectively understand that this unsaid rule means staff should allow students to be themselves first (even when confrontational or uncooperative) without immediate teacher reprimand. On this occasion, this rule meant Amber and Andy along with their friends could sit down before being served. It also meant that I would not engage in any overtly patronizing attitude toward them. Luckily, I chose not to act on an earlier impulse to ask Amber if she wanted to come to the front of the line on account of her pregnancy.

Recently, I became aware that Andy and Amber were having financial and personal difficulties. Andy was wearing the same tattered blue Levi jeans, black t-shirt and woolly blue trench coat since September. He had been couch surfing for a couple of days and was absent from school. Walking in the hallways yesterday I overheard Amber voice her personal concerns to another female student. She was worried about how her extended family would react negatively to her pregnancy. Johnny- the student success teacher— walked over to where the students were sitting. He joked with them about the food and the wait time. However, before going back to the front of the gym where other staff members were standing, Johnny said in an authoritative voice, “Let’s get going people! There’s a plate with your name on it over there!”. This comment served as a powerful validation that this dinner was for all SAHS students in the gym. It also reinforced the key role of staff as parental figures and guides who use humour to breakdown the built-in tendency of at-risk students to self-isolate, be confrontational with staff and otherwise seek to melt into the background (something from personal experience I have found is what many SAHS students use as a survival technique in the mainstream school).

Amber and Andy along with their friends shortly stood up and joined the line. Afterwards, it seemed that these students felt part of the school family- they even came back for a second round of mashed potatoes which I duly and generously put on their plates. Being a teacher at SAHS means not only conveying the official duties of education (teaching, enforcing organizational rules and procedures, etc.), but also building a close relationship with students.

Johnny, unlike many mainstream school teachers that I have known, could have ordered the uncooperative students to get up and join the line or leave the gym. In mainstream school this would be the expected response to uncooperative and defiant students who get out of line. However, at SAHS Johnny chose a different tract. He used humour to reinforce solidarity with the students. The students had “a plate with their name on it”. This was their school’s Thanksgiving dinner where staff and peers worked hard to organize and accommodate one another. This was not just a big party for Johnny and the adults— it was about giving back to students SAHS. For me, those words imparted trust, consideration and above all the hard earned respect that should be maintained between students and staff.

John and I go for lunch after meeting the Vice Principal

After missing almost a month and half of school, the Vice Principal asked me in the morning to notify her the next time that John was in class. It so happened that John arrived after first break (10:10 AM). I was surprised to see him come in on a Monday morning, especially a cold November day. John looked timid and anxious, probably because he felt guilty for having missed so many days. I felt compelled to explain that even though he had missed a lot of days, we could make a plan of action so that he could finish the course in the next two weeks. I did also mention that he would first have to see the Vice Principal. Surprisingly, John asked if I could go in with him to meet the VP. In a regular mainstream school it is rare for a teacher to leave his/her class unintended. However, since my classroom was near the office and the school culture at SAHS is open to teachers walking between classrooms and the two wings of the school, I went into the Vice Principal’s office with John. It was about two minutes before 1:00 PM and most of my students had left for the day. The Vice Principal began by asking John why he had been absent for so many days. John responded that he was going through a lot of emotional stress because of the sudden death of his beloved grandmother and also complications due to his anxiety disorder. As he continued to speak about the death of his “Nana”, John broke down in uncontrollable sobs. The Vice Principal and I felt awkward and embarrassed in our silence. At this moment I decided to take initiative and relayed that John and I had come up with a plan of action that would allow him to salvage the Grade 12 Philosophy credit within two weeks. The Vice Principal gave her support for the plan. Knowing that it was probably more

awkward for John than anyone else in the room, I asked if he wanted to go to lunch with me. I wouldn't have asked him to go for lunch if I hadn't seen other staff members regularly take students for lunch at nearby fast food restaurants. While we walked along the path that divided SAHS and the adjoining mall strip, John and I talked about different mafia-themed Hollywood movies we enjoyed watching. In particular, we both enjoyed *Goodfellas* and *Casino*. Hearing him laugh at my impersonation of mobster Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) from *Goodfellas* I felt that we had bonded and overcame the initial awkwardness at the VP's office. At Wendy's, we ordered two spicy chicken burgers with fries and cokes. While we ate, I asked John how he was holding up emotionally with the death of his "Nana". He responded that "It was rough, especially for my mom", but quickly interjected that he was now "okay". I felt comfortable to let down my guard and share with John the lingering emotional pain of losing my father and sister within a month apart. Feeling the emotional pain rush back to me, but wanting to reinforce the purpose of sharing it in the first place, I quickly added "I always look at the happy memories for solace, you know". John finished his meal and said he wanted to graduate from school for his "Nana". As we walked back to SAHS, I told John that I expected nothing but the best from him. He seemed genuine and uplifted after the meal. As we parted ways and he promised to be in class the next day, I remarked as he walked to his car "Good- because you don't want me to get Joe Pesci on you, do you?".

Can you be a reference for me for work?

In the middle of the school day at SAHS— which is after second break at 11:20 AM— Sally walked up to my desk. She stood and waited for a minute to get my attention. I was on the phone with a parent as part of my morning check-in calls for those students who were absent from class. After I hung up, Sally asked how I was doing. I felt anxious about an upcoming Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) meeting with the Vice Principal and she must have noticed it because this was readily apparent from my face. "I am fine, how are you holding up?" I responded back to her. I always felt happy to see Sally at school because she had already overcome a lot during my time at the alternative school. Sally was also no stranger to the class.

Other students greeted her as they came back from break. In the past year, she had previously taken two courses with me. During that time we had bonded over classroom

discussions about her future plans. Sally often came after school to chat with me about her life. “Hey, have a seat” I gestured to her to pull up a black chair next to my desk. After talking about her school work and family life, Sally moved the conversation to her intention to work at a nearby women’s shoe store. “Can you be a reference for me?” she asked. I immediately agreed to her request. “I am applying for this shoe store and they need a reference. I don’t want to give them my current employer because I want to leave.” In fact, Sally wanted to be hired at this store but was unable to find any character references to use other than staff at SAHS. Often students avoid mentioning SAHS as their home school because of stigma over what alternative schools are perceived to be. Alternative schools are often in the words of students, schools for “bad kids” and “full of drug heads”, even though mainstream schools have as much, if not more, drug use than at alternative school from my experience. Therefore, it was not surprising that students like Sally feel that mentioning they go to SAHS will “work against them”. So, students often will put their old previous mainstream school as the current home school. Yet, students still need character references from staff at SAHS for job interviews, probation meeting, court appointments, and access to student welfare and even renting an apartment. During my four years at SAHS I have written a dozen of such reference letters for students and Sally would be no exception.

