PERSPECTIVES OF OLDER ADOLESCENTS ON INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT AND RE-CONNECTING WITH SECONDARY SCHOOL

Anne Arthur and Erin Hannah
Durham District School Board

ABSTRACT
This qualitative combined methodology study was undertaken to identify key factors in re-engagement by students aged 18 – 21 years returning to Secondary School. It was conducted in classrooms providing educational programming for students in treatment, care, custody or correctional facilities. An interview approach was adopted since continuous intake and provision of programming year round did not permit an intervention-based design. Six recurrent themes emerged from analysis of student responses: the importance of classroom climate; the need for intellectual engagement; the centrality of the student-teacher relationship; the value of alternative educational programming; the role of psychosocial factors; and the influence of school-level elements such as class size. These recurrent themes indicate system-based contributors to disengagement and academic failure that can be modified. Curriculum relevance, teacher role, teacher-student relationship and institutional flexibility around programming were identified as key contributors to student engagement.

BACKGROUND
Grove School is composed of approximately 50 classrooms housed in community schools and in segregated sites provided by community agencies. These classrooms are located across Durham Region, which includes both urban centres and rural communities. Students in Grove classrooms originate from across the province and represent a wide variety of school and life experiences. Known as Section 23 programs under the Ontario Ministry of Education General Legislative Grant Regulation 287/98 (2014), Grove
classrooms provide educational programming for students who are in treatment, care, custody or corrections. Students are clients of community agencies and are enrolled as a part of Grove School so that their educational programming can accommodate their treatment requirements.

Although Grove School initially comprised primarily Elementary-level classrooms, the average age of students has steadily risen. In 2012, a full 20% of the Secondary enrollment at Grove School was comprised of students between 18 and 21 years of age. According to Grove School’s Taking Stock report\(^1\) (2011-2012), these students were early school leavers who reported having disengaged from school for anywhere from months to years at a time. These early school leavers were typically behind in credit accumulation, had diverse life experiences, came from varied school backgrounds and had acquired perspectives on education that were similar to other populations of students at risk for early school leaving. They were unique, however, in that they were both in the process of re-connecting with school and demonstrating academic success at the time of the interviews. As they worked to re-engage students in their education pathways, teachers in a variety of Grove classrooms had begun to recognize that these older students had distinct learning needs. While teachers had some ideas about what seemed to be working for this population of re-engaged students, the literature tended to focus on the issues of younger students as early-school leavers (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell & Rummens, 2005). Older students re-engaging with education were not highly represented in the research. While these struggling older students were getting increased attention through Student Success Initiatives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), there was not yet conclusive information about best practices for re-engaging them with school. It was determined that further understanding of the learning needs of these students was required to better inform classroom practices. The diversity and transient nature of this population were further reasons to ask the students themselves for input in order to inform teacher practice around student engagement.

**PURPOSE**
The purpose of this study was to identify those educational practices that most effectively promote the intellectual engagement of Secondary school students aged 18 – 21 years, who are re-engaging with school. Because this was not an intervention-based study, the aim was for participants to lead the way in terms of identifying issues and offering strategies that can work in classrooms and schools. By listening carefully to what students were saying, we hoped to better understand the educational practices that lead to intellectual engagement for vulnerable students. Our intent was that these engagement strategies might then inform an intervention-based action research study.

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\(^1\) The Ontario Ministry of Education (2013) *Taking Stock* report collects data to track student progress and monitor the impact of the provincial Student Success Strategy. This report was revised in 2011-2012 to include the collection data regarding student re-engagement.
LITERATURE REVIEW
In profiling students at risk in Canada, research has tended to cluster around three perspectives: socio-economic status (Audas & Willms, 2001; Frempong & Willms, 2002; Levin, 2004); parental involvement/education (Levin, 2004; Volpe, 2000, Willms, 2003); and examining the special needs of students (Levin, 2004; Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). While such non-school related variables as socio-economic status, parental involvement and specialized learning needs are important indicators, little research has concentrated on such meso-level factors as classroom climate and institutional flexibility. Thus, the factors examined in this study looked specifically at institutional factors that might have contributed more directly to early school-leaving among our student population.

More recent research studies have also focused on student engagement in understanding early-school leavers. Studies on student engagement have revealed that at-risk students often complain of boredom at school, and of a curriculum that is not relevant to their experiences (Blankenstein, 2007; Brady, 2006; McEvoy, 2009; Field & Olafson, 1999; Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). In fact, Willms et al (2009) found that students’ self-disclosed levels of intellectual engagement decreased steadily throughout Secondary school, and that a lack of intellectual engagement led directly to higher absentee rates and an increased risk for early school leaving.

It is also significant to note that, as Bushnik, Barr-Telford and Bussiere (2004) observed in 2001, 37% of 2,650 early school leavers in Ontario were actually meeting or exceeding academic requirements when they decided to terminate their formal education (p. 15). This study suggests that academic disengagement may have less to do with curriculum that is overly challenging, and more to do with the fact that students disengage “due to boredom and alienation resulting from an uninteresting and unchallenging environment” (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005, p. 65).

For the purposes of this research study, the concept of intellectual engagement was operationalized based on Willms et al (2009) definition of intellectual engagement as encompassing students’ sense of enjoyment, interest, motivation and relevance of curriculum. Intellectual engagement in this study was further understood in the context of Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, which is defined as the “subjective state which people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of losing track of time and of being unaware of fatigue and of everything else but the activity itself” (1997, p. 14). Accordingly, the connection between intellectual engagement and student motivation was addressed in this research study as well. Specifically, participants were encouraged to provide examples of intellectual engagement from their own experience, and also to suggest educational practices that they believed could promote intellectual engagement among students who are at risk for early school leaving.

