ATTENDING TO ABSENTEES: AN INVESTIGATION OF HOW FOUR URBAN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS RESPOND TO ABSENTEEISM

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of children are absent from school every day. Students miss school for a multitude of reasons connected to the student, their family, the school, and the wider society. This research conceptualizes absenteeism as voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary absences revolve around students' deliberate decisions to miss school; whereas involuntary absences are often imposed on the student. For example, preferring to engage in some recreational activity outside of the school is considered a voluntary absence, whereas having to work during school hours to earn an income is an involuntary absence. Unfortunately, the majority of mainstream schools do not demarcate between voluntary and involuntary absences and reprimand pupils for absenteeism regardless of its cause. As a result of these actions, many youths are pushed, pulled, or fade away from their education. A lucky few find their way to alternative schools where they are offered a last chance to earn a high school diploma. Some alternative schools are able to not only raise attendance, but also to accommodate involuntary absenteeism, where a student is allowed to miss some class without penalty. However, little Canadian evidence exists documenting how alternative schools respond to absenteeism. This research interviewed 40 students and 17 staff members in four alternative schools in Ontario, Canada, to capture their perspectives on absenteeism. The findings indicate that mainstream schools the students attended were not effective in responding to absenteeism; whereas the alternative schools were better positioned to ensure that the students were able to progress with their education regardless of their ability to attend consistently. Nevertheless, there are concerns about the pupils' readiness to succeed in postsecondary education and/or subsequent work upon graduation from an alternative school.

Keywords: absenteeism; alternative schools; voluntary/involuntary absenteeism; dropout

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of compulsory public schooling in Canada, educators have been preoccupied with ensuring that students are present in school each day (Milewski, 2012). Schooling was regarded as a means of social control, and regular school attendance was seen as vital in inoculating youths with "proper" British Protestant values that were perceived to be in danger of being erased in an increasingly multicultural Canadian society (Brown, 1999). This concern prompted the passage of mandatory attendance legislation in every Canadian province between the mid 19th and the mid 20th centuries (Oreopoulos, 2005). The attendance issue has not abated, and provincial Ministries of Education are continuously attempting to raise attendance (Alberta Ministry of Education, 2014; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019; Probe Research, 2009). They do so, however, without the aid of Canadian educational research, as Canadian scholars have been relatively quiet on absenteeism, with only a handful of publications appearing on the topic (e.g. Birioukov, 2016; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Muhajarine, McRae, & Soltanifar, 2019; Ogilvie, Head, Parekh, Heintzman, & Preyde, 2019; Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2015). Absenteeism studies have not gained much traction within Canadian academic circles and the topic has received relatively little scholarly attention in Canada. A recent review of all professors working in Canadian Faculties of Education has revealed that none study absenteeism as their primary area of research (Birioukov, forthcoming)[1]. This finding, coupled with the limited Canadian-based absenteeism publications, indicates that ultimately Canada is *absent* on *absenteeism*.

Significantly, however, the lack of Canadian academic interest in absenteeism does not connote that absenteeism does not exist in Canada. Findings from the 2015 Programme for

[1] This is unpublished research I have carried out. It will form the basis for an upcoming article.

International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that 17.8% of sampled Canadian students reported skipping school at least once in the two weeks prior to the assessment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Thus, while we tentatively know that almost a fifth of Canadian pupils are missing school on a regular basis, we know relatively little about why and what can be done to mitigate the issue. This is a troubling state of affairs, as absenteeism has been documented to have significantly negative repercussions for the academic and social development of the pupil; and, it is the dominant precursor to early school leaving, which itself is related to a number of unfavourable outcomes later in life (Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012b; Wood et al., 2012).

What is particularly concerning is that Canada is lagging behind other countries in its efforts to address the absenteeism issue. The U.S. Department of Education (2019) referred to absenteeism as "a hidden educational crisis" (n.p.), and attention to endemic absenteeism has risen in the U.S. Absenteeism has shifted from being primarily an administrative task, to becoming an important accountability variable for schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act (Hancock, Gottfried, & Zubrick, 2018). Whilst on a global scale, the *International Network for School Attendance* (INSA), a 13-country organization dedicated to the study of absenteeism has been established. While Canada is one of the member countries, I am the only representative. Based on this cumulative evidence it is apparent that a Canadian account of absenteeism is needed, and this research takes a step to filling this void. My personal interest in the topic, however, extends beyond a desire to fill an academic and policy gap – but rather originates out of my own experiences as an adolescent who struggled with absenteeism and who at one point left school prior to graduating.

Researcher Positionality

My desire to study absenteeism arose out of my schooling experiences; ones marked with chronic absenteeism, disengagement, and school leaving (i.e. dropping out). Reflecting back on my high school report cards I see that I missed a third of my classes, which is triple the 10% absence threshold that would have classified me as a "chronic" truant (Hancock et al., 2018). Once I turned 18, my absenteeism became so severe that I was asked to leave my mainstream high school, for the school was legally allowed to remove me from enrollment. At this point I ended up leaving high school prior to graduation – otherwise being classified as a "dropout."

After working in a bar for six months I realized that my future was limited without my high school diploma. I decided to return to school and attended an adult high school; however, not finding the school to my liking, I later transferred into a mainstream high school. Although eager to return to school, I needed to retain my job at the bar, which required me to frequently work late into the night. Arriving home at 4am made my 9am classes difficult to attend; and as a result, I was often absent in my morning classes. Today, looking at my report cards from that school year, I see that I was missing more than *half* of all of my classes. I nevertheless had two teachers who took the time to get to know me and my circumstances. After I explained my situation – having to work late – they began to find strategies to accommodate my absenteeism. Rather than penalizing me for missed assignments, these teachers began to consolidate the work into larger projects which I could complete on my own time at home. Through this more flexible approach my lack of attendance was no longer hindering my educational progress. With the assistance of Ms. Conroy and Ms. Umholtz I was able to not only graduate high school later that year, but I was also accepted to Ryerson University – being the first in my family to attend university.

Understanding the impact of absenteeism and dedicated educators, I was motivated to pursue the study of education. Upon completion of my undergraduate degree I enrolled in a Master of Education program. During my master's research I began to consider how absenteeism is managed in mainstream schools and found that most of the approaches found in the literature were concerned with *raising* attendance. I found this to be somewhat short-sighted, as I could not perceive how my own absenteeism could have been reduced by these out-of-touch recommendations – in other words, unless I was given an income, the school would not have been able to raise my attendance. I then became intrigued by the concept of *accommodation* for absenteeism, where a student (much like myself) could miss some school, whilst progressing with their education. A review of the literature on alternative schools working with at-risk youth revealed that these schools show a tremendous amount of potential to both reduce *and* accommodate absenteeism. However, few Canadian accounts of alternative schools were concerned with attendance, and fewer still dealt with accommodating absenteeism. Feeling unsatisfied with the state of the field – and witnessing the ways in which its limitations can compromise an education – I decided to investigate this issue for my doctoral research. However, before I delve into the particularities of this work, I will set the context by providing a brief overview of the literature on the pertinent topics.

Absenteeism

At the outset absenteeism may appear to be a straightforward issue pertaining to whether a student is present or absent from school. While this definition is technically correct, this conceptualization of absenteeism simplifies the behaviour, its consequences, and ways to address the problem. Absenteeism is quite convoluted and is caused by overlapping and interweaving

causes that are generally grouped into four broad categories of: the student; the student's family; the school; and the wider society (Birioukov, 2016). While these are not discrete variables, they do hone the predominantly quantitative absenteeism researchers' attention to a particular set of risk factors that may be causing a student to be absent from school. Regardless of cause, the consequences of absenteeism affect all of the abovementioned groups. Students are affected through lowered academic performance and the higher propensity to leave school prior to graduation (Attwood & Croll, 2015); families may be subject to prosecution (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Gase, Butler, & Kuo, 2015); schools must expend considerable resources tracking and following up on absenteeism (Maynard et al., 2017; Reid, 2014); and, the wider society suffers from having a less educated workforce (Uppal, 2017). These grave repercussions have motivated the search for attendance raising strategies, which are directed at the factors that are considered to be causing the absenteeism (e.g. student, family, school, society). However, the search for viable and effective attendance raising strategies has proven to be elusive, and absenteeism rates have been documented to be consistent over the past decades (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly 2012). I argue that this failure is the result of the inequitable nature of the Canadian society, one which marginalizes certain peoples. This inequity creates involuntary absences, which occur for factors outside of the school, and over which the student has little to no control over (e.g. living in poverty and having to earn an income). I split from the field of absenteeism studies by claiming that *absenteeism can never be eradicated* and that *we must search for viable accommodations to absenteeism*. Only then can we ensure that all students - regardless of ability to attend - are given an equitable chance of succeeding in high school. As mentioned previously, alternative schools hold great potential for performing the dual function of

attempting to raise attendance, whilst simultaneously accommodating involuntary absences. It is this potentiality that prompted their selection for this research.

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are designed as a safety net, a last chance for students not finding success in the mainstream setting to attain a high school diploma (Raywid, 2001). Alternative schools are home to some of the most marginalized and disadvantaged students in the system. This *at-risk of the at-risk* population are particularly prone to being chronically absent from school, and alternative schools are the ideal setting to study absenteeism, its effects, and how it can be responded to. Alternative schools are renowned for their small and intimate environment, characterized by warmth and respect; and these schools show great potential to alleviate the negative repercussions associated with absenteeism (Beattie, 2004; May & Copeland, 1998, Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Moreover, unlike rigid mainstream schools, the flexible nature of alternative schools creates the potential to accommodate students' absenteeism, where pupils are allowed to miss some school without penalty. However, few Canadian analyses of alternative schools exist (e.g. Beattie, 2004; Morrissette, 2011; The McCreary Centre Society, 2008; Vadeboncoeur, 200; Wishart, 2009), and almost none use absenteeism as the focal point (e.g. Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2013).

Present Research

It is for these reasons this research focused on how absenteeism is responded to in alternative schools in Ontario. In particular, this project sought to answer, "How is absenteeism responded to in four urban alternative schools in Ontario?" I wanted to gain an understanding of

why youths attending alternative schools are absent from school, how their alternative school was or was not helping them succeed, and what further actions need to be taken to ensure that all students are able to graduate. Through this inquiry the complexities of absenteeism are revealed, as well as the shortcomings of addressing the problem currently existing in schools and academic literature. Speaking with 40 students attending four alternative schools (10 students per school) and 17 staff members working in these schools provides a detailed account of the absenteeism phenomenon and how it is responded to in the alternative setting.

As almost all alternative school students have attended other high schools previously, the student participants were asked to trace their histories of absenteeism in high school. We spoke about what caused them to miss school, how their mainstream schools reacted to the absenteeism, and what eventually led them to transitioning to the alternative setting. The stories the students shared are an insight, a portal into the heartbreaking circumstances many youths attending Ontario's public schools endure on a daily basis. The youths missed school for a myriad of reasons, many of which were beyond their control. Their mainstream schools, however, were not responsive to their needs and only castigated them for non-attendance. At some point the pupils' connection to the school was broken, and the youths either voluntarily transferred or were involuntarily placed into an alternative school. In the alternative schools the students found solace; a safe and supportive environment attuned to their needs. They described the enormous efforts of the staff members to ensure they attended, and if they could not attend, to find accommodations to the absenteeism. It is this sense of understanding and empathy that characterized the alternative schools, and discussions with the staff brought out their commitment to and compassion for their students. The sampled alternative schools stand as exemplars of institutions that are effective in raising attendance, accommodating absenteeism,

and mitigating the negative effects of absenteeism. It must be noted that alternative schools are not perfect, and concerns about the academic rigour and the preparedness of students to succeed beyond K-12 schooling arose. Both staff and students had suggestions on how to make the sampled alternative schools more effective, stressing that further work and improvements need to be carried. It is, however, important to frame the work of these schools in the wider absenteeism and alternative school literature, to which I now turn.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The field of absenteeism has had a robust history with numerous academics, based in various disciplines, and multiple countries, studying absenteeism and related issues for decades. In a review of the literature, I was able to locate absenteeism research originating out of North America (Gottfried, 2009; Kearney, 2008), Europe (Duarte & Escario, 2006; Mounteney, Haugland, Skutle, 2010; Srand & Cedersund, 2013), the Middle East (Banerjee, King, Orazem, & Paterno, 2012), and Asia (Chou, Ho, Chen, & Chen, 2006). Likewise, the same review found that attendance, or lack thereof, is studied by researchers in: education (Attwood & Croll, 2015); psychology (Öhlund & Ericsson, 1994; Schmitt, Balles, & Venesky, 2013); social work (Gase et al., 2015); health sciences (Barry, Chaney & Chaney, 2011); criminology (Bazemore, Stinchcomb & Leip, 2004) and program evaluation (Cho, Hallfors & Sanchez, 2005). Thus, one can reasonably claim that absenteeism, its causes and consequences, and the proposed solutions to eradicate the behaviour, have received a significant amount of scholarly attention.

The research investigating absenteeism has generally focused on its causes, consequences, and solutions. These categories themselves are further divided based on whom the responsibility for the absence is thrust upon. Through a review of the literature it is apparent that the majority of absenteeism research holds the student, their family, the school, and to a lesser degree society, culpable for causing pupils to be absent from school. The consequences and solutions to absenteeism follow the same pattern, being geared towards where the cause of the absence is thought to originate. While this fragmented and isolated approach to studying absenteeism is at times criticized for missing the more nuanced, overlapping and complex aspects of absenteeism (Kearney, 2008), it is nevertheless the most common approach found in

the literature. Therefore, I will trace how the causes, consequences and solutions to absenteeism are framed around the four groups of people.

Causes of Absenteeism

As noted previously, academics studying absenteeism tend to divide the causes of absences into four discrete categories of: the student; their family; their school; and the wider society. Although there is some overlap between the categories, and more than one factor may be dissuading a student from coming to school, much of the research investigates a single set of risk factors.

Student based causes of absenteeism. One of the most obvious and often cited causes for a student's absence is an illness, and this type of absence is usually accompanied by a parental or doctor's note (Torrens-Armstrong McCormack-Brown, Brindley, Coreil, & McDermott 2011). However, other student-based factors of absenteeism are often based on psychological theories, which "tend to focus on individual factors and use internalising explanations for absenteeism, including school phobia, separation anxiety, [and] school refusal" (Attwood & Croll, 2006, p. 92).

The term school refusal is often employed to signify a child's outright refusal to attend school for certain classes or the entire day (Kearney, 2003). The primary factors prohibiting attendance in school refusal are students' mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and separation disorder cause a student fear attending school (Maynard et al., 2015). In fact, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM V) posits that "separation anxiety disorder in children may lead to school refusal" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 192). While it is

acknowledged that school phobic/refusal behaviour occurs more frequently in young children, the patterns developed at an early age may persist into adolescence. Within this category lies a plethora of psychological and behavioural issues that certain students exhibit. The school refusal literature comprises its own unique subset of absenteeism research, as it is most frequently studied from the perspective of psychology, who seek to identify and remedy psychological factors (e.g. anxiety, depression, etc.) that may contribute to dissuading a student from attending school.

While some youths may be suffering from mental health issues that either prohibit regular attendance or are expressed as behavioural issues, which are dealt with punitively by the school (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Evans, 2000; Lauchlan, 2003), other pupils may have cognitive disorders and require additional academic help they do not receive (Spencer, 2009). Aside from these health orientated explanations for absenteeism is a line of inquiry positing that students who are not interested in school, and who do poorly in their studies, have a higher propensity to being absent from school.

Some research indicates that absentees miss school due to a lack of interest in education; an unwillingness to comply to the school's code of conduct; and a desire to take part in more attractive activities outside of school (Elliott, 1999). A number of studies has confirmed this finding, each pointing to the students' lack of interest in school as the predicting factor of their non-attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godber, 2001; Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2015; Schoeneberger, 2012; Wilson, Malcolm, Edward, & Davidson, 2008). This disinterest in schooling may originate in academic difficulties, where a pupil becomes frustrated at their lack of academic success and begins to miss school (Hinz, Kapp & Snapp, 2003). Feeling academically inept can be a strong motivating factor for a student to avoid an

environment they equate with failure, and these feelings escalate as the pupil misses more schoolwork and falls further behind. As the attachment to school diminishes, an absentee may consciously or inadvertently begin to associate with other absentees, and this unsupervised time spent together in and outside of school may develop into delinquent behaviour, such as involvement in crime and substance abuse, thereby fueling further absenteeism (Chou et al., 2006; Pellegrini, 2007; Wood et al., 2012).

While a considerable amount of research has focused on discerning which students are likely to be absent from school and why, other scholars have shifted their attention to the type of family dynamics that may be leading pupils to be absent.

Family based causes of absenteeism. One of the first family-based causes of absenteeism can be termed "school withdrawal," which occurs whenever a guardian deliberately keeps their child from school (Kearney, 2008). A guardian may choose to keep their child at home for various reasons, such as "concealment of maltreatment, economic purposes such as working or child care, unjustified fear of harm or kidnap of the child at school, or assistance of a parent with psychopathology" (Kearney, 2008, p. 265). Within this concept the responsibility for the absence is thrust upon the guardian, and the child is largely absolved of any culpability in being absent. Family dynamics, and most importantly the family's socioeconomic level also have a considerable impact on a student's likelihood of being absent from school. It has been found that a substantial proportion of absentees live in a single-parent household (Dembo et al., 2016; Duarte & Escario, 2006; Egger et al., 2003; Ham, 2004; Mounteney et al., 2010). This living situation points not only to the more strained financial situation many absentees may find themselves in (De Socio et al., 2007), but may also infuse familial conflict into a youth's life

(Flaherty, Sutphen & Ely, 2012). Likewise, with diminished spousal support, a single guardian may need their child's help in caring for siblings and other relatives; and at times the child must remain at home to help around the house (Wilson et al., 2008). This not only prohibits the pupil from attending but is also an additional stressor to what is often an already chaotic lifestyle. Even when an absentee resides with both guardians, there is evidence to suggest that some families live in turmoil, where education and educational aspirations may not hold precedence over more direct familial needs (De Socio et al., 2007). Thus, as Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, and Dalicandro (1998) point out, "family problems are unlikely to be confined to the home, but rather spillover into the school affecting students' ability to concentrate, their grades, and even their relations with their teachers and classmates" (p. 637), thereby affecting their ability and motivation to be present at school consistently. Difficult home lives have a significantly detrimental impact on a youth's capacity to attend school consistently, where obstacles negate a student's desire to attend.

School based causes of absenteeism. A number of school-based factors have been considered to persuade students to be absent from school. These range from large uninviting schools to instances of bullying that are not adequately managed by school staff (Branham, 2004; Gastic, 2008). Often a myriad of school related factors can accumulate, where a student starts to feel alienated from the school, and begins a slow process of disengagement, which typically commences with increased absenteeism, and can culminate in school dropout (Huber, 2013). Having issues in their personal lives, many absentees are in dire need of emotional and physical supports, which unfortunately they do not receive at school. Rather, absentees are often punished by their teachers and schools for non-attendance (Reid, 2013).

Added to the strained relationships which often characterize absentees' experiences in mainstream schools, is the inadequate infrastructure that is apparent is some schools. A school's physical condition is an important aspect in making it attractive for students to attend, however many schools are in a state of disrepair, and this has been linked to increased absenteeism (Branham, 2004). Moreover, there is evidence to indicate that large schools foster feelings of alienation within some students, where they feel anonymous and do not develop close ties to their teachers and/or other pupils (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2008). Adolescents, particularly those who have issues with anxiety, may feel overwhelmed within sizeable schools, and with teachers' time spread thin, not receive the required supports to succeed. Linked to this lack of connectedness is what has generally been termed as poor "school climate" within the absenteeism literature. Kearney (2008b) defines this notion stating that

> poor school climate may be linked to harsh and inflexible disciplinary practices, rigid regulations regarding school reintegration, school curricula not well tailored to a child's individual needs or interests, poor teaching and student–teacher relationships, inattention to diversity issues, and inadequate attendance management practices (p. 459)

Thus, students who equate their school with a negative environment may begin to feel alienated and prefer to avoid the institution. These feelings may also be exacerbated by some youths being victims of bullying, which has been shown to be a precursor to absenteeism (Havik et al., 2015). In her nationally representative study of Grade 10 students in the U.S., Billie Gastic (2008), found that victims of bullying were more than twice as likely to be absent from school than their non-victim counterparts. Alongside conflict with peers, there is evidence to highlight that frequently absent students are treated inequitably by their teachers (Reid, 2013; 2014).

Ken Reid, a leading scholar of absenteeism for over 40 years, has made a poignant insight into the strained relationships between teachers and absentees when he remarked that "some staff and their schools are only too happy when certain types of pupils are missing from

their classes" (Reid, 2014, p. ix). As this statement exemplifies, many teachers are unable, or more likely unwilling, to allocate the necessary supports to absenteeism prone youths. Many teachers are raised in middle-class households, and as a result may not fully appreciate the difficult lives their students live, and how these factors may affect the students' abilities and motivation to attend (Reid, 2013). A number of studies have shown that teachers have lowered expectations and experience frustration with frequently absent students (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Ekstrand, 2015; De Wit, Karioja & Rye, 2010). As DeSocio and colleagues' (2007) study of a truancy prevention program exemplifies, "students also reported comments made by teachers who discouraged them from continuing to come to class as the year progressed, and it became apparent that their grades were too poor to allow them to pass" (p. 6). These acts are often coupled by the practice of meting detentions and suspensions for absenteeism, which have been shown to further alienate absentees from their schooling (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012). Considering the often-difficult life conditions of absentees this reaction from teachers and administrators can be devastating. Faced with numerous obstacles to attendance, and budding feelings of alienation, a flat-out rejection, if not outright ridicule from their teachers can be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. School staff are often the only stable adult role models many absentees have, and when these authority figures reject them, and label them as inadequate, the results can be disastrous.

As the above evidence displays, schools can be a major component of student absenteeism. School is the only secure environment in many youths' lives, and when they are met with aggression in this setting, the impediments to attendance can become insurmountable. Schools often do more harm than good in both encouraging students to attend and being flexible enough to accommodate pupils who are absent. Consequently, rather than being a protective

force against absenteeism, schools can perpetuate the behaviour they seek to eradicate. It is vital, however, to bear in mind that absenteeism does not occur in a vacuum but is a signifier of the life struggles many adolescents have to endure.

Societal based causes of absenteeism. A less frequently cited, yet one of the most fundamental causes for absenteeism can be termed 'societal.' Since academics studying absenteeism are based within distinct disciplines (e.g. education, social work, nursing, etc.), it is expected that their loci of focus is directed towards more specific and particular factors, rather than broad 'societal' ones. Yet, societal causes of absenteeism do play a key role in hindering students from attending school consistently. The major component of societal causes of absenteeism is the poverty in which many absentees live in, as pointed out by Reid (2013), "the very clear link between social disadvantages and truancy has long been established…It has also been known that the vast majority of persistent absentees and truants emanate from the lowest social class groupings" (p. 16). There is ample evidence to affirm this position, and Maynard and colleagues' (2017) latest nationally representative study of school aged youth in the U.S. unilaterally pointed to socioeconomic levels as being the crucial factor in making students more likely to be absent from school.

Living in a socially marginalized position can affect a student's ability to attend in various ways, such as: an absence of transportation; lack of money for food, clothes, and/or school supplies; having to move frequently; living in a dangerous neighborhood; involvement in the criminal justice system; having to work; and not seeing the relevance of education (Brandibas, Jeunier, Clanet & Fourasté, 2004; Branham, 2004; Darmody et al., 2008; Hinz et al., 2003; Leonard, 2011; Marvul 2012; Nichols, 2003). These absences are largely outside of the

direct control of the youths; and the school, in its current form, is unable to mitigate these difficult life circumstances.

Consequences of Absenteeism

The consequences of absenteeism are as varied as the causes and can range from academic failure to suspensions/expulsions (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Gage, Sugai, Lunde & DeLoreto, 2013). Many are impacted by absenteeism, and arguably the entire Canadian society suffers its repercussions. The ramifications of absenteeism impact: absentees through lowered academic outcomes and propensity to leaving school prior to graduation; absentees' families due to prosecutions and fines; the schools by the resources spent trying to eradicate absenteeism; and the society by the costs associated with having a significant proportion of its population reach adulthood without a high school diploma. While to some degree all feel the impacts of absenteeism, it is the absentees who bear the brunt of the repercussions related to non-attendance.

Students. One of the most commonly cited consequences of absenteeism is its relationship to poor educational outcomes (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Mac Iver, 2011). This finding is logical, considering that many absentees miss significant amounts of class time, and are therefore continuously behind their peers in course work. Research has shown that students who miss school perform substantially below their regular attending peers on academic assessments, and this lack of performance has been a consistent concern for numerous academics and school boards (Maynard et al., 2012).

Schools themselves can exacerbate the academic difficulties absentees have. Their inflexible attendance policies often punish students for non-attendance through detentions, suspensions, expulsion, and rigid assignment deadlines that do not provide time for absentees to get adequately caught up with missed schoolwork (Jonasson, 2011). In their study of 8,457 ninth grade students attending high schools across the United States, Flannery and colleagues (2012) found that in-school suspensions, Saturday school, and out-of-school suspensions were the most common disciplinary responses to absenteeism, accounting for 52.2% of disciplinary measures, leading the authors to conclude that "high schools currently select from a relatively limited repertoire of school discipline responses to student truancy" and that "the most common of these disciplinary responses are often quite exclusionary" (p. 131). Thus, frequently absent students are not only disallowed an opportunity to catch-up on their schoolwork but are often further pushed out and alienated from their school by rigid disciplinary procedures that do not take into account the often-difficult life conditions students must endure.

Faced with a challenging home life and an unwelcoming school, which rather than acting as a protective force serves as a constant reminder of academic failure, many absentees disengage from school and become isolated from their classmates (Kearney, 2016). It has been documented that pupils who miss considerable amounts of school are often a source of frustration and stress for their teachers, who may hold lower expectations of them (DeSocio et al., 2007). This is coupled by Reid's (2014) findings, which have documented that absentees often lose friendships and are negatively regarded by regular attendees, who become irritated by the extra time the absentee receives from the teacher.

Feeling estranged from the school some absentees may find comfort in associating with other absentees, which can lead to delinquent behaviour, such as involvement in criminality (De

Wit et al., 2010); substance use/abuse (Barry et al., 2011; Chou et al., 2006); and risky sexual behaviour (Dembo et al., 2016). These activities, added with general estrangement from the school can encourage a student to be absent even more than they already are, and absentees find it increasingly difficult to reengage with their education (Wilson et al., 2008). A cycle of absenteeism can develop, where the consequences of being absent fuel further absenteeism. This process unfortunately often culminates in premature school withdrawal, which has been widely cited as one, if not the most, significant ramification of absenteeism. Schoeneberger's (2012) study of a large urban school district in the southeastern U.S. has found that truants had dropout rates ranging from 10% to 24% compared to 4% for regular attendees. This finding has been corroborated by multiple studies, and the link between absenteeism and dropout is a commonly accepted fact (Maynard et al., 2012b; Wood et al., 2012). Considering that dropping out of school has been correlated with negative future life outcomes (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006), the gravity of the consequences for students who are absent becomes apparent.

Family. Habitual attendance problems can also have a negative impact on an absentee's family. The most common way this occurs is through conflict with the school (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006). It has been previously noted that school personnel often blame guardians for a student's non-attendance (Stone & Stone, 2011). When a student is continuously absent the first measure frequently involves contact by school officials with the absentee's family (Claes, Hooghe & Reeskens, 2009). While this in itself is not problematic, the increased demands on guardians who may be already living in challenging circumstances can place undue hardships on them. The families of absentees are expected to meet with school staff and can anticipate home visits if they are uncompliant with requests for meetings (Gase et al., 2015). An absentee's

family may be asked and/or forced to attend parental training, which can be quite humiliating, as it requires them to undergo the "establishment of house rules with rewards and disincentives, structured routines in the morning and evening, alteration of parent commands toward brevity and clarity, [and] reduction of excessive reassurance-seeking behavior" (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006, p. 5). The underlying assumption is that the absentee, and by extension their family, are responsible for the absenteeism, and are thus expected to augment their behaviour to increase attendance (Birioukov, 2016). As mentioned in the 'Causes of Absenteeism' section of this literature review, it has been well documented that the majority of absentees live in the lower strata of the socioeconomic scale. Accusing families of poor child rearing techniques and calling into question their ability to raise a fully functioning adult can be quite insulting to those already expending all of their energies to meet the basic needs of their child.

Alongside demands for better parenting skills, an absentee's family may also face punitive measures such as fines for their child's non-attendance (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Since truancy is considered to be a criminal offense in many provinces (including Ontario), many guardians of habitually absent students may be summoned to court if their child's attendance does not improve. Several U.S. states and Canadian provinces also actively prosecute students and their guardians for non-attendance (Bazemore et al., 2004; Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Flaherty et al., 2012; Gase et al., 2015). In fact, in 2014, 272 cases were brought to the Ministry of Justice for failure to adhere to Ontario's compulsory attendance laws (Ministry of the Attorney General, 2015, personal communication). The prosecution of guardians presents similar concerns as the ones outlined above. Namely, guardians who may be working multiple jobs must secure time off from employment and find transportation to attend court hearings. Moreover, the levied fines can

cause considerable financial stress to a family that may already be living in the economic margins.

School. Schools too bear the brunt of absenteeism. This occurs from the classroom level and expands to ministry-wide levels. Indeed, many resources are poured into the management, surveillance, and reduction of absenteeism. These range from energies spent by the classroom teacher attempting to reengage an absentee, to the countless millions of dollars spent in anti-truancy campaigns.

Teachers are perhaps the hardest hit by absenteeism, as absent students can disrupt the flow of the classroom. Teachers must find extra time to ensure that a returning absentee is adequately caught up on the material they have missed (Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby & Boyd, 2007). This additional attention can be deemed as 'special treatment' by regular attending students and cause resentment within the classroom. The teacher must then navigate the tensions within their class. Teachers must protect the confidentiality of the absent student and not disclose the reason for their absence, which is often quite personal. Yet they must also account for their 'special treatment' of the absentee to the rest of the class. Therefore, in addition to the disruption to the flow of instruction and classroom routine, teachers are expected to manage the classroom dynamics in order to ensure that absent students are not further ostracized and pushed out of school (Reid, 2014).

On a wider school level considerable resources and time are expended to track attendance and to follow-up with adolescents who are absent. Extensive amounts of time are spent daily by school administrators to monitor attendance, which detracts from their other functions and responsibilities (Gase et al., 2015). Once truant students are located time must be dedicated to

arranging meetings with them and their guardians. Further actions and monitoring put pressures on school personnel tasked with decreasing absenteeism. Likewise, school boards must invest limited funds to hire staff whose primary task is following up on students who have missed extensive amounts of class.

Lastly, school boards and ministries of education must expend substantial quantities of fiscal resources to combat absenteeism. There are a plethora of truancy prevention and reduction programs currently available in a number of school boards. While Canadian data is difficult to access, a U.S. example provides an insight into these types of expenditures. In 2010 the U.S. Office of the Inspector General carried out an audit of the Philadelphia District School Board and found that the board spent nearly half a million dollars funding a truancy centre. While this is just one example, it is indicative of the funds poured into various types of anti-truancy programs. These programs will be explained in detail in a subsequent section of this literature review, but it suffices to say that millions of dollars are being invested into preventative and recuperative measures aimed at increasing attendance (Maynard et al., 2017). These costs, of which the taxpayers take the brunt of, are exacerbated by the loss of tax revenue and additional expenditures a nation-state must make to compensate for a poorly educated citizenry.

Society. At first glance it may be difficult to ascertain how society suffers from student absenteeism. Pupil attendance appears so far removed from the daily functioning of our society that the links may not be apparent. However, upon closer inspection the true cost of absenteeism to all within Canada becomes evident. As mentioned previously, absenteeism has been found to be the main precursor of school dropout, which has been linked with negative future life

outcomes. While the focus of this study is on absenteeism, and not dropping out of school per se, it is worth noting some of the negative repercussions associated with premature school leaving.

The Canadian economy is ever changing, and now more than ever there is a need for an educated workforce. Statistics Canada has delineated the life outcomes of young adults who have not completed their secondary schooling. One of the most recent studies, carried out by Uppal (2017), found that approximately 340,000 Canadians aged 25-34 did not have a secondary school diploma. Considering that the employment rate for this demographic was 67% for men and 41% for women, and that "construction trade helpers and labourers and transport truck drivers were the two occupations employing the most men with less than a high school diploma," and for "women in the same educational category, the top two occupations were light duty cleaners and cashiers" (Uppal, 2017, p. 1), the gravity of the situation becomes apparent. The dropout demographic shows much higher rates of unemployment; receiving lower wages; working in precarious and unstable jobs; not accessing postsecondary education; relying on social assistance; and being a lone parent than adults with at least a high school diploma (Finnie, Wismer & Mueller, 2015; Gilmore, 2010; Uppal, 2017). These findings are not particularly new, and there have been similar findings in the U.S. (Attwood & Croll, 2015; DiPaoli et al., 2017; Kim & Joo, 2011), and older Canadian-focused research (Bélanger, Akbari & Madgett, 2009; Bushnik, Barr-Telford & Bussiére, 2004). What is particularly troubling, is that out of the 2,006,700 students enrolled in Ontario's public schools in 2016-17, an approximate 270,904 will not graduate secondary school based on the 5-year Ontario graduation rate of 86.5% reported by the Ontario Ministry of Education. What we see then, is a significant amount of young people who will not graduate high school, and will likely face difficulties in their adult lives, which may be passed down to their own future children. This, in turn, reproduces the inequitable social

structure that continuously serves to remarginalize vulnerable populations. Moreover, the associated costs with health care, social assistance, and the criminal justice system, not to mention lost tax revenue, are of considerable significance to all Canadians.

While not all absentees end up prematurely leaving school, there is nonetheless a number of academic, behavioural, and social risk factors that absentees tend to espouse. It is these stark and dire consequences that have prompted inquiries into how to curb the behaviour.

Solutions to Absenteeism

Much like the causes and consequences of absenteeism, the solutions are largely geared at: the student; their family; the school; and to a lesser extent, society. These interventions primarily attempt to increase attendance in hope of ensuring that all students attend school at "acceptable" levels, which are often marked as 90% attendance (Maynard et al., 2012).

Student. Absenteeism intervention efforts aimed at students generally operate on two dimensions. One aspect are the preventative efforts concerned with providing psychological counselling to students exhibiting school refusal; whereas the other approach is more punitively orientated, with threats of and actual punishments being carried out.

As noted previously, a subset of absentees miss school due to psychological issues, which are often manifested in what is typically termed as 'school refusal.' The most common mental health problems students report are anxiety and depression. The major focus of interventions designed to eradicate school refusal is on psychological counselling intended to reintegrate the student back into school as quickly as possible (Maynard et al., 2015). There is an assumption that psychological treatment can help students to overcome their mental health issues and

become regular attenders. Within student-focused solutions the schools and their role in causing and/or perpetuating feelings of anxiety and depression in their students are largely omitted, rather "these theories locate explanations for students' absenteeism in individual students and suggest interventions or treatments for individual students as a method to reduce absenteeism" (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2015, p. 92). The goal is to "solve" the mental health issue, thereby allowing the student to return to the classroom.

The other solution to absenteeism is utilizing the criminal justice system in order to bring the student back into the fold (Gentle-Genitty, Taylor, & Renguette, 2020). The arm of the law is employed in two primary functions. The first concerns itself with having police officers patrol areas near schools during school hours and pick up school-aged youth (Reid, 2005). These 'truancy sweeps' bring absent students back to school where they can be processed by school personnel. Alongside this measure is the practice of sending youths and their families to court and charging them with truancy (Maynard et al., 2012). Since mandatory school attendance is enacted into legislation in most provinces in Canada and states in the U.S., the absentee and their family are subject to court-based interventions to reduce absenteeism. In Ontario for example, a youth may be fined $1000 and lose their driver's licence if they are convicted of truancy (*Ontario Education Act*, 1991). The implicit logic is that students are missing school voluntarily, and if a strong enough deterrent is created, absenteeism will virtually disappear. However, there is considerable evidence within the literature that these harsh measures are not effective in curbing absenteeism (Bazemore et al., 2004; Ekstrand, 2015).

Family. The primary solutions to absenteeism directed at the families of absentees mirror the familial consequences of absenteeism, as the families can expect to have school personnel

intervene in their family functioning, and if they are uncompliant, a referral to the court system is likely (Claes et al., 2009; De Socio et al., 2007; Fantuzzo et al., 2005). There is an underlying assumption that the absenteeism is caused by a dysfunctional family, and that they must be fixed or punished for their inability to ensure the child is attending school. While this may be a necessary response, when this is the primary reaction from the schooling system, it is unlikely to have positive effects, and will rather fuel further conflict and alienation between the absentee's family and the school. As Sheppard (2011) noted, "there is *no published evidence* to show that prosecuting parents for their children's non-attendance improves attendance in young people" (p. 244, emphasis in original). Yet, the schooling system still places the responsibility for absences on students and/or their families, thereby echoing the meritocratic ideology which is the foundation of Canadian schools. However, it must be noted that schools themselves have been held accountable for their role in causing absenteeism, and there is a substantial amount of interventions based at the school level.