After I typed the usual standard reference letter template that I have used in the past, Sally excitedly beamed, “Thank you so much!”. She also hurriedly gave me a form to write my contact information and email address. I provided her my work number and email address to use as a direct reference along with the typed letter. Being a reference for a student such as Sally sends a strong message to students that staff “are there for them”. It is these small gestures of support that are immensely valuable for students. Students are willing to trust and cooperate with staff in dealing with their academic and personal problems because of these reference letters. Sally came to me because she knew from past experiences that I would not “sell her out” and divulge her personal affairs after she shared her drug addiction problems with me. Being a reference for her is a way for me to give her additional support for coming, and more importantly, enabling her to stay connected to the alternative school despite her addiction problem. Regardless if she gets the job, Sally is more willing to reconnect and stay optimistic about graduating from SAHS.

For me the alternative school is about “small victories” not “big defeats or “untenable victories”. Students and staff win small victories if students obtain employment and come to the alternative school two days out of the five days in the week. If students are productive during those two days, that is what matters. However, as staff we suffer “big defeats” if students are habitually removed from the alternative school due to lack of attendance. Forcing students like Sally to come to school to get a bus pass or access student welfare is an “untenable victory” because students do not respect the institution nor the role of staff in helping them. Instead, they will just come to school to pick up the bus pass or earn enough attendance days to qualify for student welfare. Therefore, helping Sally to get a job was a better way of building social capital. From these small victories, we are able to keep students like Sally connected and feeling optimistic about school (social bonding) and confident in obtaining employment in the community (social bridging).

5.3 Discussion of Alternative School Experiences

At Sunnyside Alternative High School, student participants were able to connect with teachers who overwhelmingly provided bonding social capital. In particular, they received affective assets from staff in the form of emotional support; as well, cognitive assets in the form of academic support. The students were comfortable in interacting with staff at SAHS. The good rapport and levels of comfort with staff developed into affective relationships that they came to rely upon to seek emotional support with personal crises. This was facilitated by the many opportunities for students to build affective relationships in the classrooms and hallways. In fact, for some of the student participants, maintaining affective personal relationships with staff was an all-important factor in their well-being at the alternative school. Similarly, counselling from teachers regarding drug addiction, anxiety, and low self-esteem promoted affective bonding social capital. Students felt staff respected, cared for and valued them as equals in the classroom. What’s more, the teachers were seen to be trustworthy, relaxed, easy-going and friendly in their treatment of students, especially by upholding personal confidentiality.

Student participants also had strong affective peer relationships that helped them to connect and adjust to the alternative school. At SAHS, they expanded their social circle to include new friends. The students also indicated they felt respected by peers and this significantly reduced conflict with peers. The harmonious relations with peers also due to the

lack of peer pressure to conform or join cliques. In fact, none of the students reported the presence of any cliques at SAHS. They all had reciprocal relationships with peers. They offer mutual academic and personal assistance to one and upheld a caring environment for all. What helped to promote the amicable peer relations was the sense of familiarity where students and staff were on a first name basis. By breaking down the anonymity they were able to form positive peer relations that often turned into friendships.

The inclusive general learning environment and social interaction between staff and students and among students provided affective bonding social capital. Students believed they were responsible for welcoming others at school and cooperating with staff. Not only were alternative school teachers seen by the students as emotionally engaged in their teaching, but they fostered in them a desire for positive change within an inclusive environment. The inclusive nature of the social learning environment could be seen in the ease with which students modified their learning and attendance schedule at SAHS. Any student participant who felt distressed over a problem felt comfortable to discuss it with staff members. Teachers used the phone to motivate students to come to school and participate.

The respectful relationships with SAHS staff was also evident in the fact that the alternative school staff were seen as courteous and genuine in their approach to helping students learn. In particular, students felt sufficiently safe and cared for by staff to ask questions and give their opinions on various topics. Over time their connection to the alternative school improved as their relationship with teachers deepened. The student participants attributed their personal success to staff as well as the openness and flexibility of the alternative school. A welcoming environment coupled with the positive and non-judgemental attitude of staff led to affective assets that the student participants used to lessen their anxiety and stress at the alternative school.

Student participants also received cognitive benefits from their relationship with the alternative school teachers. Some prominent examples of cognitive assets obtained by students were improvements in writing skills, better oral communication and reading comprehension, as well as research and inquiry skills. The positive feedback and academic support from teachers helped students to learn how to independently work at their own pace. In particular, teachers provided opportunities in the classroom to access learning resources as well as to work with

other students. If students had any questions about the learning material or encountered difficulty, staff were available and willing to assist them. In fact, teachers at SAHS were not only eager to help students acquire solid academic skills, but more importantly they were perceived by the students themselves as being capable of providing such assistance. Therefore, the benefits of cognitive bonding relations between staff and students directly enabled students to obtain academic credits quickly and in an enjoyable way. Other cognitive benefits that students obtained from their bonding relationships with teachers at the alternative school included physics, chemistry, and rudimentary math. Staff provided accommodations for students to facilitate their learning such as flexible submission dates and a more personalized attendance schedule that took into account the employment needs of students outside of the alternative school. Similarly, staff provided “individualized lesson plans” which directly focused on the particular learning needs of the students.

Affective bridging social capital for students was mainly in the form of solidarity, motivation and validation from staff which allowed students to access educational and employment opportunities outside of SAHS. For example, student participants relied upon the moral support and confidence of staff in their transition to college. Students also used their affective bridging relationship with staff to receive guidance and mentorship at coop placements and when undertaking official school functions like field trips and the graduation ceremony. Consequently, at-risk student participants at SAHS earned more secondary school credits at the alternative school than in the mainstream school. As well, some of the student participants used their affective bridging relationship with SAHS staff to further their hobbies and interests outside of school such as in social justice or science. Even the most ambivalent and disengaged student participant felt that staff members were helpful in providing affective bridging assets such as motivation in finishing high school and getting to a post-secondary destination.