School. Considering that the topic at hand is *school* absenteeism, it is not surprising that school-based interventions dominate the field of absenteeism studies. School-based solutions to absenteeism are arguably the easiest to implement, as there is more control over school functions than the absentee and/or their family. The solutions are varied, ranging from anti-bullying campaigns (Havik et al., 2015) to reducing class sizes (De Wit et al., 2010), with the underlying belief that if schools are made more attractive the absenteeism rates will significantly decline.

The starting point for many school-based solutions to absenteeism is the call for schools to consistently place regular attendance as a fundamental goal for all pupils (Gase et al., 2015). It is believed that stressing the importance of and rewarding steady attendance will instill a culture

of attendance that will pre-emptively discourage youths from missing school (Reid, 2013). Coupled with this general preventative measure is the advocacy for effective monitoring and early responses to a student's burgeoning absenteeism (Gottfried, 2009; Torrens-Armstrong et al., 2011). These are sound suggestions, as it has been documented that unchecked absenteeism can quickly spiral into a cycle, making it all the more difficult for pupils to resume regular attendance (Wilson et al., 2008).

The one dimension of school life receiving by far the most attention from academics and absenteeism prevention efforts is the development of a positive *school climate*. While this umbrella term is vast, capturing almost every facet of schooling, it nevertheless points to the essential role of relationships within schools. Since some youths miss school due to their negative schooling experiences, ensuring that students have tight links to their school is an important component of preventing absenteeism. There are a number of proposed actions schools can take to cultivate environments characterized by caring and student engagement, such as: providing extra academic help (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014); establishing high expectations (Keppens & Spryut, 2016); creating 'buddy' systems to develop friendships for students who may be feeling isolated within the school (Lyon & Cotler, 2009); reducing instances of bullying (Havik et al., 2015); and most importantly, cultivating close bonds between pupils and their teachers (De Wit et al., 2010; Marvul, 2012). The association between positive student-teacher relationships and greater attendance has been well established (Reid, 2014), and it is arguably the most important school-based factor in reducing absenteeism. Students are much more likely to attend schools typified by warmth and respect, rather than estrangement and punishment. Likewise, adolescents who feel safe and comfortable in their school are more likely to seek out supports they need to ensure their attendance does not drop. Proactive and easily accessible

support services, such as mental/physical health and social assistance, are necessary to impede absenteeism from taking place (Wood et al., 2012). Thus, if students feel comfortable to ask for essential assistance before absenteeism has occurred, they may not engage in said behaviour.

Alongside closer ties to both peers and adults within the school, there are also suggestions to tailor the learning experiences to the pupil's needs (Gage et al., 2013). Marvul (2012) assessed a truancy intervention program and found that a curriculum reflective of student interests had a positive effect on engaging truant students back into schooling. This is not surprising, as it would be expected that students are more likely to remain in school when learning useful and meaningful content, rather than something they perceive as irrelevant to their lives.

Beside the more positive and proactive methods to reducing absenteeism is the more heavy-handed approach of disciplinary responses for non-attendance. It has already been mentioned that one of the current ways of combating absenteeism is through threats and punishments. Disciplinary measures include detentions, suspensions, and expulsions; as well as referrals to the criminal justice system (Flannery et al., 2012). While practice of handing out detentions and suspensions for non-attendance has been proven to be largely ineffective in reducing absenteeism, and has even been documented to provoke the behaviour, schools are still frequently resorting to the deterrent model of anti-absenteeism interventions (Flannery et al., 2012).

Through making the school more attractive, or at the very least less hostile, it is believed that a large segment of absentees will return to school. Likewise, the deterrent model, which uses threats and punishment, coerces pupils into coming to school. However, there are solutions that are aimed at "societal" causes of absenteeism that move beyond the carrot and stick approach

outlined above. Although quite limited, there is a body of research that promotes solutions to absenteeism that are geared towards social inequalities that may cause the behaviour.

Society. Societal solutions to absenteeism arguably receive the least attention. This could be explained, in part, through the meritocratic dogma pervading Canadian schools. A mantra dictating that social ills, such as economic inequality, are beyond the school's capacity and responsibility to alleviate. Since economic inequality has characterized Canadian life for decades, it is seen as an intractable problem, and thus, relatively few studies have sought to address student absenteeism through a societal lens. However, it has been documented how poverty characterizes the lives of many absentees and is extremely detrimental to students' ability to be present in school consistently. In the societal anti-absenteeism measures that do exist, attention is paid to the more structural causes of absenteeism related to poverty and difficult lives. Within these interventions are suggestions for increased access to social services (Gase et al., 2015; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014) and the provision of free transportation, school supplies, clothing, and food (DeSocio et al., 2007). While this is a promising avenue of absenteeism reduction efforts, it receives little attention of academics. Moreover, accommodation strategies that allow pupils to miss some class without penalty are not included in the solutions to absenteeism.

Wraparound. Although sparse in number, some academics have been advocating for a more individualized approach to absenteeism reduction (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020: Kearney, 2016). One that is sensitive to the needs of the youths and is empathetic to their difficult lives. Absenteeism reduction becomes much more individualized, and as Reid (2013) points out

"school absentees and truants benefit considerably from personalised and appropriate intervention strategies which are tailor-made to suit each individual" (p. 202), rather than the more universal interventions so far discussed. This method provides specific and multifocal tiered strategies to eliminate barriers to attendance, whilst attempting to motivate the student to attend. A particular student is assessed on their needs (e.g. social assistance; psychological counseling; academic help) and is given support in the areas of concern (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020: Kearney, 2016). These services are often delivered simultaneously in a wraparound manner, where the individual needs of an absentee are assessed and intervened upon (Carroll, 2015; Strand & Cedersund, 2013). Unfortunately, many mainstream schools with large enrollment numbers do not have the personal knowledge of their students' lives, or the capacity to deliver said services in an effective manner.

Limited Success of Absenteeism Reduction Efforts

As the above sections have highlighted, absenteeism, and its causes, consequences, and solutions has been extensively researched. We know a considerable amount about why students are absent, what the consequences for absenteeism are, and the plethora of intervention strategies designed to alleviate absenteeism. With countless thousands of dollars spent, and experimentation in support delivery, we would expect to see tangible results in the decrease of absenteeism. Yet, all of the theoretical and practical knowledge has been unable to stop thousands of children from missing school in Canada and elsewhere, with evidence showing that absenteeism levels have not significantly changed over the past 30 years (Levy, 2008; Maynard et al., 2012). Maynard and colleagues' (2017) analyzed the responses of a nationally representative sample of U.S. youth between the ages of 12-17 to the question "during the past

30 days, how many whole days did you miss (school) because you skipped or 'cut' or just didn't want to be there?" (p. 190). While the phrasing of the question is problematic, as it implies that all absences are related to "skipping" school and only counts full-day absences, the results are nevertheless illuminating, with the authors finding that "truancy remained more-or-less constant across the study period with an overall prevalence of 10.9% in 2002 and 11.1% in 2014" (p. 191). In fact, these results may be underreporting the absenteeism rate, as some youth did not report being "truant" as specified in the questionnaire due to being absent for other reasons than "skipping;" they also may not have reported partial-day absences. Canada-wide absenteeism data is largely unavailable, however, a study carried out by the Toronto District School Board found that across the board student absenteeism increased between the 2005-06 and the 2011-12 school years (TDSB, 2013). Another report by the TDSB (2015) noted that during the 2013-2014 school year, an *average* student missed 8.7% of their classes. This number will of course be much higher for a certain subset of students. Cumulatively, these studies suggest that so far anti-absenteeism efforts have been unsuccessful at achieving their goals.

A number of factors inhibit the reduction of absenteeism, and many researchers have voiced frustration at the apparent inability to lower non-attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Kim & Joo, 2011; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). The reasons why absenteeism is difficult to eradicate have many origins. Some believe families hinder absenteeism prevention efforts by not sufficiently encouraging their children to attend school (Kearney, 2016). Whereas others point to the lack of commitment on the part of the school staff to expend the necessary time and resources to ensure students do not become absent, and if they do, are able to reintegrate quickly into the classroom/school (Reid, 2007). Kearney (2008) takes issue with the disjointed nature of the field, arguing that "the use of varying terminology, frameworks, and methods of addressing excessive

school absenteeism has led to exceptionally poor comparability across publications in this area as well as disjointed, uncoordinated approaches for resolving the problem" (p. 263). Numerous truancy prevention programs have been assessed, and yet, many report consistent absenteeism levels post-intervention, thereby pointing to their ineffectiveness (Bazemore et al., 2004; Flannery et al., 2012). It appears that absenteeism is insolvable, and no matter the attempts to curb the behaviour, it continues unabated. This begs the questions of "if we know so much absenteeism, why are students still missing school?" after all, would we not expect the countless initiatives to increase attendance to accomplish at least some of their goals? The answers to these questions are hard to come by, however, how absenteeism is researched and conceptualized may point to some explanations.

Siloed research. The first aspect draws from the above quote by Kearney (2008), where he takes issue with the fragmented approach to studying and alleviating absenteeism. As mentioned previously, attendance related research is carried out by academics based in quite distinct disciplines (e.g. psychology, education, social work), thus much absenteeism research occurs in disciplinary isolation. Moreover, the majority of absenteeism research is quantitatively based, and focuses on particular variables related to absenteeism. This honing of research questions and designs provides valuable information to the study of absenteeism; however, it may miss the more nuanced and contextual features of the behaviour. Kearney (2008), has been quite vocal in criticizing absenteeism literature stating that "little or no attempt is made in the fractured literature to consider all relevant factors that affect a given youth's absenteeism" (p. 274). As Table 1 highlights below, the causes, consequences, and solutions to absenteeism are not quite as distinct as they first appear. There is considerable overlap, as some variables (e.g.

academic difficulties/performance) traverse categories. The category of "detention, suspension, expulsion" is particularly interesting in this regard. Punishing students through detentions, suspensions and in extreme cases expulsion has been documented to be a leading disciplinary response from schools (Flannery et al., 2012). The belief in this deterrent model predicates that pupils will attend school due to fear of punishment. However, the research indicates that these punitive measures actually encourage youths to miss more school in order to avoid future punishment (Ekstrand, 2015; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Sheppard, 2011; Stone & Stone, 2011). Thus, punishment becomes the cause, consequence and solution to absenteeism.

Table 1
Matrix of Absenteeism Literature

	Cause	**Consequence**	**Solution**
Student	Illness; cognitive, behaviour, and mental health issues; lack of interest in school; academic difficulties; delinquency	Lowered expectations from teachers; lowered academic performance; delinquent and risky behaviour; further absenteeism; suspensions/expulsions; early school leaving; criminal charges	Psychological counselling; truancy sweeps; criminal charges
Family	School withdrawal; low socioeconomic position; familial conflict; pupils having to help at home and/or earn income	Conflict with the school; attending school meetings; having home visits by school/board personnel; attending parental training classes; criminal charges	Arranging school meetings with carers; home visits by school/board personnel; parental training classes; criminal charges
School	Poor condition of school building; large schools/classes; school climate/environment; poor relationships with teachers and/or peers; lowered teacher expectations; bullying; detentions, suspensions, expulsions	Teacher frustration; cost of monitoring and acting on absences; cost of anti-truancy programs	Putting emphasis on regular attendance; monitoring of attendance; improving school climate; academic assistance; high expectations; tight bonds between teachers-pupils; mental health supports; curricular/pedagogic

			innovations; detentions, suspensions, expulsions
Society	Lack of transportation, food, clothes, school supplies; frequent moves; living in a dangerous neighbourhood; having to work	An undereducated population; increased unemployment; higher social assistance, health care, and criminal justice costs; loss of tax revenue	Greater social services; providing free food, transportation, clothing; and school supplies

Here the slippery nature of the absenteeism variables and how they interact becomes evident. Academics have difficulty determining causality and are therefore somewhat unsure of how these variables intersect with one another. Another confounding difficulty in absenteeism research is discerning whether certain behaviours (e.g. delinquency) are the cause or the result of absenteeism, or whether the two are simply correlated. The isolated nature of quantitative methods is limited in its ability to fully capture the dynamics of absenteeism.

However, there are questions of whether absenteeism can ever be fully stopped. All of the solutions so far discussed are primarily focused on *raising* attendance. Yet once the inherent tensions of absenteeism are unpacked, the tactic of raising attendance

Impossibility of eradicating absenteeism. This dissertation takes a significant departure from the field of absenteeism by positing that *absenteeism can never be eradicated*. Rather than continuously searching for methods to *improve* attendance, I argue that we must begin to investigate how we can *accommodate* absenteeism. Considering that much of the absenteeism behaviour is not in the direct control of the student (e.g. having to work; living in a dangerous neighbourhood) we must accept the fact that no matter our efforts, some students will nevertheless miss some school. The failure of absenteeism reduction efforts supports this assertion, as these programs cannot directly intervene in a student's life. The vast majority of

absenteeism reduction efforts are grounded on the assumption that students are voluntarily and willfully missing school, and that if the schools are made attractive enough, or if the deterrents to absenteeism are severe enough, the attendance rate will improve. However, these measures are often unresponsive to the coerced involuntary absences many students exhibit (Birioukov, 2016). As long as students are subjected to health problems, safety issues in the school (e.g. bullying), and challenging lives, they are unlikely to be consistently present at school. It must be acknowledged that the carrot and stick approach of responding to absenteeism can only do so much to increase attendance. Once this admission has taken place, our efforts can be redirected to finding methods to ensure that even if students are absent, they are able to successfully complete secondary school in a timely manner. One sector of schools – alternative schools – has taken steps in this process. Alternative schools show much promise in not only attempting to reduce absenteeism, but to *accommodate* it as well.

Alternative Schools

Defining alternative schools. The alternative school movement began in the 1960s and the 1970s, and these schools gained broad popularity within that timeframe (Lehr, Mareau, Lange & Lanners, 2004). The main focus of alternative schools was on delivering innovative methods of education and many were based on progressive educational ideals (O'Brien & Curry, 2009). Since the 1970s there has been an increase in the variety of alternative schools, with some being used as short-term placements for students exhibiting behavioural problems, while others are designed for long-term placements for youths not experiencing success in the mainstream setting (Raywid, 1983).

The diversity and plethora of the types of alternative schools has led to much debate as to what "counts" or "qualifies" as an alternative school. Yet, although there has been much

dialogue, there is no commonly accepted definition of an alternative school (Lehr et al., 2004). The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) provides its own definition, stating that alternative schools have been developed, in part, to "re-engage students who have had difficulty succeeding in a traditional classroom or school environment, including students who are returning to school after having dropped out" (OME, 2005, p. 2). Some authors prefer to differentiate between “alternative” and “second chance” schools. For example, Vellos and Vadeboncoeur (2013) make an important distinction between alternative education and second chance education, arguing that

> Alternative education is defined by nontraditional approaches to learning and teaching that are seen to enrich the experiences of students. It is frequently based on philosophical, political, and psychological theories and/or practices about the role of education in society, the development of democratic citizens, and/or the creation of rich and developmentally appropriate contexts for learning. (p. 35)

These types of schools are the descendants of the alternative schools designed in the 1960s and embody many of their progressive principles. Second chance education, on the other hand is “defined by the type of participant: usually young people who have been pushed out of mainstream schooling or who have otherwise disengaged from schools” (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2013, p. 35). While both types of schools share some similarities, namely their small size and low teacher-to-student ratio, they often differ markedly based on their curricular options, instructional strategies, postsecondary preparation, and philosophical outlooks on education. It is second chance alternative schools (will now be referred to as alternative schools) that are of particular interest to this study, as they are the ones more likely to work with absentees.

Due to the breadth of alternative schools, each with its own ethos and operations, it is difficult to give a precise account of a “typical” second chance alternative school. Nevertheless, these schools tend to share some commonalities, including small class sizes, low student-to-

teacher ratios, positive relationships between students and staff, innovative curricula, and year-around classes (Vellos & Vadeboncouer, 2013). Alternative schools tend to be concentrated at the secondary level; are predominantly located in urban areas; and serve a generally socioeconomically marginalized demographic (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; O'Brien & Curry, 2009; Raywid, 1983). These schools are quite small, typically having less than 120 students on roll (Lehr et al., 2004), and may be housed in a separate or attached building within a mainstream high school; or be a standalone institution based in or near a community centre (The McCreary Centre Society, 2008). Some alternative schools are attended voluntarily by pupils who are unsatisfied with their mainstream schools, while other programs are designed specifically for students who have been removed from the mainstream setting. Alternative schools do not tend to have catchment areas and accept all youths who either voluntarily transfer or are placed into them (The McCreary Centre, 2008; Vellos & Vadeboncouer, 2013). The duration of an alternative program is often dictated by its goals; whether it is for a student to return to a traditional school or a prolonged stay until graduation (Johnson, McMorris & Kubik, 2012). However, in a sample of 300 students attending alternative schools in British Columbia, only 36% wished to return to a traditional high school (Smith et al., 2007), and there is evidence that the positive attributes pupils gain in an alternative setting are lost upon return to a mainstream school (Cox, 1999).

Positive characteristics of alternative schools. Alternative schools are renowned for their ability to create warm, safe, and caring environments that allow their students to flourish (De La Ossa, 2005). Based on trust and respect, these schools can become stable environments, filled with dedicated adults that many alternative school students unfortunately do not have in

their home lives (Johnson et al., 2012). Authoritarian structures are diminished through the use of first names between staff and students (Beattie, 2004), as well as more nuanced disciplinary procedures that treat each student as an individual and reduce the punitive nature of the penalties for non-attendance (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The individualized disciplinary procedures have had positive effects, with a number of studies documenting improvement in student behaviour once they began attending an alternative school (Campbell, 1995; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). This egalitarian atmosphere is possible primarily due to the small sizes of alternative schools, where students and staff have an opportunity to interact on a more meaningful level than is usually possible in a larger mainstream school. Having low student numbers affords the time and space for teachers and students to become acquainted, and there is evidence to indicate that the establishment of tighter links between pupils and teachers leads to increased attendance, greater engagement, and improved academic outcomes (Beattie, 2004; May & Copeland, 1998, Quinn et al., 2006).

The impact of caring and supportive teachers cannot be underestimated, as it is one of the most fundamental components of alternative schools. Many youths attending alternative schools have had strained relationships with staff members in their previous mainstream schools, and it is in the alternative setting where they finally find understanding and sympathetic teachers (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Teachers in alternative schools transgress the instructor role, whose sole responsibility is content delivery, to a considerate and warm role model, an individual the youths can legitimately trust (Dods, 2013). With less students to work with, teachers are able to spend time developing bonds with their students, which has been documented "to positively influence students' desire to remain at the school" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 213). The lower student-teacher ratios also have the added advantage of allowing

educators to provide more individualized curricular planning; and being able to work with a small number of pupils affords teachers the necessary time to differentiate instruction (De La Ossa, 2005; Gaskell, 1995).

The individualized attention is complimented by greater flexibility in the type of pedagogical and content options available to the teachers. Having a teacher-student ratio of 1 to 10 is relatively common in alternative schools (Lehr et al., 2004), and it provides teachers enough time to incorporate students' interests and preferred learning methods into daily instruction (The McCreary Centre Society, 2008). Coupled with a focus on remediation and an accelerated pace, this personalized instruction has had positive effects, with students achieving academically, whereas before they have had limited success in the mainstream setting (Franklin, Streeter, Kim & Tripodi, 2007).

Another component of the supportive environment in alternative schools are the growing positive peer relationships. While there are some legitimate concerns about grouping at-risk youths with problematic behaviours together, there is promising evidence that high needs adolescents attending alternative schools bond over their hardships both in and outside of the school. In their study of a British Columbia alternative secondary school Vellos and Vadeboncoeur (2015) noted that "finding a commonality in the 'poor fit' they had experienced in mainstream schools, enabled youth at Mountain High to bond over those experience" (p. 104). Other studies have had similar findings, pointing out that youth in alternative schools are more focused on graduating (Morrissette, 2011), and work together as a community based on trust and respect (Saunders & Saunders 2001/2). Wishart's (2009) detailed study of an alternative school in Alberta posited an intriguing finding, claiming that racial lines and boundaries were reduced, as the students bonded over their common low socioeconomic positions. Thus, it appears that

youth who grow up in difficult living conditions marked by socioeconomic marginalization can bond over their experiences and use them as a source of strength.

The above examples point to how alternative schools, due to their small nature and commitment to helping their students create an atmosphere that is conducive to academic progress. While this is an important facet of any educational institution, it becomes critical when working with students who have high rates of absenteeism. Through making the school more attractive, these schools are, in effect, combating absenteeism that is largely voluntary. By removing motivational barriers to attendance (e.g. boredom, strained relationships with peers/teachers), alternative schools are encouraging youths to reengage with their schooling, and begin attending more consistently (Mac Iver, 2011; Marvul, 2012).

Developing a positive school climate is essential in motivating absenteeism prone students to attend more often. However, structural obstacles to attendance also exist, and must be navigated by school personnel. What is distinctive about alternative schools is their concerted effort to reduce the barriers to attendance many youths experience. Alternative schools employ a number of support staff (e.g. addictions counselors, psychologists, social workers, etc.) who are able to assist youths with their health and life problems (Gaskell, 1995; Mac Iver, 2011; Saunders & Saunders, 2002). This is particularly important as a number of adolescences attending these schools face a number of obstacles to attendance, many of which are unrelated to the actual school. The support staff augment the school's position from a content delivery one, to a more holistic approach that attempts to both educate and supply much needed resources to underprivileged youths. Alternative schools provide multiple supports to their students, such as: provision of free transportation (Cox, 1999; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009), day care (Lagana-Rioridan et al., 2011), food (Gaskell, 1995), and clothing (Wishart, 2009), as well as shower and

laundry facilities (The McCreary Centre Society, 2008). These supports, coupled with on-site mental health/life skills groups and classes have allowed alternative schools to deliver wraparound services, which focus on the whole individual. The infusion of these kinds of implementations, which aim to "remove *barriers* to education" (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 110, emphasis added), serve as interventions that are student-centered, individualized, and comprehensive. Moreover, they work to eradicate the more structural barriers to attendance not necessarily connected to the school. However, as I argue, absenteeism can never be fully eradicated, and regardless of the actions schools take, students will always continue to miss school for a plethora of reasons. Alternative schools appear to be cognizant of this fact, which appears to elude the majority of mainstream schools.

Many alternative schools are extremely flexible in how they operate, and a number have flexible attendance requirements. Alternative schools have been documented to offer several accommodation strategies for students who must be absent involuntarily, including: a flexible schedule (Morrissette, 2011); bending mandatory in-class and test-taking attendance expectations (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2015); offering extensions on assignments (Cox, 1999); and providing independent learning opportunities, thereby allowing students to occasionally miss school (Wishart, 2009). Furthermore, some alternative schools have a continuous intake process, permitting students to transfer or enroll into the school at any given time (Peled & Smith, 2010). These accommodation strategies are cognizant of the often imposed, involuntary absences some students may be exhibiting. Thus, these schools appear to be better suited to work with absentees, as their responses to absenteeism are aimed at both voluntary and involuntary absences, and there is evidence that they can be quite successful in reengaging youths, improving attendance, and graduating a large segment of their cohort (Cox, 1999; De La Ossa, 2005).

Feeling respected, cared for, and valued can have a profound effect on students who have felt marginalized in their previous school(s). The combination of additional supports, individual attention, and a flexible environment has been cited to "show an increase in self-esteem, positive peer relationships, commitment to school, and school performance" (Lehr et al., 2004, p. 6). A survey of alternative school students in British Columbia found that 81% liked their program, compared to only 41% liking their previous mainstream school; moreover, 92% reported that they skip school less than in their old school (Smith et al., 2007). Consequently, it appears that alternative schools can be effective in assisting high-needs students in attending school more regularly, and potentially graduating.

Nevertheless, alternative programs are not without their critics, and several researchers have pointed to the real and potential shortcomings of these schools, arguing that they have the potential to segregate marginalized students, and perpetuate educational inequality (Kim, 2011; Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013).

Negative characteristics of alternative schools. Although the majority of the alternative school literature presents the schools in a positive light, depicting these schools as “safe havens” for youth experiencing difficulties in school and life, a more negative undertone is also evident. Alternative schools have been criticized for two main functions, namely their role as a readily available “dumping ground” for students schools are no longer willing to work with (Cox, 1999); and as a site of class reproduction, where marginalized students receive a subpar education that will inevitably lead to low-end work that is likely to result in disadvantage as adults (Smyth et al., 2013). While these findings must be tempered by the fact that there are a multitude of alternative schools, some of which are quite restrictive due to their focus on changing student

behaviours without much concern for their educational credentials, these criticisms do present a legitimate concern for alternative schools and warrant further unpacking.

The first argument is that alternative schools become dumping grounds for unwanted students, where alternative schools serve as little more than holding tanks until the students are of legal age to leave school (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017). There is evidence to show that students who prove to be too difficult to manage in the mainstream setting are transferred to alternative schools (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Alternative schools present a convenient option for mainstream schools to remove students deemed to be troublesome without any real concern for their educational futures (Cox, 1999). Frattura and Topinka (2006) are particularly critical of the "separateness" of alternative schools, which segregate "abnormal" students in separate facilities, as the authors note "the success experienced [by students in alternative schools] does not outweigh the oppression created for the student segregated or the symbolism suggested to the other students 'who still belong'" (p. 329).

Aside from being an opportune location to move difficult students to, the dumping ground conception of alternative schools also posits that grouping large numbers of "troubled" youths has negative impacts through "peer deviancy training models" (Flannery et al., 2012, p. 131), where gathering students who exhibit negative behaviours (e.g. absenteeism, involvement in crime, drug use, etc.), will worsen these activities (Kilma, Miller & Nunlist, 2009). This notion is coupled with the often-involuntary nature of the enrollment process in some alternative schools, as some students are placed into alternative schools as a punishment. Not choosing to be at an alternative school can cause a youth to act out in protest or in defiance of their involuntary placement (Kilma et al., 2009). Disciplinary issues and misbehaviour are not the only challenges that occur when "dumping" at-risk students together. What is particularly applicable to the

present study, is the finding that absenteeism can be rampant within alternative schools (Johnson et al., 2012). While absenteeism can be expected from students who have challenging lives, the prevalence of it puts into question the interventions exercised by alternative schools, with research data pointing to the fact that some schools may not be doing enough to increase attendance (Gaskell, 1995). There is some evidence of the ineffectiveness of alternative schools to affect the change they desire. A number of studies have documented how youths attending alternative schools did not have improved outcomes (e.g. attachment to school; educational aspirations; delinquency) compared to similar youths in the mainstream setting (Cox, 1999; Quinn et al., 2006). This lack of attitudinal shifts towards school may be explained by the pervasive stigma that surrounds alternative schools (Kim & Taylor, 2008). This stigma can become so ingrained that a number of studies have shown how students internalize these labels (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; De La Ossa, 2005; Vadeboncoeur, 2009), and felt that "they were going to the 'stupid kids school' and that they were not smart enough to be at the traditional school" (Cox, 1999, p. 334).

While the dumping of students into the alternative setting is certainly problematic, the dumping of staff into these institutions is even more troubling. Kim and Taylor's (2008) study found that this particular "alternative school housed the 'leftover teachers' from regular schools" (p. 215), and this finding has been corroborated by others (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Hemmer, Madsen & Torres, 2013). This is a disturbing revelation, as teachers are the crucial component of effective alternative schools. Having teachers who do not wish to work in an alternative setting can have drastic repercussions on how they approach and think about the student population they are tasked to work with. This can culminate in negative attitudes of both teachers and students, resulting in an atmosphere of failure and dissatisfaction for all members of

an alternative school (O'Brien & Curry, 2009). Rather than being positive spaces where youths can gain a sense of normalcy and stability in their lives, alternative schools can become breeding grounds for frustration and discontent. Therein lies the second major criticism of alternative schools, namely that they are agents of social reproduction and inequitable life outcomes for their students.

It has been noted previously that many alternative schools provide self-paced, individual, and remedial instruction. While this in of itself is not inherently problematic, if this is the only instruction that students are offered, one must ask the question of "what kind of education are these students receiving?" The pedagogical and curricular choices of alternative schools have been disparaged for their overemphasis on credit recovery, which while allowing students to earn credits quickly, presents "legitimate concerns over it being used as an entire curriculum, the lack of evidence base around the packaged curricula being used widely in alternative education, and whether it can realistically prepare students for postsecondary or the workforce" (DePaoli et al., 2017, p. 33). Not only are there uncertainties about the inappropriate use of credit recovery courses, there are reasonable anxieties about the rigor, or lack thereof, of the academic programming evident in alternative schools (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Alternative schools have been criticized for lowered academic expectations that generally do not engage their students in deep and critical thinking (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Munoz, 2005). Smyth and colleagues (2013) have criticized alternative school staff for presuming their students are only capable of basic education, which results in the students not being prepared to enter/succeed in a postsecondary institution or develop the work habits necessary to excel in the workforce. Through these practices alternative schools can remarginalize their students and lead them to challenging lives in the future.

Earning a high school diploma is no longer a precursor to success in the Canadian workforce, and considerable evidence emanating from Statistics Canada highlights the economic and employment disparities between young people who have a high school diploma as their highest educational credential and those with a university degree (Marshal 2012; Martin, 2009). Marshal (2012) has elucidated how levels of educational attainment are directly correlated with future life outcomes, going on to highlight that students with only a high school diploma are approximately 40% more likely to be unemployed than those with a university degree. Considering that many of the youths attending alternative schools come from a low socioeconomic background, and that postsecondary educational access and success are directly tied to socioeconomic factors (Finnie et al., 2015), we can see a system of social reproduction occurring. The most disadvantaged students are pushed out of their mainstream schools due to their absenteeism, and end up in alternative schools, where they receive a poor quality of education that will likely lead them to low-end work positions, which further propagate social inequalities.

We are left then with two conceptions of alternative schools. One is the "safe haven," a place where youths experiencing challenges in their lives and difficulties in their mainstream schools can go and flourish, achieving not only academically, but also socially. This conception of alternative schools presents them as spaces where adolescents have their needs met in a warm and caring environment. On the other hand, we can conceptualize alternative schools as the "dumping grounds" of the educational system. Schools that serve little purpose than to keep "difficult" youths away from their "normal" mainstream counterparts in segregated holding tanks until they are legally old enough to drop out of school. This representation of alternative schools depicts images of unlawful and dangerous students, who come from broken homes, have no

interest in their schoolwork, and pose a threat to society. These notions have become so ingrained within our society that a number of films (e.g. Freedom Writers, Detachment, and Precious) although not only concerned with alternative schools, nevertheless portray these youths as challenges to be overcome.

It appears that alternative schools have the potential to successfully serve at-risk youths; however, these schools may experience problems, and can in fact perpetuate the cycle of educational inequality evident in some mainstream schools. The mixed results point to the varying conceptions and goals of alternative schools, and how they are organized. One of the purposes of this research is to document the impacts, whether they be positive or negative, the alternative schools in the sample have on their students' lives.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

At the onset it may appear that absenteeism is fairly easy to define and conceptualize, wherein the definition focuses primarily on whether a student is present or absent in school. However, the absenteeism literature does contain a number of conceptualizations of absenteeism, each framing the "fault" of absenteeism on different actors. I begin this conceptual framework by outlining the existing conceptualizations of absenteeism being used in the literature, and offer a critique, arguing that they all contain several shortcomings. In order to avoid some of these limitations I recommend the adaptation of the voluntary/involuntary absence framework from workplace studies. This framework is more attuned to the motivational and structural dimensions of absenteeism, not currently recognized by the majority of absenteeism research and schools.

Mainstream schools generally treat all absences the same, assuming the absence is the fault of the student, thereby punishing students for non-attendance regardless of cause. As a result of this neglect a number of students prone to absenteeism leave secondary schooling prior to graduation. They do so for a myriad of reasons, and to capture these decisions I utilize the concepts of *push*, *pull* and *fade* out of school, as used in the dropout literature. As all of the student participants in this research attended and left at least one mainstream high school, a school leaving framework provides clarity to their decision to do so. By seeing how students are actively pushed, pulled, or fade out of schools highlights the mainstream schools' inability and/or unwillingness to dedicate the necessary resources to effectively respond to absenteeism.

Lastly, the concepts of *safe haven* and *dumping ground* are introduced to demark the two binary conceptions of alternative schools found in the literature. This distinction is crucial as it positions alternative schools as being either well-suited to assist absentees in graduating or being

a holding tank until the students are old enough to be legally allowed to leave school prior to graduation. Cumulatively the conceptual framework articulates how students are often absent for reasons beyond their control, and are punished for non-attendance at mainstream schools, which results in them being pushed, pulled or fading out prior to graduation. As all of the students attended alternative schools at the time of data collection, I trace the effectiveness of these schools in responding to absenteeism; graduating their students; and preparing them for future success (see Figure 1 below).

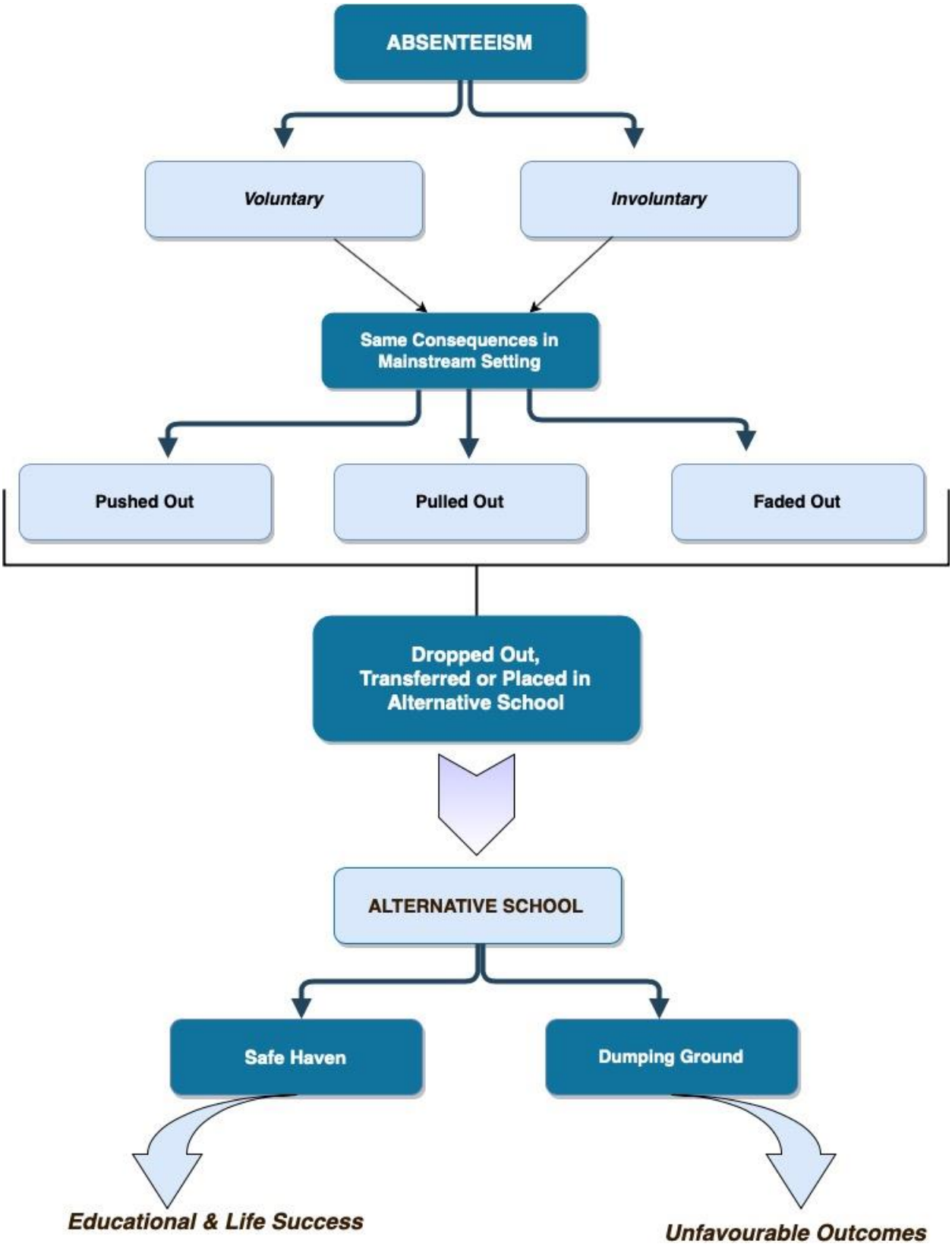

Figure 1. Schematic of Conceptual Framework.

Conceptualizing Absenteeism

Researchers have struggled to define and conceptualize absenteeism, and a generally agreed upon definition of absenteeism has proven to be quite elusive (Hobbs, Kotlaja, & Wylie, 2018). With researchers based in distinct disciplines, employing discrete methodological and theoretical approaches to studying absenteeism, there is little surprise that the field is plagued by conceptual debates and ambiguity. In a recent review, Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin and Gentle-Genitty (2019) documented 49 different conceptualizations of absenteeism used in the literature.