Cognitive bridging assets also emerged from the relationships students had with the alternative school staff. For instance, staff trained students on how to register for college and university. They also learned yoga and used it in the community. Students were able to learn technical skills in their coop placements from staff, for example how to register clients that helped them to be successful. Moreover, students received cognitive bridging assets from new opportunities and contexts such as booking guest speakers, venues, arranging transportation,

corresponding with governmental institutions. These skills helped student participants to be successful outside of the alternative school.

Chapter 6: Summative Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will be a comprehensive analysis and discussion of how student social capital acquisition differed in mainstream and alternative school setting for student participants. The lived experiences of at-risk students attending Sunnyside Alternative High School after the mainstream school provides not only a refreshing look at the Canadian educational system in general, but also the benefits of alternative schooling in particular. It was clear from the data that the students obtained social capital from their supportive relationships with staff at the alternative school. In particular, they used affective assets stemming from bonding and bridging relationships with staff to manage anxiety, gain confidence to explore post-secondary education, and achieve a sense of inclusion at the alternative school. Students also gained cognitive assets from these same bonding and bridging relations with staff to improve literacy, numeracy and science as well as to obtain academic credits, access employment opportunities outside of school, and to register for college.

However, at the mainstream school the students encountered significant blockages to social capital acquisition. This was mainly due to the unwillingness of staff to foster affective bonding relations with them. Also, a rigid social learning environment at the mainstream school made interpersonal engagement difficult between staff and students. In contrast, a powerful and recurring theme from the collective experiences of the students was the strong affective bonding relationship that they had developed with staff at the alternative school. Unfortunately, it was precisely the absence of such affective bonding relationships with mainstream school staff and a hostile learning environment that pushed the students out from the mainstream school.

Moreover, the guiding premise of my research was that alternative schools foster more social capital than mainstream schools. This was captured in the conceptual framework based on the research questions that were used to organize the analysis of the data in Chapters 4 and 5. Accordingly, my main findings of the study in this chapter will also be grouped according to the research questions. By comparing the alternative school and mainstream school experiences, a better understanding emerged for me regarding the formation of social capital at SAHS.

In relation to the scholarly literature on social capital, my main findings concerning the experiences of students in the alternative school in comparison to their experiences in the mainstream school are two-fold. First, social learning environments, primarily the combination of organization, size and scheduling of the alternative school and mainstream schools, were contributing factors respectively to fostering and preventing affective bonding and bridging social capital between students and adult staff members. Second, the affective assets that students gained from bonding and bridging relationships with staff members SAHS were more significant than the cognitive assets from these relationships. Affective social capital was, overall, essential for the students to remain and do well at the alternative school. It is important to note that I have defined bridging social capital throughout my research as relationships between students and staff that facilitate additional learning opportunities, employment prospects, and memberships in social circles or organizational settings outside of the immediate school context. Therefore, I considered affective bridging to be any emotional support from staff to students that allowed them to take up opportunities outside of the school, e.g., in the case of a coop placement, field trip and organizing the school's graduation ceremony activities intricately related to the alternative school. These activities should be interpreted as bridging social capital since the students would not have had the chance to engage in them if it were not for the supportive relationships with staff at the alternative school. In the next sections I will discuss these two findings in more detail.

6.1 Research Question #1 What have been the mainstream school experiences of students who are now in an alternative school setting?

In terms of the first research question — What have been the mainstream school experiences of students who are now in an alternative school setting? The answer from the data was overwhelmingly negative. The students felt disconnected from the mainstream school mostly because of the lack of affective engagement by staff. An exclusionary school culture, typified by students' perceptions of teacher apathy and intimidation from peers, permeated the mainstream school. As a result, students did not establish strong affective bonding relationships with staff and peers. Quite the contrary, most of the students consistently felt “invisible” at the mainstream school despite their daily interactions with the staff and peers. With the sole exception of Billy who bonded with a teacher playing chess, there were no positive recollections

from the students about staff, peers or even events in which they participated that made them feel “good” about their learning and themselves. In fact, students perceived their personal and academic needs as unwanted by the mainstream school. Understandably, the majority of them did not receive from staff any affective bonding social capital. What’s more, the students experienced limited academic progress as evidenced by their failure to accumulate the needed credits to graduate from the mainstream school. Despite their difficulties, staff did not offer assistance to students in order for them to resolve personal and academic problems. Even students who did not encounter significant academic difficulty, notably Veronica and Brad, nevertheless felt emotional stress in their interactions at the mainstream school. The academic success of at-risk students, in other words, did not result in an improvement in relations with staff. Rather, students uniformly felt a general discomfort at the mainstream school and this manifested itself in anxiety and depression.

Yet, it was not only the lack of affective engagement of mainstream school staff that contributed to the difficulties students experienced. Many of them struggled with poverty-related issues, including homelessness and unemployment. As their teacher I knew about these hardships because the students struggled to pay rent, buy groceries and secure transportation to the alternative school. In light of the socio-economic issues prevalent within the experiences of the students at the mainstream school, Coleman’s (1988) view of schools as institutional extensions of prevailing and inequitable socio-economic and ideological structures was relevant. Like Coleman, I came to believe that the mainstream school did not function as a force for equality, social leveling or inclusivity for at-risk students. Instead, the mainstream school reproduced societal inequalities by not offering the assistance which at-risk students needed. While the mainstream school functioned well for students from more privileged backgrounds—since the prevalent institutional norms and values (e.g. conformity and punctuality) reinforced their own values and norms—this was not the case for at-risk students who struggled to adjust to an impersonal learning environment. My twelve research participants reported difficult relational experiences with staff who did not understand their problems. For instance, mainstream school staff were not flexible in accommodating their learning needs in class (e.g. accommodations through differentiated lessons, flexible submission dates, and counselling). Rather than accommodate the difference in outlook of at-risk students, staff expected the students to adjust to the mainstream school’s established norms and expectations. The onus was placed on the at-risk

students to adjust, not on the mainstream school system. Inevitably, when the students failed to adjust to the expectations of the mainstream school, they were socially marginalized. Their social exclusion prevented them from forming a personal relationship with staff and peers that could have helped them acquire cognitive and affective benefits (Barker, 2012; Garcia-Reid; Portes, 1998; Sletten, 2011).

As Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) have explained, at-risk students become depressed and feel isolated more than other students because of the lack of social bonding. Because teachers at the mainstream school were not willing to meet their emotional (affective) and learning (cognitive) needs, the students disengaged from the mainstream school. However, their disengagement was not limited to non-attendance, but could also be seen in the lack of participation in the learning environment of the mainstream school. There was a direct connection between the students' emotional isolation and academic disengagement. For example, they did not seek help from staff with academic difficulties since there were no relationships to serve as conduits for in-class help seeking. This is similar to the findings of Lee and Ip (2003) who concluded that the lack of encouragement from teachers and counselors—often exacerbated by student resistance to teachers and school administrators—contributed to young people's alienation and propensity to drop out of the mainstream school. My student participants were alienated from the mainstream school. They felt like “a number” because staff did not notice the personal difficulties they were experiencing at school. Consequently, the emotional turmoil of students increasingly became tied to their lack of affective relationships with staff. Booker (2006) has highlighted the significance of social relationships and the value of positive interpersonal interactions among children and adolescents at school in fostering a sense of belonging and connection within the school environment. For my student participants, the unsupportive and negative relationships at the mainstream school resulted in lower levels of belonging, and hence lower academic achievement (Holt et al., 2008).

Although the student participants failed to establish social capital relationships with the mainstream school staff, there was always a potential for them to bond with their peers. Unfortunately, there was no strong peer bonding relations because of the presence of restrictive “clique” groupings. These cliques prevented the students from interacting with peers who were different from them. As studies have shown, relationships with heterogeneous “others” can help

at-risk students capitalize on social bonding opportunities that might not be possible with adults (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Phillips, 2010; Sokal, 2003). This could have been particularly valuable for the students at the mainstream school. However, the failure to benefit from peer relationships along with the disconnection with staff members reinforced feelings of anxiety, alienation and social isolation among my student participants at the mainstream school.

In my view, therefore, mainstream schools in Canada should be improved for at-risk students through training of teachers to provide more affective engagement with at-risk students. Jones (2011) recommends that to achieve real participation, mainstream schools should work hard to promote at-risk students' identification with the school community (Jones, 2011). Specifically, this can be done by using potential adult mentors at school such as teachers, custodial and administrative staff. Such mentors can help at-risk students make improvements in their emotional wellbeing, attendance, academic performance and greater involvement at school (Holloway & Salinitri, 2010). My research has also confirmed what Holt et al. (2008) concluded, namely, that at-risk students who are disengaged from the mainstream school are more likely to experience not only academic failure and high school dropout, but also a host of other negative psychosocial outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Holt et al., 2008). Therefore, at-risk students require sustained bonding social capital through supportive relationships to generate essential affective and cognitive resources for their wellbeing.

6.2 Research Question #2 What are the alternative school experiences of students currently in an alternative school?

In looking at the second research question— What are the alternative school experiences of students currently in an alternative school?— it was important to reflect on the data that accounted most of the changes in the students' outlook on schooling. Overwhelmingly, student participants cited affective relationships at the alternative school. Specifically, they forged strong affective bonding and bridging relations with staff who provided personal counselling and friendship. As well, students at SAHS engaged staff for academic and personal assistance outside the alternative school. They consulted them about how to transition to post-secondary education. At the alternative school, the students also formed affective bonding relations with other at-risk

students. Not only did they make individual friendships but the students collectively supported one another to maintain the alternative school's inclusive environment. They were not intimidated by peers but felt able to freely engage in class discussions, go on field trips and remain optimistic. The social learning environment was a crucial factor for facilitating social capital relationships. Student participants consistently praised and described the learning environment at SAHS as “flexible”, “open”, and “relaxed”. In fact, the welcoming environment was why the students were able to learn and build affective relationships with staff.

Coming to alternative school, they were supported and valued as individuals. They did not feel like “a cog in a machine” but rather as individuals whom the alternative school was helping and who could equally help the school. In fact, student participants were on a first name basis with teachers and peers and this lessened the inevitable power hierarchy and tensions within the alternative school. The students' attendance gradually improved as they connected more with staff and peers who provided affective resources at school such as drug and alcohol counselling. As a staff member, it was clear to me that the alternative school encouraged close supportive relationships between students and staff. On a daily basis, the staff at the alternative school focused on the specific problems of each individual at-risk student. Moreover, at the alternative school the needs of every at-risk student, including introverted and withdrawn students, was prioritized by staff (e.g., at SAHS there was a daily and weekly check-in between teachers and students on setting personal and academic goals). At SAHS, the teachers, guidance counsellors, and office administrators were active mentors in keeping student participants motivated and connected to the alternative school. By creating a safe learning environment the alternative school fostered acceptance, genuineness, and empathy (Holloway & Salinitri, 2010, p.395).

Broadly speaking, alternative schools such as SAHS have been known to provide affective bonding social capital— inward looking bonds focused on trust and reciprocity— through close relationships between at-risk students and teachers (Holland et al., 2007). Additionally, within SAHS, there was affective bridging social capital, which involved staff providing emotional support in-order to enable students to take on new opportunities outside of the alternative school. Research on social capital, notably by Philips (2010), has confirmed the importance of affective bridging relationships (prominently found in alternative schools) which

young people form within their existing social networks (Philips, 2010). These affective bonding and bridging relationships were built on trust, reciprocity and immensely contributed to the success of students at SAHS.

Affective Bonding

On an emotional level, having affective bonding relationships with staff and peers made student participants feel supported at the alternative school. They felt comfortable to socialize and share personal problems with staff. As one student participant observed, “You can talk, you can laugh, you can converse, you can trust, you can ask for advice, I mean, it is all good and nothing is bad about it whatsoever.” On many occasions the students referenced specific examples of bonding with a SAHS staff member to share their personal frustrations, as well as hopes and desire to transcend the difficulties that had pushed them out from the mainstream school. Having a strong affective connection with a SAHS staff not only changed their perceptions of teachers in general, but also helped them to overcome a lot of built-up mistrust of the educational system. Collectively, staff assumed a mentoring role for at-risk students at SAHS. Teachers and guidance counsellors provided sympathy and motivation to students in dealing with drug addictions. Many of students found that the staff at SAHS gave them authentic and useful advice that helped them to overcome their addiction.