While many definitions are interrelated, and there is much overlap between the categories, they nonetheless have distinct approaches to framing absenteeism. I unpack the five conceptualizations of absenteeism most commonly used in the literature: *excused/unexcused* and *authorized/unauthorized absences*; *truancy*; *school refusal*; *school withdrawal*; *Kearney's model*, as developed by Christopher Kearney; and, school exclusion. I then move on to critique the current conceptualizations and introduce the *voluntary/involuntary* absenteeism framework used in this research.

Excused/unexcused & authorized/unauthorized absences. The most common differentiation of absenteeism is based on whether an absence is 'excused' or 'unexcused' by the school (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006). Excused absences are defined as "those that are legally justified and often due to illness, hazardous weather conditions, family emergency or travel, or other sanctioned release" (Kearney, 2016, p. 2), and are treated as legitimate causes for a student being absent (Lyon & Cotler, 2009). Excused absences are generally tolerated by the schools and are not considered to be "indicative of academic, family, or social problems" (Gottfried, 2009, p. 393). Contrasted to these 'unavoidable' absences are unexcused absences, which refer to a

student being absent without being excused by the school and parent (Eaton, Brener & Kann, 2008). The excused/unexcused absence category does not explicitly place responsibility of the absence on a particular individual. However, by positioning the school and the family as the arbitrator to legitimize an absence as excused, the student is therefore considered to be responsible for all unexcused absences. This is accomplished by defining excused absences as occurring largely for involuntary reasons (e.g. being sick); and hence, by the same thought, assuming all unexcused absences to be the students' voluntary decision.

Recently Hancock and colleagues (2018) have suggested the employment of an authorized/unauthorized absence framework to distinguish between different types of absenteeism. Authorized absences are defined as being accepted by the school and are generally short-term (e.g. illness, suspension); however, the authors acknowledge that some authorized absences may be excessive due to a prolonged illness (Hancock et al., 2018). Unauthorized absences are split into student-driven (i.e. school refusal) and parent-driven (i.e. parental withdrawal) absences. The authorized/unauthorized framework bares much similarity to the excused/unexcused binary. However, while the excused/unexcused framework implicitly blames only the student for the absence, the authorized/unauthorized concepts explicitly blame students and/or their family for non-attendance. In the authorized/unauthorized frame the family loses the privilege of excusing or legitimizing an absence, leaving the school as the only arbitrator. Yet the two concepts are fundamentally intertwined, seeing absenteeism as binary: approved or unapproved. Thus, all absences that are not legitimated by the school are considered unexcused/unauthorized and are often labeled as truancy - a criminal offense in many jurisdictions, including Ontario (*Ontario Education Act*, 1990).

Truancy. Truancy is generally defined as any unexcused or unauthorized absence from school (Claes et al., 2009; Gentle-Genitty, Karikari, Chen, Wilka, & Kim, 2015) and is often correlated with "anti-school sentiments and antisocial characteristics such as finding school boring and seeking more rewarding activities outside of school" (Havik et al., 2015, p. 222). Truancy has been linked with conduct disorder and is generally considered a deviant act of the child. The 5th Edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM V) connects conduct disorders with a range of negative outcomes such as: disciplinary measures in school; risky sexual behaviour; physical altercations; pregnancy; and, involvement in the criminal justice system. These behaviours are then linked to a lack of attendance at school (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While this conception prescribes conduct disorder as the antecedent to truancy, within the absenteeism literature this linear pathology is not always made apparent, as there is difficulty in discerning "whether truancy leads to risk behaviors, or risk behaviors lead to truancy, or the two are simply correlated" (Gage et al., 2013, p. 118). Regardless of the trajectory of truancy vis-à-vis conduct disorder, the majority of absenteeism research typically treats truancy as any unexcused absence from school regardless of cause (De Witte & Csillag, 2012). A related concept of school refusal utilizes a psychological model of absenteeism, looking for psychiatric explanations for non-attendance.

School refusal. The concept of school refusal is primarily based in a psychiatric model of absenteeism, where a child deliberately refuses to go to school (Carroll, 2015). There are similarities between school refusal and truancy, however in DSM V school refusal is attributed to anxiety, whereas truancy is linked to conduct disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Within the school refusal literature, absenteeism is thought to originate from a child's

experience of emotional upset at the prospect of having to attend school, where students may experience anxiety of and avoidance to coming to school (Evans, 2000). For example, some children may feel separation anxiety from being apart from their parent; and/or have testing anxiety that is severe enough for them to miss school (Kearney, 2016). In this framing of absenteeism, the child's mental state is the primary explanation for the absenteeism behaviour (Evans, 2000). What is distinctive about school refusal is that the child cannot exhibit anti-social behaviour, as this would classify the absence as "truancy." Also, in order for absenteeism to be considered school refusal the guardians must be aware of the absenteeism and must have made attempts to ensure their child attends school. If this condition is not met the absenteeism is classified as school withdrawal (Heyne et al., 2019).

School withdrawal. School withdrawal refers to a guardian's deliberate attempts to keep their child from school (Heyne et al., 2019). In this conceptualization of absenteeism, the guardians of an absentee are held accountable for the absenteeism, as they purposefully kept their child from school. Causes for school withdrawal are varied and include: the student providing assistance to the family at home; economic and financial concerns; hiding of maltreatment; separation anxiety; and, perceived threats at school (Kearney, 2008b). While it is acknowledged that school withdrawal tends to be more prominent when children are young and more dependent on their carer, the patterns of absenteeism can develop at a young age and persist into adolescence (Kearney, 2008b).

Kearney's model. Unsatisfied with the fragmented nature of the absenteeism field, and its inability to come to an agreed upon conceptualization of absenteeism, Christopher Kearney

(2003; 2008) developed his own comprehensive model of absenteeism. Kearney's (2008) framework begins by differentiating between *non-problematic* and *problematic* absenteeism. Non-problematic absenteeism is defined as "formal or informal school absence agreed on by parents and school officials as legitimate and not involving detriment to the child" (Kearney, 2008, p. 264), and this conceptualization bares similarity to *excused* absences previously discussed. The distinction is that non-problematic absences must be agreed upon both by the family and the school, thereby excluding school withdrawal. Problematic absenteeism is defined in numerical terms, comprising various absenteeism rates (e.g. a student must miss at least 25% of all classes for at least 2 weeks) that classify absenteeism as falling into the problematic grouping (Kearney, 2008). The logic behind this schema is that problematic absenteeism is the type of absenteeism that is of concern to researchers and school officials. Thus, it is first necessary to establish that the absenteeism is problematic, before determining the causes for the absence. This model is arguably more streamlined but does little to explain *why* the absence is occurring.

School exclusion. A recent addition of school exclusion to the conceptualization of absenteeism has been proposed by Heyne and colleagues (2019). At face value, school exclusion appears to be promising, as it holds the school accountable for the forced (i.e. involuntary) absence of a student. However, the authors offer quite a narrow set of actions that fall within the school exclusion category: illegal disciplinary measures; failure to accommodate special learning/emotional needs; and, encouraging students to be absent during high-stakes testing (Heyne et al., 2019). Thus, holding schools accountable for non-attendance only when they break the law; or, when they are unwilling to ensure special educational needs are honoured; or, when

attempting to avoid negative evaluations, serves to mitigate the other school-based causes of absenteeism described in the "Literature Review" of this dissertation.

Critique of the field. The lack of consistent conceptualizations of absenteeism have exasperated the field and a number of academics have voiced frustration at the inability to develop an agreed upon framework (Barry et al., 2011; Darmody et al., 2008). There are contrasting values and labels attributed to absenteeism, and this quandary of inconsistency presents challenges to both studying absenteeism and attempting to remedy the behaviour. A number of criticisms are directed at the current conceptualizations of absenteeism, namely: imprecision and difficulty in differentiation; placing the blame on the student and family; and simplification of the absenteeism phenomena.

The majority of the criticism is focused on the inability to effectively discern whether absences are *legitimate* or *illegitimate* (Wilson et al., 2008). With numerous informal terminologies being utilized, there is difficulty distinguishing between the different types of absenteeism (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). This issue is apparent in the challenges of differentiating between excused/unexcused and authorized/unauthorized absences. There is much debate as to what constitutes an excused absence, and how absences are categorized within this framework (Hobbs et al., 2018). For example, some schools may excuse students to go on holiday with their family, but a student missing a day of school to earn an income may be considered to be absent without an excuse. Relying on the school as the arbitrator of an absence provides an imprecise account of absenteeism, as schools tend to demark absences in different ways (Reid, 2008). Therefore, the excused/unexcused and authorized/unauthorized labels lack stability, and this unreliability has drawn much criticism from various academics (Darmody et

al., 2008; Gastic, 2008; Jonasson, 2011). Moreover, both frameworks largely blame the student and/or their family for the absenteeism, treating it as deliberate decision; thereby ignoring the school and societal factors that may be prohibiting steady attendance.

The second concern with the current conceptualizations of absenteeism is their connotation that the problem lies with the child as implied by the labels of truancy and school refusal; or with the family by the concept of school withdrawal (Barry et al., 2011). Thus, the onus for absenteeism is primarily directed at the absentee and their family, rather than the school or wider societal factors that have a dramatic impact on a pupil's ability to attend. Absenteeism is usually presented as a voluntary and rational choice on the part of the student and/or their family. While the school exclusion framework attempts to mitigate this misdirected blaming process, the narrow set of school-based factors that comprise school exclusion allows the schools to shirk much of their culpability in non-attendance. Moreover, societal causes of absenteeism receive little mention in any of the frameworks so far discussed. Thus, most of the frameworks provide a biased and simplified account of absenteeism, one that tends to overwhelmingly hold the student and their family accountable for non-attendance. However, research has documented that absentees are a heterogenous group, and that individual students miss school for numerous reasons (Carroll, 2015).

The conceptual frameworks so far presented provide a decontextualized interpretation of the absenteeism phenomenon, one that fails to account for complexity of the lives of the absentees. This shortcoming is arguably as much due to the overreliance on quantitative methodological approaches to studying absenteeism within the field, as it is of the conceptual frameworks being employed. Nevertheless, discrete variable testing does not deliver a holistic understanding of student absenteeism, as Carroll (2015) elucidates:

> neither truants, school phobics/school refusers nor those who had attendance at or below/absence at or above a specific value were found to constitute a homogenous group, and given the problems relating to the terms truancy and school phobia/school refusal…there is clearly a need for an alternative term to cover these, to some extent, different forms of school attendance problems (p. 52).

Thus, it is apparent that the current conceptualizations of absenteeism are, at best, attempts to categorize extremely convoluted behaviours. While it must be acknowledged that the field has progressed in its recognition of school-based and societal-based factors causing absenteeism, the conceptual frameworks currently employed have not yet caught up to the lived realities many students face. The conceptualizations outlined above maintain and preserve connotations that absenteeism is, by and large, a student's and their family's responsibility. Moreover, they present absenteeism as a voluntary decision predominantly associated with the motivational drive students have in coming to school, rather than acknowledging structural barriers to attendance. In order to address this shortcoming, I have adapted the concepts of voluntary and involuntary absenteeism from workplace research which acknowledge both motivational and structural causes of absenteeism within its definition (Birioukov, 2016; Driver & Watson, 1989; Hackett & Guion, 1985; Steers & Rhodes, 1978).

Voluntary/Involuntary Absenteeism

Before explicating the concepts of voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, and how they are applied to this research, it is pertinent to consider the voluntary/involuntary nature of the Canadian schooling system.

Every province in Canada has legislation stipulating that all youths attend school every day, and a failure to do so is considered to be a criminal offense (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019). Thus, students are expected to be in school regardless of their desire to be there, and some students may be forced to be in school

involuntarily. John Ogbu's (Ogbu & Simmons,1998) cultural-ecological theory on voluntary and involuntary minorities in the U.S. provides some context for this assertion. Ogbu (1995; 1995b) argues that some minorities are voluntary, in that these peoples have voluntarily chosen to immigrate to the U.S. Whereas, involuntary minorities were conquered, colonized and/or enslaved into the U.S., and are forced to take part in the dominant society. Ogbu (1995; 1995b) attributes varying attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of minority groups to their voluntary and involuntary status. Voluntary minorities are more likely to "buy" into the dominant society, and by extension its educational system. Involuntary minorities are more likely to be resistant to the dominant educational system, which they consider to be oppressive (Ogbu 1995; 1995b; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). While both groups are cognizant that educational credentials and skills taught in school are vital for economic success, the cost of "buying" into dominant educational systems is considered differently by voluntary and involuntary groups. Voluntary groups see dominant education as an addition to their sense of self, or as Ogbu (1995; 1995b) terms it, *cultural frames of reference*. Whereas, involuntary groups see dominant education as subtracting from their cultural frame of reference through forcible assimilation. The notion of being a voluntary or involuntary member of a community can be transplanted to Canadian schools, where some youths "buy" into the schooling structure, with its set of rewards and punishments, while others do not and act out in defiance of a system they perceive to be inequitable. Thus, Canadian schools can be conceptualized as containing students who are voluntary or involuntary participants. As an extension of Ogbu's (Ogbu 1995; 1995b; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998) theorizing, we can see how students who are involuntarily forced to be in school may actively resist schooling through absenteeism. This conceptualization of absenteeism, although not explicitly articulated, pervades the majority of the absenteeism literature, as it envisions

disaffected youths deliberately missing school. Thus, students who are involuntarily forced to be in school voluntarily choose to abstain from the institution. A look at educational motivation theory elucidates this point further.

Self-determination theory. The field of educational motivation is a broad one, with a number of interweaving and overlapping theories attempting to explain children's behaviour in educational contexts (Kaplan, Katz, & Flue, 2012). Although the majority of these theories are focused on motivation in academic and/or learning tasks, and not on absenteeism per se, a subbranch of motivation theory, *self-determination theory*, can provide insight into how absenteeism is implicitly conceptualized within the absenteeism literature.

Rather than seeing motivation as static, something that one either does or not have, self-determination theory conceptualizes motivation as a continuum, one which is composed of gradients (Graham & Weiner, 2012). On the one end of the spectrum is *intrinsic motivation*, where an individual performs a task due to internal interest of the task; whilst on the other is *amotivation*, referring to a complete lack of motivation whatsoever (Ryan & Deci, 2016). *Extrinsic motivation* occupies a middle space, where varying typologies of extrinsic motivation bridge the divide between intrinsic motivation and amotivation.

When a student has *intrinsic motivation* they both *value* and have an *interest* in the activity and/or behaviour being performed (Ryan & Deci, 2016). Thus, students who genuinely enjoy and see the value of going to school can be conceptualized as having an intrinsic motivation to attend and are unlikely to have any absences. When a student does not have an internal *interest* in doing a task (i.e. going to school) but can appreciate its *value* (i.e. getting an education) they are thought to have *extrinsic motivation*. Self-determination theory differentiates

between four types of extrinsic motivation (*integrated, identified, introjected, external*), that "vary in the degree to which individuals engage in autonomously regulated behavior" (Graham & Weiner, 2012, p. 377); or, in other words, these gradations reflect the amount of autonomy a student has in deciding to carry out an action (e.g. going to school). A student who has *integrated regulation* sees the alignment of steady attendance to their ultimate goal of graduating high school, and thus attends regularly. Whereas a student exhibiting *identified regulation* may see the value of attendance in a more abstract sense connoted by others around them (i.e. family, school personnel, societal cues), and their frequency of attendance may be reflective of the social influences around them. Pupils holding *introjected regulation* see little value in coming to school but continue to do so in order to adhere to social norms and avoid punishment. Lastly, when a student has *external regulation* they attend school only when external rewards or punishments are used to induce their attendance. Thus, the motivation to attend can be seen as diminishing from intrinsic to the sliding scales of extrinsic motivation, where attendance at school progressively becomes more coerced, and less of an autonomous decision. Therefore, we can reasonably expect absenteeism to worsen as a student moves from being intrinsically motivated to attend to having only external regulation to come to school. This, process culminates in what Ryan and Deci (2016) term "*amotivation*," where there is no longer any motivation to perform a task, in this case to come to school.

Self-determination theory aids in clarifying how the majority of the absenteeism field conceptualizes absenteeism (albeit without ever acknowledging this theoretical framing). We all want children to enjoy and appreciate going to school and do our utmost to ensure their experience is a pleasant one. The solutions to absenteeism often attempt to increase intrinsic motivation, or to move students towards higher level extrinsic motivational behaviours (i.e.

identified regulation). Here we see attempts to improve schooling experiences in order to increase the motivation to attend. However, counter to the theory, schools also frequently employ punishments as an attempt to improve attendance, which have been documented to achieve the opposite results they are supposed to (Ryan & Deci, 2016). Nevertheless, the approaches to conceptualizing absenteeism found in the literature tend to align themselves to the self-determination model of motivation to attend school. However, what is missing is a consideration of what happens when a student has high intrinsic motivation to attend, but due to life circumstances cannot do so. As this research will show, this omission neglects to consider the often imposed structural barriers to attendance many students must navigate.

Referring back to the theorization of John Ogbu (1995, 1995b), what has so far not been contemplated in much depth within the absenteeism literature is the opposite side of the spectrum, where students who voluntarily wish to be in school must be involuntarily absent due to life conditions (e.g. poverty). These voluntary participants in school are hindered in their participation in schooling activities through involuntary absenteeism. Thus, absenteeism becomes less a matter of defiance and voluntary abstention from school; and, more of concern about *access* to schooling. Self-determination theory sheds light on the motivational aspects of absenteeism, however it does not address external barriers that are unrelated to motivational aspects of attendance. Thus, by primarily focusing on the motivation as the determinant of attendance, the absenteeism literature fails to account for imposed hinderances to students' attendance. Framing absenteeism as involuntary articulates the structural causes of absenteeism not captured by existing absenteeism frameworks and progresses our conceptualization of absenteeism further. In order to theorize the full complexity of the absenteeism dilemma, we

need to differentiate between the motivational and structural causes of student absenteeism, and this is where the voluntary/involuntary absenteeism framework provides utility.

Voluntary/involuntary absenteeism in the literature. Driver and Watson (1989) postulate that "*voluntary* absences are under the worker's control and are typically short-term, casual and illegitimate" where "the decision to take a voluntary absence may be based on a worker's motivation to attend work" (p. 110, emphasis in original). Hackett and Guion (1985) too pay credence to the motivational aspects of absenteeism, stating that "the concept of 'voluntary absenteeism' implies volition; that the individual worker makes a *conscious decision* on whether to attend" (Hackett & Guion, 1985, p. 375, emphasis in original). These absences are in direct control of the worker, who may voluntarily miss work to avoid stress, tension, anxiety, group norms, and other unattractive aspects of the workplace. Few if any structural obstacles to attendance exist, and the decision to miss work is at the employee's discretion.

Involuntary absenteeism, on the other hand, is considered to be beyond an employee's control, and is related to substance abuse, familial responsibilities, and transportation (Steers & Rhodes, 1978). Involuntary absenteeism occurs whenever structural obstacles to attendance exist, and motivation plays little to no role in the absenteeism behaviour. There is little choice for an employee to attend, and they are effectively barred from doing so, as Steers and Rhodes (1978) elucidate, "even if a person wants to come to work and has a high attendance motivation, there are many instances where such attendance is not possible, that is, where the individual does not have behavioral discretion or choice" (p. 400). Thus, a demarcation occurs, where the absenteeism behaviour is segregated based on the motivational and structural obstacles to attendance. By discerning whether the absence is voluntary or involuntary we begin to see the

underlying causes for an absence and implement varying strategies to alleviate or accommodate the behaviour.

The conceptualization of absenteeism as voluntary or involuntary has made its way into educational research, albeit in a limited way. This framework has been utilized to investigate the absenteeism patterns of teachers and administrators in Israel (Rosenblatt & Shirom, 2006; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Ishan, 2013); United Kingdom (Bradley, Green, Leeves, 2007); Norway (Carlsen, 2012); and Finland (Ervasti et al., 2012). Others have used this conceptualization to study absenteeism patterns of undergraduate nursing students in Ireland (Doyle, O'Brien, Timmins, Tobin, O'Rourke, & Doherty, 2008; Timmins & Kaliszer, 2002). However, aside from my and my colleague's writing on the subject (Birioukov, 2016; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019) this framework has yet to be utilized in K-12 absenteeism research.

Adaptation of voluntary/involuntary absenteeism for the present research. Within the secondary school context, voluntary absenteeism can be broadened to include the generic notions of "skipping school" that can be expected from the majority of youths. Some may willingly miss school to be with friends, stay home, or engage in some other type of activity outside of the school. Alongside this commonplace truancy are the motivational aspects of attendance mentioned by Driver and Watson (1989). Hostile peers and/or teachers; seemingly irrelevant curriculum; punitive behavioural punishments; academic failure; and, dilapidated buildings can all motivate a student not to attend. Involuntary absenteeism operates in three overlapping spheres of: student health; social/emotional barriers; and life conditions. Students absent due to an illness miss school through no fault of their own. Cases of bullying and sexual harassment can cause students to fear for their safety, thereby erecting a social barrier to

attendance. Lastly, having to work or move frequently; caring for a family member; and, being involved in the criminal justice system are all examples of structural obstacles to attendance, where a student may wish to attend, but their ability to do so is compromised. These causes are centred on factors that make attending extremely difficult if not outright impossible.

Using this framework allows for the demarcation of the cause of an absence and the development of appropriate responses to each type of absenteeism. Making the school more welcoming is an excellent strategy to decrease motivational (i.e. voluntary) absenteeism but is unlikely to have any tangible results if a student is absent involuntarily. The attractiveness of the school will have a limited capacity to ensure that a student who must spend hours standing in line at the food bank is present at school. Involuntary absences often require *accommodations* that allow a student to miss some class without penalty. The acknowledgement that some students will miss school regardless of preventative efforts is a major break from the absenteeism literature, and through the employment of the voluntary/involuntary absenteeism framework I aim to prove this assertion. The first step in doing so is to document how mainstream schools are currently conceptualizing absenteeism as a voluntary decision. Documenting the student participants' experiences with voluntary/involuntary absenteeism in the mainstream setting and their schools' responses to their non-attendance will elucidate how mainstream schools do not acknowledge involuntary absenteeism. The schools' failure to address both types of absenteeism highlights how many mainstream high schools are currently failing their most disadvantaged students. Pupils, who often come from marginalized backgrounds come to the school seeking guidance, assistance, and help. However, as exemplified by the current graduation rate of 86.5% in Ontario, it can be surmised that a significant portion of them do not receive it.

As all of the students in the sample attended, and left, at least one mainstream school in the past it is valuable to consider how to conceptualize the school leaving decision. Borrowing the terms of push, pull and fade out from the dropout literature, which bear similarity to voluntary/involuntary absenteeism articulates how students are often forced to leave mainstream schools due to the schools' inability or unwillingness to provide absenteeism responses aimed at both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism.

Push, Pull and Fade – Factors Causing Dropping Out of School

The dropout literature is arguably more advanced in its theorizations on school leaving, than the field of absenteeism is in its conception of non-attendance. The two main loci of schooling leaving factors are generally termed as "either *push* factors that force a student out of school, or *pull* factors that interfere with a student's commitment to his or her education" (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011, p. 522, emphasis added). Push factors are associated with negative schooling structures and environments that implicitly or explicitly push a student to leave school and are similar to voluntary absenteeism (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983). Whereas, pull factors resemble involuntary absenteeism, as they describe factors occurring in an adolescent's life (e.g. prolonged sickness, pregnancy, having to work) that effectively pull them out of school (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Alongside these common terms is the concept of *fade out* suggested by George Sefa Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine (1997) in their ethnography of racialized Black dropouts in Ontario

> some students also included in their definition of a drop-out students who are still officially 'at' school, but who are involved in a process of 'fading out' or disengagement. These students were characterized as skipping classes, hanging out, 'acting out,' and not being involved in the formal aspects of the school (pp. 46-7)

Thus, there are three complementary conceptions of leaving school prior to graduation, those of push, pull, and fade. The push and pull factors bear a marked resemblance to voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. Whereas, fading out can be linked to the slow process of disengagement from schooling that is almost always predicated on absenteeism. While not all absentees end up leaving school prior to graduation, there is a considerable body of evidence indicating that nearly all dropouts have exhibited absenteeism in their past (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Bridgeland, 2010; The Hospital for Sick Children, 2005).

The pertinence of the push, pull, and fade out factors to the present study is their connection to the absenteeism behaviour (Ekstrand, 2015). What can be gleaned from the vast amounts of research on absentees and dropouts is the fact that for a plethora of reasons many students are not given an opportunity to succeed in mainstream high schools. These pupils, who face challenges in their schooling are effectively blamed for their failure and "helped out the door" (Sefa Dei et al., 1997, p. 68) by their schools. Rather than attempting to assist their students in overcoming the obstacles (both motivational and structural) to their attendance, schools often adhere to rigid attendance policies that punish students for non-attendance regardless of cause. Students are effectively blamed for their inability to adhere to attendance expectations, which often causes premature school leaving. In mainstream schools there is little seeking, let alone understanding, of students' lives and opinions concerning their education (Caine, 2013). Instead of being encouraged and supported, many students experiencing difficulties in and out of school are simply pushed, pulled or fade away from their education (Fine, 1991). Differentiating the three pathways of school leaving allows for a more honed analysis of the mainstream schools' reactions and responses to absenteeism. Students who are pushed out of school highlight the mainstream schools' unwillingness to differentiate between

different types of absenteeism; and, the schools' placement of blame for non-attendance on the student. This conceptualization of leaving school underscores how many mainstream schools actively remove students deemed to be too difficult to manage from their rolls. Whereas, investigating pull factors emphasizes mainstream schools' current inability of delivering the necessary supports for their students to succeed. Whenever a student leaves school to attend to pressing matters in their lives (e.g. work; raising a child), and is not adequately supported in their schooling, is an indication of the failure of the school to meet student need. Lastly, tracing how students fade out of school allows for the examination of the attendance raising strategies, or lack thereof, utilized in mainstream schools. Student disengagement is a slow process one that generally occurs with the school's knowledge (Sefa Dei et al., 1997). Thus, when students are allowed to fade out of school the school itself is held accountable. Separating students' decisions to leave school into these three categories provides more clarity to the mainstream schools' reactions and responses to absenteeism. These will be juxtaposed with the alternative schools' responses to absenteeism.

Alternative schools have been described in the "Literature Review" section of this dissertation. While alternative schools appear promising in their ability to both raise attendance and accommodate absenteeism, there are conflicting results in the literature. Some argue that alternative schools are *safe havens,* which are warm and supportive environments where students flourish (Wishart, 2009); whereas others charge that alternative schools should be seen as the *dumping grounds* for unwanted or difficult students (Cox, 1999). This distinction is important, as it informs how we conceptualize alternative schools.

Alternative Schools – Safe Havens or Dumping Grounds?

Alternative schools are imbued with both positive and negative connotations. These attributes, or perhaps more accurately termed as labels, are generally represented by the metaphors of safe havens and dumping grounds.

On the one hand, there is the image of the alternative school as a warm and caring environment where students' needs are met at every level, as Wishart (2009) exemplifies "students need this safe haven, a place to go where they are accepted and protected from the violence and difficult circumstances of their lives outside of school" (p. 18). In this idyllic conception, alternative schools are a refuge for pupils who have been pushed, pulled or faded out of mainstream schooling. These youths are finally able to find a place where they are cared for, understood, and respected. Alternative schools possess tremendous potential in (re)engaging the hardest to reach students in the educational system. These small environments can be flexible enough to motivate and accommodate students, as well as propagating educational success. However, as mentioned previously, alternative schools are not without their critics, who have voiced concerns regarding that "these schools were alternative in name only and represented ineffective and often punitive approaches that isolated, stigmatized, and segregated difficult children from the mainstream, traditional schools" (Hemmer et al., 2013, p. 657).

The above quote represents the other conceptualization of alternative schools, namely the dumping ground metaphor, where students are dumped into alternative schools that are unprepared or unwilling to provide the necessary services to ensure students succeed (Cox, 1999). The dumping ground conception of alternative schools frames these institutions as mere holding tanks with little structure, and limited learning opportunities. Rather than serving as a unique setting for at-risk youths to progress with their education, conceptualizing alternative

schools as dumping grounds points to their potential to stream disadvantaged students to narrow future life outcomes (see Figure 1).

While alternative schools can be conceptualized as safe havens or dumping grounds, it is likely that each alternative school will have aspects of both. However, if alternative schools are to be used as locations to assist absentees with advancing their education, we must critically assess their practices. A failure to do so may result in the segregation of disadvantaged students to diminished educational opportunities in separate alternative schools. This research utilizes the concepts of safe haven and dumping ground to demark both the positive and negative aspects of the alternative schools in the sample, and their role in reducing and/or raising issues associated with absenteeism (e.g. academic failure; lack of preparedness for postsecondary education; premature school leaving).

Conclusion

Focusing on why the youths miss school through a voluntary/involuntary classification provides a detailed account of the absenteeism trajectories of the student participants in this study. The students' process of leaving school and transitioning into the alternative setting is seen through the lens of the push, pull, and fade out factors. This is followed by a thorough investigation of the students' experiences within the alternative setting, and whether alternative schools espouse the *safe haven* or *dumping ground* conceptions, or perhaps contain aspects of both.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Student absenteeism has received significant scholarly attention over the past thirty years (Kearney, 2003). Considering the link between absenteeism and schooling leaving; and the serious implications of early school withdrawal for students (Archambault et al., 2009), it is not surprising that academics have been concerned about alleviating absenteeism. However, the approaches to studying the topic have been somewhat homogenous, with quantitative designs historically and currently predominating. While quantitative designs are necessary to the study of absenteeism, they do present several shortcomings which can be overcome by employing a qualitative methodology that I pursued in this research.

Predominance of Quantitative Methods

While both the dropout literature (Fine, 1991; Sefa Dei et al., 1997) and alternative school research (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Morrissette, 2011) contain qualitative studies, within the absenteeism discourse this type of research is underutilized, an issue noted by Christenson et al. (2001) in their comment "the omission of qualitative data, particularly data that represent the voices of students about individual factors and contextual influences, is sobering" (p.481). Although some researchers have utilized qualitative research methods to study absenteeism, such as interviews (Reid, 2007), focus groups (Reid, 2008), and ethnographies (Jonasson, 2011), the majority of absenteeism research is quantitatively designed. Due to their numerical nature, quantitative methods are efficient tools to process large amounts of data that would be virtually impossible with qualitative approaches (Metz, 2000). School boards and provincial/state governments are increasingly seeking large-scale interventions to absenteeism, and this may be a motivating factor for researchers to implement quantitatively designed studies.

The ability to carry out large-scale surveys, which dominate absenteeism research, is also bolstered by access to school attendance records, which are readily available in a number of countries (Claes et al., 2009). For example, Gottfried (2009) relied on census data for student demographics; and school records for achievement and absences, to determine whether there was an association between absenteeism and academic achievement. Being able to sample large representative samples, quantitative research is arguably more efficient and effective at providing educational professionals aggregate data on the characteristics of absentees, their families, and their schools. This information, with its numerical neatness, is a practical tool for educators seeking explanations as to why students are absent from school. Moreover, broad findings may be easier to transplant to different locales, than the more context-specific qualitative data (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina, 2006). Thus, the perceived need for large-scale studies, and availability of data sets, encourages quantitative research designs. This, however, comes at a cost.

Limitations of Quantitative Methods

Within the absenteeism literature there are concerns about the wide discrepancies in how "absentees" are defined. The classification of a student as an absentee has a direct impact on the sampling procedures of quantitative researchers; and these categorical inconsistencies confound much of the absenteeism literature. Furthermore, a reliance on surveys administered in the school can distort the findings, as a large number of students of interest (absentees) may not be in school the day the survey is administered (Eaton et al., 2008). Henry (2007) reported that 12% of students in his sample were absent on the day of the survey. Keppens & Spryut (2019), had a similar issue, leading them to conclude "it is plausible that those who were absent at the time of

the survey were skipping classes" (p. 1153). Considering that absent students are the ones of concern, this is a significant limitation of survey designs. This may explain some contradictory results found in quantitative studies. For example, Ham (2004) and De Witte and Csillag (2012) found that gender was related to absenteeism, whereas Gottfried (2009) and Henry and Huizinga (2007) did not find this correlation.

Quantitative studies also run the risk of what Lee and Staff (2007) term *omitted variable bias*, which refers to extraneous variables that may be influencing behaviour, and a number of studies also cite this as one of their limitations (DeSocio et al., 2007; Flannery, et al., 2012; Hallfors et al., 2002; Landis & Reschly, 2011). Connected to the lack of variables to account for a behaviour is the inability to determine causality, as researchers cannot definitely prove that certain factors cause students to miss school (Jonasson, 2011). Being unable to perform experiments under the complete control of the researcher, establishing causality is a difficult endeavour in educational research (Hoy, 2010). The lack of causality creates difficulty in demarcating if the behaviour under study is created by the school or brought to the school by the student (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). For example, Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (2000) had difficulty delineating whether low student engagement occurred in high school (where their sample was situated) or if the students brought these habits with them from the lower grades. Likewise, Attwood and Croll (2015), studying the relationship between truancy and mental health found correlations between the two variables but could not prove that absenteeism was the cause of the mental health issues. Additionally, qualitative researchers have argued that "the probabilities that certain factors will lead a student to drop out provide statistics which yield a fragmented, decontextualized picture" (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2008, p. 27) and sought to address this shortcoming by describing "how the

lived experiences of dropouts have helped to shape their educational journeys" (p. 28). It is these considerations that motivated the utilization of a qualitative methodology for this study.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is concerned with deep understanding of human behaviour, one that is informed by the participants' experiences (Hoy, 2010). Much like Kennedy (1999) has argued, I do not believe that educational matters are ruled by universal laws and effects, and as a result, this research is purposefully context specific. The main objective of this research was to investigate how alternative schools respond to absenteeism, and qualitative methods aid in answering the "how" educational questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research relies on textual, rather than numerical data (Carter & Little, 2007), where processes and meanings are not measured "in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8), but rather in the depth of experiences captured. A qualitative methodology provided me an opportunity to investigate the complex and interconnected nature of absenteeism, which was useful in highlighting the heterogeneity of absentees, something rarely seen in the fragmented and isolated variable testing practices of quantitative designs. Moreover, the utilization of interviews ensured that the voices of the absentees themselves were heard.

Qualitative researchers have argued for a holistic account of absenteeism, with the inclusion of the perspectives of students, who are most affected by being absent from school (Ekstrand, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Reid, 2008). Although it can be argued that student questionnaires serve this function, there is a lack of depth and complexity in their analyses of the lived experiences of absentees. Considering that I myself was an absentee, I felt a personal obligation to ensure the students' voices were represented in the research.

Qualitative Case Studies

This research was designed as a qualitative multiple case study (Andrade, 2009; Barth & Thomas, 2012). Second-chance alternative schools showing potential to combat voluntary absenteeism and accommodate involuntary absenteeism were selected, with four schools in Ontario taking part in this research. Through conversations with students and staff, one of the aims of this inquiry was to document the "good practices" of these schools in relation to responding to absenteeism. Therefore, I chose the "instrumental case study" design suggested by Stake (1995), who presents a definition stating that when

> [We] have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case...Case study here is instrumental to accomplishing something other than understanding this particular teacher, and we may call our inquiry *instrumental case study* (p. 3, emphasis in original).

This design points to the purposeful nature of selecting the cases that took part in this research. Purposeful sampling is used to investigate specific cases that have potential to provide deep insight into the research question (Emmel, 2013). Rather than collecting limited insights from a large number of schools, I chose to undertake a more thorough investigation of four schools. While the findings of this research are specific to the individual schools, Hodgetts and Stolte (2012) argue that a strategic selection of case may yield findings that can be transplanted to other contexts.

Recruitment Procedures

To gather rich data concerning absenteeism I thought it would be valuable to interview a wide range of participants within alternative schools. I wished to speak with both staff and students, as their perceptions would provide multiple voices and perspectives regarding attendance and absenteeism. By speaking with curriculum leaders, who served as the

administrative arm of the schools, I was able to gather a more formal and organizational perspective on how the schools responded to absenteeism. Whereas interviewing teachers evoked the more daily activities of working with high-needs youths. Lastly, the students themselves were an invaluable source of information regarding how they perceived their attendance and absenteeism, and how their school was attempting to mitigate the issue.

School recruitment. Considering that the majority of alternative schools are located within urban areas I identified and contacted a number of urban school boards in Ontario that had alternative schools/programmes that fit the characteristics of "second chance alternative schools" described in the "Literature Review" section of this dissertation. Multiple school boards expressed an interest in participating in the research and I selected a large urban school board as the site for data collection. The rationale for this decision was that the diversity of a metropolitan hub would aid in finding a wide range of participants who would have unique perspectives on absenteeism not found in more homogenous settings.

Once ethical clearance from the school board was secured, I approached the principals who oversaw a number of alternative schools within the board about their interest in having their schools participate in this study. Personal meetings were arranged, during which I described my research and the type of schools I was seeking to sample. As each principal was in charge of many schools, they provided recommendations for which schools I should contact and visit.