SAHS teachers likewise helped at-risk students who needed personal counselling. Teachers were always there when students had questions, whether it was textbook-related or personal in nature. For this reason, the students felt guided “very nicely” through the process of transitioning from the mainstream school to the alternative school. This confirms what Kim & Taylor (2008) have shown, that at-risk students prefer alternative schools because they benefit from the alternative school’s inclusive environment and bonding relationships with teachers—especially from the ways teachers assist them with academic and personal problems (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Cognitive Bonding

At SAHS, bonding relationships between the students and teachers as well as among students was based on reciprocity and empathy. This allowed the students to feel comfortable to ask staff for assistance. The students also used their affective bonding relationships with staff to

access academic resources. For instance, they acquired cognitive assets such as improved written and verbal communication, math and science skills. Similarly, staff actively listened and supported students to find appropriate academic courses; as well as obtained cooperative education (co-op) placements, and provided training and for students during these coop placements. Teachers also helped students to read and complete forms for housing and student welfare. Drawing upon these cognitive bonding relationships, the students felt motivated to learn at the alternative school.

Studies have shown how at-risk students generally become independent social actors by using the resources and networks that they have in order to settle in and get on with a new high school (Holland et al., 2007). Through cognitive bonding the students participants earned more credits than their at-risk peers who continued to attend the mainstream school. This meant that for the students, academic success at SAHS often was not about grades but about feeling confident to learn. In fact, alternative schools like SAHS rely on the idea that even a student's failure (i.e. slips, acting out, failure on exams) should be viewed positively, as a step toward something else. This reinforces Loutzenheiser's (2002) conclusion, that when alternative school teachers and at-risk students recognize each other based on first names, this contributes to an environment that is much more conducive to learning.

Gaps not yet filled

Yet, Sunnyside Alternative High School did have a serious shortcoming in fostering peer social capital. It also had a diminished role for cognitive assets. As a teacher currently working at SAHS, I believe we can do better in promoting positive peer bonding by offering more youth-friendly clubs and extracurricular activities. Current social activities offered at SAHS to bring together staff and students such as after-school crafts and guitar sessions should be expanded across all classes. Similarly, the half-day program remains a significant obstacle to expanding peer social capital. Specifically, the half-day program makes extracurricular activities very difficult for students who already have limited time (4 hours) to focus on their academic courses. For this reason, I believe Sunnyside's hours of operation should be extended to a whole day program so as to allow students to participate in extracurricular activities and also complete their academic work. While some at-risk students benefit from the half-day program to pursue

employment and other activities outside of school, a full-day program with accommodations should nevertheless be adopted.

Similarly, there needs to be more academic focus to help underperforming students at SAHS obtain more academic credits. The current focus on the psychosocial wellbeing of students should remain, but students also urgently require academic intervention. Many of them are not accumulating the needed credits to graduate. Once students become 20 years old and have few credits (usually ten credits or less), they are automatically transferred to a mainstream adult secondary program. Naturally, at-risk students do not want to leave SAHS for a mainstream adult high school. However, given the incremental accumulation of credits and their age, these students will have no choice but to leave the alternative school. In some respect, as the alternative school staff we have collectively failed to help these older at-risk students to succeed by not providing the needed cognitive assets such as independent learning skills to get credits. To remedy this shortcoming, SAHS and the local district school board ought to devise a plan for older at-risk students who require a substantial number of credits to graduate. For instance, an afternoon program should be established to help these older at-risk students. Such an initiative will require organizational restructuring of staff and start-up resources. From my experience, any program to help older at-risk students remain at SAHS is more desirable than the current policy of transferring them back to a mainstream adult high school with minimal credits. Sadly, some of these older at-risk students who have been transferred out of SAHS and have come back to visit me revealed that they eventually dropped out of the adult high school without graduating.

6.3 Research Question # 3 How has student social capital acquisition differed in mainstream and alternative school settings for these students?

In answering the third research question—How has student social capital acquisition differed in mainstream and alternative school settings for these students?— it was clear for me that social capital acquisition differed in mainstream and alternative school settings for student participants. In the mainstream school, the students experienced neither bonding with staff and peers nor bridging social capital because of the absence of any strong affective relationships. The mainstream school staff was not able to offer student participants meaningful interactions—

conversations beyond academic work— that could facilitate affective social capital assets. Based on what the student participants reported, the main problem with the mainstream school was that it was centred on academics and procedures to the detriment of the emotional needs of students.

At Sunnyside, on the other hand, the emotional and non-academic needs of students were prioritized over academics. Students had more time to discuss their personal problems with teachers and as a result were able to access affective bonding from their relationship. In particular, many student participants saw their teachers as more than staff but as “friends”. In my view, this was an important factor in why the alternative school fostered more social capital acquisition than the mainstream school. Students freely shared their thoughts, concerns, and aspirations with staff which allowed for more collaboration and mutual respect. However, in the mainstream school, teachers were seen to be too “top-down” in dealing with their concerns. Moreover, staff dictated instructions rather than foster a discussion with students. As a result, there was no willingness on the part of staff to emotionally open themselves up to students. On the other hand, social capital was fostered at SAHS over a period of time based on the depth of relationships between students and staff. This could be seen daily at SAHS where students benefited from their affective bonding relationships with staff to inquire about work and post-secondary programs. Students also used affective bridging to out seek out external opportunities, primarily through co-operative education, field trips and employment. Yet, in the mainstream school, these external opportunities for students were not available. In essence, the structure and design of the mainstream school was not conducive to fostering social capital. At the mainstream school, students and staff were cut off by the scheduling of classes from spending adequate time to get to know one another. Consequently, students, at the mainstream school felt as outsiders in an unwelcoming learning environment. Once they had left the mainstream school, the students began to relate more to the alternative school environment and the affective bonding overtures of staff. At SAHS, they were welcomed and helped to deal with their individual problems.

As an alternative school teacher, my view of the experiences of students in mainstream school is multi-faceted. From the interviews, the at-risk student participants were not committed to the mainstream school and its social learning environment. An important factor that was missing in the mainstream school was a mentoring relationship between students and staff built

on mutual trust and respect. Though the students wanted a positive relationship with mainstream staff and peers, they were unable to initiate one given the difficult interpersonal relations. As a teacher, I attributed the failure to help at-risk students in mainstream school to the staff. The mainstream school staff did not foster strong affective bonding and bridging relationships with students. They clearly did not use reflective practice to understand how their actions in the classroom affected the wellbeing of at-risk students. Likewise, staff at the mainstream school could have identified the strengths of at-risk students to help build a more affective bonding relationship that could then have been used to help the students overcome their personal and academic problems. The failure to foster bonding social capital was what made the student participants less connected to the mainstream school. As well, it caused higher levels of emotional distress, drug addiction, anxiety and poor attendance. The students' experiences at the mainstream school demonstrated that staff did not have a positive and hopeful attitude when working with them. From an institutional perspective, it was incumbent upon the mainstream school administration to ensure that staff collectively provided at-risk students with increased academic support (including mentoring) and positive personal attention in the classroom. In fact, studies have shown that the academic and personal difficulties faced by at-risk students in mainstream school are intertwined and lead directly to their disengagement from learning (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Morrisette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2009)

Affective Bonding and the Social Learning Environment

However, what were the specific factors that made the alternative school— which had limited social clubs, less resources and lacked even a parent-school council— more successful in connecting with at-risk students than the mainstream school? First, at-risk students at Sunnyside benefited from affective bonding relationships and the inclusive school environment. The overriding reason why they were successful and wanted to stay at the alternative school was because staff fostered affective bonding social capital. Teachers were perceived by at-risk students to be there to help them succeed. For example, the students consistently identified the characteristics of SAHS staff as distinguished by “respect”, “caring”, “honesty”, “genuineness”, and “trust”. Once students had developed strong affective bonding relationships with teachers not only did they use it in their transition to the alternative school but also to deal with personal

issues interfering with school. A study by Jones (2011) and an earlier one by Kim and Taylor (2008) showed that bonding social capital from caring relationships with staff was influential in personal changes in at-risk students (Jones, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Specifically, these bonding relationships with staff enabled at-risk students to open up to the resources associated with meaningful engagement in the learning process (Jones, 2011). Additionally, student participants looked upon SAHS teachers not as authoritarian figures imposing the curriculum and school rules but rather as helpful guides who are willing to provide both academic and personal support. In fact, the students repeatedly stressed the importance of having a good rapport with SAHS teachers. For some, the close bonding relationship with the alternative school staff was transformative in changing their worldviews. Transforming lives may not have been the stated purpose of the alternative school staff; however, student participants saw their own lives at SAHS as being improved for the better (e.g. they managed addictions, gained higher self-esteem, became less anxious and more confident) after establishing these meaningful affective bonding relationships.

Secondly, bonding social capital at SAHS was facilitated by a personalized learning environment where emphasis was placed on greater teacher-student interaction and attention to personal learning styles. As well, the organization structure of the alternative school differed from the mainstream school in terms of smaller class sizes and student ownership in setting goals. As a result, not only did the student participants at SAHS earn more credits than their at-risk peers who continued to attend mainstream schools but they were more optimistic about life. The fact that alternative schooling develops and expands at-risk students' social capital is not surprising to me since research by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and Wilkins (2008) showed that compared to large schools, it was much easier for at-risk students to become involved in small alternative schools (Wilkins, 2008).

What's more, from my personal observations as a teacher, researcher and former student at SAHS, there are four main reasons why the alternative school fostered more social capital than the mainstream school. First, alternative schools like SAHS, unlike mainstream schools, are organizationally designed to meet the needs of at-risk students. In practice, staff at Sunnyside was open to multiple ways of helping students academically and with personal difficulties

outside of school- which nevertheless impacted their learning. Similarly, smaller class sizes and enrolment at SAHS allowed staff to have more time to personally bond with students.

Second, SAHS was a more student-centred learning environment. The students were the decision-makers when it came to what courses they wanted to take, as well as the choice of coop placements and post-secondary planning. The staff at SAHS worked hard to facilitate the interest of students in their capacity as “guides” and “partners”.

Thirdly, the alternative school presented itself as an opportunity for at-risk students who had failed in mainstream school. Therefore, Sunnyside was offered to the students as a “second chance to make a first impression”- the guiding motto for staff. This meant students were not stigmatized as “failures” or “troublemakers”, but were instead seen by staff as equal partners in the learning process.

Fourthly, teachers at Sunnyside constantly engaged in check-ins with students about their emotional and academic needs. For example, staff often talked to students in classrooms, hallways, and around the outside parking area. The alternative school administration encouraged staff to use reflective pedagogy to look at how one’s own feelings and experiences impacted the lives of at-risk students during weekly STOC (Students of Concern) meetings. Therefore, staff was always discussing ways of assisting students to feel more comfortable at SAHS. It was the personal and emotional investment of staff that furthered their bonding relationships with students. The staff’s engagement deeply resonated with at-risk students who came to SAHS.

In alternative schools, it is about understanding how teaching can serve to bring about greater collaboration and mutual support between staff and students. The commitment to reflective teaching and collaboration was what distinguished SAHS from the mainstream school. At SAHS, teachers fostered an open and inclusive atmosphere in the classroom. Studies by Saunders and Saunders (2001) and Vadeboncoeur (2009) have confirmed that alternative programs are a vital component in enhancing at-risk students’ sense of belonging and greater academic and social success (Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Most of the at-risk students at SAHS benefitted from affective bonding social capital to overcome previous problems they had in mainstream school. Consequently, staff at Sunnyside created a sense of belonging and community for at-risk students, which allowed them to grow as individuals within its walls.

Similarly, research by Foley and Pang (2006) and D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) have also shown that high-quality, well-staffed alternative programs like SAHS enhance at-risk students' academic achievement and decrease truancy and poor behaviour through bonding relationships (Foley & Pang, 2006; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Within alternative schools, staff directly transmit or negotiate the transmission of social capital resources and opportunities (Garcia-Reid, 2007). According to Edwards et al. (2007) because alternative schools provide at-risk students with increased academic support and positive personal attention, they have an effective method for building social capital assets for at-risk students (Edwards et al., 2007).