With the school lists finalized I began to contact potential field sites and arranged meetings with school personnel. I was able to visit and recruit four schools that were interested in participating. Arrangements for scheduling interviews were made, and in May 2016 I began to carry out interviews in the selected schools.

Staff participant recruitment. The alternative schools within my sample were quite small in size, usually having 80-225 students on roll. As a result, each school employed 6-12 teachers and support staff. I introduced myself and my research to the staff members and asked if any were interested and available to participate. All of the staff within the sampled schools performed a number of tasks (i.e. cooking lunch for students; calling absent youths, etc.), in addition to their instructional duties. Therefore, most were consistently occupied with numerous responsibilities, and their free time during school hours was limited. Nevertheless, four staff members at three schools agreed to participate, and in the case of Bridgeport Alternative School[2], five staff members wished to be interviewed. The staff participants consisted primarily of curriculum leaders and teachers; however, a social worker, a child and youth worker, and a teacher who also served as a guidance counsellor were interviewed as well. The inclusion of support staff allowed for more varied opinions and experiences working with absentee youth.

The staff members were predominantly female (N=12), than male (N=5), which is reflective of the overall gender split within the educational professions. The racial/ethnic variables were likewise similar to the general makeup of school staff in Ontario, with 13 staff members identifying as Caucasian, 3 as Black-Canadian, and 1 as Asian-Canadian. All but two had worked in other schools prior to joining the alternative school, with staff having worked at 2.5 schools on average. The length of time the participants had worked at their current alternative school varied considerably, with one teacher being on a long-term occasional (LTO) contract, and another having spent her entire 40-year teaching career at the alternative school (see Appendix A for more detailed demographic information).

[2] To protect the participants' and schools' anonymity, all names are pseudonyms.

Student participant recruitment. When visiting the four schools that took part in this research, I often met with curriculum leaders. Without a principal on site, these individuals largely oversaw the daily functioning of the schools. As I was explaining my research, I made sure to mention that I was seeking to interview students who have had and/or continue to have troubles with attendance, and who are over the age of 18. Interviewing older students served two functions, the first being that these youths have been in the secondary schooling system for some time, thereby being able to offer deep insights into their absenteeism; while the second consideration was more pragmatic, as these students would be able to personally consent to being interviewed. I was quickly informed that the vast majority of the pupils enrolled in these schools were there primarily due to irregular attendance. Thus, there was a plethora of potential participants, the only consideration was to find time for them to take part in the interviews, as many had spotty attendance, and when in school, were focused on catching up on their assignments. In order to sample a wide range of students, I made myself widely available, and was present at each school for approximately a week. This ensured that I was able to interview students who may have been absent on a particular day(s), an issue not easily solved by quantitative approaches to the study of absenteeism.

This snowballing sampling technique (Emmel, 2013) proved to be quite useful, and in all, I interviewed ten students from each of the four schools, for a total of 40 pupil participants. The youths were selected by their teachers and/or curriculum leaders, who thought that these adolescents' stories and opinions would be beneficial for my research purposes. The selection of the student participants by the staff and not myself may have potentially affected the findings of this research. However, the staff members knew the students and their lives intimately and could suggest particular participants based on their past and/or present pattern of absenteeism.

Student participants ranged between 17 to 20 years of age; however only one participant was 17, and the average age was 18.5 years (for more detailed demographic information see Appendix B). 17 students self-identified as female, 21 as male, and 2 as non-binary, which, based on my anecdotal observations during my time in the schools was proportionate to the overall student body. An interesting and troubling finding was that only 7 out of 40 students lived with both biological parents, with the majority (N=23) living with a single parent, and a further 8 living alone or with a family member. This not only highlights the precarious financial position that many of these youths may have found themselves in, but also problematizes the often-held notion in absenteeism research that most absentees live within a nuclear family (DeSocio et al., 2007; Elliott, 1999; Flaherty et al., 2012). Lastly, all student participants had attended at least one secondary school prior to making the transition to the alternative site. On average, the youths attended two secondary schools before moving to the alternative school; however, a few participants mentioned that they had attended as many as seven high schools in the past. It should be noted that racial/ethnic data was not collected from the students. This was, admittedly, an oversight, as I did not consider race to be a focal point of the research. As described in the "Conceptual Framework" of this dissertation, the main focus of the research was absenteeism as a whole, and not a subsection of how certain students experienced absenteeism. Since absentees are a heterogeneous demographic, racial/ethnic data were not explicitly collected, as the scope of the research was a broad one. However, anecdotal data from memory, as well as school demographic records, show that my student samples were quite reflective of the general schools' make-ups, which were very diverse.

Semi-structured interviews. Seidman (2013) argues for the validity of carrying out interviews, stating that an "individual's consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on concrete experience of people" (p. 7), and that "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Utilizing interviews creates an opportunity to deeply engage with the participants' insights, something that is rarely possible with the more distanced quantitative approaches and observational studies (Forseym, 2012). Moreover, interviews allow a channel of investigation into matters that are not directly observable (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011). As noted previously, qualitative studies are rare in the field of absenteeism (Birioukov, 2016; Ekstrand, 2015), therefore the employment of interviews allowed the absentees themselves, and their opinions, to be heard.

Seidman (2013) proposes the utilization of open-ended questions. While the researcher knows the topic of interest, and is aware of the possible lines of investigation she or he may wish to pursue, the goal is to "build upon and explore [the] participants' responses to those questions" (Seidman, 2013, p. 14), therefore, while I developed and used an interview guide (see Appendix C), these questions were not rigid and were designed to allow maximum room for fluidity. Semi-structured interviews have a number of advantages. They allow room for flexibility, where points of interest and unexpected or unclear responses can be investigated further through follow-up questions. While conversely having participants answer the same set of questions ensured a standardization of responses and the material covered, thereby allowing for greater comparability (Barriball & While, 1994).

I adapted Seidman's (2013) three interview structure to suit the needs and confines of this research. Due to the relatively large number of participants, it proved too cumbersome to carry out three separate interviews with each interviewee. In addition to the logistical considerations was the fact that many of these youths miss considerable amounts of school, thereby scheduling three separate interviews at weekly intervals, as Seidman (2013) suggests, would ask the students to miss more school than they already do. Rather, I chose to split a single interview into three sections. With the staff participants I began by asking them to describe their past teaching experiences; moving on to their current perspectives on working in an alternative school; and ending with their ideas to make their school more effective in assisting absentee students in graduating. The student interviews were also split into three sections and were focused on: past schooling experiences and absenteeism prior to attending the alternative school; current school experiences; and aspirations for the future, as well as any suggestions they had for school improvement.

Interview procedure. As I was present at each school for a week, I consulted the staff to determine an ideal time and location to interview them. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the teachers' classrooms during their preparatory period; however, two took place as the teachers were preparing lunch for the students. The staff were reminded of the research purposes, the degree of their involvement, and their rights under the University of Ottawa ethical guidelines. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 25 and 71 minutes.

With the permission of their teachers, arrangements were made with the student participants, as the majority of the interviews took place during class time. Some students who could not miss class were interviewed during the lunch hour or after school. The student

interviews either took place in a vacant office or an empty classroom. The pupils were told a similar preamble as the teachers; however, I added my own personal information of being an absentee and leaving high school for six months. The student interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 9 and 51 minutes in length. The disparity in the length of the interviews was primarily caused by the varying comfort levels the student participants felt in talking about their lives and absenteeism. Some youths willingly described in often great detail what had caused them to be absent from school. While other pupils seemed much more guarded and provided rather short answers to similar questions.

The interviews were organized around three subquestions (see below) which cumulatively answered the main research question of this study: "How do four urban alternative schools in Ontario respond to absenteeism?"

Subquestion #1 "What are the participants experiences with absenteeism the mainstream setting and how did the participants transition to the alternative setting?"

This question formed the basis for the first third of the findings of this research. I was interested in documenting the students' patterns of absenteeism over the course of their high school journey. The students were asked to describe their schooling experiences and their absenteeism in the mainstream setting. The majority of the questions focused on why these students were absent in their previous school(s); how their old school(s) responded to their absenteeism; and what caused them to enroll in an alternative school. Whereas with the staff I wished to gain a better understanding of their career trajectories and what led them to work in the alternative setting. The staff were asked about: how they became involved in education; their past work at previous schools; and how they came to work in the alternative school. This line of

inquiry was aimed at enquiring about the staff's past work experiences; and how they contributed to their decision to work in the alternative setting. This line of inquiry with both the students and staff set the stage for investigating the types of absences (i.e. voluntary/involuntary) the alternative schools were faced with, and the strategies employed in responding to each type of absenteeism.

Subquestion #2 "What are the participants' perceptions of what the alternative school does to increase attendance and accommodate absenteeism?"

This part of the interviews was primarily concerned with the lived experiences of both staff and students in relation to absenteeism in the alternative schools. This was the crucial aspect of the interview process, as this is where the questions turned to the day-to-day responses to absenteeism within the alternative school. The questions mainly revolved around particular examples of absenteeism responses. The overarching goal was documenting how these alternative schools both attempted to increase attendance and accommodate students who were not able to attend consistently, thereby mitigating both types of absenteeism. The staff members were asked to provide information on how their school responds to attendance and absenteeism (including both raising attendance and accommodating absentees). The students were asked to describe how they navigate the school's expectations of attending; how often they were currently absent; what the school does to ensure that they attend; and the treatment (e.g. punishment, accommodation strategies) they receive for being absent. During this stage the participants were asked to think about and remark on how their school responded to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, and whether it was effective at doing this. The objective was to compare the perceptions of the staff and students regarding how attendance and absenteeism

were handled within the school. This process aided in discerning whether the alternative schools were effective in reducing voluntary absenteeism; while simultaneously presenting an account of the strategies aimed at accommodating involuntary absenteeism.

A secondary purpose of this line of questioning was to seek out responses concerning whether alternative schools within the sample resembled the "dumping ground" or "safe haven" conceptions of alternative schools outlined in the "Conceptual Framework." The staff were asked direct questions concerning the academic quality of their school, and whether their school normalizes absenteeism through its flexible approach. Whereas, the students were asked about how much they were learning in the alternative school compared to their previous mainstream school(s); if the high prevalence of absenteeism within the alternative setting encouraged them to miss more school; and if they wished they had remained in the mainstreams setting. These questions were coupled with suggestions for improvements from both staff and students.

Subquestion #3 'What are the participants' suggestions on improving the alternative schools' abilities to proactively respond to absenteeism and assist absentee students in graduating?'

This last avenue of inquiry focused on gathering the participants' perceptions on what the alternative schools could further do to help all students, regardless of the ability to attend, to graduate. The overall aim of this question was principally concerned with suggestions for additional actions the alternative schools, the school board, and the Ministry of Education could take to both raise attendance and accommodate involuntary absenteeism. This aspect of the interview was instrumental in: allowing student ideas to be considered and respected in school improvement efforts; providing concrete steps for schools to become more effective at responding to both types of absenteeism; helping direct absenteeism policy initiatives within the

school board and Ministry of Education; as well as contributing information to other schools confronted with absenteeism. The staff members' opinions were sought to determine further efforts to combat and alleviate the negative consequences of both types of absenteeism, as well as needed supports from both the school board and the Ministry of Education. The students were asked for suggestions on how the alternative schools could be more responsive to their needs, and in turn, assist them in not only graduating, but also pursuing further educational and professional aspirations. This aspect of the interviewing process is quite distinctive in absenteeism research, as unfortunately, relatively few studies have sought out students' opinions for school improvement. Considering these youths' experiences with absenteeism, they are uniquely positioned to put forth suggestions to increase alternative and mainstream schools' abilities to adapt to student needs.

The central goal of the interviews was to gain a deep insight into the participants' viewpoints regarding attendance and absenteeism. By concentrating on three levels of participants I captured a range of outlooks and insights that may be missed by a more distanced quantitative approach, or by focusing on only one of these groups. This goal was aided by the sampling of multiple schools, as I was able to document the similarities and discrepancies evident in each setting, thereby contributing a wider lens of investigation than would be available through a concentration on a single school. The rationale for using interviews, rather than observations, was that they were more likely to provide rich data. This was an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), where the strategies aimed at alleviating and accommodating absenteeism were of interest, rather than the particular schools. Moreover, many alternative schools are loosely structured, with some not having traditional classes that can be easily observed. In order

to categorize and order the data, I employed Morrissette's (1999) interview analysis strategy and NVivo qualitative analysis software.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the interviews I transcribed all of the audio recordings. Upon completion, I listened to the interviews once more to catch any errors that may have been made within the initial transcription and to ensure accuracy. Due to the volume of the interviews it was not logistically feasible to send the transcripts to the interviewees. As the amount of data proved to be quite large, I decided to employ NVivo qualitative analysis software, as well as Morrissette's (1999) interview analysis method. Morrissette (1999) presents a seven-stage process for analyzing interviews which is summarized in the table below. This data analysis technique, with its reliance on thematic codes and clusters can be used effectively with semi-structured interviews employed in this research. Moreover, Morrissette's (1999) process allows for analyzing both individual interviews, as well as looking for patterns across multiple participants, which was well-suited to the present study's design.

I relied on the literature to develop most of the thematic codes. I began with broad thematic categories (e.g. *cause of absence, consequence to absenteeism, solutions to absenteeism*), that are reflective of the main tenets of the absenteeism literature. Each of the categories were further divided into more narrow themes. For example, knowing that schools can be a *cause of absenteeism* I highlighted any comment a student participant made about the school causing their absenteeism. This process was repeated for all student participants. Once all of the pertinent quotes relating to the school as a *cause of absenteeism* were captured I separated the passages into *voluntary* and *involuntary* categories. This created succinct codes that were

specific enough to provide accurate information about each facet of absenteeism covered in the literature.

The staff interviews were analyzed in much the same fashion. I relied on the literature to develop some of the broader categories, which were then refined further to reflect the findings of this research. The staff interview coding was at times more emergent than the student interview analysis, as there is less academic research on the views of staff members concerning absenteeism.

Lastly, I compared and contrasted the findings arising out of each school. Through this process I was able to look for patterns that traversed multiple interviews. While the stories the students and staff told were all unique, discernable patterns became apparent through the analytic process. It is for this reason that I chose to present the findings in a thematic format, rather than relying on discrete case study presentation.

By looking for patterns across the research sites I aim to display how both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism were manifested in different schools, thereby highlighting the contextual and complex nature of absenteeism that is difficult to capture with quantitative methods. Moreover, I exemplify the alternative schools' approaches to reengaging absentees, as well as the accommodation strategies employed. This was done in order to present some tangible suggestions to other schools that are confronted with high rates of absenteeism.

Table 2
Data Analysis Procedure

Steps	Description
Step 1 Interview as a Whole	Morrissette (1999) suggests that the interviewer listen to the recorded interview as soon as possible. This process is meant to allow "researchers [to] gain an awareness of the experiences described by co-researchers" (p. 4), and notes can be added to the field notes the interviewer has written during the actual interview.
Step 2: Interview as Text	This stage primarily involves the transcription of the interviews. Once the transcription is completed "the researcher reads each protocol several times, highlighting key words and significant statements" (p. 4). This process develops key points that can then be thematically grouped in the following step.
Step 3: First Order Thematic Abstraction	The third stage consists of "reviewing the protocol and collecting the highlighted significant statements, which will be paraphrased and assigned a theme" (p. 4). During this process the important excerpts of an interview are placed into a table, with a shorthand description of the passage, along with a thematic code being attached.
Step 4: Second Order Thematic Cluster	This stage involves the grouping of similar themes into more broad thematic categories. The aim of this step is to bring coherence to the various themes that originate out of Step 3. The interviewer clusters the passages under particular themes and provides a description for each cluster.
Step 5: Individual Participant Protocol Synthesis	At this point the interviewer begins to sift through the various theme clusters and starts to create a coherent summary of the participant's experiences and perspectives "to provide an overall picture" (p. 4).
Step 6: Overall Synthesis of Participants' Protocols	This step involves a comparative analysis among all of the respondents. I reflected on the various emerging themes from the individual interviews and compared the results emerging from each school, looking for commonalities and discrepancies.
Step 7: Between Person Analysis	During this final stage of the interview analysis I developed a grid for the main themes that arose out of the interviews. On a different axis I listed all of the participants and noted whether certain themes were or were not present within their interviews. This was meant to provide a quick chart, where at a glance, I was able to see which particular themes were present in certain interviews. This provided a reference point, without having to search the individual interviews for the required data, and "this process can be helpful in comparing experiences among co-researchers and in formulating a global picture of a co-researcher's inner experience" (p. 5).

Setting the Scene

This study investigated the perceptions of youths and alternative school staff concerning student absenteeism. The students traced their absenteeism during their high school journeys and commented how both mainstream and alternative schools responded to their absenteeism. Whereas the staff were asked how absenteeism affected their school, and what efforts were being carried to combat the problem. Through these conversations I delineate the marked differences between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism; examine the promising potential of alternative schools to mitigate the harmful effects associated with missing substantial amounts of school. The staff interviews aided in fully exploring the alternative schools' actions in both reducing and accommodating absenteeism.

All of the schools sampled in this research are considered "second" and/or "last" chance and were selected due to the high enrollment of students with past and/or present patterns of absenteeism. All of the schools are part of the same school board but are considerable distances from one another. In order to set the context for the following results, each school is briefly described. It must be noted that all school and participant names are pseudonyms.

Bridgeport Alternative School. Bridgeport Alternative School is nestled in the urban core of the city. The school is easily accessed through public transit and is surrounded by shops, restaurants, and other miscellaneous characteristics of an urban downtown core. The school occupies the top two stories of a building which also houses a daycare. Bridgeport's floor space is limited, and the rooms feel a little tight. The first floor is primarily comprised of staff offices; a central office; a large open area for school meetings and lunches; and an industrial sized kitchen. The space is constricted and rather dark, however couches and innumerable posters on the walls

brighten the area. Most of the classrooms, located on the second floor are small and intimate settings. The school demographic is quite diverse; however, the students tend to be older with primarily Grade 10-12 courses being offered. The total enrollment fluctuates due to a continuous intake process but is capped at 210 students (approximately 180 students were on roll at the time of data collection). The school is structured as a regular school day (9 am – 3 pm), with students taking 5 classes per day. However, the semester is more unusual, and is split into halves (quadmesters), where students attain half a credit for each quadmester completed. This is done to allow students to enroll almost continuously and to lower the frustration and disappointment the students feel if they are unable to successfully pass a course.

Stoneridge Alternative School. Stoneridge Alternative School is located on the outskirts of the city and being removed some of the more major transportation routes is somewhat difficult to get to. However, the isolation affords space for a large school grounds, as well as close vicinity to parks and fields. A housing subdivision surrounds the general parameters of the school. Stoneridge Alternative shares space in a relatively large building with other programs. One of these is a short-term placement school for students who have been expelled or removed from the mainstream setting. There is also a learning centre which offers adult education classes. Stoneridge Alternative is housed on a single floor and is comprised of 5 large and bright classrooms, one of which is equipped with a kitchen. Many posters and photos of students decorate the walls of the classrooms and hallways. The student demographic is relatively diverse, but rather small, with a maximum enrollment of 85 students. However approximately 110 students were enrolled at the time of data collection. This is made possible by 40% of the students taking part in a full-time cooperative education program, which does not require them to

visit the actual school. Stoneridge offers Grade 9-12 courses; however, students must be over the age of 16 to enroll. The school follows mainstream school hours (9 am – 3 pm), however the day is split in half, with a student working on one course in the morning and another in the afternoon for a quadmester. It is believed that allowing students to concentrate on fewer credits at a time is a better option than splitting their attention across multiple subjects.

Pine Alternative School. Pine Alternative School is located in the eastern end of the city. Although slightly removed from the downtown core, it is easily accessible by major transportation routes. There are a number of shops and restaurants near the school. Pine Alternative is located in a separate building that is adjacent to a large mainstream secondary school. However, the mainstream school has closed due to low enrollment and was vacant at the time of data collection. A day care is located on the first floor of the building, and Pine Alternative occupies the entire second floor, which consists of two connected hallways. There are large and bright classrooms, one of which has a small kitchen. There is also a sizeable common area for students, with two guidance counselors having desks in this room. The school demographic is fairly diverse, and Pine Alternative is one of the biggest alternative schools in the board, with a capacity of 225 students (148 enrolled at the time of data collection). Courses are offered for Grades 9-12; however, students must be over the age of 16 to enroll. Pine Alternative takes the most unique approach to scheduling. The school runs on a regular 2 semester schedule; however, classes are held 5 times a week for 75 minutes per class. In effect the scheduling runs much like a college or university timetable, with students having classes at certain periods in the day. This gives students the flexibility to arrange their schedule and avoid taking certain classes due to scheduling conflicts.

Meadows Alternative School. Meadows Alternative school is located just to the west of the city's downtown core. It is easily accessible by major transportation routes and is close to restaurants and shops. The school shares a building with an adult education and culinary arts program. Meadows Alternative School takes up the second story of the building. The school consists of one hallway which runs the length of the building. Small classrooms line the hallway, with one being utilized as a kitchen/lunchroom. The school demographic is fairly diverse, and the school is designed to house a maximum of 90 students (86 on roll at the time of data collection). Meadows Alternative offers Grade 10-12 courses to students over the age of 16. The schedule resembles that of mainstream schools, with students taking 75-minute classes four times a day per term. However, the school day begins at 9:30, thereby giving students an additional 30 minutes in the morning.

Summary. The schools have both similarities and differences. Although each school is unique, they share a number of commonalities, the main one being a student population that has and continues to be absent from school. These students have a long history of absenteeism, which often started in elementary and/or middle school and worsened as the youths entered mainstream high schools.

Layout of Findings

The "Findings" predominantly focus on the causes, consequences and solutions to absenteeism as evident in the mainstream and alternative schools the students attended. This study is not all encompassing, and some variables described in the "Literature Review" section

did not become apparent in this study (e.g. societal consequences of absenteeism) and were therefore omitted. On the other hand, as voluntary/involuntary absenteeism is one of the lenses used in this research, it was added in the presentation of the findings.

The findings are split into two chapters, the first documenting the students' experiences in the mainstream setting, whereas the second is concerned with the alternative schools. Both halves employ the causes, consequences, and solutions to absenteeism headings found in the "Literature Review." However, the uneven terrain of the findings, resulted in some variation in the organization of these chapters. For example, the students cited numerous and varied examples of what caused them to miss school while they were in the mainstream setting. Thus, this theme is rather detailed and contains a number of subheadings. Whereas, in the alternative setting the participants had relative few examples of what caused them to miss school, thereby prompting the amalgamation of certain subheadings. Therefore, the two halves of the findings do not always contain the exact same subheadings.

CHAPTER 5: ABSENTEEISM IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

Introduction

In order to fully capture the student participants' absenteeism, I thought it was prudent to discuss with them their previous absenteeism in mainstream high schools. Considering that all of the student participants had attended, and left, at least one mainstream high school prior to their enrollment in the alternative school, gaining insight into their absenteeism in the mainstream setting is useful for setting the wider context for the findings. Moreover, this line of investigation sheds light on how mainstream schools currently respond to absenteeism, thereby further allowing a comparison between mainstream and alternative schools' responses to absenteeism.

Students' Absenteeism in K-8 Schools

It has been noted in the literature that absenteeism patterns can begin in childhood and develop as the adolescent matures (Nichols, 2003). Although the focus of this research is on absenteeism in high school, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of past attendance patterns, the interviews began with the students being asked if they missed school between Grades 1-8. Out of the 32 students who responded to the question (eight were unable to recall their attendance patterns at that age) 15 had issues with attendance prior to high school. This ingrained pattern of absenteeism points to the learned behaviour of non-attendance many of these adolescents acquired from quite a young age. Thus, it is unsurprising that many of these youths continued being absent in high school.

Perceptions of Absenteeism

When asked about the amount of school they were missing in the mainstream high school setting the students had mixed replies, with some stating that they only missed the occasional

class, whilst others reported missing weeks and months of school at a time. The frequency of absences differed based on the cause, with students reporting missing certain school periods to avoid a particular class or teacher, whereas pupils suffering from mental health illnesses and/or turbulent lives were absent for longer periods. Moreover, there is as much fluctuation within a particular student's absenteeism, as between students. Rashmit's (Meadows Alternative) recollection of his high school absenteeism patterns elucidates the instability of the behaviour:

> 9th Grade was pretty consecutive, I was there often, definitely late every morning, it was just inevitable, I lived 5 minutes from the school, I thought I could make it, but I couldn't. Then 10th Grade I got settled in with a group of friends and we were always hanging out at lunch time so I started becoming late, in the morning and at lunch. And then by 11th Grade I lived even closer to the school, like I was moving houses a lot, so it's kind of interesting, but by 11th Grade we were settled two minutes from school, so I started skipping class. I would literally go to school to get my friends and then we'd come back to my house yeah. And 12th Grade I was there maybe once a week, maybe, for a period (p. 2)

Sam, from Bridgeport Alternative, shared a similar account, describing the rise of her absenteeism from "Grade 9 just like you know once a week maybe, that wasn't so bad, and the next year like multiple times a week" (p. 1), the escalating due to drug use "Grade 11 the whole year, just coming maybe twice a month, or a few times a month" (p. 1), before subsiding later on in her high school career "I started to go to school a bit more because I got clean, but it was like back and forth. So that was like multiple times a week, maybe missing I don't know like two days a week" (p. 1). It is all too easy for a pattern of absenteeism to develop over time, where pupils become locked into a pattern of absenteeism that is difficult to break out of. Many students described a history of absenteeism in their high school, which often grew into a self-perpetuating cycle

> We were I think to a point where we were skipping and it got too much that it was overwhelming the next day, when you had so much to catch up on and we were missing a lot, so we'd end up skipping more and we just left and yeah like we just didn't end up going (Gail, Stoneridge, p. 2)

The students' absenteeism patterns were varied, and there was no "typical" absentee. The student participants missed different amounts of school, and as the next section will show, they did so for various reasons.

Causes of Absenteeism

The pupils in the sample described a plethora of causes for their absenteeism. In order to maintain clarity this section is subdivided into: student, family, school, and societal causes of absenteeism. However, the voluntary/involuntary lens is also added to this categorization in order to document both the motivationally and structurally based causes of absenteeism.

Student. Students showed absenteeism related to both voluntary and involuntary causes. Voluntary causes of student-based absenteeism included: lack of interest in education; negative peer influences; whereas, involuntary absenteeism was predominantly caused by mental health substance abuse issues; and becoming a parent.

Voluntary. By far the most common voluntary cause of absenteeism falling within the "Student" category was a lack of motivation to attend, which was reported by 32% of the sample. Many pupils did not see the relevance of education and chose to be absent. Students described missing school due to a general lack of interest in school, as exemplified by Katia's (Pine Alternative) remark "I just didn't feel any motivation to go, didn't want to work, didn't want to do anything" (p. 2). Some students did come to school, but did not attend their classes, rather choosing to spend time with friends on school grounds. This behaviour was often accompanied by the use of marijuana, as Tiffany (Bridgeport Alternative) pointed out "I went to

school every day, but I didn't really go to class, to every class. I was smoking weed a lot back then, so I was kind of more interested in the social aspect rather than actually learning" (p. 1). In fact, 12/40 students reported smoking marijuana during school time as a pastime activity.

Negative peer influences were also cited by the students to cause their absenteeism. While it is difficult to ascertain whether the absenteeism led the student participants to form friendships with other absentees, or whether the absenteeism was caused by negative friendships, 22% of the sample cited "friends" as a cause of their absenteeism. Lance (Stoneridge), who admitted to selling marijuana with friends at school, articulated how associating with other absentees furthered his own absenteeism "it was a different vibe back then though, everyone was like wanting to skip, wanting to bring each other down, you know, just smoke weed and shit, that's it. So I didn't really go to school in Grade 9" (p. 1). As his comment highlights, many pupils become trapped in a cycle of absenteeism, where their friendships further hamper their motivation to attend.

Another participant also revealed that he too actively sold drugs during school hours, which he found more rewarding than school attendance. When asked about what he did when he was missing school her replied:

> Selling weed or selling crack or chilling with my homies. … Honestly wherever was like, wherever I could do it I'd sell whatever I could. I try selling, because for me I started hanging out with like some older people once I hit like Grade 10 and all of my friends are still hanging out with my age group. So once I started hanging out with these older people I really felt, I felt like really more accomplished because like none of my friends were hanging out with some of the people I was hanging out with [interruption]. So I started hanging out with the older people and they really showed me like some cool stuff that, honestly I don't want to say it like this, but they get me street smart, they showed me things that I didn't know of, and I showed my friends and my friends made me feel even bigger than who I was so, so I really enjoyed that those times (Ryan, Meadows Alternative, p. 2)

This student was quite disengaged from his education and perceived more value in learning "street smarts" than being in school. The school system does not seem to have engaged Ryan, and he was not alone.

Finding little attraction to school, a subset of the student participants chose to voluntarily miss classes. For these students the educational system was not enticing enough to motivate them to attend. However, as previously discussed, not all student-based causes of absenteeism are voluntary, and some pupils miss school for structurally based involuntary reasons.

Involuntary. Student-based causes of absenteeism reported by the student participants that were classified as involuntary often revolved around mental health, becoming a parent, and substance abuse. These issues serve as barriers to attendance where motivation is not a factor, thereby highlighting some of the structural causes of absenteeism.

Over a quarter of the student participants (12/40) reported having a mental health issue that made regular school attendance difficult. The majority of these problems were related to depression and anxiety, with students describing "feeling depressed that one day and like I just don't want to go to school, so I'll just stay in bed," (A.J., Bridgeport Alternative, p. 2); being "hugely depressed and anxious" to the point where "I completely stopped going to school" (Mort, Meadows Alternative, p. 1); and going "into this depression mode, it was the first time where I've ever experienced anxiety and I didn't know exactly how to cope with that, so that contributed a lot, a lot, and that's why I started to not attend school regularly" (Jeremy, Pine Alternative, p. 1). While many of the youths struggled with their mental health, three students described having mental health episodes severe enough to warrant hospitalization, with two spending time in the psychiatric ward.

While mental health issues were a leading cause of involuntary absenteeism, other structural obstacles to attendance also arose. Sam (Bridgeport), a student on the verge of graduation, mentioned that in the past "I had a really serious drug addiction. I was injecting hard drugs" (p. 4) and how this prohibited her from attending school. It was only once she became clean that she was able to renew her schooling efforts. Two other youths also spoke about having to become sober prior to being able to continue with their education. Substance abuse took such a grip on these young people that the school became a distant shadow in their daily lives, "I was addicted to drugs, I was drinking, I was doing everything that I shouldn't be doing, and I wasn't attending" (Sandy, Pine, p. 1). The students who had substance abuse issues had to find stability in their lives prior to focusing on their schooling.

Three participants became parents whilst in high school, which caused monumental changes to their lives, often forcing them to miss significant amounts of school. Chantel (Bridgeport) described the physical and social challenges of having a child in high school "when I was in Grade 11 I got pregnant, so I was too sick to go to school, came out of school, then managing stuff on the outside with my son was kind of hard" (p. 1). Lance (Stoneridge), who had a child at 16 described leaving school to provide an income for his growing family

> I needed to start working because I had a son coming. I needed to make money. I wasn't on welfare or nothing like that, I just needed to make money, that's when I dropped out, that's when I was no longer in the school system, I was out (pp. 3-4).

Needing to care for a child presented a considerable obstacle to steady attendance. The priorities in the lives of the students drastically shifted, and schooling became of secondary importance.

It is apparent that not all student-based causes of absenteeism are voluntary and motivational in nature. Rather, a subset of youths is missing school due to personal issues

affecting their lives. While this is a troubling finding, the home lives of these pupils also had negative effects on their school attendance.

Family. A breadth of literature indicates that absentees come from marginalized backgrounds, and some academics argue that family dynamics cause absenteeism (De Socio et al., 2007; Flaherty et al., 2012; Kearney, 2008; Mounteney et al., 2010). For these reasons some interview questions asked the students to report on how much involvement their family/guardian had in their education. The students had mixed replies, with some stating that their family is "very involved, my mom is a bit like, she always pushes me to go to school and she always like encourages me" (Gail, Stoneridge, p. 1), whereas others felt their family was only partially or not at all involved in their education, "I'd say not at all. She obviously wants me to do well, a mother wants, any parent wants you to do well, but I'd say she's not like paying close attention to my assignments and stuff like that" (Laura, Pine, p. 1). There were no discernable patterns of association between the perception of familial involvement and the amount of school missed. However, it must be noted that only 18% of the student participants resided within a nuclear family, with 57% living with a single parent, and a further 20% residing alone or with an extended family member. Thus, although not explicitly stated, the degree or amount of involvement a single parent has in their child's education can impact their attendance.

Considering the breadth of evidence within the absenteeism field framing families as one of the causes of student absenteeism, it is surprising that only seven pupils spoke directly about their family as a hindrance to attendance. However, some students experienced familial turmoil grave enough to warrant placement into a group home and/or foster care. Although not as prevalent as the other factors, the family's potential impact on attendance warrants unpacking.

Voluntary. Two themes emerged within the "voluntary" family related causes of absenteeism. The first was a general lack of support in education/attendance, whereas the second related to having to relocate far from a school. In the first instance two students spoke about parents who had such little involvement in their education that it led to absenteeism. When asked about why she was absent in her mainstream school, Chantel (Bridgeport), mentioned "my parents weren't around so I got to do what I wanted" (p. 1), pointing to a lack of structure within her life that led her to associate with "the wrong crowd" (p. 1) which eventually caused her to miss school.

Some pupils reported having to move away from school. The additional commute often acted as a motivational obstacle to attending school. A.J., already suffering mental health issues and the adjustment of having to move in with his father after a divorce also had to circumvent the added obstacle of a longer commute. While not unachievable, this added hindrance ultimately caused him to miss more school, as he noted

> Well basically I moved an hour away from school right? So usually it went from like a 15-minute commute to an hour commute and I was already dealing with a bunch of other shit at the time so. I basically just never went to school, like at any point (A.J., Bridgeport, p. 1).

Dre, a student at Meadows Alternative, too spoke about distance being a demotivating factor to attendance "I was being lazy because I live pretty far so, I'll stay home, I'll chill with my cousin you know? Stuff like that" (p. 1).

Although these incidents were rather limited, they nonetheless reflect the interplay of familial dynamics and a student's motivation to attend school. Moreover, a few pupils experienced such serious issues in the home that structural obstacles hindered attendance.

Involuntary. Four students' home circumstances were precarious enough for them to be placed into foster care and/or group homes. Living in challenging circumstances created insurmountable obstacles to attendance, as exemplified by Sandy (Pine Alternative)

> I was living with my mother who struggles with alcoholism. Because of her addiction she neglected me unvoluntarily [sic], she didn't mean to, and so I was getting sick a lot. I had pneumonia a couple of times and I was in and out of my dad's and I was all over the place in terms of housing. Children's Aid was involved and I just I didn't recognize school as a necessary part of my life at that time. (p. 1).

Sandy's life conditions were truly heartbreaking, and they (the student identified as non-binary) experienced what could be classified as neglect. Often, they chose to avoid their home as much as possible, "I was living with my mom and I didn't want to stay there during the day" (p. 4). Unfortunately, Sandy was not the only student who had to endure such difficult conditions. Randy (Pine), a youth self-identified as transgender spoke about having to move to a foster home in the middle of high school. Although not explicitly stated, Randy alluded to their parents' refusal to accept their gender, when asked what they did while missing school Randy replied, "at the time I lived with my parents and I would probably just be laying down in bed crying" (p. 2). The issue became so aggravated that Randy attempted to commit suicide and was admitted to a psychiatric institution, after which they were placed into a group home.

While the experiences of living at home may have been damaging, there is also evidence that being part of the foster care system presents its own set of challenges. This was elucidated by Stella (Pine) in her description of her high school experience. Stella attended six different high school prior to enrollment in the alternative school, and spoke about being uninterested in school "because I was always moving, so I'm like I didn't know when I would end up moving, and then have to restart a semester, which was happening often" (p. 2). Having to move frequently; living with different families and group homes; and consequently, having to change

schools multiple times a year presented insurmountable obstacles to her attendance. While Stella spoke about attending schools that she liked and did well in, she was inevitably forced to transfer whenever she was relocated to a different home. This constant life in flux effectively barred Stella from succeeding in school, as she mentioned:

> Starting from Grade 9 I was being moved around a lot, so whenever I would start a new school I'd be discouraged to go because I'm like I'm always getting moved, what's the point in starting and getting all this work done and then having to move far and then can't attend and having to restart a semester. So I was discouraged, I was like there's no point and other times there was home issues where I would have to leave so I would have to miss school (p. 2)

This turbulent home life, over which Stella as a ward of the state had little control over, made attendance almost impossible.

Other students experienced tremendous grief during their schooling years. Three students spoke at length about losing a parent either through death; deportation; or immigration. One of these students, Connor (Stoneridge), described missing increasing amounts of class in high school because of the grief caused by the death of his mother. Connor eventually dropped out of school in Grade 10 and spent two and a half years out of school. Time away from school allowed Connor to process the emotional loss associated with the death of a parent

> I'd had a lot of time to myself when I was out of school and I was going through some shit, my mom passing when I was younger, you know stuff really doesn't hit you when you're young, and it might come back to hit you when you're older. And I was dealing with the fact that she's not there, my dad's having such a hard time coping… That was another factor of me just dropping out of school to be honest (p. 4)

Having time to reflect Connor saw how the passing of his mother had a significant, yet subconscious influence on him while in high school. It was only after he was able to process his grief could Connor return to school.

Another student, when speaking about missing school in Grade 8, mentioned in an offhand remark that "I had to leave [school] because my mom got deported too, that made me

miss some days" (Chantel, Bridgeport, p. 1). While Chantel did not dwell on the subject, the impact of effectively losing a mother at the age of 13 or 14 has a substantial impact on a child's ability to attend school. When asked who she was living with while in high school, Chantel replied

> I was living my parents, well my parent, but my parent was never there. Yeah so basically my friends, maybe I'd have a friend over at my house, or me and my brother because my brother's two years from me, but yeah that was pretty much it, we'd supervise ourselves (p. 2)

Having to supervise herself at a young age added to the trauma experienced by the separation from her mother, and Chantel described this moment as the beginning of her attendance troubles, which escalated with drug use.

Another student, Natasha (Bridgeport), experienced separation from her father when she immigrated to Canada from the U.S. with her mother and two sisters. Moreover, Natasha spoke about being quite surprised when she found out that they would be moving "without my dad and I didn't really expect for that to happen" (p. 3). This move caused many difficulties, as Natasha's family was "all of a sudden way poor, because my dad wasn't supporting us" (p. 3). Without her father in the home Natasha was expected to assume some of the parenting responsibilities,

> I had to take care of my little sister, who is like 2 years younger than me, all the time, so I had to bring her to school or watch her when my mom was at work. So that stressed me out a lot and it just made me feel crappy. I thought that I really wasn't supposed to be doing that. I was a kid. I was supposed to have my own life (p. 3)

The stress and frustration Natasha experienced not only demotivated her to come to school, but created physical obstacles to attendance, as she had to assume childcare responsibilities.

Through the narratives of the students we can glean that some students are subjected to quite adverse experiences at home, which essentially bar them from attending school consistently. The data highlights how a student's home life can and does have repercussions for

their attendance. While this category of the causes of absences received the least amount of responses, it is nevertheless an important component of absenteeism.

School. The students' previous mainstream high schools played a major role in our conversations about their absenteeism, and many discussed their previous schooling in tones of apathy, disengagement, or outright resistance. Most described negative experiences, ones filled with conflict, ridicule, and misunderstanding. While the majority of the school-based causes of absenteeism are voluntary, where there were no structural barriers to attendance, the negative associations formed about the school were so strong that they effectively restricted some pupils from attending. Because after all, who would expect a student to attend a school characterized by such experiences as told by Tiffany (Bridgeport)

> Some [teachers] would look at me like I was just trouble and that I was just no good, and they would be like "Well you're going to fail" and they would just be really really negative towards me and from that point when it started until I didn't have that teacher anymore they would really really be just like condescending and they would really make you feel like a failure, like there was no support there whatsoever, it wasn't like "What's going on? Is there something happening at home?" It was just like "You're too sick to do this and screw you kind of" like you weren't important anymore (p. 2).

It is these types of hostile relationships that characterized the schooling experiences of the majority of the participants, and in fact, 32/40 spoke about their previous schools in a negative tone. The greatest convergence of grievances falls under the umbrella term of "school climate," which was discussed in the "Literature Review" section of this manuscript.

Voluntary. As mentioned previously, school climate "refers generally to quality of school life" and includes aspects "such as safety, order, strong and positive student-teacher and other social relationships, academic accomplishment and recognition, student autonomy,

clear and consistent rules and goals, classroom organization, effective instructional methods, and high-quality school facilities" (Kearney, 2016, p. 19). School climate plays a considerable role in a student's attendance, and pupils are unlikely to attend a school full of hostility, turmoil, and anger. As the interview excerpts below elucidate, many of the student participants felt that their school climate was inhospitable and was a major cause of their absenteeism.

For example, a number of students reported feeling isolated within their previous high school(s), "before at my other school I was totally like the other" (A.J., Bridgeport, p. 11), which created negative associations with the institution. Kara (Pine) spoke about a disconnect between her and the other students in her previous mainstream school

> Everybody had this like fakeness to them, where they weren't themselves at all, they were just what they thought other people wanted them to be, the main things in their life that they wanted, their goals, for girls, was to get the cutest boy or always go to parties and always be the most popular person and stuff like that. It's just like that's not my goals, I actually want to do something with my life, and just being surrounded by those people was just knocking me off from my path you know? (p. 2)

While Kara (Pine) consciously distanced herself from her peers, the separation from other students was not always voluntary, and Chantel (Bridgeport) exemplified unwanted feelings of isolation when asked if she felt like a part of her previous school

> That school no. It was too big. I didn't feel like a part of the school. I felt isolated. Because like everybody had their own situation, you can't see how people's lives are looking from the outside because they were able to function well in that school and I wasn't. I felt weird. I felt I was isolated, I was always being called down to the office (pp. 2-3)

Chantel (Bridgeport) had a difficult life, and unable to relate, she felt pushed to the margins of the school. Finding little in common with the other pupils Chantel felt little belonging. This was a common theme, and a third of the student participants reported not getting along with their peers. Statements such as "I never really got along with anybody I just kept to myself" (Jamaya, Meadows, p. 1) and "at my last school nobody talked to me" (Reketa, Meadows, p. 3) were

relatively common. This lack of connection pushed them even further to the periphery of the school community, and a few of the pupils felt like social outcasts. Feeling unwelcomed by their peers many of these students began to disengage from their schooling through increased absenteeism

> I knew that place wasn't for me, I didn't even actually have that many friends honestly and people literally told me as I walked through the hallways they could see hatred in my eyes, so no one would come up and talk to me, and it's just like I knew that wasn't the place for me (Kara, Pine, p. 2)

> So I just kind of stopped going I guess and I didn't feel any motivation to go to school, there was no reason to go to school, I didn't really like any of my friends, I had friends, but they weren't my real friends (Katie, Pine, p. 2)

Many of these students attended large mainstream high schools where they felt invisible and lost. They were metaphorical "ghosts" who rarely registered on the radar of the school personnel, and as a result faded away from their education.

The students' disengagement was worsened by what they perceived to be a dull and irrelevant curriculum, and some students spoke about feelings of boredom or going through the motions. Students talked about having teachers who "were there for money, just there for the job, they didn't care if you succeeded" (Connor, Stoneridge, p. 3) or as Mort (Meadows) elucidated about his teacher

> A science teacher in Grade 10 who would, he copied out every single page from the science book and copied all that into writing and he would put it on a projector screen and he would say "copy it." And we copied the entire chapter or at least what he thought was relevant and then he would make you do the work. There were maybe 3-4 classes in the entire semester where he actually taught (p. 2)

For students already struggling with various issues in their lives an uninteresting schooling experience encouraged them to miss more school than they already were. Ryan (Meadows), who had spoken at length about missing school to get "street smart" and sell crack cocaine summarized his learning experiences at school "I didn't learn anything from Grade 1 to now to

be honest so I didn't learn shit in high school" (p. 3). It is perhaps unsurprising that Ryan, not seeing the relevance of education, and feeling he was not learning anything valuable, would voluntarily choose to educate himself in the streets. By his own admission Ryan felt "more accomplished" outside of school than within it, thereby pointing to the lack of credibility that our educational institutions have for a subset of our youths.

To make matters worse many student participants spoke about how the school staff further aggravated their burgeoning feelings of discontent with the schooling experience. The student participants recalled some horrifying schooling experiences characterized by aggressive, insensitive, and/or apathetic teachers. Sandy (Pine) who had significant home, mental health, and substance abuse issues spoke about attending an all-girls Catholic high school where "I wasn't being treated like a human, I was just degraded constantly" (p. 2). Sandy felt that they were being blamed for the problems they were experiencing in their personal life. This had quite devastating effects on Sandy's self-esteem, as they explained further

> I was ashamed of myself, of my life, I didn't talk openly, I couldn't talk openly about anything without feeling judged. Because of my life I thought I was lesser than everybody and I started to believe that I did need maybe special ed or I needed a different psychological test because I wasn't able to succeed there and I thought something was wrong with me (p. 2)

Much like Sandy, most of the youths in this research yearned for care and understanding, however they were frequently met with a lack of empathy from their teachers, and this response effectively severed the teacher-student relationship. Unsurprisingly, almost three quarters of the student participants characterized their relationships with the staff in their previous schools negatively. Comments such as: "[teachers] didn't understand my circumstances of how I had to live, that I didn't have my parents, and I didn't have this, and I didn't have that" (Chantel, Bridgeport, p. 2) and "my teachers would look down on me, like ohh she's a bad kid, she can

never change, she's just like this, they never wanted to invest any kind of time or effort into me" (Natasha, Bridgeport, p. 4) were all too common, where the youths felt misunderstood and penalized for the difficulty of their lives. The staffs' outright rejection and labelling of students as "bad" or "troublemakers" pushed the youths further to the margins. Many internalized the labels thrust upon them, and a sentiment of self-blame was apparent in a few of the students' narratives. For example, when asked how she felt about her teachers' responses to her absenteeism Reketa (Meadows) remarked "I didn't not like them because I knew I was in trouble and I deserved it, but it didn't feel great to be confronted in front of the whole class" (p. 3). Reketa was not alone, and a few other students defined themselves in negative terms such as "I was always just like a bad kid" (Stacy, Bridgeport, p. 5) and "I was bad" (Lance, Stoneridge, p. 1). After years of the labeling process it appears that the students actively assumed these labels and enacted what they thought was expected of them through drug use and misbehaviour.

Schools have a monumental impact on students' desires and motivations to attend. Seeking a kind and considerate environment in their mainstream schools the majority of the student participants were met with antagonism, anger, and ridicule. Feeling ostracized, marginalized and misjudged severely decreased the adolescents' drive to come to school. Moreover, how certain incidents were handled by the school had further repercussions for the students' *ability* to be present.

Involuntary. While not all youths may enjoy their schooling experience, most are not directly prevented from attending. Some acts such as bullying however, have been documented to create obstacles to attendance due to the fear youths have in going to school (Branham, 2004; Gastic, 2008). Three youths in my sample cited relentless bullying as the main

cause of their absenteeism. Sankrin (Stoneridge) was quite candid about her experiences with bullying

> Well when I was, this is kind of like, personal. But when I was in Grade 5 I fell and my teeth came out, my two front teeth. And then I had to wear a retainer that had fake teeth on it, but eventually I stopped wearing it because it didn't fit anymore. And then I had a big space here [in the mouth] for like 7 years of my life up until two years ago so I got bullied a lot when I was in Grade like 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, my whole, after being always bullied I kept switching schools because I was being bullied badly (p. 2)

Sankrin was victimized to such a degree that she began leaving schools to escape the abuse. When asked whether she informed any of the school staff about the bullying she answered that she had, but that "nobody really did anything about it." Sankrin was not alone in her victimization, and Sharon (Stoneridge) too spoke about being bullied

> Basically in high school I stopped going because the people who were bullying me and giving me problems in elementary school decided to come to the high school I was going to, so that's why I stopped going to high school (p. 1)

These two cases highlight how the fear of torment has considerable power in preventing a student from attending. Another incident was related to sexual harassment that Laura (Pine) experienced in her mainstream high school from another student. Laura felt that the harassment was not adequately responded to by the school, "there were other issues like sexual harassment that I had to deal with and the police got involved and you know my whole outlook on high school from that point went just downhill" (p. 2). While Laura did not speak at length about this incident, it did shake her confidence in the school staff's ability to intervene and help in such a troubling situation. As a result, Laura spoke about having mistrust of and "resentment against all the teachers" (p. 2) when she transferred to a new mainstream high school.

These experiences of abuse instilled fear and anger into these three students and created a structural obstacle for them to attend. While they may have had the motivation to come to

school, the fear of being bullied and/or harassed overcame the desire to attend and these students actively switched schools to find solace.

It is clear that the school has a substantial impact on students' motivation and ability to attend consistently. As previously described, many of the youths in the sample had difficulties in their personal lives. Regrettably their schooling experiences rarely provided any respite from their often-challenging lives. Rather than being a protective force, their schools further alienated and pushed them out. These schools not only failed to address the absenteeism the students exhibited, but also further exacerbated the issue and implicitly encouraged these students to miss more school than they already were.

Society. As mentioned in the "Literature Review" section of this dissertation, societal causes of absenteeism receive the least amount of academic attention. The students in the present study too, rarely framed their absenteeism in societal or structural ways. Nevertheless, six pupils did explain their absenteeism as occurring for societal causes, which were mainly related to living in the lower strata of the socioeconomic scale.

Voluntary. Societally based causes of absenteeism falling into the "voluntary" category are few. Yet, two students exhibited behaviour that traversed within this classification, with one working additional hours for financial gain; whilst the other sold drugs to earn an income.

Tiffany (Bridgeport) spoke about having to live alone starting in Grade 12 and the financial repercussions that came with it. While her absenteeism could be classified in the "involuntary" grouping, as she had to take on full-time employment during school, the

satisfaction Tiffany received from work resulted in her taking on additional hours, thereby nudging the absenteeism into the "voluntary" category.

> All I wanted to do was work, I was working myself about 50 hours a week and I would still wake up and go to school in the morning for two hours, so I would wake up at 6 o'clock in the morning and go to bed at 3, just like a cycle of it and I was working and I love work, I love it, there's nothing better to do for me to do than work (p. 6)

Although Tiffany felt compelled to work to earn an income, she voluntarily took on additional hours if given the opportunity. Tiffany's work commitments increasingly interfered with her attendance, and she began to lose contact with her school. Not seeing the relevance of education and receiving both fiscal and psychological feelings of achievement at work Tiffany's dedication to school lessened, "definitely when I went to work school became a second priority for sure" (p. 6). Although her employment may have been a necessity, the large number of hours Tiffany worked was predicated on her enjoyment of the experience, rather than acute financial need, and therefore is classified as voluntary absenteeism.

Another case is Ryan who spoke about selling drugs while missing school. Ryan was living with a single parent and two siblings and may have felt compelled to sell drugs in order to supplement familial income, thereby classifying his absenteeism as involuntary. However, when Ryan spoke about selling drugs and spending time in the streets, he framed it as a voluntary decision, something that he wanted and enjoyed doing, thus classifying it as voluntary absenteeism. The two students' absenteeism highlights the continuum of the voluntary-involuntary absenteeism spectrum, highlighting how absenteeism that can appear to involuntary may be of a voluntary nature. Other students, however, did exemplify involuntary societally based causes of absenteeism.

Involuntary. Involuntary societal causes of absenteeism generally refer to living in an economically marginalized position and the inherent difficulties of living in poverty. While only two students explicitly spoke about being poor, it can be surmised that many lived in precarious financial conditions.

Chantel (Bridgeport), who was living with her son whilst in high school spoke at length about how poverty prevented her from attending school. Simple issues as "I don't have bus tickets" (p. 2) to get to school and back often served as obstacles to her attendance. With the added financial responsibility of raising a son by herself, Chantel experienced multiple structural barriers to her ability to be present at school on a consistent basis. Darren (Meadows) also spoke about living on his own and having to support himself financially. Not only did work commitments impinge Darren's ability to attend, but antagonistic reactions from some of the staff humiliated and shamed him. Darren recalled an exchange with a teacher

> [Darren as himself] "I was working for a week that's why I missed"
> [Darren as teacher] "Yeah whatever go sit down, I'm going to teach the class, I have stuff to do"
> You know blow you off

This response not only chastened Darren for having to support himself, but also furthered the voluntary aspect of his absenteeism as he became quite antagonistic towards his school. Although few in number, it is evident that a segment of the student population is absent due to inequitable economic structures evident in Ontario.

Summary of the Causes of Absenteeism. As this section indicates, pupils miss school for a plethora of reasons (e.g. individual, familial, school, societal), which are both motivationally (voluntary) and structurally (involuntary) based. Often the students wished to attend, but their lives prevented them from doing so. Experiencing motivational and/or structural obstacles to

attendance has a significant impact on the students' attendance rates. What is particularly troubling is that the staffs' reactions to and the repercussions for absenteeism often fuel further absenteeism.

Consequences of Absenteeism

There were several consequences associated with the students' persistent absenteeism. These consequences were generally punitive in nature and primarily directed at the students (e.g. unfriendly and indifferent staff members; lowered expectations and labelling; assignment to special education; automated phone calls; threats of punishment; punishments; criminal charges of truancy; removal from the school); and/or their families (e.g. contact by the school personnel; attending in-school meetings; and assisting their child with navigating the court system when they were charged with truancy). The students, who were directly impacted by these consequences spoke in detail about how they were ridiculed and reprimanded for their unwillingness and/or inability to attend.

Students. When the student participants returned to class after an absence they were frequently met with hostility and anger from a number of their teachers. Pupils described teachers being "mad at me" and "aggressive," whenever they would return to school. Teachers would react quite negatively, as Matt (Bridgeport) mentioned "the teacher would get really angry at me if I didn't go, like he would, his face would be red, he would just get really offended when I wasn't there" (p. 1). What was quite devastating to many of the student participants was the lack of empathy and understanding from the teachers. Sentiments such as the one expressed by Dallas (Stoneridge) "I don't know if they understood what I was going through" (p. 2) and

Sharron (Stoneridge) “some of the teachers weren’t exactly so understanding of some problems that I was having” (p. 2) were common. These reactions are not ideal, but the active singling out and ridiculing absent students upon their return is particularly egregious. Unfortunately, these occurrences were rather common

> They would just make a big deal out of it, if it’s someone who can deal with that then that’s fine, but I mean if it’s someone who has anxiety and you put them on the spot like that and you make it a joke it’s like “yeah ha ha,” but you’re like freaking out inside, it’s like okay everyone is looking at me now, okay everyone knows I wasn’t here (Katie, Pine, p. 3)

> If you walk in late some of them would call you out in the middle of class and that’s kind of embarrassing and it’s really hard to put me in an embarrassing situation, but I hated that because then everybody would be looking at you and you’re standing in front of the class and like “ok what do I do now?” and you just don’t feel like you should be walking into the class, when a teacher is calling you out. Especially because I told all of my teachers that I had anxiety issues and calling me out in front of the class wasn’t exactly the best thing to do, and they still did it (Sharron, Stoneridge, p. 3)

Rather than being a protective force, an understanding and caring adult figure, teachers often did more harm than good in their interactions with the absent students. The attitudes on the part of the teachers often further strained the tenuous relationship these youths had with the school, and in turn, some began to be absent more frequently.

As their absenteeism behaviour worsened the pupils described a shift in the approach of the school staff to their absenteeism. Grown exasperated by the persistent nature of the absenteeism problem some staff members began to show signs of apathy and resignation towards the pupils, as described by Stella (Pine) “the teachers were just kind of like ‘well that’s too bad, you missed this work, you should have been here or you should’ve at least called or reached out’ or whatever, so they’d make it hard on me” (p. 3). These attitudes were mixed with what the absentees perceived as favoritism, where teachers paid more attention to regularly attending than absent pupils. Laura (Pine) spoke at length about this occurrence

> They pretty much just push you out of their, what they pay attention on, the students they pay attention on, so if you miss maybe a week you see that you're totally off their radar like they don't, they just assume in their mind, they don't care anymore and they don't think ohh maybe there's something going on at home or something going on with their friends. They don't, they just assume, I feel like they just assume that they don't care and they don't want to try with you, they don't take anything into consideration other than the fact ohh they don't care they want to fail (p. 2).

The attitudes and actions of the teachers had a significant impact on the absentees, who felt persecuted for their life conditions. Many began feeling like ghosts who entered and the left the school unnoticed, as Darren (Meadows) described, "if you miss a few days at [my old school] you go back the teacher didn't really notice you were missing" (p. 4). Gail (Stoneridge) had a similar account, stating

> I found like some of them weren't really asking me, some of them just didn't, like some of them cared and some of them were like if you're not here you're not here, so some of them didn't really react to it (p. 2)

At times this indifference trickled down to academic matters, and some students spoke about stringent penalties for being absent from school. A number of pupils spoke about losing grades and failing courses for non-attendance, which was at times due to a zero-tolerance approach to absenteeism

> I was in math and I failed because I was in and out of the psych ward, and the teacher just told me that you have literally no chance of passing (Randy, Pine, p. 2)

> Some of them would just fail me on the spot (Sharron, Stoneridge, p. 5)

> So many teachers do their marking schemes based on, they have a mark for your attendance, so I was, even though I was doing exceptionally on the academic side, I was getting such low marks in classes because of my attendance, and that was just really detrimental to my average and my future in school (Emma, Pine, p. 2)

Being characterized as a failure and experiencing real failure within school served to further estrange the pupils from their schooling. Some students' academic and/or social difficulties were interpreted as psychological/cognitive issues by school staff, and two students were placed into

special education due to their absenteeism. Sandy (Pine) recalled when they "missed like a week of school they took me out of the class and put me into a special ed class," (p. 2) which made them not only feel misjudged, but further marginalized through the use of the label of "special ed." Sandy felt that they were misdiagnosed "I didn't need to be in that class, but they thought since I was having trouble then I must be mentally delayed, when really it was my environment and just life" (p. 2). The use of labels, lowered expectations and implied connotations that the students were failures was a common response on the part of not only teachers, but school administrators as well. Stella (Pine), who was frequently switching schools due to having to change foster homes recalled an episode when she was attempting to enroll in a high school in a suburb of the large city

> I know in [name of town] the principal actually didn't even want to allow me to attend the school because I was turning 18 in May and this was February, she didn't want me to attend to begin with, she was just like "well there's no point, you're not going to make it," this and that, and I'm like this makes no sense (p. 3)

The harsh consequences of absenteeism in the mainstream setting so far mentioned were also coupled with the staffs' utilization of threats and punishments to entice and/or coerce students into compliance with mandatory attendance expectations.

School board absenteeism protocol dictated that an automated phone call be made to the student's household informing the guardian of an absence. However, most of the students found ways to erase these messages before their guardians were aware that they were sent, as Josh (Bridgeport) explained, "I'd always get home in time for that phone call" (p. 2). Josh also described more punitive punishments for missing school, "they suspended me" (p. 2), and a few other pupils had similar accounts. For example, Jason (Stoneridge) recalled how the administrators in his old school "would try to suspend me or do other things to get me come" (p.

2), however the staff quickly grew resigned and "after a while they just kind of stopped caring, nothing ever happened" (p. 2).

For two other youths the punishments were considerably more severe. One youth had a truancy officer sent to his residence, although the young man hid in a closest and pretended not to be home. Another youth was actually charged with the offense of truancy and had to attend court proceedings before the charges were dropped at a later date due to his improved attendance at an alternative school.

Many youths also spoke about being threatened with being demitted from the school roll if their attendance did not improve. Tiffany (Bridgeport) recalled a principal tell her "we're just going to kick you out if you're not coming" (p. 2). These threats were rather common, and for some, became a reality. Once the students reached the age of 18 the schools no longer had a legal obligation to ensure they attended and were allowed to remove absent students from school enrollment. Twelve student participants described being told to leave their mainstream school once they turned 18, as Matt (Bridgeport) recalled "after a while they said 'hey you gotta go to an alternative school or something,' they didn't want me to stay there anymore" (p. 2). Tiffany (Bridgeport) presented a similar account

> In the first semester of my Grade 12 year they kicked me out because I didn't come, because as I said I was living on my own and I was working, so I didn't have any time to like go to school at all, and I was turning 18 so they released me (p. 3)

This approach proved to be all too common, as mainstream high schools were able to purge themselves of students they no longer wanted. These students were often left on the margins of the educational system, and 40% of all student participants reported being out of formal education at one of time. This is the ultimate consequence of absenteeism, one that has been documented to have dire repercussions for the life of a young person.

Family. The families of absentees also received some consequences for their children's non-attendance. A few students spoke about having letters sent home and phone calls being made to their carer; whereas others mentioned their guardians having to attend conferences at the school concerning their absenteeism. Moreover, the youth charged with truancy spoke about having to attend court with his mother. Thus, the daily lives of the families of absentees were disturbed by their lack of attendance.

As the above section has demonstrated, the repercussions for not attending school consistently are quite severe. The behaviours on the part of the school staff are lamentable, however, these were often the default responses to absenteeism that the mainstream school staff utilized.

Solutions to Absenteeism

As the preceding section has highlighted, the mainstream schools used harsh retributory measures to forcibly compel their students to attend. However, I was also curious about the more proactive measures employed to increase attendance and alleviate the negative outcomes associated with absenteeism. Therefore, a line of questioning asked the students if anyone at their old school(s) motivated them to attend, thereby combating voluntary absenteeism; and/or whether any accommodations to their absenteeism were made, thereby alleviating involuntary absenteeism. Although sporadic, there were instances where staff in the mainstream schools took positive steps to increase attendance through encouraging their students to attend more and providing incentives for attendance; whilst others provided accommodations such as: extensions

on assignments; opportunities to catch up on missed work; and even delivering a student's work to their home.

Solutions to voluntary absenteeism. Just under half of the students spoke about having staff members in their previous schools motivating and encouraging them to attend more. The staff formed relationships through conversations and spending time with a student. This in turn, made the teacher(s) sympathetic to the students' lives and more supportive in encouraging the pupil to attend as much as they could. Often kind staff members had a profound impact on a student, such as Jeremy (Pine), who spoke glowingly of a past teacher

> There was this one teacher at [my old school] which I will never forget, and even to this day….I will never forget, and he is the teacher, besides, everything I've done in the past, all my mistakes and all the problems that I had. He overlooked that and he just, and he told me that he sees a person with potential, even despite all my problems…He was willing to do everything in his power to just pass, because he said that he sees potential in me. I was really shocked by that (p. 3)

Although a fortunate few did find a caring adult in their previous high schools, the majority of the students spoke about having only one or two staff members in the school with whom they felt they had a connection. Aside from these special individuals, the rest of the staff was usually characterized as uninterested in their students. When asked if anyone motivated her to come to school, Tiffany (Bridgeport) replied "definitely my guidance counselor, definitely this one teacher, other than that not really, no one really cared" (p. 3). Rashmit (Meadows) had a similar account "I had two teachers, my art teacher and my French teacher" (p. 3), however when I asked if the rest of the staff tried to motivate him Rashmit responded "not really, not at all actually" (p. 3).

Aside from showing compassion and an interest in their students some staff also used incentives to motivate their pupils to attend. Dallas (Stoneridge) was given gum every time he

attended school, as he recalled “like every time I’d walk into the class she’d be like ‘hey, I’m glad you’re here’ and give me a little piece of gum. It was small but it was nice” (p. 2). Josh (Bridgeport) spoke about coming to school because his teacher would buy him lunch if he maintained his attendance. These strategies had some positive effects, as Josh noted “I’d just go to class just so I could get lunch” (p. 2). However, the incentives strategy became problematic when staff members coerced Jeremy (Pine), a basketball star to attend. Jeremy spoke about being allowed to play basketball only if he attended his classes. Jeremy felt he was being treated unfairly as his absenteeism was caused by mental health reasons. The situation where “they would keep using basketball against me and I thought that was really evil of them and that was not really just” (p. 5) became so aggravated that he left the basketball team and eventually the school.

The student interviews indicate that some staff in the mainstream schools did reach out and attempt to motivate their students to attend. However, these people were relatively few in number and had limited ability to overturn the negative associations the majority of the youths had made with their school. Much too often these overtures were simply too little and too late to have any tangible results (i.e. a decrease in absenteeism). It must also be noted that more than half of the student participants did not identify a single person in their school who attempted to motivate them attend. Moreover, motivation only affects one side of the spectrum of absenteeism put forward in this dissertation. No matter the motivational strategies employed, students will still miss school for involuntary reasons. Sam (Bridgeport) who was struggling with drug addiction and an eating disorder elucidated this issue, “even though there were a few [teachers] who wanted me to come, I didn’t really deal with any of my problems and so it didn’t really matter what they said, because I was still going through the same stuff” (p. 2). Motivationally

based strategies only have a limited ability to eradicate absenteeism altogether, and schools need to infuse accommodations that allow their students to miss some class without penalty. There were a few accounts of accommodations within the mainstream setting.

Accommodation of involuntary absenteeism. The student participants were asked whether they were provided with accommodations such as: opportunities to catch up on missed work; given extensions and/or extra help; and allowed to take a test at a later date. Accommodations were given in some mainstream schools, and 17 students spoke about being provided chances to catch up on missed work. For example, Harshir (Stoneridge) spoke about "teachers that were nice to me, they would give me like extensions or give me extra work that would bump up my mark" (p. 3). A few pupils recalled similar stories, where a particular teacher would accommodate the absenteeism and allow them to complete missed assignments. However, the pupils were often expected to complete the work on their own time and without assistance. Moreover, teachers would often send accompanying messages of urgency for the students to finish missing assignments. Following are three instances

> There was some attempt at extra help, but it was like "yeah sure we'll give you extra help, you just have to show up at 6 in the morning and you'll learn all about physics." Yeah I have trouble getting here at 9, but yeah sure 6 would be great. Like ridiculous, doesn't really make any sense (Mort, Meadows, p. 3)

> But the thing is they would just hand me *huge* packets of like work that they told me I could do to get my grade up, but yet they didn't help me you know? They just gave me the work (Kara, Pine, p. 2, emphasis for interviewee inflection)

> They kind of just be like you have to do this all right now, or like that's it. Whatever work you missed if you don't complete it by like right now, the end of this course or the end of this period, that's it, it's like a zero and there's no point to try (Jason, Stoneridge, p. 3)

While having opportunities to catch up on missed work were appreciated by the students, many felt overwhelmed by the amount of work given and were unable to complete it on their own.

One mainstream school, and its staff members, exemplified an exemplary approach to providing the necessary academic assistance to an often-absent student. Stella (Pine) had a child in high school and was often unable to attend consistently. Rather than allowing Stella to fall through the cracks, some of the teachers in her mainstream school took the extra step in accommodating her. Stella spoke about the experience, recalling

> I missed a lot of school and they were still very like it's okay, they would drop work off at my house, so yeah. It just really depends on the school and the teachers, if they're willing to understand or not (p. 3)

Stella was extremely appreciative of this gesture, speaking about how the staff went "out of their way on weekends to drop off work to me, because I couldn't make it. That's, they don't have to do that" (p. 3). Sadly, this excellent set of actions was an isolated example.

The accommodations so far discussed must be taken with a grain of salt, as more often than not, pupils reported receiving little to no accommodation. A truly disturbing example surfaced during my conversation with Sandy (Pine) who had spent time in a psychiatric facility. As they explained

> I was admitted into the psych ward, so I missed two weeks and there wasn't any way to work around or compromise with the school so I could receive the credits. I brought the work to the psych ward and I did the work, just because of the absences and everything couldn't get the credits…they didn't have any sort of compromise or in-between, it was just you either attend every day and meet these requirements or we can't pass you on anything (p. 2).

While some mainstream school staff motivate and accommodate students who are frequently absent, the rate at which this happens, and the degree of the actions are not sufficient to assist all youths in progressing with their education. As a result, all of the youths in the sample transitioned out of their mainstream school(s), to an alternative school.

Transitions to Alternative School

At some point in their high school journey all of the student participants decided to or were told to leave their mainstream high school(s). Some dissatisfied with how the school operated (e.g. teachers, discipline, etc.), voluntarily chose to leave the institution. Whereas other pupils could not meet the mandatory attendance expectations and were removed from their mainstream school. Prior to enrollment in their alternative school at the time of the interview, most had attended a myriad of mainstream and/or alternative schools, with the student participants on average having attended three high schools.

The pathways the youths took to the alternative schools varied, but three broad categories emerged, where pupils would: a) voluntarily transfer to an alternative school; b) leave schooling and return to an alternative school at a later date; or c) be removed from their mainstream school. It must be noted that the youths in this sample did eventually find their way to an alternative school, based on Ontario's four-year graduation rate of 79.8% thousands do not.

Transfer. Fifteen youths in the sample reported voluntarily transferring to an alternative school. The students were often told about these schools by their friends; trusted adults in their mainstream high school; or sought them out on their own. The goal was to find a school that was a better fit and more attuned to their needs. Chantel (Bridgeport), who was quite candid about growing up in poverty and who had a child in high school, spoke about her movements between schools

> When I was in Grade 10 I started really disliking the Catholic school, I was like this school is like a prison, I really don't like this school, and then I decided to leave that school and go to [another mainstream high school]… and then I realized that school is 10 times worse because it's the complete opposite, and the school is just too much, it's a big,

> big school, and when I left there I went to a whole bunch of other schools, and then a teacher referred me to this school and said it's more of an intimate setting, that I would be able to do better in this setting, because they help with bus tickets and they help a lot of stuff with families, people can actually make the connection with education and your life, so you can actually get it done (p. 3).

The notion of "get it done" was prevalent from a number of participants, who being overage for their credit accumulation felt time constraints to finish their high school diploma. Many spoke about being able to accumulate credits quickly as the driving force for their transition to the alternative setting.

For a subset of the students the move to an alternative school was largely voluntary and accomplished with little, if any, time spent not being enrolled in a school. Granted it may have taken pupils a number of "tries" to find a school they felt worked for them, but their decision to leave was expressed in generally consenting tones. An interesting finding is that some students actually attended a different alternative school, and not finding it to their liking, chose to transfer to a different one. A few pupils even attended, left, and reenrolled back into the same alternative school, thereby highlighting their ongoing battle to complete their education.

The transitions outlined above are some of the more voluntary within the sample, and these students did not mention either having "dropped" out or being "kicked" out from their previous high school(s). For the remaining 25 students, the transition to the alternative school was more volatile, either comprising a decision to leave schooling for a period of time; or being dropped from enrollment at their previous school.

Dropout. Thirteen students reported "dropping out" of high school prior to enrolling in the alternative school. The length of time out of school varied from a couple of months to as much as three years. The main difference between dropping out as opposed to being kicked out

of school was that the dropping out process was framed as a largely voluntary and deliberate decision, rather than a coerced one, where a pupil was forcibly removed from the school by the staff.

The reasons the pupils gave for their decision to voluntarily leave school varied. Some slowly lost their engagement and attachment to the school and drifted away from their education

> I dropped out of school after Grade 12 because I you know, completely screwed up, well technically speaking I didn't drop out of school. I signed up for a fifth year, but I decided to never show up (A. J., Bridgeport, p. 5)

> I just got into smoking a lot of weed and kind of rebelling, not worrying about school, I could do it later, I don't need high school and what not (Connor, Stoneridge, p. 2)

Others had more immediate concerns that predicated their leaving school. Feeling the need or the desire to work was a cause for the dropping out cited by five youths, who took the time away from school to find employment. For two pupils a change in their living arrangements forced them to leave school for a period of time. Stella (Pine), who had a child in high school and who was part of the foster care system often had to leave schools due to forcible relocations to new foster homes. She spoke about dropping out of school that she liked

> Other than the fact that I couldn't get daycare, my daughter was in daycare, but there was an issue so I had to take her out. This home situation did not work, so I had to move and my only option at the time was to go into a shelter which ended up being in [the opposite side of the city], so I had no control over that too (p. 3).

While all of the pupils in the sample had difficulties at school, the choice to drop out was both voluntary and involuntary. Some youths not feeling satisfied with their education framed their decision to drop out as their own choice, whereas others left school due to pressing matters in their lives. However, for some pupils, the decision to change schools was completely out of their control. Situations where students were explicitly told to leave and removed from their mainstream school were relatively common and present the third avenue of transitions to the

alternative school.

Kicked out. Just over a quarter of the student participants were overtly instructed to leave their school. These messages were not an implicit unwelcoming aura but were rather concrete statements informing the student that they were no longer welcome in the school. This action usually occurred once the youth turned 18 and the school could legally demit them from enrollment without penalty.

Seven pupils were removed from their school due to a lack of attendance. For a few this removal was predicated by their breach of the school board's mandatory attendance policy, which allowed schools to demit students from roll if they had missed 12 consecutive days[3]. Josh (Bridgeport) experienced this exact scenario in Grade 12

> [If] you're skipping a lot, they'll tell you, "You have this amount of time," and if you don't go to class in this amount of time then we'll kick you out I didn't take it seriously, so I skipped for two weeks. And then they brought me into their office, they boxed - they literally cornered me in and then said I'm kicked out (p. 3)

Darren (Meadows) echoed this sentiment, stating "I got actually demitted, kind of kicked out because I wasn't going as much" (p. 1). There is some evidence that the schools were all too happy to demit these pupils, as they were considered to be a nuisance, as Stacy (Bridgeport) explained "they just said I wasn't working, because they said I was very distracting to other students who were willing to learn and get an education" (p. 4). Matt (Bridgeport) had a similar experience

> It was a lot of me disrupting classes, that's what they said. They said I made it hard for other people to do the work. It was mainly the teacher that would yell at me for skipping who said that. I don't know how much of that is the truth, but they said that a lot (p. 2)

[3] Actual number of absences changed to ensure anonymity.