An at-risk student who comes to SAHS receives positive feedback from his or her teachers (affective bonding). This, in turn, according to Holt et al. (2008) will enhance the at-risk student's confidence that he or she can complete the required academic work (Holt et al., 2008). It has also been shown by Souza (1999) that at-risk students experience greater freedom of expression at the alternative school than at a mainstream school (Souza, 1999). Loutzenheiser (2002) highlighted that by incorporating at-risk students' cultures and experiences into the social learning environment, alternative school teachers moderated the negative effects (e.g. lack of role models, tracking, etc.) of the dominant school culture (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p.457). Elaborating further on this point, McFadden (2010) found that the general pattern of alternative education program outcomes showed a positive impact on at-risk student's school performance and attitudes toward school, as well as a positive effect on their self-esteem (McFadden, 2010).

Affective Bridging Social Capital

Beyond Sunnyside, the student participants were able to benefit from their affective bridging relationship with SAHS staff to access external opportunities. Staff mentored and encouraged students to participate. For example, students accessed opportunities ranging from a coop placement in a community centre to organizing field trips and guest speakers. Students also initiated social justice projects (e.g. aboriginal rights) and even co-hosted the school's graduation ceremony. They also used their affective relationship with staff to explore careers and post-secondary education. From their interactions with staff, students developed goals such as becoming social workers, addictions counsellors, and paramedics. Before the alternative school,

the student participants did not have any aspirations to enter these professions and social circles outside of their immediate surroundings. However, they became motivated and supported by staff to engage in these opportunities, as well as membership in wider social circles such as joining yoga classes in the community. Staff consistently provided mentoring which was instrumental in opening new cultures and perspectives for student participants. In spite of this, SAHS was unable to expand affective bridging social capita because it lacked the larger community networks found in mainstream schools such as an active parent-school council, social clubs, and membership in sporting associations as well as hosting community events. In my view, there are some strategies that Sunnyside could use in-order to expand bridging social capital for at-risk students. For example, Sunnyside should engage local businesses to participate at school events such as the holiday dinner and BBQs. Engaging local businesses will allow students to have an opportunity to network in-order to obtain employment or coop placements. As well, a parent committee should be set up and chaired by the Vice Principal. The parent committee can bring more networks, opportunities and resources for students and the school such as fundraising, advocacy, and scholarships.

Conclusion

In this study I have endeavoured to demonstrate that many of the problems faced by Canadian at-risk students in mainstream school relate to the lack of social capital, especially affective relationships. At Sunnyside Alternative high School at-risk students were able to access social capital because of affective relationships with staff within an inclusive learning environment. It was clear from my findings and personal experience in working at SAHS that at-risk students in Canada require affective relationships—the foundation of social capital theory where personal relationships become resources for young people. Within both alternative and mainstream schools, teachers can facilitate social capital through personal engagement with students. As the student participants have shown when at-risk students have affective bonding relationships at school, they will become more engaged with staff to regulate personal difficulties. Therefore, social capital remains an important area to examine because of the potential to help these marginal learners make a positive turnaround in their schooling.

However, the main limitations of my study relate to a singular focus on at-risk students currently attending the alternative school and not on the views of staff at both the alternative and mainstream schools. As a staff member at SAHS, I strongly felt that my research would have been strengthened by including the viewpoints of colleagues who interacted daily with the student participants. It would have also been more holistic to include the perspectives of mainstream school teachers and the parents and friends of the student participants. Unfortunately, I did not have enough time and resources to conduct such wide reaching interviews with these groups. In future research, it would be very useful to examine the perspective of these stakeholders. Another area of potential inquiry into social capital of at-risk students based on my findings would be to examine the experiences of at-risk students who are transitioning from a mainstream elementary school to a mainstream high school. Conducting this research would complement or refute my current findings about social capital acquisition of students who have left a mainstream high school for an alternative high school. As well, it will provide a comprehensive insight on how at-risk elementary students experience social capital assets, affective and cognitive, in their relationships with staff as they adjust to the mainstream high school.

Two Important Contributions of My Research

The contribution of my study and its findings are important in expanding the existing social capital and at-risk youth literature, specifically, as it relates to alternative schooling in Canada. At the start of the research I relied on my Conceptual Framework (diagram) to understand how bonding and bridging social capital were generated at Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS). My study clearly shows the significance of the school environment, and the people (especially teachers) in it vis à vis social capital formation. This is especially significant for at-risk youth who do not have supportive family connections – school is essentially the only social environment available to them. However, as the evidence revealed, bonding within the alternative school was more prominent among my youth participants than bridging, and the “affective” component of bonding was especially salient. Bridging occurred, but it was bonding that served as the basis for this. Likewise, the affective connection with sympathetic teachers, facilitated by an environment that generates respect for these youth – and hence bolsters self-confidence, trust, etc. (affective domains) – was crucial.

While past social capital research on at-risk youth has focused on the educational and familial deficits that students have experienced, I found resilience and agency among my student participants. Despite being cut off from the mainstream social networks and resources at the alternative school, the students were able to create mutually supportive bonds among themselves and with staff. It was surprising to hear students refer to their relationships with peers as being like “family” when the traditional understanding of family locates it beyond the school’s walls. Equally important was to find out that students who excelled academically cared more about how they felt at the alternative school than what they learned on a given day. In other words, it was the bonding relationship with staff members that came first, and learning and academic achievement followed. The reason this is important is because at-risk youth are generally seen in the existing scholarly literature as often educationally deficit and emotionally disengaged. However, I found that SAHS students who were academically strong but had nevertheless failed in the mainstream school were making strong connections with staff. At the mainstream school these students were isolated and emotionally disconnected from the social learning environment, and from staff and peers. But at the alternative school (a second home for them) they made new relationships. Bonding social capital from staff was for them the vital “bedrock” in which further academic successes were built on at SAHS. The role of staff members in providing social capital was an important finding.

The staff members at SAHS— a few of them who voluntarily transferred from mainstream school— consciously opened up to these marginal students. They provided emotional and personal counselling at all times. It was not atypical to find a student conversing with a staff member for 1-2 hours each day about everything going on in his/her life. What made such a close-knit relationship and “conversations” between staff and students possible was the social learning environment at the alternative school that emphasized bonding social capital. As a staff member and researcher myself, SAHS was already a familiar place, but it soon became for me a “world within a world” – where students interacted with each other and staff on multiple levels. The alternative school is a learning environment, but it is also a counselling centre, a drop-in/recreational club, a food bank and a health clinic, all in one building. Students come to SAHS to access dental and health care when the public health nurse and dental hygienist are available; on other days they come to use the gym to play basketball and table tennis. There is an active and well-stocked food cabinet where students take what they need at any given time. In

such a flexible and open environment it is hard to see the rigid separations that exist in a mainstream school between staff and students, and among themselves (e.g. cliques). In fact, bonding social capital would not be so prominent had the social learning environment at SAHS been one characterized by the usual school bureaucracy and age/class separations. As a staff member I was not bothered that students dropped in to my classroom to chat with me about their living arrangement and then abruptly asked if “they could grab some groceries”. Many of these students were homeless and in dire financial circumstances. Even though they were acquaintances and had not taken any courses with me, nevertheless, they felt confident in stepping into my room, or into another staff member’s class, and knew that they would be listened to and helped.

The findings of this study challenge pre-existing notions of at-risk students as hopeless, uncooperative and violent youth. Contrary to these stereotypes, the student participants at SAHS were hopeful about themselves and their future. They actively exercised personal agency in choosing to attend and remain at SAHS. All of them had post-secondary educational goals and none of them felt they were “wasting their time” at the alternative school. When students encountered difficulties with their schoolwork as well as with out-of-school stressors (e.g. homelessness and unemployment being prominent ones) they came forward to request help and resources from staff and the administration. In this respect, I believe public school educators and school administrations (e.g., principals and vice-principals) should be sensitive to the needs of at-risk youth within their walls. School administrators should work hard to emulate SAHS’s learning environment by promoting a culture of openness with staff and students that can help at-risk youth who lack strong community and family linkages. It was empowering to see that SAHS had become a “second home” for these students as much as “a second chance to make a first impression”. I am proud to have documented these facts that can help future researchers examine the powerful role of social capital bonding in reconnecting with at-risk youth who are looking for their place in Canadian society.

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Appendix A Sample Interview Questions

1. What do you do when not in school?

☐ What led you to do these activities?

2. What are your interests or hobbies outside of school?

☐ What led you to these interests/hobbies?

3. What are your goals?

o Short-term?

o Long-term?

☐ How did you come to arrive at these goals?

4. Have these activities / interests / goals changed since coming to the *Alternative* school?

5. If so, what accounts for these changes?

☐ What have you learned?

- ☐ **Has the curriculum (courses) at the Alternative school provided bridging benefits and skills outside of school?**
- ☐ **Has the structure of the Alternative school benefited you inside and outside of the school?**
- ☐ **Has peer relationships at the Alternative school benefited you inside and outside of school?**
 - **How have you felt?**
 - **Did it enhance your learning?**
- ☐ **Has the general atmosphere at the Alternative school benefited you in getting academic credits?**

6. In your questionnaire response, you mentioned that you have good relations with teachers in Alternative School? . . How have you benefited from these relationships?

7. What other relationships with Alternative school staff and students are important to you?

- ☐ **How have you benefited from these relationships when it comes to seeking in-class help?**
 - **How have you felt?"**
 - **Has it helped you rather than "benefited you"?**

Appendix B Questionnaire

Sample Questionnaire

1. In what age group are you?

- ☐ 15 and under
- ☐ 16 – 19
- ☐ 20 and above

2. Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

3. In terms of your involvement at school, how would you characterize yourself?

- ☐ Very involved
- ☐ Somewhat involved
- ☐ Not involved
- ☐ Other, please specify:

4. With respect to your relationships at SAHS with teachers, administrators, office staff and peers, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

SD = Strongly Disagree
 D = Disagree
 N = Neutral
 A = Agree
 SA = Strongly Agree

I have a close relationship with school staff.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
I am able to approach teaching staff about academic problems.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
I have learned a lot of life skills from teachers.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
I have made close friends at school.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
Teachers are engaging and empathic.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
I feel a sense of belonging at school.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
Teachers care about me as an individual.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
Everyone at school supports each other.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
Teachers are friendly and helpful.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
It is easy to talk to someone about personal problems at school.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
Teachers regularly collaborate with students.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
I have an opportunity to shape my learning.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA
School is flexible and fun.	☐	SD	☐	D	☐	N	☐	A	☐	SA

5. If you could choose between a mainstream (mainstream) school or alternative school, which one would it be?

- ☐ Mainstream School ☐ Alternative School

6. What particular aspect(s) of an alternative school did you *like*?

7. How would you describe your previous mainstream/mainstream school experience?

8. How would you describe your current school experience at SAHS?

Appendix C Sample Field Observation and Potential Social Capital Indicators

Log# 1	Themes	Student-Teacher Interactions	Student Responses
Date: November 2014	Individual relationships	Teachers and students jointly working in the school garden or Art presentation at school.	“Let us begin with the middle of the garden and then move around”. “Where should we put the photographs?”
Time/Location 9:00 am to 12:00 pm	Bonding Bridging	Teacher and student socializing after school Teacher helping student apply for a job online	“Can you help me with an application for student housing?” “There is an opening at a Metro near my house, are you interested?”

Appendix D

Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS)

Sunnyside Alternative High School (SAHS) is a public alternative high school in Ottawa, Ontario. SAHS is the largest of four alternative secondary programs for the local district school board. It was initially designed as a dropout prevention program and has been in existence for

over 30 years. In any given school year, there are around 300 students who are registered but only 150 attend daily. The students that attend SAHS can be considered to be at-risk and have generally experienced academic, personal, and social difficulties in their previous mainstream high schools.

Along with a Vice-Principal, there are 18 full-time teachers and 3 support staff. SAHS also has a part-time social worker, a part-time addictions counsellor, and a part-time psychologist. In terms of programming, Sunnyside Alternative High School allows students to work towards their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (O.S.S.D.) through an individualized pathway tailored for them. Specifically, students at SAHS work on one credit at a time. They also have access to the same core curriculum offered at mainstream high schools at the applied/college and academic/university levels and have opportunities to participate in cooperative education placements; and apprenticeship and house building focus programs.