Other pupils were demitted for behavioural infractions and/or prolonged conflict with their teachers. Being considered a potential safety threat was also relatively common for the students who reported being "kicked out" of school, and many were asked to leave due to safety precautions. The messages of their potential danger to other pupils were quite unambiguous. Dre (Meadows) spoke about being involved in crime and having been arrested, and was removed from a different alternative school because "they didn't want me there…they didn't feel safe having me there because of my stuff so I was like okay and they just kicked me out" (p. 3). Sandy (Pine), who had a history of self-harm was also asked to leave a school as a safety precaution "I went to [name of school] and they rejected me because of my history with self-harm, and they misunderstood me and thought I was a threat to their safety" (p. 2). Whereas Matt (Bridgeport) framed being kicked out of school due to having "a couple of other issues at the school, but after a while they said 'hey you gotta go to an alternative school or something,' they didn't want me to stay there anymore" (p. 2). When I asked him what the issues were, he mentioned being involved in two fights. These youths, after years of being labelled as a failure received one final act of rejection from the schooling system, and the mainstream schools were able to remove these "difficult" students from their rolls.

As this section has highlighted the youths took a number of pathways to their enrollment in the alternative schools. This process ranged from voluntary transfers to forcible removals from the mainstream schools.

Conclusion

This chapters indicates that the youths in the sample missed school for both voluntary and involuntary reasons. However, their mainstream schools did not differentiate between the two

types of absenteeism, and often exacerbated the issue through hostile and punitive responses to absenteeism. With few supports the students floundered in the mainstream setting, and as a result, either voluntarily or involuntary left their mainstream school and found themselves enrolled in an alternative school at the time of data collection. I now turn to unpacking the student participants' absenteeism in the alternative schools, and how these schools responded to the behaviour.

CHAPTER 6: ABSENTEEISM IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Introduction

All of the students in the sample had tried and "failed" at other schools prior to entry into their current alternative school. More often than not, absenteeism was the main cause of their transfer or removal from their previous school(s). While the students followed different pathways to the alternative school(s), it was felt that for many it would be their last chance to earn a high school diploma. All but one were over the age of 18, and many were coming close to what is generally referred to as "aging out," where a pupil who turns 21 has to leave K-12 schools and enroll in an adult education program. There was a feeling of finality. Either the youths would complete their education in the alternative school, or they would have to enter the adult education system.

On average the youths had spent 15 months in their alternative school at the time of data collection, with duration of enrollment ranging from 3 months to 3 years. The youths had spent a considerable amount of time attending the schools and had valuable insights into what they felt was and was not working within the alternative school. In this section the alternative school staff interviews are also included, as the staff were able to comment more fully on what the schools are doing to alleviate the negative repercussions of absenteeism. The structure of this section will mirror the first, with the perceptions, causes, consequences, and solutions to absenteeism being the main headings.

Perception of Absenteeism

The majority of the pupils were still absent to some degree in the alternative school. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the students' absenteeism patterns were well established and difficult

to eradicate. Moreover, many formed negative associations with schooling in general, and these feelings surfaced in the alternative school setting

> Again it was, at the beginning me just being upset and not finding a point in things, but like it's just, sometimes I just don't, I get really emotional sometimes, so like sometimes I'll just wake up and be like I can't go to school today (Kara, Pine, p. 3)

> My problem mainly is getting here on time. Mainly because I don't like being here, even though it's shorter than a normal school day I don't like being here (Eric, Stoneridge, p. 7)

> From the time I dropped out of school in November, early November to the time I enrolled in school which was March, I hadn't really been doing anything, so it was hard to get back into school, but I just had to try really hard to learn how I learn, and learn what kind of things I want from my school experience, so that took like a month and a half, that I wasn't really here, I was coming every once in a while and just figuring it out (Natasha, Bridgeport, p. 6)

The transition from being a non-attender to an attender was difficult for some pupils. Yet, most (85%) spoke about having improved attendance, and were showing signs of reengagement with their education. All but six attended school more often than in the past, with five students indicating no change in their absenteeism, and one pupil reporting missing more school than before. Moreover, 22% of the students spoke about being perfect attenders and not missing any school whatsoever.

In order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the absenteeism dilemma the alternative schools' staff were asked their opinions about attendance within their schools. Unsurprisingly the staff felt that absenteeism was the biggest challenge to overcome. It was a persistent problem they continuously tried to navigate

> 100% of our students are attendance issues (Kendra, curriculum leader, Stoneridge, p. 5)

> I would say we struggle with attendance, I think it's one of our largest concerns as a staff. For the last 6 years my experience it's been an ongoing dialogue of trying to find solutions, trying to create some changes to curve the absenteeism that we struggle with at this school (Erin, teacher, Pine, p. 2)

> We have many students who have never attended school even when they were like 5 years old. So the absenteeism is ingrained, entrenched and on a much deeper level, it's actually rooted more in family circumstances and it's created behavioral patterns with the students that are very difficult to reverse (Amanda, curriculum leader, Bridgeport, p. 2)

> We certainly still struggle with it… it's tricky, we're pretty much constantly trying to think of how to get the kids here. We text in the morning, we call in the morning, we call in the afternoon, but there's definitely no magic bullet, so yeah it's an issue, it's for sure an issue. And I wish that I knew how to fix it, that's what I wish the most (Anna, teacher, Meadows, p. 2)

While the student participants characterized their absenteeism as diminishing, the staff were more sombre and reported an average of 49% attendance for the entire school, with it ranging from as low as 20% to as high as 80% in specific classes. Thus, many students continued to be absent in the alternative setting.

Causes of Absenteeism

The fact that the students reported being absent less in their alternative than in the mainstream school(s) is a cause for optimism. However, several pupils still described missing some school, although to a lesser degree. Moreover, the range of the causes for absenteeism was much smaller than in the mainstream setting. Therefore, the causes of absenteeism in the alternative school setting are grouped under two broad categories of "voluntary" and "involuntary." Voluntary causes of absenteeism were associated with: being bored in class; ingrained pattern of absenteeism; negative associations with schooling; feeling old; and fear of graduation. Whereas the involuntary absenteeism was mainly caused by: having to earn an income; maintaining a household; becoming a parent; mental health issues; and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Voluntary. The majority of the causes in the voluntary absenteeism category revolved around issues established within the mainstream setting. Students described being bored in class or avoiding certain teachers, while others spoke about a long-ingrained pattern of absenteeism that was difficult to break. Many were haunted by previous negative schooling experiences. Sharron for example, spoke about not coming to school "because I was so anxious about the people here because at [my old schools] the people were really really horrible and obnoxious, and you don't want to be around those people" (p. 6). Negative associations with schooling were entrenched to such a degree that it took students time to readjust to going to school in a positive environment. For a few, their relationships with formal education had been damaged to a point where steady attendance appeared unattainable. These students seemed to have lost all motivation to attend, to the point where the pattern became almost irreversible.

> I just don't want to be here [laughs]. I know I came here for a reason, to finish my stuff, but honestly sometimes I just feel like I want to go. Because you know when you feeling that school is just not for everybody, I just feel that (Gail, Stoneridge, p. 4)

> I don't like school. I fucking hate school so much. But I'm coming here back because the world we live you need a diploma. Really I don't like nothing about school. I hate it. If I could be out of here and working, making money, I'd be making money you know? (Lance, Stoneridge, p. 8)

While entrenched patterns of absenteeism were one of the main causes of absenteeism the students reported, there were a few reasons for missing school that were unique to the alternative setting. Some pupils were becoming "old" by high school standards, which served as a demotivating factor to their attendance

> I'm like two years older. You know, that's very demoralizing (Dallas, Stoneridge, p. 6)

> The moment you reach 20 years of age and you're still in high school you start carrying these thoughts that saying that people graduate when they're 17 or 18 years old…but here you are, you're 20 years old, still in high school, you start to lose hope, you start to give up, you start to say what's the point of doing this anymore. I think those are the thoughts

> that I'm carrying and that's probably the reason why I'm being absent more often (Jeremy, Pine, p. 6)

It is unsurprising that after years of trying and failing to attend and graduate within the mainstream setting pupils began to lose hope for their educational futures. Seeing friends not only graduate high school but start attending postsecondary schooling also served to imbue a few students with feelings of disappointment. It was difficult to keep trying and working towards a goal that at times seemed unachievable.

There was however, an intriguing and contradictory finding to the one above. Some pupils developed such a strong attachment and bond to their alternative school that it lessened their motivation to graduate and move on. This behaviour was termed "failure to launch" by one of the curricular leaders, as she explained

> Failure to launch meaning they'd get to 25 credits and then they would just freeze, because they don't actually want to graduate, because this is a place they come every day that's like safe, and they know the teachers, and they get fed every day, so they would like sabotage and this would happen for a semester…where they've been in a position to graduate for like a year and a half, but they're not just pulling the trigger (Amanda, Bridgeport, p. 6)

At first glance this finding appears counterintuitive, where pupils miss school and sabotage their progress due to *liking* the school. While unusual and unexpected, a couple of students did speak about missing school because "I only have like half a credit I'm kind like umm I don't really need to come. Like I can do that whenever" (Sam, Bridgeport, p. 4) and "because I'm a lot more independent now…because at this point I only have three credits left…so now I'm just going at my own pace" (Matt, Bridgeport, p. 4). Thus, there was a reluctance to complete the last remaining remnants of the schooling requirements in order to graduate.

Although the schools undertake commendable actions to motivate their students to attend, there is another voluntary cause of absenteeism that is directly triggered by the schools

themselves. The sampled alternative schools have relatively low attendance rates (49% reported by staff). Since these schools are quite small, averaging 129 students, having more than half of the pupils miss class daily means that quite a small number of students are in school on a particular day. This results in some of the students being in class by themselves, which often causes them to miss school

> It's like in my literacy class, I think it was like two days ago I was the only one there. And it's just like "why am I the only one here?" She was like, "You care about school." I was like, "Miss can I go to the washroom?" She's like "yeah." Got my bag and left [laughs] (Josh, Bridgeport, p. 5)

> Yeah when there's no one else here I just go. I'm not going to stay here by myself (Lance, Stoneridge, p. 7).

> I have my two friends here right? So sometimes they don't end up showing up, so when I'm like I don't have people or I know they're not going to be here, sometimes I'll be like I don't want to go to school, because sometimes it does come down to social, like yeah sometimes it does come down if my friends aren't going to be here I'm not going to come (Gail, Stoneridge, p. 7)

Schooling is still very much a social experience for some of the students. Although many spoke of coming in to do their work, others used peers and friends as a motivating force to attend. Being the only one in class removed some of the students' desire to be there, and being over the age of 18, they were legally allowed to leave.

The student participants' voluntary absenteeism declined in severity in the alternative setting. In particular, school-based causes of absenteeism were all but absent in the pupils' accounts, and it was the remnants of poor schooling experiences that discouraged the students from attending regularly. Involuntary absences, however, were still evident in a subset of youths, and contributed to their continued absenteeism.

Involuntary. As the motivational struggles to attend school persisted in the alternative setting for some of the student participants, so did their personal struggles. Thirteen students spoke about missing school for involuntary reasons. These absences were predominantly associated with unresolved issues from the students' past (e.g. mental health; involvement in the criminal justice system); and the added responsibilities the youths took on as they transitioned from adolescence to adulthood.

One of the primary barriers to attendance was the need for the pupils to work and earn an income. Six pupils lived alone and had to support themselves financially. While another who still lived with a guardian felt the need to contribute to the household "I still pay my own bills and stuff even though I'm living with my mom" (Tiffany, Bridgeport, p. 7). Having to work a substantial number of hours, often during school time, presented quite a challenging obstacle to overcome for a number of the youths.

Additionally, three students who had children during high school spoke about the added difficulties of balancing parental responsibilities and schooling. When I asked Chantel (Bridgeport) why she was currently absent she had a simple reply: "my son – my son, or I'm just exhausted" (p. 3). Stella (Pine) had to spend three hours commuting daily to her alternative school because the only daycare she could find was a considerable distance from her home and school

> Then I came here and due to like it being an hour and a half away I missed a lot, sometimes I'd miss my first period classes and my second period classes because it takes me a while to get here….it takes an hour and a half, from leaving my house, to drop her off, get her ready for her class or whatever, and get the bus again (p. 2).

Stella enjoyed and appreciated her alternative school to such an extent that she was willing to spend three hours a day traveling to and from the institution. The energies required to raise a child are further taxed by the precarious financial situation students may find themselves in.

Lance (Stoneridge) had to juggle raising his son, going to school, and being the main financial earner for his family. Lance often had to miss entire days if not weeks of school to work as a subcontractor, as he explained

> If I get a customer, get called in for a job, I can tell these guys "hey I'm not going to be here for 4 days I got a job to do, I need to make money" but I'll come back, I always catch up on my work (p. 4).

While the youths above had to juggle adult and student roles, others exhibiting involuntary absenteeism had issues unresolved from their past. A few spoke about continuing struggles with mental health, where episodic breakdowns would prohibit school attendance. Others mentioned involvement in the criminal justice system and attending court. An ironic case was Jerry (Stoneridge), who spoke about missing classes in his alternative school because he had to attend court proceedings for his charge of truancy

> Yeah I was going almost every day, there were days where I had to leave because seeing as I missed like a full year, two years, I was actually getting charged with truancy. So I went to court for that (p. 3).

It is apparent that students' life conditions do not change when they transition to the alternative setting. However, the alternative school staff take measures to ensure that these difficult circumstances do not have a detrimental impact on their students' education. Unlike in the mainstream setting the consequences to non-attendance are much more positive in the alternative schools.

Consequences of Absenteeism

There was a relatively significant shift the consequences to absenteeism evident in the alternative setting, where there are few, if any, disciplinary responses to absenteeism. The alternative school staff interviews also contributed an added lens, which captures the motivations and justifications for the consequences of absenteeism. Thus, this section focuses on the

students' interpretations and perceptions of the consequences, as well as the underlying logics from the staff's perspective.

Consequences for students. Contrasted to the often-negative reactions and consequences of absenteeism in the mainstream setting, there are relatively few repercussions for being absent in the sampled alternative schools. When asked what the consequences for non-attendance were, most students had replies similar to Joanna's (Bridgeport) "if you don't come to school there won't be any punishment" (p. 1). While a few students were somewhat aware of the school board's attendance policy, which on occasion the alternative schools had to enforce, the vast majority of the pupils felt that there were no real consequences for being absent. The usual response from the school is one of warmth and caring, characterized by phone calls by the school staff to the student. The use of personalized phone calls will be described in greater detail in the "Solutions to Absenteeism" section, but it is worth to note that the said calls are never aggressive or hostile in nature. Rather they are characterized by caring, as exemplified by Stella's (Pine) comment

> They'll either email me or call me and the first thing is, is everything okay? They're not like "ohh you need to attend school, you're going to fail." They just check on you, "are you okay, do you need to talk, is there anything I can do to help you?" So it's always a concern and trying to help you without even knowing what's going on so they're great like that (p. 5)

This is quite a shift from the antagonistic responses to absenteeism evident in the student participants' mainstream schools. This change in attitude is caused primarily by the alternative school staff. Having no administration on site, staff members have to use their intuition and discretion when dolling out consequences for non-attendance. Having an intimate knowledge of their students' lives the staff members are hesitant to give out harsh punishments, choosing

instead to find ways to solve the varying issues stagnating attendance. This stance is also extended to the alternative schools' interactions with absentees' families.

Consequences for family. The families of absent students too were largely spared any consequences for non-attendance, and at most they can expect a phone call from one of the staff members. According to the staff, this is explained, in part, by a lack of familial educational involvement. The staff voiced complaints of the futility of attempting to contact an absentee's family. Anthony, a teacher at Bridgeport described the struggles of involving absent students' families in reducing absenteeism, he described trying to "talk to the parents hopefully, although sometimes there's not a lot of parental involvement, so we just talk to the students" (p. 3). Some teachers described how their students "are either on their own or just based at their parents or parents disengage from them" (Anna, Meadows, p. 1) and

> I think for them issues around their parents or caregivers or they have to find means to take care of themselves. A lot of them are on their own here in terms of high school, a lot of students here although they might be living with a parent a lot of them, most of the students here don't have, have very minimal parental impact (Dektor, child and youth worker, Bridgeport, p. 3)

Whilst staff members attempt to contact families of the students it is felt that they have limited involvement in their child's schooling; and there is a reduction in the amount of consequences the families receive. Considering that many of the pupils are over the age of 18 and are thereby legally allowed to manage their own education affairs, there is an increased focus on making contact with them first and foremost. By concentrating on reaching out to absent students the expectations of involvement from the families are diminished and they are largely unaffected by their child's absenteeism.

Consequences for school. The alternative schools arguably bear the biggest brunt of the repercussions associated with their students' absenteeism. The staff are caught in a difficult position, as on the one hand they have to abide by ministry and board regulations concerning attendance, while on the other they have a commitment to uphold their students' best interests. This ethical and professional quandary weighs heavily on a number of staff members, who expressed frustration at the inability to raise attendance.

The schools in the sample have to follow the compulsory attendance policy mandated by the school board. This policy stipulates that if a student has missed 12 consecutive days, they are to be referred to an attendance counselor if they are under 18 years old; or be demitted from the school roll if they are over 18. As most of the pupils in the sampled schools are over 18, if the attendance policy is implemented exactly as designed many would be at risk of being involuntarily removed from the school. However the staff pushed back against the policy, and one of the staff members referred to it as "our guideline, I would rather use the language guideline" (Barbara, curriculum leader, Pine, p. 8), because "if something becomes policy then it has to be enforced and if you can't enforce it then you're screwed" (Samantha, curriculum leader, Meadows, p. 5). Blind compliance to the policy would effectively remove a subset of the students from the alternative schools, which the staff members feel goes against the school ethos.

Staff consistently find ways to skirt around the attendance policy, as illustrated by Amanda, the curricular leader at Bridgeport Alternative, "you're supposed to demit them after [12] days of non-attendance, we stretch that *all* the time (p. 4, emphasis for interviewee inflection, number augmented to protect anonymity)." This is done in a number of ways, as Amanda demonstrated

> If a student calls and says that they're sick or something, you can put something in the system to just buy you a bit of time, so you don't have to demit them…We'll do whatever

> the work arounds to avoid demitting. And if we have to we'll demit with a note saying like they can re-enter at any time (p. 4)

The staff members are all too aware of the difficulties their students have in attending school, and thus rather than being punitive, are focused on meeting their students' needs. Kendra the curricular leader, and Liz the child and youth counselor at Stoneridge Alternative School, spoke about this approach

> Punitive has not worked for them, they've been in schools where they've been consequenced, they've been kicked out, they've been…suspended for a whole bunch of reasons…and that hasn't worked, that's why they ended up here…if a kid comes at 11 o'clock we're aren't on them "Why are you only here at 11." … because if they're getting scolded every time they walk through the front door they will stop walking through the front door and that is what's happening in many of their high schools (p. 3)

The navigation between a caring approach and the board's attendance expectations takes a great toll on the staff. Some feel unfairly judged by the school board, which is quite critical of their low provincial standardized test scores, attendance and graduation rates. This exasperating situation is just one of the challenges of working in a high absenteeism school. Many of the staff members expressed disappointment and concern about their inability to deliver engaging lessons; powerlessness to meet all students' needs; as well as their failure to raise attendance

> Group projects? Forget it. You can't, it's very difficult to do group assignments because you never know who's going to show up and who isn't. So it's very frustrating that way (Samantha, curriculum leader, Meadows, p. 7)

> I honestly think, and this is maybe a personal frustration, but I honestly think a lot of our students need many more professional services for what they're dealing with because I'm not a social worker, but I almost feel like that's what they need more than a teacher (Peter, Stoneridge, teacher, p. 7)

> Attendance is a huge problem at this school, and that's making me really frustrated as a teacher, I mean you can't teach somebody if they're not there…I've tried being more structured, I've tried being less structured. It doesn't seem to change anything…Like sometimes it's really nice to work with two students who show up. But, yeah, it's also not good to feel like you're not doing a good job (Julia, Bridgeport, teacher, p. 5)

The students' absenteeism has a direct impact on the professional lives of the staff members as they struggle to navigate the ethical tensions inherent in the attendance policy. Moreover, all have had to adapt their curricular and pedagogical approaches to compensate for the lack of attendance. However, rather than punishing and castigating the absentees for their lack of attendance, these schools take a caring and proactive approach; and seek to find any way to reduce absenteeism.

Solutions to Absenteeism

This section traces the strategies aimed at reducing both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism evident in the alternative schools; before proceeding to unpacking the various accommodations employed if a student is still absent. Voluntary and involuntary absences are markedly different and require varied solutions. Strategies to reduce voluntary absenteeism are divided into our categories of: school climate; staff; learning; and motivating students to attend. These approaches for diminishing motivational (voluntary) causes for absenteeism are focused on making the school as attractive as possible. Whereas strategies to reduce involuntary absenteeism (e.g. provision of food, transit fare, etc.), are utilized if a student has structural obstacles to their attendance. If all measures are ineffective and a pupil continues to miss school, accommodations (e.g. extensions; flexible approach to attendance expectations) are used to allow students to miss some school without penalty.

Solutions to voluntary absenteeism. In order to reduce voluntary absenteeism, where pupils deliberately choose to miss school, educational institutions need to become more engaging and attractive for the students. The alternative schools' attempts to reengage students at the

margins of the educational system are quite remarkable, and as a result, they have had success in reducing voluntary absenteeism. This section documents how this is accomplished.

School climate. When asked what they liked most about their alternative school the student participants spoke about the school environment. The sampled alternative schools are characterized by warmth and respect, which is made possible by their small sizes. In these more intimate settings, the pupils are able to reengage with their education, and to develop bonds with teachers and peers. Since the alternative schools are small and have low attendance rates there are few pupils in the school at a given time. Although this motivates some students to be absent, others spoke about enjoying having few people around

> I sort of prefer that it's quiet most of the time, you can get a lot more done (Emma, Pine, p. 7)
>
> I like the small school, the small class sizes (Natasha, Bridgeport, p. 7)
>
> It's much smaller. It's easier to focus to be honest. Because I never had a problem socially, and that was sort of the problem, because I had too many distractions. I'd always allow myself to get caught up in things (Dallas, Stoneridge, p. 3).

Having a smaller school primarily comprised of a single hallway allows students to concentrate on their studies, and for a subset of youths represents a safe environment. Many of the student participants spoke about feeling lost and invisible in their mainstream schools. Having few friends and connections to the staff some traversed the extremities of the school community. A more intimate setting provided by the alternative schools offers pupils more opportunities to converse with their peers and teachers. Students described a sense of camaraderie and community developing in the alternative schools, as all knew they were in a "last chance" alternative school for a reason. Many bonded over their hardships

> We can all relate you know, which is the one thing, because we're all kind of here for the same reasons so it's never hard to make friends (A.J., Bridgeport, pp. 3-4)

> I met tons of new people and they're all really interesting because they're all here for a reason, there's something that led to them being here instead of somewhere else so we've got, we get a lot to talk about (Emma, Pine, p. 7)

> I often have this phrase where I say "alternative school is the end result of when public school fails to serve your common interest" that's what I say usually, because when you don't seem comfortable to be in a public school, then most kids end up in alternative schools, and truthfully I believe that everyone here are facing our own problem, but then they kind of find solace in this type of environment. And I don't think that's bad right? Because we're human beings. (Jeremy, Pine, p. 5)

> I think that I can relate to a lot of them here, a lot of people here are, have parents who are refugees, and a lot of people here have like struggled to finish school. Like they're poor, like I just think that lots of things about our backgrounds, I feel like they're more like me than the kids I went to school with before (Natasha, Bridgeport, p. 6)

> I just feel like there's this common understanding between everybody that everyone has their struggles here and they're not going to judge you (Sandy, Pine, p. 5)

Many of the pupils finally found a sense of belonging so far not experienced in their schooling. Rather than being social pariahs the youths felt like a part of the school community in the alternative setting. These feelings are heightened by the immense amount of work undertaken by the staff members to create a warm environment. The staff go to great lengths to ensure their students feel cared for and take great pride in their ability to offer a compassionate atmosphere

> We make them feel valued. So we include them in our school community, which a lot of them come from communities that are not healthy, whether it be at home, neighborhood or their past school. So I mean I might have a day-to-day conversation with a student who's not even my student, but I see them in the hallway and we talk. We know each other, we cook for them, so we support them as far as students who are you know, sometimes come from vulnerable situations and need to be supported as young people (John, teacher, Meadows, p. 6)

> I think that the number one thing that our school provides is that understanding caring environment. And I think that's big because speaking about the issues that our kids have had in the past, a lot of them have anxiety issues, and a lot of them have home problems and things like that. So knowing that being at school is a caring and safe place to be, that's what brings them in. So a lot of them would rather be here, than be at home (Ella, teacher, Stoneridge, p. 5)

The last sentence of the above quote presents quite a contrast to the horrible experiences these students underwent in their previous schools. Moreover, a number of pupils spoke about the school feeling like home and the staff as family. When asked about their relationships with their teachers all but two of the pupils spoke glowingly of the staff in the alternative schools. In fact, it was the single largest theme captured during the entire coding process.

Staff. The youths begin to develop bonds with the staff members as soon as they enter the alternative school(s). A simple, yet effective technique of lowering authoritarian structures is the use of first names between staff and students. At first glance this may appear to be an inconsequential and minor adjustment, but it has a profound impact on the students. Being able to refer to a staff member by their first name frames the relationships as one based on egalitarianism and equality. Students felt that the staff are more approachable and willing to break down the traditional boundaries between student and teacher. A few pupils spoke about the impact of being able to call the teachers by their first name

> You actually call a teacher by their first name, which I actually think is pretty cool, instead of Missus this and Mr. that, it's more like [Jo-Ann] or [Josh] like how are you doing, you're having a conversation with this person…you treat them like how they treat you kind of, it's not like you're higher than me, it's kind of like they put you on their level, they connect with you (Darren, Meadows, pp. 2-3)

> We get treated a lot better so teachers talk to us as if we were people as opposed to students, we're on a first name basis, we're friends with teachers (Mort, Meadows, p. 3)

> These teachers are on a first name basis and they'll sit with you at lunch and they'll talk to you and like it feels like they care more about you (Reketa, Meadows, p. 6)

The use of first names is also tied to the notion of respect. Since many pupils experienced what they felt was disrespect in their previous school, they spoke about being constantly guarded when meeting new staff. However, the students quickly felt that the staff treat them fairly and

respectfully. With the diminished power imbalance, the pupils expressed a belief that the adults in the school genuinely care for them and, as a result, the students were more receptive to opening lines of communication. A number of students referred to a staff member as a friend or a relative, with statements such as “they’re always there, kind of like a second mom and I can talk to them about anything, even when I can’t talk to others I trust them with that” (Gail, Stoneridge, p. 6); “the [curriculum leader] is like a second mom to a lot of the students here” (Chris, Pine, p. 4); “love the staff, you know they’re like a second family” (Connor, Stoneridge, p. 6) being expressed by a few students, and one even referred to a teacher as a best friend.

Connected to the theme of respect and equality is the flexibility and leniency expressed by the teachers towards the students’ absenteeism not found in the mainstream setting. Rather than employing a punitive approach the staff in the alternative schools are more tolerant and understanding of the students’ difficulties attending school consistently. The staff have an intimate knowledge of the hardships their students struggle with on a daily basis, and this insight informs how they interact with the pupils

> Some of the kids are really coming from really horrible, horrible, horrible places, so best case scenario we’re modelling communication styles and some consistency in kindness and respect and some values that they’re not necessarily getting elsewhere even maybe in the schools they came from, because they keep describing being treated in ways that are pretty horrible (Julia, Bridgeport, p. 5)

> Substance abuse is a big one, responsibilities at home, like being the only caregiver for a little brother or sister, work sometimes if they need to pay the bills or help pay the bills at home, they’ll work instead of coming to school, that happens a lot, mental illness for sure, a lot of depression, a lot of depression there, and all sorts of other mental illnesses as well, that’s a biggie… I can’t come to school because I don’t have clean clothes. I can’t come to school because I was up until 3 in the morning working, or I can’t come to school because I didn’t have breakfast, there’s no food at home (Peter, Stoneridge, pp. 3-4)

The staff use a softer touch, which was appreciated by almost every single student participant. The students’ knowledge of their teachers’ sincere interest in their well-being is an important

component in making the school more attractive for the youths. All but two spoke glowingly of the alternative schools' teachers, and most of the student interviews were replete with praise for the staff

> I feel like they, the teachers and the staff, try to have connections with all the students to try and encourage, cause like if a student feels like they actually are cared for in a way, they are more likely to come in, from personal experience anyways. I'm more likely to come in, if I know a teacher actually somewhat cares whether I come in or not. That's helpful (Dallas, Stoneridge, p. 6).

> I really like how we're really close with the teachers, kinda like friends. Like you can talk to them about anything. All the teachers are really nice here (Joanna, Bridgeport, p. 2)

> I don't look at any of these people as teachers, I look at them as mentors and that's what I needed. I needed guidance in terms of education so I could graduate, but I needed life skills that I wasn't being taught by my parents (Sandy, Meadows, p. 3)

> The sewing teacher she's a reason why I come to school, she's not just a teacher for me, she's more than that and I have to at least check in with her (Rashmit, Pine, p. 5)

The warmth, care and respect espoused by the staff has an immense impact on the students' motivation to attend. While the dedication of the staff cannot and should not be downplayed, their commitment is aided by the low numbers of students enrolled and present each day in the school(s). Having few pupils to attend to gives teachers the time to become well acquainted with their pupils and develop strong relationships. The teachers are able to individualize not only their attention, but the content and pedagogical approaches as well. There is room for flexibility and the pupils receive engaging and rich learning experiences. Many spoke about reconnecting to and rediscovering their passion for learning. This is accentuated and enhanced through the ability to have a voice in the content they were learning and being able to work at their own pace. The what and the how the students are learning plays a significant role in enticing the pupils to attend school.

Learning. The alternative school staff cater learning experiences to their pupils, and do so on many levels, ranging from creating locally developed courses to allowing students to craft their own projects. The staff go through great lengths to deliver curricular content in innovative ways tailored to their students' needs and interests. They are able to do so even within the confines of the small physical spaces afforded to them.

Many of the teachers lament having limited facilities, which prevent them from offering more technical courses (e.g. car mechanics, wood working); as well as not being able to have in-depth science courses. However, the lack of equipment and space does not discourage teachers from curricular innovation. Many teachers spoke about completing additional qualification courses at Faculties of Education in order to teach and create new courses, and as a result, the course offerings in the sampled alternative schools are quite diverse, especially considering the relatively small number of teachers working within each school. This effort is not lost on the pupils, as Randy (Pine) highlighted "I took gender studies last year. It was actually a really good course for me because I am transgender, and it was kind of hard for me to figure out what it was" (p. 5). A number of the youths spoke positively about the greater course offerings, particularly within electives, and spoke about being able to "take something here that's more interesting because it's so specialized" (Sam, Bridgeport, p. 7). Moreover, the schools do offer some "hands-on" courses the students enjoy. All of the schools offer cooking as an elective course where the students not only learn about the culinary arts, but actually have opportunities to practice cooking meals for the school. One of the schools also offers a sewing class, which teaches the students to make clothes. The clothes are sold at school functions, with the proceeds going back to the pupils. The youths felt that these classes taught them concrete skills, and since

many were beginning to take on adult responsibilities, they felt like these knowledges would be directly applicable to their lives.

The students are also given the opportunity to have a voice in their education. A few spoke about having input concerning how their assignments and projects are structured. The ability to study topics of interest serves to engage the pupils in their learning. There was a spike in the students' interest in learning and it encouraged them to attend school more consistently. Rather than the rote learning experienced in mainstream high schools, many of the student participants spoke about the meaningful learning opportunities afforded in the alternative setting. There appeared to be a genuine interest and enjoyment of the learning process that many of these pupils had so far not experienced, and several spoke about learning a great deal more than they ever had in the past.

Lastly, the pupils appreciated the ability to work at their own pace without having to keep up with the rest of the class. With attendance sporadic, the teachers diversify their teaching styles, as Anthony (Bridgeport) explained "you don't know who's going to be showing up sometimes. Sometimes you have to think on your feet and teach to whoever you have in your class" (p. 1). While this presents a challenge to the teachers, it has a positive effect on the students, who can work at their own pace. Individualized and self-paced learning lowers the anxieties many pupils have towards their schoolwork, and in turn diminishing inhibitions to coming to school. Even if students still struggle in their schoolwork, they have the undivided attention of the teacher, who assists them with difficult content

> All the teachers are really nice here. And also because it's a smaller school, so you get a lot more one-on-one time with the teachers. So you would get a lot more feedback, than perhaps in a bigger school, and so then I would be able to improve my work more (Joanna, Bridgeport, p. 2)

> I'm doing math right now. And I'm horrible at math, I hate it, but Mr. K will, if it's a hard question he'll do a step-by-step, he'll give you a step-by-step paper so that you understand everything and he will not leave your side until you understand everything, which I love because throughout my elementary school career I had no idea what I was doing because every time I would ask for help they would just say something and then if I didn't understand it they would be like "well you weren't listening because I just explained it to you," they weren't explaining it in a way that I could actually learn from it. But Mr. K stays there and makes sure I actually understand what I'm doing before he walks away from me, which is amazing, because I'm actually understanding what I'm doing (Sharron, Stoneridge, p. 7).

The efforts of the staff are rewarded, as the students became open to learning; and finding that they could actually enjoy learning and succeed in school the students began attending much more frequently.

Motivating students to attend. The above subsections have shown the school environment's ability to reduce voluntary absenteeism and to reengage pupils prone to missing school, as A.J. (Bridgeport) succinctly highlighted

> I like coming to school, school is fun, so that in itself motivates me because I like the things that we do and the things that we talk about and the people who are here, so I say that motivates me to go to school (p. 8)

A.J.'s comment exemplifies how making schooling attractive reduces the motivationally-based, or voluntary absences some youths carry out. These aims are universal in nature and are geared at every pupil that walks through the school doors. However, the alternative school staff goes even further and takes extra measures to motivate their pupils. For example, students are continuously encouraged to attend to the best of their abilities, and the staff maintain regular contact through personalized phone calls, text messages, and emails. Students are also given extrinsic incentives and rewards for attendance in the form of raffles and snacks.

One of the most basic and fundamental methods of motivation employed by the alternative school staff is an unceasing encouragement to attend. In their interactions with the

students the staff persistently evoke the importance of education, and a number of pupils spoke about having teachers who constantly motivate them to attend

> They're there to encourage me or tell me like, try to boost my confidence to make me feel like I could do it or like I have time or this and that, and I can get a great mark, they always push me to try to do better (Jason, Stoneridge, p. 5)

> When I wasn't coming they would ask me why I'm not coming, they would remind me of what I need to do to get to where I want to go. They do ask why I'm not coming, they tell me "Ohh I don't see you," but they don't put any pressure on me, but they're telling me that I need to come, that's part of the reason, that's part of what made me start thinking I need to come to school again (Chantel, Bridgeport, p. 5)

Words of encouragement and kind remarks of reassurance inspire the students and boost their self-esteem. If a student is absent, they are quickly reminded that their absence is noticed. Rather than using the automated calling system utilized by the mainstream schools, alternative schools take a more nuanced and proactive course of action. All of the sampled schools collect students' cell phone numbers at the time of enrollment. While it is not mandatory for the students to provide this information, it is a regular practice, and the schools have lists of contact information for the students. Every day staff members spend hours calling, texting, and emailing students to encourage them to come to school. It takes an immense amount of time to do this in schools that typically have 6-8 staff members and highlights the commitment and dedication on the part of the staff. Avoiding blaming the students for non-attendance, the staff focus on being positive

> It had to be positive, you couldn't call them and say "if you don't come to school today you're going to fail" or "you're going to miss this tests and you'll never be able to catch up." You'd have to say things like "I wish you were here, you know we're doing something fun in class tomorrow it would be awesome if you came" (Amanda, curriculum leader, Bridgeport, p. 4)

> We make personalized phone calls, mainly [Liz], but also myself and the teachers, and we will call kids 2-3 times a day, and they then feel cared about. It's that touch-in to make sure that "Where are you? Why aren't you here? Is everything okay?" (Kendra, curriculum leader, Stoneridge, p. 3)

This tactic is quite effective in not only reminding students that their absence is noted and that someone at their school cares for them, but also serves as its own motivational tool. Students described relying on the phone calls to persuade themselves to come to school

> [My teacher] texts me and says "where are you today, what's going on" if it's halfway through the day and I don't come. At first I was like I don't want these teachers texting me, that's a little too much, you're going to text my phone and call me, I don't know but, as I've seen that it actually worked. Because I would see a text maybe at 10:30 and I wouldn't want to go to school, but [my teacher] texted me so I feel really bad, okay I'm going to go in. So it actually helped and it works, so now I've kind of accepted it, so I know she can text or call me (Darren, Meadows, p. 5)

> When I missed a while, a couple of days they call me. "Ohh are you okay, I just wanted to make sure you're not lost" you know what I mean? Just joking around, but they actually want to make sure you're coming to school you know? (Lance, Stoneridge, p. 5)

> The teachers they'll call me in the morning "Hey it's [name of teacher] please get to school or are you coming to school today?" They really want us here, they want to see us succeed (Jamaya, Meadows, p. 4)

Feeling wanted and appreciated is a significant motivating factor for students who have experienced quite the opposite in their mainstream schooling. Rather than punishing or accosting pupils for their non-attendance these schools take a more incentivising approach. The students are congratulated for the attendance they are able to achieve and are repeatedly asked what can be further done to help them attend more consistently. This "high reward, high praise" (Kendra and Liz, Stoneridge) method is quite effective in further motivating pupils to come to school.

The "high praise" aspect of encouraging pupils to attend revolves around the distribution of minor incentives for attendance. These range from snacks and candy; to more elaborate processes evident at Stoneridge Alternative. There two staff members had multiple incentive programs to encourage their students to attend. One of these they called "caught in class"

> We have caught in class, where we run around like crazy women with a bucket and we're like "Caught in class!" And everybody, anyone who's in there gets a prize on the spot, like on a hot day a popsicle, or a ballot into a draw to win a movie pass, that sort of thing.

> And the kids like that little interruption, it's fun. But it also rewards them for being there in the moment (Kendra and Liz, Stoneridge p. 14)

This tactic has a tremendous effect on the students who appreciate the gesture. Liz and Kendra also have what they call the "9:05 Club," where every pupil who arrives between 9 – 9:05 am is given a weekly raffle ticket for movie passes. There is also an award for "Student of the Week," which Kendra and Liz described in some detail

> So the teachers of each class choose a student of the week. And it doesn't have to be just academic, it could be they've actually come for 5 days and it was not normal for them to do that. Now all of a sudden something's changed and they're doing that. Or they did great assignments. Various reasons and the teacher choses. And once you get 5 of those you get a movie pass (p. 14)

When asked whether such simple incentives one would likely to find in an elementary school are effective for rather mature students, Liz and Kendra responded

> They love it. They collect. You see these big kids you'd never expect. Take a picture of their room and they have all their students of week posters lined up and they took a picture "Look at my room" or they post them on their fridge. They're so proud of it because they didn't have that experience at elementary school (p. 14)

Some students are so starved for attention and affection that even small amounts of praise mean a great deal to them. Many youths come from challenging lives; which are made worse by poor schooling experiences. Finally being able to attend a school where they are a part of the community and are cared for has a tremendous influence on a student's motivation to come to school. Rather than being punished for their non-attendance, these pupils are *rewarded* for their attendance, no matter how sporadic it is. The impact on their psyche cannot be understated, as Sandy a student at Pine Alternative who won an award for improved attendance/behaviour explained

> I don't know just the recognition piece and just giving me credit when I can't give it to myself, very important. And it motivated me to continue and do better. Not just to be recognized, but the empowerment I felt because of that. And yeah I'm just here every day, all day every day (p. 4)

Sandy developed such an attachment to school that "when I leave it's like shit, I hate leaving here, so I hate the summer, that's probably the first time you ever heard that, not looking forward to the summer" (p. 5). This statement highlights the incredible work carried out by the staff in the sampled alternative schools. The schools are a refuge for youths who often live challenging and chaotic lives. Several students described the school as the only stable place in their lives. A place where they feel respected, wanted, and cared for. Based on the diminished absenteeism reported by the students, these schools are quite effective in reducing voluntary absenteeism. Establishing a kind and compassionate school climate; removing retributive punishments for absenteeism; and implementing positive reward systems for attendance achieved the desired effect of motivating the student participants in attending more frequently. However, voluntary absenteeism is only one side of the continuum, and involuntary absenteeism was still evident by a number of youths. Involuntary absenteeism is much more difficult, if not outright impossible to solve "because if it's something in the student's life that's preventing them from coming to school there's literally nothing we can do about that" (Anthony, teacher, Bridgeport, p. 3). Yet, while acknowledging the complications of preventing involuntary absenteeism, the schools do take active steps in mitigating its harmful effects.

Solutions to involuntary absenteeism. As involuntary absenteeism is associated with structural obstacles to steady attendance, making the school attractive has a limited capacity to increase attendance. After all, if a student has to miss school in order to earn an income, a school's invitingness is unlikely to reduce said absenteeism. Yet, schools can provide certain supports to lessen the students' barriers to attendance (e.g. food; transportation). The interviews with the students and staff highlighted a number of supports in place in the alternative schools.

One of the most fundamental services offered in the alternative schools is the provision of free food for all students. All of the sampled schools have a nutrition program, with three out of the four providing breakfast, snacks, and lunch (the remaining school is moving towards implementing a lunch program). The food programs are a joint endeavour between the students and staff, where the pupils earn school credit for cooking the food; and the staff volunteer to set up, supervise and clean the kitchen. Providing free meals is an extremely important component of removing a barrier to attendance. Since many of the pupils attending alternative schools live in marginal economic positions, the prospect of having a free meal not only encourages them to attend more, but also alleviates the need to find a source of food and/or income to pay for a meal

> Yeah they make lunch too, which is a big help for some people who don't even want it, because not everybody talks like I talk, not everyone's going to say I don't have food, not everyone is going to say if I buy this meal I won't be able to buy the next (Chantel, Bridgeport, p. 5).

> I've never seen no school that gives students food every day, doesn't ask for money, that's a good thing I like about this school. Not that I'm like "ohhh I need food," it's nice that they try to make kids like have food, stay in class you know? We'll take care of you, that kind of thing you know? (Lance, Stoneridge, p. 5)

> Well the food program is good, that they feed everyone, because some kids can't afford food here and stuff or like it's hard for them, they do that good (Andrew, Meadows, p. 6)

Almost three quarters of the students (28/40) explicitly mentioned the provision of free food as a positive characteristic of their alternative school. Some of the staff even spoke about students coming to school in order to eat a meal, at which point the staff urges them to remain. Having a school-wide food program available to all students also reduces the stigma of having to ask and/or qualify for a free meal. Considering that many alternative school pupils live in poverty and difficult home conditions, having readily available access to food is essential. Sandy (Pine) spoke about living with a mother who suffered from alcohol abuse and explained the importance of having a consistent source of food

> We have food, I don't know what program it is, but there's food every day. There's bagels, cheese strings, juice boxes, which was really helpful for me when I was living at my mom's cause I was fucked, so I basically only ate when I came to school. And at the end of the week if there's any leftovers it's welcome to anybody (p. 5).

The ability to take food home is furthered by a program that provides non-perishable food items to students in need. Rashmit (Meadows) who was part of the program described it as "it's this program where they get certain non-perishable foods like shipped to them and they give it out to kids who don't always have full fridges so yeah I actually get food" (p. 6). This ensures that not only are the students fed while in school but are also able to procure food for themselves and their families at home.

Related to the food programs are the stocks of clothing, hygiene, and household items; as well as school supplies that are readily available in the schools. These provisions are distributed to students in need. Samantha, the curriculum leader at Meadows Alternative spoke about the delivery of necessary items

> We do have sort of a cupboard of clothing for students that are, that come to school and they are too dirty, they haven't done their laundry, sometimes we've had to give t-shirts out, so we do have a stock of emergency items, emergency personal care items, like deodorant, soap, shampoo (p. 8)

Alongside these items, staff members spoke about bringing in personal items to give away to the students. When a particular youth moved into their own apartment the staff members brought housewares (e.g. dishes, cooking utensils, etc.), for the pupil to have for their new home. These supports are readily available in the schools, however even getting to school proves to be a challenge for some of the socioeconomically marginalized youths.

Finding adequate transportation, or money to pay for transport is another barrier to attendance for students living in or near poverty. As the alternative schools are located in an urban centre, there is no busing available and the students have to find their own means of

transportation. The vast majority rely on public transit, which some cannot afford. The schools apply for and receive grants fund their students' transit fare to attend school. Eighteen students spoke about the importance of free transportation. For example, Sharron (Stoneridge) remarked, "well the transportation is a big thing because my mom and I don't come from like. We're not wealthy people so at first having bus fare to go to and from school was amazing" (p. 8). Ensuring that a youth's access to school is unobstructed is a simple, yet effective barrier from a poverty-related cause of absenteeism.

Providing food and other items is a proactive step in reducing involuntary absenteeism and is part of a general fight against poverty taking place in the sampled alternative schools. The staff also seek to alleviate some of the financial pressures their students experience through a job referral process. While often informal, many of the staff members refer their students to job opportunities, help draft resumes, write reference letters, and even drive students to job interviews. Six youths spoke about finding employment through the school or having an opportunity to do so. Finding a source of income was quite a desperate need for a number of youths, but Ivan (Bridgeport) perhaps presented the most extreme example of this need

> They get you jobs and they give you lunch. I was homeless man at the beginning of the year. Without all these [school] credits homeless man. I'd come here eat lunch and go to sleep. Do homework in the library. I had 35 dollars in my pocket. That was for the whole week. But because of this school it's good (p. 5)

By "because of this school" Ivan was speaking of having found a job through a connection in the school. Finding a source of income was absolutely necessary as Ivan was homeless for a part of the year. Rather than attending school Ivan often had to search for food and jobs. However, after enrolling in Bridgeport Alternative, Ivan was given a steady source of food and was assisted in finding stable employment and housing.

When the needs of the pupils cannot be met by the school, the staff rely on an extensive network of social service agencies that are better equipped to assist the students. Staff spoke about referring pupils to social assistance programs that provide them with a basic income and housing, “so for instance they’re kicked out of their house, we will call with them, make appointments with social services, try to find them a place to live” (Liz, child and youth counselor, Stoneridge, p. 15); “we’re connecting with resources outside of our school, we get other counseling services that can better support, where sometimes the board falls shorts” (Erin, teacher, Meadows, p. 10). The schools also have access to social workers and mental health nurses. While some of these support staffs’ time is split between multiple schools and a request for them to meet with a student has to be made, they are available to procure more thorough and comprehensive supports than accessible to the schools themselves.

The staff members work tirelessly to ensure their students’ needs are met. Through these actions the staff members are actively combating involuntary absenteeism, as Kendra, the curricular leader at Stoneridge Alternative explained “we want to remove all those *barriers* so that there’s really no reason that they can’t attend” (p. 3, emphasis added). The staff does everything in their power to not only make the school attractive, but also to reduce the structural obstacles to their students’ attendance. However, regardless of their efforts, some students continue to miss school for a plethora of reasons. Either their disengagement with schooling is so severe, or their lives so challenging, that even the extraordinary measures employed by the alternative schools are not enough to increase attendance. The staff members are acutely aware of their limited ability to raise attendance for all of their students, but rather than resigning the pupils to their fate, the schools implement accommodation strategies that allow the students to miss some school without penalty or falling behind.

Accommodating absenteeism. Accommodations to absenteeism are a necessary measure to guarantee that all pupils, regardless of the ability to attend, are given an equal chance to succeed in school. Although the sampled schools both encourage their students to attend and attempt to reduce barriers to attendance, a subset of youths is still absent. Anthony, a teacher at Bridgeport explained, "students are expected to attend, but that being said, we do know our population, and so what we do is we make accommodations for students who are unable to come" (p. 2). These accommodations take form in primarily three ways: flexible deadlines; ability to catch-up on schoolwork; and removing exams.

All of the sampled schools have almost no deadlines attached to assignments and tests. While rigid cut-off dates have to be implemented at the end of a semester in order for the teachers to evaluate a student's performance, the pupils have until then to submit all assignments. Moreover, marks are generally not detracted for late submissions. This flexibility is also extended to test-taking dates, and the students have leeway in completing their work and tests.

Course content is individualized for each student, and many work independently towards course completion. This does create some challenges for the staff, as they have to create content resembling independent study or packaged courses. However, this approach allows the students to work at their own pace, which is particularly important for youths who are still absent. This way the pupils are able to return to class and resume with their coursework with minimal assistance from the teacher or disruption to the other students.

Students are also given the ability to catch up on missed work, and this is a crucial element in allowing the pupils to progress with their education. However, unlike in the mainstream schools the teachers in the alternative setting do not simply dump the missed work

on the returning student. Rather, the youths are assisted in mastering the curricular competencies and progressing to new tasks. The pupils are always afforded extra help when encountering difficulty with course content. The workload too is lowered, and the students spoke about being given less assignments than they received in the mainstream setting. This is a conscious decision on the part of the teachers, one aimed at reducing the stress students experience when falling behind in schoolwork. Even if a student fails to earn a credit, the quadmester approach to structuring the schoolyear evident in two schools ensures that they have an opportunity to retake the credit shortly thereafter. This is coupled with extensive use of credit recovery and credit rescue, where pupils can do additional work to boost a failing grade into a passing one.

Lastly, all but one of the schools in the sample chose to eliminate final exams. This decision is predicated on the belief that exam anxiety is too severe for many of the students, the majority of whom are only beginning to reengage with their education. Instead of writing formal exams the students complete large culminating projects to showcase their learning and understanding of course content.

Through these accommodations the schools implement one last measure to ensure their students' success. If all of the interventions to increase attendance fail and the pupils still miss school the accommodations described above are the last resort to assist the students in moving forward with their education. The accommodations however come at a cost, as they inadvertently create a lackadaisical atmosphere towards attendance, and may contribute to increased absenteeism.

Concerns Evident in the Alternative Setting

Alternative schools have been criticized as the dumping grounds for unwanted and difficult students; and as places characterized by a lackadaisical approach to education and lowered expectations (DePaoli et al., 2017; Hemmer et al., 2013). All alternative schools – including ones in this sample – must grapple with this stigma. When asked tough questions concerning the quality of education their school provides the staff members evoked complex negotiations and rationalizations concerning the aims and successes of their school. The majority of these mental debates center on the ethical dilemma of finding a balance between accommodation/flexibility and accountability/structure.

One of the major challenges the staff encounter is toeing the line between being accommodating to their students' absenteeism and maintaining the integrity of the program. There is concern about being flexible enough to accommodate absenteeism, whilst ensuring that the students are held to high standards. A number of staff members spoke about a cycle of absenteeism that can quickly arise within an alternative school, for example Amanda, the curriculum leader at Bridgeport Alternative described

> If students aren't attending your class, as a teacher, then you adjust the way that you're teaching to account for the lower attendance right? Maybe you structure your course so that people who aren't there as often can still succeed, but then that can be, that can be sort of like a self-fulfilling prophecy because then students start to see well if it's structured this way then I don't actually have to go. Like if you're just going to give me a booklet of work to complete when I come to class and I complete it and get all the marks then I don't really need to come to class, I can just come once a week and pick up the booklets and leave and come back a week later with them done (p. 3)

The sampled alternative schools are not designed as independent learning centres, which do exist within the school board. "We are not a no attendance school" (p. 8) Anthony, a teacher at Bridgeport Alternative remarked when asked about the attendance policy at his school. This sentiment reflects the structure of the alternative schools in the sample, which while being

flexible are meant to function much like mainstream schools. However, confronted with their students' absenteeism the staff are placed in a delicate position. They are expected to enforce the school board's mandatory attendance policy that requires direct intervention with the student and/or their family, which is challenging in these schools. Moreover, many of the students are over the age of 18 and are legally responsible for their own educational affairs. The official protocol stipulated by the school board policy forces the curricular leaders to demit students whose absenteeism is ongoing. However, allowing pupils to miss class freely and providing them with prepackaged work puts into question the entire ethos and goals of the school.

There is evidence that some academic aspects of schooling are compromised in the sampled alternative schools. The majority of the staff felt that their school does not provide an education that is of comparable quality to mainstream institutions. This is primarily caused by the students' irregular attendance, which fragments and slows the pace of instruction. Group assignments and discussions are nearly impossible to orchestrate, as the fluctuations in attendance result in students being at varying stages of moving through content. While the accommodations to absenteeism are seen as critical to the schools' functioning and success, the price paid is the quality and rigor of the academic content. The lowering of academic quality puts in question the post K-12 schooling opportunities of the students enrolled in the sampled schools. When asked whether their students are prepared to transition to postsecondary education many of the teachers admitted that their pupils are unprepared to succeed, as unequivocally stated by Julie (teacher, Pine) "postsecondary absolutely not at all." Considering that the job prospects of someone with only a high school diploma are rather low, one cannot but wonder what kind of lives these are students being prepared to lead? While alternative schools themselves may not be

to blame, in their current operation they are unable to overturn the cycle of marginalization their students have experienced in the mainstream setting.

Connected to the lack of academic rigor is the dilemma of whether the flexible and accommodating nature of the alternative schools encourages and/or enables students' further absenteeism. This issue occupies the educators' minds and they ask themselves these difficult questions on a daily basis

> Are we just enabling this behavior by being so understanding, flexible and accommodating? And those are questions I ask myself every day, so I can't actually give you a proper answer other than I don't know. I think it works really well for some kids and I think for some kids we're totally letting them exacerbate their issues (Anna, teacher, Meadows, p. 9).

> I think students have the belief, and I guess it's supported, students are told, "hand in all of your work, you have up until the last day to do it, and if you've met all of the expectations then you can get the credit." And students know that they don't get marks for attendance, so the official policy is, you don't have to come to school. I don't think anyone says to them you don't have to come to school, and I certainly don't say to them you don't have to come to school, but I think that they have kind of figured out that they don't *have* to come to school….If we made that a requirement, would they come? I'm not sure at this point, if that would be sufficient (Julia, teacher, Bridgeport, p. 9, emphasis for interviewee inflection)

> I'll be honest with you, I get emails from parents like "does my student have to attend school?" and I'm saying yeah, but when they're surrounded by friends who don't come to school, disappear, come in and they're just given a package of work to do, it's hard to say that there is an attendance policy, it's hard to enforce it right? So I'd like to say that they should have to attend, and I know ministry says they should, and I know the principal says they should, but what actually happens in reality is different (Natalie, teacher, Pine, p. 4)

> There's that side of it, some students they abuse the situation or take advantage of what they feel is a relaxed environment. Or they just don't motivate themselves so it's a double-edged sword (Jonathan, teacher, Meadows, p. 6)

The passivity necessary to allow students to function and succeed within the alternative schools falls victim to its own success. The schools must be flexible and accommodating to be effective in responding to absenteeism. This flexibility, however, creates a lackadaisical approach to

attendance where youths do not see the importance of coming to school. Seeing others progress with their education with minimal attendance is a source of frustration and demotivation for the regularly attending youths. Questions such as "why am I the only one here?" become all too common and are difficult for the teachers to answer. Thus, through their relaxed approach the alternative schools may inadvertently motivate or at the very least enable, some of their students' unnecessary absences. This issue was picked up by some of the student participants, a few of whom were concerned about the lack of accountability within their school

> I think a lot of people they're too flexible on and it's going to not bite the teachers in the ass, but the student in the ass. If you let them think now ohh yeah if you skip it's cool you can just get it done the next day. They do that at work they're fired, they're fired! They don't have a job! Isn't school supposed to prepare you for the real world? (Clive, Pine, p. 7)

> I know at this school because attendance is such a huge schoolwide problem it kind of ceases being a problem because it's just more like a normality, like an assumption… the expectations are not very high at all…I feel like because it isn't treated as a message of importance here, most people don't really care if they miss a week or two weeks because no one is really going to yell at them because it's kind of what's expected of them….To some extent I feel like the teachers aren't doing anything about it (A.J., Bridgeport, p. 8)

> When students are offered the privilege of freedom and they tend to abuse it… I think that's the danger of alternative schools right there (Jeremy, Pine, p. 7)

The implicit notion that a student does not have to attend in order to continue with their education is both a blessing and a curse. Although it gives the flexibility of accommodating absenteeism which is often involuntary, the same flexibility instils an ethos of apathy towards steady attendance.

As with much educational research and issues, there is no simple answer to the above dilemma. If mainstream schools are unable or unwilling to modify their current responses to absenteeism, flexible and accommodating alternative schools are necessary to allow pupils to earn their high school diploma. However, without careful monitoring of how accommodation

strategies are utilized, there is a danger that alternative schools will morph into quasi-independent study centres, which in their current conception, they are not meant to be. Without this awareness alternative schools can become sites where educational inequality is further reproduced, and students who are struggling in the mainstream setting receive a second-rate education that will leave them ill-equipped to succeed in adult life. There is clearly room for improvement, and the students and staff had a number of suggestions for making the alternative schools more effective in responding to absenteeism and preparing their students to succeed in life beyond high school.

Suggestions for Improvement – Students and Staff

The students had a number of things they would like to see change. Some were context specific (e.g. students at Stoneridge Alternative wanted air conditioning), whereas some were broader. The two main categories for improvement from the students were greater choices in course selection and more extracurricular activities.

It must be admitted that due to the low staff numbers and limited facilities, the schools are not able to offer as comprehensive a course selection as one would find in a mainstream high school. Although the staff develop unique courses, they are unable to offer much in the way of science, physical education, and hands-on technical courses. With the current hiring practices in the school board, which allot teachers based on a student-to-teacher ratio, it is difficult if not impossible for the alternative schools to hire more teachers and expand their course selection. Each teacher already has a full course load and uses their preparatory periods to cook food for the pupils; respond to absenteeism; and carry out general tasks. Likewise, the limitation of facilities is unlikely to change unless new alternative schools are built.

Another request from the pupils was the infusion of extracurricular activities into their schools. The alternative schools do have some extracurricular activities, mainly comprising of clubs. However, due to fluctuating enrollment and attendance the majority of these clubs are student-led; are based on an ad hoc basis; and can easily disband if a student in charge transitions away from the school. Sports teams too are difficult to organize, as a steady roster cannot be guaranteed. That being said, there does appear room for growth in this aspect. Although already tasked with a great deal, the staff can create clubs that they monitor, and a few do this already. A teacher-initiated club or activity can be delivered in a drop-in manner, where pupils do not have to be consistently present in order to engage in the club/activity. The same point stands for sports teams, which can be a loosely organized weekly game that is comprised of whichever students wish to participate. These activities are likely to draw even more students into school doors.

The staff members also have a number of recommendations and proposed changes. The majority of these revolve around making alternative schools more alternative. Many staff members feel they are inappropriately held to the same standards and policies as mainstream schools. One of the major issues is the school board hiring process. Not only are the schools understaffed, but the adding and removing of teachers based on seniority presents its own challenges. It takes a special kind of teacher to work in an alternative school. One must be willing to adjust to the ethos of the school and its processes; and relinquish some of the authority and control one would expect to have in a mainstream school. Unfortunately, at times teachers are placed into the schools without having any desire to be there, and likewise teachers are surplused, or "bumped out" even though they are committed to the school's vision. The staff members want to see a different hiring process that would allow only dedicated individuals to work in alternative schools. The staff members also desire more support personnel (e.g. social

workers, mental health nurses, hall monitors, etc.) to be infused into their school(s). The available support personnel often have to split time between many alternative schools and are only available on an itinerant basis. Since the students have so many needs the staff feel hindered by their lack of training in mental health/social work and the little time available to assist each student adequately. A provision of more support staff would alleviate the heavy workload all of the staff within the sampled alternative schools experience.

Added to the above points are staffs' requests for innovative programming; the infusion of technology; and greater access to community resources into their school(s). The goal of many of the educators within the alternative schools is to provide a rich schooling experience for their pupils. Since many of the youths attending alternative schools live in the lower strata of the socioeconomic scale, the staff feel that it is their duty to expose the students to a range of experiences they may not have access to due to financial constraints (e.g. field trips). Once again many of the staff feel hindered by rigid school board and ministry regulations that treat them as a small mainstream high school, rather than a true alternative school. The bureaucracy is at times too difficult to overcome. Without administration on site, the staff not only have to manage their classes, but also perform an administrative role. This leaves little time to petition for and attempt to secure funding; as well as receiving school board permission for more innovative programming.

Conclusion

As the evidence indicates, many of the student participants continued missing school, albeit to a much lesser degree. This can be partly attributed to the alternative schools themselves. The students spoke glowingly of their alternative school, and particularly the staff who work

there. The alternative schools and their staff are exemplary in their efforts to reengage their students with their education. However, if pupils continue experiencing problems attending, the schools offer a number of accommodation strategies that allow the youths to progress with their education. These accommodations do have some caveats, and there are questions pertaining to the academic quality of the sampled alternative schools. The students and staff did have some suggestions to improve the schools' functioning, but further analysis is needed to investigate if these recommendations would address the abovementioned concerns.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research presents a qualitative account of absenteeism in four alternative schools in Ontario. An examination of the interviews with the students and staff reveals the complexity of the absenteeism issue. Primarily, the data exposes the skewed understandings of absenteeism found in some of the academic literature on the topic, as much of the writing on the subject implicitly or explicitly blames students and/or their families for non-attendance through the use of terms such as *excused/unexcused absences, truancy, school refusal,* and *parental withdrawal,* amongst others (Birioukov, 2016). I have argued throughout this dissertation that academic literature, ministries of education, school boards, and schools must to move away from the deficit model of theorizing absenteeism and shift towards a more compassionate understanding of the behaviour. In other words, we need to begin differentiating between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. The data from this research supports this assertion, and the students' accounts show a clear demarcation between the two different types of absenteeism. Acknowledging both the motivational and structural obstacles to attendance is paramount if we are to stop blaming students for their trying lives and their inability to adhere to our attendance expectations. Moreover, recognizing the difference between motivational (voluntary) and structural (involuntary) absenteeism reveals the futility of exclusively attempting to *improve* attendance, as certain involuntary absences can never be fully stopped. Some absences will continue unabated regardless of what the schools do, and mainstream schools need look to the alternative setting for accommodation strategies that allow students to miss some school without penalty. This is not to say that attendance raising strategies should be abandoned, but that we

must also incorporate accommodations to absenteeism alongside our attempts to improve attendance. This set of concepts will be the first subsection of this "Discussion."

The current de facto modus operandi within mainstream schools is the "wait to fail" approach, where pupils must first fail in order to receive assistance (Kearney, 2016). The student participants' accounts have shown how this process operate in mainstream schools and how these schools do little to aid their students in attending more frequently. The lack of differentiation between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism evident in the mainstream setting deserves attention and comprises the second subsection of this chapter.

The lack of distinctions between the different types of absenteeism results in students floundering in unresponsive mainstream schools until their troubles are deemed severe enough to warrant placement in an alternative school, that is assuming they have not already dropped out of school. The pathways the sampled students took to the alternative schools are indicative of the failure of the mainstream schools to adequately respond to their students' needs. In particular, the tactic of removing students from school enrollment for non-attendance once they turned 18 is especially troubling, as it allows for schools to purge themselves of students deemed to be too troublesome to work with. Thus, I spend time considering the transitions the student participants made to the alternative schools in the third subsection.

Alternative schools themselves are in need of discussing. As noted previously, alternative schools tend to be assigned the labels of safe haven and dumping ground (Cox, 1999; Wishart, 2009). Based on the results of this research I can tentatively posit that the sampled alternative schools exhibited both labels, thereby putting into question their utility. It is likely that many alternative schools reflect both the safe haven and dumping ground metaphors and we must be careful not to polarize these schools in either-or conceptualizations. I take up this point further in

this chapter, and I problematize how these labels are used to measure and evaluate alternative schools.

I end the "Discussion" on a similar thread to the one above by reflecting on how we define success in an alternative school. I argue that we must be careful not to transplant mainstream notion of success into the alternative setting. However, we must be simultaneously vigilant against the possibility of lowered academic expectations and rigor pervading alternative schools. This presents a challenging dilemma, as alternative schools must be given the space to experiment with programming and flexibility, yet still be held accountable for ensuring their students are given every opportunity to succeed in and beyond K-12 schooling.

Voluntary/Involuntary Absenteeism

As the literature review has demonstrated, the field of absenteeism has varying conceptualizations of absenteeism. However, the majority of these conceptualizations place the school, and at times the parents of the student as the arbitrators of the validity of an absence (Birioukov, 2016). This framing of the issue delegitimizes the students' lives, as a deficit theorizing lens is implicitly utilized. There is an inherent assumption lurking beneath the surface of the absenteeism field. It is the belief that it is the student and their family that is at fault for non-attendance. By utilizing a motivationally based absenteeism orientation, as outlined by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2016), there is the presumption that most absences can be reduced through increasing motivation for students to come to school. The implicit belief that most of the absences are voluntary pervades the absenteeism literature, as academics spend countless hours to envision new ways to entice or force students to attend. While this view has recently become challenged (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2016), it is

nevertheless prevalent within the field of absenteeism studies, and as this research has highlighted within some mainstream schools as well. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of absenteeism studies are concerned with *raising* attendance.

Since the onset of compulsory education, getting students to school has been a priority for educational professionals, and academics have been studying absenteeism and offering solutions for decades (Heyne et al., 2019). The literature is replete with numerous strategies to reduce absenteeism (Havik et al., 2015; Reid, 2005). Yet, there have been few, if any, improvements in the absenteeism rates over the past thirty years (Maynard et al., 2017), and there has been a general failure to solve absenteeism (Maynard et al., 2012). In the U.S., absenteeism has become such a concern that the federal Department of Education has called it "a hidden educational crisis" (n.p.), with 20% of all high school students classified as "chronic absentees" (having at least 15 absences) in 2015-2016. While Canadian absenteeism data is frustratingly difficult if not outright impossible to attain, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) does collect truancy data. In 2015 17.8% Canadian pupils reported having skipped at least one full day of school in the two weeks prior to the administration of the test (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). This data is likely underreporting the prevalence of absenteeism, as it is focused on "skipping" and a rather narrow window of two weeks. Nonetheless, it appears that a substantial number of Canada's youths are missing school. All of this begs the question of *why?*

I posit that the endeavour of decreasing absenteeism is doomed from the onset. As this research has demonstrated, many pupils are absent for reasons not connected to the actual school. Thus, solutions to absenteeism grounded solely in the attempt to make the school more attractive have only limited potential in reducing absenteeism. Although it can be gleaned that many

absences are of an involuntary nature, the vast majority of absenteeism reduction interventions are based on the voluntary notion of absenteeism, believing that students are willfully and deliberately missing school. Recalling Ogbu's (1995; 1995b) theorization on voluntary/involuntary minorities' participation in mainstream society, we can see how the field of absenteeism characterizes most absentees as involuntary participants in the school. Through this lens, the absentees are portrayed as resistors to a schooling structure that does not meet their needs. Thus, there is a postulation that if warm and caring schools are created, the absenteeism rate will naturally drop as students will have less reasons to avoid school (Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019). While there is validity to this assertion, the logic is flawed, as it does not encompass the students who are voluntary school participants, but who are involuntarily absent from school; and students who miss school *even though* they have an intrinsic motivation to attend. Motivation is not a factor for these students, and if an adolescent is abused and mistreated at home, the attractiveness of the school will only have a reduced ability in guaranteeing the student is consistently present in school. There is simply only so much that schools, in their current form, can accomplish. The majority of the solutions to absenteeism found in the literature tend to primarily focus on the absentee, their family, and the school, rather than societal causes. Moreover, they are disposed to focusing their interventions at a single set of variables (e.g. student, family, school), rather than a multidirectional approach (Hancock et al., 2018). This may be explained by the overreliance on quantitative approaches utilized in the absenteeism field, but this is a significant shortcoming, as it simplifies the absenteeism behaviour. Similar critiques have been made of motivational theory in education, as even motivation is a multifaceted and complex concept that is difficult to measure with quantitative methods (Kaplan et al., 2012). As this research has documented, absentees comprise a heterogenous demographic, and absenteeism

is as complex as the absentees themselves. Moreover, absenteeism is an extremely multifaceted and convoluted issue. The concepts of voluntary and involuntary absenteeism provide guidance in how to approach each type of absenteeism, which require quite different responses from the educational system. While some academics have vocalized the call for multifocal interventions (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020; Hancock et al., 2018; Kearney, 2016), the heterogeneous nature of absentees precludes any widely applicable suggestions for future absenteeism reduction efforts, leading experts to conclude that "truant youth are not a homogeneous group and not all intervention programs may be appropriate for all truant youth" (Maynard et al., 2012b, pp. 1672-3). Thus, we are left at an impasse. Wide measures to prevent absenteeism appear to be ineffective, and only concern themselves with voluntary absenteeism. Whereas more responsive models that *do* focus on involuntary absenteeism are so context-specific that they do little in ways of creating broad strategies to reduce absenteeism across multiple schools.

Unless schools begin to intervene directly in their students' lives, the youths' life conditions will effectively negate any attempts to increase attendance. If children continue to grow up in poverty; be abused; and suffer from mental health issues perfect attendance will never be achievable. This needs to become an accepted fact. Only then can we move beyond focusing our efforts solely on *raising* attendance, and progress to installing *accommodation* strategies evident in the alternative setting. Current efforts to introduce tiered models of absenteeism interventions that become more intensive as the absenteeism increases (e.g. Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020; Kearney, 2016) are a step in this direction, but they do not go far enough.

The role of the school must be reconceptualised, and an extension of the school's influence beyond its walls and directly into the lives of students needs to occur. Absenteeism intervention efforts must be focused not only on making schools more attractive, but also on

accommodating students who involuntarily cannot be present on a consistent basis. Academics, district and school personnel must confront the reality that perfect attendance is simply unachievable for a subset of our youth. However, the inability to abide by mandatory attendance expectations set out by ministries and departments of education should not be a sentence to a life in the margins of educational failure. These most disadvantaged youths are in dire need of understanding and support to ensure they are able to progress with their education, and do not succumb to the pressures of their lives more so than they already have. This is not to say that attendance raising measures are without their utility and should be discarded. Rather, an acknowledgement that these measures *alone* cannot do justice to the most disadvantaged students in our educational systems must take place. What is needed is a two-pronged approach, one that simultaneously attempts to increase attendance for all students and is flexible enough to accommodate involuntary absenteeism. It is only through such a method that the negative consequences of both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism can be mitigated, and all youths given a chance to succeed in school. Unfortunately, the student participants' descriptions of how their absenteeism was responded to in the mainstream setting highlights the lack of differentiation of absenteeism within mainstream schools.

Lack of Differentiation of Absenteeism in Mainstream Schools

The staff in the mainstream schools the students attended frequently used a lens of deficit theorizing to blame the students for their lack of educational success. Through this process "the students are blamed for their failures and are viewed as burdens" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207), while the school is absolved of any culpability. The mainstream schools, rather than being protective forces, further pushed the students to the margins of the educational system. The

schools utilize a “wait to fail” approach described by Kearney (2016), where youths are not supported, and must fail in the mainstream setting before receiving the assistance they need. The student interviews demonstrate this tacit approach to absenteeism found in the mainstream setting.

The students spoke about punitive and hostile repercussions for not coming to school, thereby reflecting the common punitive “solutions” found in the literature (Bazemore et al., 2004). These reactions can be conceptualized through motivation theory, which posits that when school personnel think a student has control over their inappropriate behaviour (in this case, their absenteeism), it elicits their frustration. Whereas uncontrollable behaviours (such as involuntary absenteeism) prompts sympathetic responses from staff (Graham & Taylor, 2016). Thus, when absenteeism is considered to be voluntary (i.e. controllable) it is dealt with negatively. Steeped in motivational conceptions of absenteeism the mainstream schools the sampled students attended generally did not differentiate between the voluntary/involuntary natures of the absence and treated all absences as deviant and punishable behaviour. These practices are similar to the zero-tolerance behavioural policies popular in the U.S. (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). These policies install standardized punishments and consequences for behavioural infractions (including absenteeism) which disregard the underlying cause for a behavioural infraction. Although there has been little to no evidence to show the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gage et al., 2013; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014); this approach to responding to absenteeism was reported by most of the student participants in this research. Moreover, the students who wanted to be in school, but were involuntary absent, reported being treated in much the same ways as those who were intentionally absent. Instead of striking fear

into students the insensitive consequences for non-attendance only served to push them further away from their education, as Ekstrand (2015) highlights "truancy cannot be reduced by law and order…and where mild punishment does not work, neither does harsher discipline" (p. 464). There is little empirical evidence to suggest that the carrot and stick approach to responding to absenteeism is effective (Sheppard, 2011). Even within motivational literature there are serious doubts as to whether external rewards and/or punishments are effective in raising student motivation (Graham & Weiner, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2016). Furthermore, based on the student accounts there is an "underestimation of the demands of private life for students, especially for those living in poverty and those who have experienced family turmoil" (Caine, 2013, p. 36) taking place in mainstream schools. Standardized mandatory attendance expectations do not take into account the lives of the students and we must reconsider their goals and ethicality.

The punitively orientated responses to absenteeism in the mainstream setting did the opposite of what they intended. The consequences for absenteeism inadvertently became causes for further absenteeism, as the students described being ridiculed and castigated for non-attendance. The reactions of some staff were so humiliating that they can be considered instances of teacher bullying, where the staff embarrass students in front of the class (Allen, 2010). Knowing that they would be met with punishments and unsympathetic reactions upon their return to school after an absence many of the students avoided going to class, thereby mirroring the correlation between punishments and a decrease in motivation found in motivation research (Graham & Weiner, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2016). Other research has cautioned how this cycle of absenteeism can occur (DeSocio et al., 2007; Hinz et al., 2003; Jonasson, 2011), yet based on the student participants' responses, the practice of punishing students for non-attendance appears to be widely utilized in mainstream schools. The youths' narratives highlight how the tactic of

"guilting" students into compliance with mandatory attendance expectations fails, and only serves as a motivating force for the pupils to miss more school than they already are.

These school responses are a reflection of the "survival of the fittest" ethos of public schooling. A model that operates to the advantage of some, at the expense of others (Apple, 2006). Many youths in the sample suffered from the retributive consequences for non-attendance. However, it was the most vulnerable students, those with precarious lives, who were unjustly punished for their absenteeism. These pupils could not attend for very legitimate reasons and were effectively penalized for the difficulty of their lives. It becomes evident that "schools neither attend to, nor question, issues of inequality or unequal distribution of resources and needs" but are rather "breeding grounds for competition, where everyone competes against everyone" (Caine, 2013, p. 31). Looking for a helping hand, these students received resentment and a labeling process that left them in the margins of the educational system. Through these acts the mainstream schools effectively mirror the meritocratic and individualistic undertones that characterize much of Canadian education, as they continue to blame a subset of youths for their inability to meet behavioural and academic expectations (Caine, 2013). Creating a blanket attendance standard through the establishment of mandatory attendance policies results in inequitable opportunities for every student to succeed. The standardized attendance policy assumes that each student arrives at the school ready to learn and forgoes any considerations of the students' lives. Through a lens of deficit thinking, the students themselves are held accountable for issues outside of their control (e.g. abuse; poverty). The mainstream schools look for risk factors within students, rather than looking inwards, a finding that has been corroborated elsewhere (Tilleczek et al., 2011).

This mentality is also apparent in the lack of solutions to absenteeism in the mainstream schools reported by the youths. Aside from a few isolated individuals, the majority of the school staff did little to increase attendance and/or accommodate absenteeism. As a result of these (in)actions, all of the students in the sample left their mainstream school(s). However, they did not do so uniformly. The students described either being disaffected with their schooling experience to the point where they voluntarily chose to leave their high school or being demitted from their mainstream school.

Push, Pull, and Fade – Leaving the Mainstream System

The pupils took three general roads to leaving their mainstream high schools, namely transferring out (15/40), dropping out (13/40), or being kicked out (12/40). These pathways are reflective of the push factors which "include negative interactions with schooling" and pull factors, "those interactions outside the school environment that might attract youth away from schooling" (Bushnik et al., 2004, p. 14), as well as the fade out concept presented by Sefa Dei and colleagues (1997). The student interviews highlight how the students were explicitly pushed out of school; pulled out due to life circumstances; or simply faded away from their mainstream institution. Symbolic of the "wait to fail" approach (Kearney, 2016) described earlier the students' troubles in the mainstream setting had to become so grievous that they voluntarily or involuntarily left the institution. Rather than attempting to reengage the youths or finding ways to mitigate the absenteeism behaviour, the mainstream schools absolved themselves of any responsibility in not only reducing absenteeism, but in their complicity in encouraging the behaviour as well. After all, "if a system is inherently rational, failure of someone in the system can only be attributed to the one who failed" (Frattura & Topinka, 2006, p. 335), and not to the

system itself. Once again, the meritocratic system of education is apparent, as students are expected to meet the mandatory attendance expectations established by the school board and Ministry of Education. These attendance policies are applied to the entire schooling population and set a standard against which all pupils are measured against regardless of their circumstances. Considering the punitive reactions to absenteeism evident in the mainstream schools, it is apparent that failure to meet said standard is marked as the adolescents' fault and problem, not the schools'. There is an implicit assumption that it is the students who need to change, not the schools.

The pupils in the sample were often disregarded by the staff in their mainstream schools and were "exposed to continuous remarks that clearly indicate that they are not welcome" (Caine, 2013, p. 30). These explicit and implicit messages framed the students as being at fault for not meeting attendance expectations, and it was the students' responsibility to find an adequate school that would lead them to graduation. This lack of understanding provoked many (28/40) to leave the mainstream schools voluntarily, while the other 12 resided in the schools' peripheries until being removed.

The processes of demitting students from school rolls for non-attendance is particularly egregious, as it is an overt act of transferring the responsibility of education onto the student and away from the educational system. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case and Caine (2013) has postulated that "although students are able to stay in school until the age of 21, some students who are over the age of 18 get pushed out of school" (p. 18). This is clearly happening in Ontario's mainstream high schools, which purge themselves of unwanted students. The grey legal area, one that gives students the right to attend high school until the age of 21, but also gives schools the right to remove students once they are 18 is problematic in that it provides a

convenient avenue for schools to remove troublesome students without having to ensure they are provided with an adequate opportunity to complete their education. This is the final act of rejection on the behalf of mainstream schools. It must be noted that the student participants in this study *did* reengage with their schooling. Based on the Ontario five-year graduation rate of 86%, thousands more do not.

The mainstream schools the sampled students attended are not effective in reducing and/or accommodating absenteeism. However, instead of changing their operations the schools shirk their responsibility by thrusting the blame for non-attendance on the student. By doing so they effectively push out their most "difficult" pupils or create conditions hostile enough to warrant students' voluntary leaving. This process segregates the most marginalized youths within alternative settings and separates the "normal" from the "abnormal" youths, which carries a set of ethical and moral dilemmas. Vellos and Vadeboncoeur (2013) had a similar concern, leading them to remark that placing students into second chance alternative schools can be "seen as a way to segregate students who are different and, therefore, [is] a way to misdirect and ignore problems created by public schooling, rather than reforming public school education in ways that make it socially just and equitable" (p. 38). Alternative schools can serve as convenient hiding places for students deemed to be troublesome. Moreover, there are conflicting findings in the literature on the effectiveness of alternative schools to meet the needs of their students (DePaoli et al., 2017). This ambiguity is captured by the concepts of "safe haven" and "dumping ground," which characterize alternative schools as decreasing or increasing educational inequality. The sampled alternative schools traverse both categories, thereby putting in questions the utility of these concepts.

Alternative Schools – Safe Havens, Dumping Grounds, or Both?

Alternative schools have been designed to be a safety net, a last opportunity for students deemed to be "failing" in the mainstream setting to finish their education (Beattie,2004). These schools are not a universal solution to absenteeism but are rather a last resort. There have been mixed findings on the effectiveness of alternative schools in not only responding to absenteeism, but in preparing their students to succeed in adult life (D'Angelo & Zemanick,2009; Franklin et al., 2007). There are two conceptualizations of alternative schools, namely either as safe havens or as dumping grounds. The safe haven metaphor encapsulates alternative schools as warm and caring places, where youths are able to find support and progress with their education (Wishart, 2009). Whereas, the dumping ground conception portrays alternative schools as holding tanks, where unwanted students and staff are discarded by mainstream institutions; and as places characterized by low expectations; little to no discipline; and questionable educational practices (DePaoli et al., 2017). The findings of this dissertation indicate that the sampled alternative schools are reflective of both conceptualizations, thereby putting into question the rigid binary presented in the literature.

Safe haven. The sampled alternative schools can be classified as safe havens, and nearly every single student spoke about enjoying attending the alternative school they were enrolled in, especially when compared to their old mainstream school(s). The students most often spoke about the general school environment, one staffed by considerate and understanding teachers and support personnel, which has been documented to increase attendance (Mac Iver, 2011). The significance of a positive school climate cannot be underestimated in its ability to improve attendance and reengage youths with their education. Raywid (2001) reminds us about

> The widely recognized need to personalize schools so that all students are genuinely known by at least one adult. Such a caring environment would doubtless benefit all youngsters. But as extensive evidence suggests, it is clearly essential for the unsuccessful and for those at risk of being unsuccessful (p. 583)

The small and intimate setting, based on warmth and respect, is the ideal place for the students in the sample, who described finally finding a school that they not only liked, but that was also attuned to their needs. The staff too are a crucial component of effective alternative schools. The staff interviews revealed the commitment and dedication these individuals have to ensuring their students are successful. They go above and beyond what would "normally" be expected of educators and seek ways to reduce and accommodate absenteeism. Their efforts are rewarded, with all but six students reporting less absenteeism in the alternative setting than in the mainstream. The students that continued to be absent did so for involuntary reasons largely outside of the schools' control. Most pupils missed school due to entrenched absenteeism patterns established in their previous school(s), or for societally related involuntary reasons. Based on the student interviews the alternative schools are successful in reengaging a large segment of their population. Considering the negative experiences these youths underwent in mainstream schools this feat is quite impressive.

What is of particular significance to the present study is the fact that the alternative school staff actively seek out the causes of their students' absenteeism. While school personnel did not explicitly differentiate between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, it is apparent that they are well aware of the differences between the two types of the absenteeism. Staff interviews are replete with acknowledgements that many students miss school for reasons beyond their control and that they should not punished for their inability to attend. The removal of punitive consequences utilized in the mainstream setting elucidates this point further, as the alternative school staff do not blame the students for their non-attendance. The meritocratic and

individualistic ethos evident in the mainstream schools is diminished, if not outright rejected, and an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003) is imbued into each of the four alternative schools. These responses are reflective of the understanding of both controllable and uncontrollable behaviours of students outlined in the motivation literature, where uncontrollable behaviours evoke feelings of sympathy and support (Graham & Taylor, 2016). Instead of punishing and ridiculing the pupils for their lack of attendance, the alternative schools *praise* the youths for attending, even if their attendance is not perfect. The sampled alternative schools are unique in their capacity and willingness to combat both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. They seek ways to improve attendance, and if these measures prove ineffective, find ways to accommodate the behaviour and allow the student to progress with their education even if they are absent. The alternative schools are arguably doing everything in their power to ensure that their students are given every opportunity to be successful. However, these accommodation practices, which are so necessary in all schools, but particularly in alternative settings, do have some caveats that need further exploration. There is a potential danger that the flexible and accommodating nature of alternative schools enables pupils to miss more school than is necessary. Moreover, there is a concern that alternative schools push students through the system, without any real preparation for the pupils' lives beyond secondary schooling.

Dumping ground. Although the students gave glowing reviews of the alternative schools there were a few issues that put the ethicality of the schools' operations into question. Johnson and colleagues (2012) have documented the rampant absenteeism in some alternative high schools and based on the staff's reported absenteeism rate of 50% this appears to be occurring in the sampled alternative schools as well. There is the possibility that grouping large numbers of

students prone to absenteeism together provokes further absenteeism (Flannery et al., 2012), and some students did report missing school when they were the only ones in class. Moreover, there is a lack of clear and consistent repercussions for non-attendance in the sampled alternative schools, and as a result these schools normalize absenteeism. There is evidence to indicate that some alternative schools do have attendance requirements (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2012), the alternative schools in this research did not. It must be acknowledged that the alternative schools did comply the school board's mandatory attendance policy and demitted students who had amassed enough absences to warrant their demitting. They did so however, as a last resort; moreover, this tactic was not seen as conducive to increasing attendance by the school staff. While punitive consequences for non-attendance have not been proven to deter absenteeism (Gage et al., 2013), a lack of any real repercussions may also exacerbate the behaviour. It appears that the flexibility necessary to accommodate absenteeism is a double-edged sword, as it provides the room for students to take advantage of the lax atmosphere and miss more school than necessary.

When the students are in class there are concerns about the type of education they are receiving. Alternative schools have been charged with delivering a lackluster education that does not adequately prepare the students to be successful in postsecondary education and/or the workplace (Hemmer et al., 2013). This issue arose in the sampled alternative schools as well, and the staff readily admitted that their students are not prepared to succeed in postsecondary education. Considering that more than half of the students reported wishing to attend a postsecondary institution (23/40) there are significant concerns about their preparedness to do so and succeed. As the "Findings" have documented, the workload is considerably reduced in the alternative setting when compared to the mainstream. Additionally, the loose deadlines and

numerous extensions can create a sense of dependency on the accommodations that are unlikely to be given in postsecondary institutions. Thus, the sampled alternative schools can be conceptualized as "dumping grounds," where the youths are housed until they are old enough to legally leave school prior to graduation or are only expected to finish high school as their highest educational achievement. The alternative schools are in a difficult position, as they attempt to provide accommodations to students who are involuntarily absent, whilst simultaneously attempting to hold students accountable for their educational progress.

With minimal involvement of guardians in their child's education, the schools have little recourse than to try and reason with the student. Many students lack the maturity to see the significance of their decisions, including unnecessarily missing school, and do not have the self-control to hold themselves responsible. Thus, the alternative schools may not hold high enough standards concerning attendance and educational output from their students. This issue weighs heavily on the teachers', who are concerned about their students' preparedness to succeed as adults. This brings about the ethical dilemma of how flexible alternative schools should be, and what constitutes "success" in the alternative setting.

Defining Success in an Alternative School Setting

One of the main concerns with configuring success criteria within alternative schools is the lack of representative numbers of students to carry out large scale evaluations. In fact, the small size of alternative schools for which they are renowned for, is also used as a criticism, where "far too many alternative schools and programs, with some of the poorest academic outcomes of any school, are skirting accountability" (DePaoli et al., 2017, p. 39). Others have voiced similar concerns, claiming that alternative schools often operate beneath the radar of

accountability policies, which are used to determine the effectiveness of a given school (Carter et al., 2015; Hemmer et al., 2013). What we are often left with are anecdotal accounts of what does and does not work in an alternative school setting, without a general sense of the state of alternative education (Quinn et al., 2006). With a lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of alternative schools, there are concerns as to the freedom these institutions are given in governing and managing their own affairs.

Some scholars have pushed back against the above assertions and have problematized the application of accountability measures designed for mainstream schools in alternative schools. As Almeida, Le, Steinberg, and Cervantes (2010) point out

> if schools primarily serving off-track students or returning dropouts are penalized for the amount of time students have already been out of school…they are particularly vulnerable to being deemed substandard or failing under such policies, even if their students make consistent progress (p. 12)

This is quite an intriguing proposition, as it highlights how "standardized" accountability measures may misrepresent alternative schools as "dumping grounds" in which students flounder in spaces of poor pedagogical and curricular offerings. Carter et al. (2015) take up this point in their work, arguing "it is possible, that even though AEC [Alternative Education Campus] students' test scores continued to decrease while attending an AEC, their scores would have been even lower in the absence of enrollment at an AEC" (p. 20). A similar assertion can be made in regard to attendance, or lack thereof. It has been documented that the majority of alternative school students have had issues with absenteeism, with many having missed significant amounts of school in the past (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2013). Therefore, a student who would attend one day a week in a mainstream school, but who begins to attend three days a week in an alternative school can be classified as either failing or succeeding. If one takes the position of the Ministry of Education, with its legally sanctioned zero tolerance policy for non-attendance, then the pupil

is still considered to be “failing” to adhere to the mandated expectations. However, from the view of an alternative school educator (or any educator for that matter) a 200% increase in attendance is a definite sign of success. Thus, the definition of “success” in an alternative setting is a contested terrain. One that must be cognizant of ensuring that all students receive a quality education, while being sensitive to the exceptional needs these pupils have.

The sampled schools problematize how we conceptualize success in the alternative school setting. As previously discussed, the schools have both positive and negative features. The flexible approach to attendance, with its accompanying accommodations is a necessary facet of alternative schools, however this same flexibility can be considered detrimental to the students’ future educational and work opportunities, as they become reliant on the accommodations. There are no simple answers in this dilemma, however when I asked the staff whether they thought their school was setting up their students for failure many pushed back against this assertion, arguing that their students would have otherwise been kicked out, or would have dropped out of mainstream schools. Thus, while the programs are not as rigorous as they can be, they nevertheless deliver a basic education these students would unlikely receive in the mainstream setting. Yet, there is the danger that this mindset expresses lowered expectations on the behalf of the staff, who are complacent with their inability to deliver a rigorous education to their students. This is a challenging educational predicament.

This research presents the limited utility of the “safe haven” and “dumping ground” metaphors for alternative schools. The sampled alternative schools contain aspects of both, as they attempt to deliver an education to their students. Seeing alternative schools as *either* safe havens or dumping grounds simplifies the complex processes taking part in these schools. Alternative schools are faced with the difficult task of balancing flexibility with holding high

expectations simultaneously. As this research has documented, alternative schools are complex institutions, imbued with challenging ethical dilemmas. They test our conceptions of what an education is and should be. If we use mainstream high schools' notions of success alternative schools may be unfairly deemed to be failing their students, yet if their students are not given an equitable opportunity to be successful in adult life, we need to question the purpose and ethicality of alternative schools. Further research documenting the pathways alternative school students take needs to be carried out. We need to know more about the kinds of futures these students are being prepared to lead. Without this work it is difficult to ascertain the ethicality of running separate educational institutions that serve a high absentee demographic.

Conclusion

This research has documented the usefulness and appropriateness of utilizing the voluntary/involuntary absence framework. Once the need to differentiate between motivational and structural obstacles to attendance is acknowledge educational stakeholders can move past focusing solely on raising attendance and paying attention to accommodating absenteeism. The blaming of students for non-attendance must stop, and we must carefully consider how the inequity of our schools and society plays a role in making steady attendance nearly impossible for some students. Alternative schools are already doing this work and are undertaking efforts to ensure that all students are able to succeed regardless of their circumstances. However, this research has also revealed that alternative schools are not perfect "safe havens," and further work needs to be carried out to ensure that they deliver a rigorous education for their students.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This dissertation is concerned with student absenteeism. However, we need to look beyond "absenteeism," past the numerical counting of absences, the assignment of blame, and the futile solutions, to seeing absenteeism for what it is: a signifier of the failure of not only our schools, but society in general. Gene Anyon (2014) has argued that we must critically analyze how an "unjust economy and the policies through which it is maintained create barriers to educational success that no teacher or principal practice, no standardized test, and no 'zero tolerance' policy can surmount for long" (p. 5). Absenteeism is a signifier, a signifier of the inequitable operations in our society that further marginalize those at the periphery. Whenever a youth is absent because they are hungry, or because they have to work, whenever a youth is punished and kicked out of school for not attending, we see the remarginalization of the most vulnerable population in our schools.

By failing to account for and acknowledge involuntary absences many mainstream schools in Ontario are currently failing their students. It is all too easy for youths to *slip through the cracks* of the educational system. Although this is a worn-out expression in academic and professional circles, the findings of this dissertation confirm its propagation. Most of the youths in this study underwent heartbreaking experiences and had lives filled with anger, sadness, and despondency. Sam (Bridgeport), struggled with an eating disorder and injected hard drugs into her body. Sandy (Pine) lived with an alcoholic parent, was thrown into the foster care system, developed a drinking problem, and spent time in the psychiatric ward. Lance (Stoneridge) had a child at 16 and had to work full-time to support his family. Natasha (Bridgeport) moved to a new country without her father and found herself in poverty. These students, and many others, have to navigate challenging lives, where school *cannot* be a priority. Many of the student participants

faced nearly insurmountable obstacles to their attendance yet found the strength and courage to come to school as much as possible. Rather than being praised for overcoming their struggles, these youths were shamed in their mainstream schools for not meeting attendance expectations. Implicitly and explicitly, these adolescents were told that their failure was theirs alone. The students described in great detail the deficit theorizing that occurs in our schools. Students are continuously judged against the "norm," and their inability to meet these standards are considered to be their fault. Although these four students may be considered "extreme" cases, the remaining 36 students' accounts of absenteeism and schooling are no less grave. And they are not alone. There are dozens of alternative schools in Ontario, and almost all school boards in the province have some type of alternative education in place for the youths "who have had difficulty succeeding in a traditional classroom" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 2). Considering that 1 out 7 children entering Ontario's public schools will not graduate, there are thousands of youths who likely resemble the 40 student participants who took part in this study.

This research is a reflection of our mainstream schools' current inability and/or unwillingness to address the needs of their students and puts into question the role of schools in the Canadian society. We must grapple with the question of "what can we reasonably expect our schools to do?" I expect that answers to this question will fluctuate wildly based on a person's political and educational philosophies. Some may argue that our nation's schools' primary, and arguably only task, is educating our youth. That we should not place undue burdens on the already strained educational system by requiring it to be responsive to students' needs that lie far beyond its system of influence. Schools are not a social service agency, which do exist in the Canadian welfare state. Thus, we should not expect teachers who are not trained as social workers, or poorly funded schools, to assist youths in navigating their often-difficult lives. Yet,

others may posit that this is an outdated model of education, one that is still steeped in factory-production model of British education established at the end of the Industrial Revolution. This line of thinking has gained traction in some educational circles, who call for schools to be remodelled to resemble community centres, where multiagency services are easily accessible to youths and their families (Gase et al., 2015; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Kearney, 2016). The proponents of wraparound services put forward a reconceptualization of schools, to community hubs that will strive to meet the physical, emotional, as well as educational needs of their students. Yet these projects require immense fiscal resources that many provincial governments are unwilling to invest. Educational funding is more often reactive than it is proactive, and funds are distributed only when a crisis or shortcoming has been revealed. Rather than investing money into schools that are better equipped to assist their students with a range of issues, our politicians and appointed decisionmakers appear to prefer investing these resources into social supports and the criminal justice system – the users of which have generally low educational credentials. Thus, rather than proactively spending the necessary capital to ensure that all youths are able to receive an adequate education and have a chance to succeed in life, our current model allows these youths to fail in the inequitable schooling structure and become reliant on the social welfare net to assist them with daily need. Educational stakeholders need to critically examine the functions of schools and rethink their role in the lives of students. However, this is a lofty goal, and in the meantime we must look for more tangible actions to reduce the effects of absenteeism.

Seeing as our mainstream schools are not well prepared to reduce and/or mitigate the harmful effects of absenteeism we must search for promising practices that will allow them to be better responsive to the current levels of absenteeism. We need not look far, and as this research

has documented, some excellent work is already being carried out in alternative schools. A lucky few students reengage and enter alternative schools, places where they find solace, a friendly environment filled by compassionate staff dedicated to ensuring that they successfully complete their education. The sampled alternative schools actively seek out the underlying cause of absenteeism and attempt to find supports to mitigate the issue. The staff go to enormous lengths to ensure that their students are able to attend as much as they can. If they are unable to do so, the alternative schools have developed accommodation strategies designed to allow pupils to miss some school without compromising their education. Rather than punishing and castigating pupils for non-attendance alternative schools praise and reward their students for coming as much as they can, whilst offering pathways to school completion that do not require perfect attendance. The sampled alternative schools are to be applauded for their absenteeism reduction efforts and accommodations.

However, the findings and recommendations of this research must thus be taken with caution. While one of the strengths of this research is its qualitative design, it does come at the cost of lacking any large-scale generalizable conclusions. This research utilized a relatively small sample of four schools in one geographical area at a particular time. Thus, the causes and responses to absenteeism may not carry over to other settings, and this research is context specific. There have been warnings about the difficulty of transplanting effective responses to absenteeism from one setting to another (Raywid, 1983). What does and does not work in the sampled schools may not carry over to another school, as all are unique institutions. That being said, it is evident that there is much to learn from alternative schools and their responses to absenteeism.

Yet, absenteeism, and its causes, consequences, and solutions to the issue, have remained a relatively unknown area of research in Canada, and there are no Canadian absenteeism scholars. A recent review I completed showed that no academics in *any* of Canadian Faculties of Education are absenteeism scholars. This research has taken a step towards alleviating this issue and provides one of the few Canadian accounts of absenteeism. While the U.S. based research has been a surrogate to many of the discussions in this dissertation, the Canadian educational, social, political and economic realities are markedly different than that of the U.S. Thus, a truly Canadian account of absenteeism is necessary, and has been presented here.

There is also a need for the greater infusion of qualitative designs to the study of absenteeism, as the field has been dominated by quantitative methods. Although quantitative approaches to studying absenteeism are necessary and offer useful information for our understanding of the issue, they fail to account for the extremely convoluted nature of absenteeism and absentees. This empirical qualitative account shows how each youths' absenteeism was unique and individual. Rather than using a variable counting analysis, which fragments and isolates the causes of absenteeism, this account presents a more holistic understanding of the problem. A qualitative analysis allows to inspect each pupil's absenteeism and has shown how the causes of absenteeism are diverse, both traversing voluntary and involuntary realms. More work like this needs to be carried out in order for us to continue developing more nuanced responses to the absenteeism dilemma. This research has illuminated some further areas that warrant investigating.

As mentioned in the "Discussion," one of the challenges confronting the sampled alternative schools, and likely many others, is the demarcation between accommodation and enabling pupils. On the one hand accommodations are a vital and fundamental component of

what distinguishes alternative from mainstream schools. This, however, comes at a cost, as arguably some pupils may be consciously or unconsciously taking advantage of the relaxed and flexible atmosphere, thereby perpetuating their own absenteeism. There is an inherent tension in alternative schools, as staff members attempt to find balance between accommodation and enabling, and how this done requires further study.

Related to above issue is a need to delve into post-schooling outcomes of alternative school graduates. As the "Findings" elucidate, there are questionable educational practices taking place in the sampled alternative schools. As the educators attempt to reengage absentees, they admit to sacrificing some of the academic rigor and quality of instruction. Moreover, the flexibility of the programs may not adequately prepare these youths for being successful post K-12 schooling. A longitudinal study tracking the life outcomes of alternative school graduates would be quite valuable in ascertaining the preparedness of these individuals to succeed in adult life. It would be worthwhile to see the postsecondary/career decisions these individuals make, as well as their thoughts about how prepared they felt to transition past secondary schooling. This would aid in further developing effective alternative schools that prepare their graduates for adult life.

Before ending this chapter, I want to briefly revisit the line of thinking I started this conclusion with. We must be mindful that although schools should never be absolved of their responsibility of adequately meeting the needs of their students, their functioning is the direct reproduction of the larger social, political, and economic forces characterizing our society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Canada's schools are founded on the wider societal beliefs in meritocracy and individualism, and "using school as a sorting mechanism, we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway

trains begging and who sleep upon the streets" (Gatto, 2002, p. 21). Mandatory attendance policies, and the dominant responses to absenteeism found in mainstream schools are (in)actively creating this subclass.

There is no doubt that alternative schools are a necessity, but they are not a wholly adequate solution to mitigating the harmful effects of absenteeism. We need to remove the cloak of security, stop hiding behind appalling U.S. graduation rates, and thinking that "we have it right." We need to acknowledge that our society and education system are failing the most disadvantaged youths who walk through school doors. By listening to the youths, and their stories of being absent in school, the greater nuance of absenteeism becomes visible. Moreover, differentiation between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism begins to absolve the youths from some of the blame for non-attendance. This empathetic approach to working with absenteeism will hopefully result in more responsive, nuanced, and effective methods of responding to absenteeism and mitigating its negative effects.

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Table 3
Findings Outline

Findings	
First Half	**Second Half**
1. Introduction	**6. Alternative Schools**
2. Perceptions of Absenteeism	**7. Perceptions of Absenteeism**
3. Causes of Absenteeism *I.* *Student* a) Voluntary (i.e. not interested in education; substance use; friends; selling drugs) b) Involuntary (i.e. mental health issues; becoming a parent; substance abuse) *II.* *Family* a) Voluntary (i.e. lack of parental support in education; moving far from the school) b) Involuntary (i.e. difficult home lives; familial conflict; placement/living in foster care; losing a carer) *III.* *School* a) Voluntary (i.e. school climate; large school/class sizes; conflict with peers/staff; labelling; lowered expectations; uninteresting classes) b) Involuntary (bullying; sexual harassment) *IV.* *Society* a) Voluntary (i.e. working additional hours; selling drugs)	**8. Causes of Absenteeism** *I.* *Voluntary* (i.e. being bored in class; ingrained pattern of absenteeism; negative associations with schooling; feeling old; and fear of graduation) *II.* *Involuntary* (i.e. having to earn an income; maintaining a household; becoming a parent; mental health issues; and involvement in the criminal justice system)

b) Involuntary (i.e. need to earn an income; lack of transit fare; providing childcare)	
4. Consequences of Absenteeism *I.* *Student* (i.e. hostile and apathetic staff members; lowered expectations and labelling; assignment to special education; punitive punishments; automated phone calls; threats of further punishment; criminal charges of truancy; being demitted from the school) *II.* *Family* (i.e. contact by school personnel; having to attend in-school meetings; assisting their child in navigating the court system if charged with truancy)	**9. Consequences of Absenteeism** *I.* *Student* (i.e. phone call; no consequence) *II.* *Family* (i.e. phone call; no consequence) *III.* *School* (i.e. ethical and moral dilemmas; frustration)
5. Solutions to Absenteeism *I.* *Solutions to Voluntary Absenteeism* (i.e. encouraging students to attend; providing incentives for attendance) *II.* *Accommodation of Involuntary Absenteeism*	**10. Solutions to Absenteeism** *I.* *Solutions to Voluntary Absenteeism* a) School Climate (i.e. small school size; establishing a community; caring staff) b) Staff (i.e. use of first names; showing respect and caring; flexible and lenient; individualized attention) c) Learning (i.e. wide course offerings; student voice in education; self-paced; one-on-one academic support) d) Motivating Students to Attend (i.e. encouragement; phone calls, texts, and emails; incentives for attendance) *II.* *Solutions/Accommodations to Absenteeism*

(i.e. opportunities to catch up on missed work; extensions on assignments)	a) Solutions to Involuntary Absenteeism (i.e. free food, personal/household items, and transportation; employment referrals; greater access to social services) b) Accommodations to Absenteeism (i.e. flexible deadlines; opportunities to catch up on missed work; removal of exams)
6. Transitions to the Alternative School *I.* *Transfer* (i.e. students voluntarily transfer from a mainstream to an alternative school) *II.* *Dropout* (i.e. disengagement; mental health issues; employment; having to move) *III.* *Kicked Out* (i.e. absenteeism; behavioural infractions; safety concern)	**11. Conclusion**

APPENDIX A
Staff Information

Name	Bridgeport	Stoneridge	Pine	Meadows	Total
Gender	Female: 3 Male: 2	Female: 3 Male: 1	Female: 3 Male: 1	Female: 3 Male: 1	Female: 12 Male: 5
Number of Schools Worked in Prior to Current School	Range: 0-4	Range: 1-6	Range: 1-6	Range: 0-4	Range: 0-6
	Average: 1.75	Average: 3.25	Average: 2.75	Average: 2.25	Average: 2.5
Length of Time Working at School	Range: 7 to 40 years	Range: 1 to 10 years	Range: 9 months to 11 years	Range: 3 to 25 years	Range: 9 months to 40 years
	Average: 16 years	Average: 4.25 years	Average:6.6 years	Average: 8.75 years	Average: 8.9 years

APPENDIX B
Student Information

School	Bridgeport Alternative School	Stoneridge Alternative School	Pine Alternative School	Meadows Alternative school	Total
Age	Range: 18-20	Range: 18-19	Range: 17-20	Range: 18-20	Range: 17-20
	Average: 18.9	Average: 18.5	Average: 18.6	Average: 18.5	Average: 18.6
Gender	Female: 6 Male: 4	Female: 3 Male: 7	Female: 5 Male: 3 Transgender: 2	Female: 3 Male: 7	Female: 17 Male: 21 Transgender: 2
Living Arrangement	Parents: 1 Single Parent: 5 Alone/Roommates: 4	Parents: 1 Single Parent: 8 Alone: 1	Parents: 3 Single Parent: 5 Alone: 1 Group Home: 1	Parents: 2 Single Parent: 5 Mother and Stepfather: 1 Aunt: 1 Not Available: 1	Parents: 7 Single Parent: 23 Alone: 6 Other: 3 Not Available: 1
Number of Schools Attended Prior to Alternative School	Range: 1-7	Range: 1-4	Range: 1-6	Range: 1-2	Range: 1-7
	Average: 3.2	Average: 1.9	Average: 2.1	Average: 1.4	Average: 2.1
Length of Time Enrolled in Alternative School	Range: 3 months to 3 years	Range: 5 months to 3 years	Range: 8 months to 3 years	Range: 9 months to	Range: 3 months to 3 years
	Average: 13 months	Average: 15 months	Average: 20 months	Average: 13.5 months	Average: 15 months
Graduation Status	Range: ½ of a credit to 1.5 years	Range: 1 month to 2.5 years	Range: 1 month to 1 year	Range: 1 month to 1.5 years	Range: ½ credit to 2.5 years

APPENDIX C
Interview Guide

Curriculum Leader & Support Staff Interview Questions

Prompts for Subquestion #1

Where have you worked in the past?

What kind of students have you worked with in the past?

Was absenteeism ever a problem in your previous school(s)?

How did you start working at this school?

Prompts for Subquestion #2

Can you tell me about your past experiences working at this school?

How do students become enrolled in your school?

How far do the students live away from the school?

Can you tell me about attendance at this school since you have been here?

How many students are enrolled in your school? How many are present on a daily basis?

Can you think of the reasons why some of the students are absent in your school?

What is your school's official policy regarding attendance?

What are your school's attendance expectations?

What happens if a student is absent?

Do you think the policy is followed on a day-to-day basis?

Do you know the teachers' opinions regarding absenteeism?

Can you tell me about how your school motivates students to attend?

Does the school try to support students to attend regularly? (help find employment, provide social services contacts, provide meals and/or school supplies, etc.).

Does your school provide any accommodations to students who cannot be present at school consistently (i.e., extension on assignments, catch-up work, flexibility in test scheduling, etc.)?

Do you think the flexible nature of your school may encourage students to be absent?

Do students motivate each other not to attend?

What do you think about the academic quality the students are receiving at your school?

Can you define success at your school?

Where do your students generally end up after graduation (workplace, college, university)?

Prompts for Subquestion #3

Do you think alternative schools are the right setting for absentees?

What do you think your school does well to accommodate absentees, encourage them to attend, and eventually graduate?

Could the school do anything else?

If you could have extra supports from the board and/or the ministry of education what would you hope for?

What could other schools, both mainstream and alternative do to accommodate absentees?

Teacher Interview Questions

Prompts for Subquestion #1

Where have you worked in the past?

What kind of students have you worked with in the past?

Was absenteeism ever a problem in your previous school(s)?

How did you start working at this school?

Prompts for Subquestion #2

Can you tell me about your past experiences working at this school?

How do students become enrolled in your school?

How far do the students live away from the school?

Can you tell me about attendance at this school since you have been here?

How many students are enrolled in your school? How many are present on a daily basis?

Can you think of the reasons why some of the students are absent in your school?

What is your school's official policy regarding attendance?

What are your school's attendance expectations?

What happens if a student is absent?

Do you think the policy is followed on a day-to-day basis?

Can you tell me about how your school motivates students to attend?

Do you motivate your students to attend? If so, how?
Does the school try to support students to attend regularly? (help find employment, provide social services contacts, provide meals and/or school supplies, etc.).
Do you try to support your students to attend regularly?
Does your school provide any accommodations to students who cannot be present at school consistently (i.e., extension on assignments, catch-up work, flexibility in test scheduling, etc.)?
Di you provide any accommodations to students who cannot be present at school consistently?
Do you think the flexible nature of your school may encourage students to be absent?
Do students motivate each other not to attend?
What do you think about the academic quality the students are receiving at your school?
Can you define success at your school?
Where do your students generally end up after graduation (workplace, college, university)?

Prompts for Subquestion #3

Do you think alternative schools are the right setting for absentees?
What do you think your school does well to accommodate absentees, encourage them to attend, and eventually graduate?
Could the school do anything else?
If you could have extra supports from the board and/or the ministry of education what would you hope for?
What could other schools, both mainstream and alternative do to accommodate absentees?

Student Questions

Prompts for Subquestion #1

Describe your attendance patterns between Grade 1-8
Who do you live with?
How involved is your guardian(s) in your education?
Which high school(s) did you go to and how far away from them did you live?
Tell me about your high school attendance patterns
Why have you been absent in this past?

How often were you absent in your old school(s)?
How did your old school(s) (administration, teachers, support staff) react to your absenteeism?
How did that make you feel?
Did you like the teachers at your old school?
Did you like what you were learning at your old school?
Did you get along with other students/feel a part of your old school?
Did anyone try to motivate you to attend?
Did anyone provide accommodations if you were absent (i.e. extra help, extensions on assignments)?

Prompts for Subquestion #2

How did you become enrolled in this school?
How far from this school do you live?
Can you tell me about this school? For example, what makes it different?
Do you like this school more than your old school? Do you wish you were in a regular school?
Currently how often are you absent?
Why are you absent?
What happens if you are absent?
Is there anyone in charge to make sure you attend?
Does anybody at the school try to motivate you to attend?
Does anybody at the school provide supports for you to attend (i.e. transportation fare, school supplies, guidance, etc.)?
Does anybody at the school provide accommodations if you are absent (i.e. extra help, delayed assignment due dates, etc.)?
Are you absent more at this school compared to your old school(s)? Why?
Do you like your teachers?
Do you like what you are learning?
Do you feel like you learn more at this school?
Does anyone from outside of the school come to give talks (i.e. community groups, NGOs)?
How many students are in your class? Do other students motivate you not to attend?
Do you like the flexibility of this school or do you wish it had more structure?

Prompts for Subquestion #3

How far are you from graduation?

Do you have any plans after graduation?

Is your current school doing enough to help you graduate?

Can you tell me about what you think the school is doing well?

What else do you think the school could and should do?

Do you wish this school has something that it currently doesn't?