This qualitative study did not include an action research component in the truest sense of the term; it did not employ the usual methodology of identifying a problem, implementing an intervention and then measuring its success (Creswell, 2012). The highly transient and
widely diverse nature of student populations found in Section 23 classroom situations made it impractical to frame a meaningfully narrow research question. Because this was not an intervention-based study, there were no instructional strategies and/or actions to implement in this research project. Instead, an inquiry-based research design more typically used “for preliminary or pilot research” was employed (O’Brien, 1998). Thus, we adopted a “combined methodological approach” which blended narrative inquiry and grounded theory – a more recent trend recognized in qualitative research (Lal, Suto, & Ungar, 2012). As inquiry-based research, the study was designed to uncover factors involved in intellectual engagement as well as educational practices that participants identified as promoting intellectual engagement. Subsequent research that focuses on an intervention, reflection and another cycle of research may be more appropriate in a follow-up study.

**METHODOLOGY**

Studies of early school leaving have tended to rely heavily on the use of surveys rather than on one-to-one interactions (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). Thus, the narrative inquiry approach implemented in our study was designed to provide early school leavers with an opportunity to share their stories of re-engagement in a semi-structured interview context. Narrative inquiry as a methodological approach allows participants to give meaning to their experience and provides educational researchers with an opportunity to analyze and study those narratives (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). The inquiry-based methodology and procedures employed in this study were also based in part on Waterman’s (1988) astute observation that, “if you want to know what someone is thinking, ask them” (p. 196). Decisions concerning methodology derived from our fundamental belief that, “Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (Freire, 2003, p. 88). A qualitative research methodology was also warranted because a detailed view was required, and the research questions could only be addressed from the lived experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Cresswell, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 2008; Myers, 1997; Urquhart, 2001).

In a study designed to better understand students’ resistance to institutional discourse, Field & Olafson (1999) found that educational institutions characteristically tended to locate the roots of school failure within the student – not within the institution. By focusing on the possible contributions of socio-economic status, parental involvement and learning disabilities to academic failure, research studies may have missed important opportunities to discover the crucial role that institutional factors and educational practices could play in terms of re-engaging students who are at risk.

An important function of the research design was to probe and uncover system-based factors that may have contributed to disengagement and academic failure at the Secondary School level. According to Lal et al (2012), grounded theory is commonly recognized as a methodology that helps researchers understand psychological and social processes (p. 5). Furthermore, grounded theory and narrative inquiry can be considered complementary in that the advantages of one approach can be used to offset the limitations of the other, i.e. the concerns of “fragmentation and de-contextualization in grounded theory can be offset
by the situated and particular focus associated with narrative inquiry” (Lal et al, 2012, p. 16). Thus, the combined research methodology employed in this study allowed us to ground our participants’ words and ideas concerning educational practices and intellectual engagement in their own narratives and lived experiences. It also allowed us to build an integrated model around student engagement in the context of institutional flexibility, programming and teacher role in the classroom.

Participants
Students voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, based on information shared with them by their classroom teachers. Information was provided to all Grove staff members having students who matched the age demographic to share with all students in their classrooms. This involvement of Grove staff beyond the two researchers was to ensure that the process was inclusionary, and that the sample was more representative of the diverse nature of the group.

Students were interviewed in a private location at the site where they attended their Grove School classes. Every effort was made to make these locations familiar and comfortable, in the hope that students would be able to reflect as honestly and completely as possible through the interviews. Where possible, students were interviewed by their own teacher. Five of the students were interviewed by a researcher who was not their classroom teacher. Since the interviewer was not familiar with these participants, the students’ classroom teacher provided an introduction and worked with the student to identify a comfortable location for the interview. The interviews all took place in the students’ regular classroom space when class was not in session.

Since Grove School has continuous intake and provides programs year round, the interviews took place in the middle of the traditional school year, i.e. between November and March. The students interviewed represented five different classroom programs offered by four separate community agencies. Four of the classrooms were located in segregated sites and one was located in a community school. While all of the programs were located in urban centres, the students interviewed were fairly representative of the larger Grove School population in that three of the 15 participants were from rural areas and three were from outside the school board region.

Eight of the participants were males and seven were females. The proportion of female students in the study was higher than that of the general population of Grove School. The interview sample did not include members of the Grove community who were transgendered, as gender was not a determining characteristic in the selection of participants.

All participants in the study were students who were actively enrolled in a Grove classroom at the time of study. Although the selection of participants focused on their age (18 – 21 years), the fact that they had re-engaged with school and were willing to share their school experiences in a voluntary, audio-recorded interview occurring at their
classroom locations, the sample was found to be generally representative of the diverse nature of the population at Grove School.

**Recruitment and Data Collection Process**

The research study proposal was introduced to students aged 18-21 years enrolled in Grove classrooms. Interested students were provided with a copy of the Consent to Participate in Research. In an initial one-on-one meeting with interested participants, the project was explained in more detail.

Participants (n = 15) were asked to answer a series of questions (Appendix A) in an audio-recorded interview session. Interview questions were open-ended and, as such, encouraged participants to express their views on which educational practices and teaching strategies tended to stimulate their intellectual engagement. Intellectual engagement was described to students as instances when they were so absorbed in a school assignment or activity that they actually lost track of time. Questions also probed participants' views on how previous institutional factors and/or educational practices may have fallen short of meeting their learning needs and affected their decisions to leave high school before graduating.

**Data Analysis Process**

The audio-recordings were transcribed using a variable-speed playback software program called Express Scribe. Hard copies of completed transcriptions were then reviewed independently by members of the research team and checked against the audio recordings for accuracy and completeness.

A systematic line-by-line analysis of data was employed initially to label phrases and ideas that might be relevant to the research investigation. Individual pencil-and-paper open-coding sessions were used to identify phrases or codes indicative of student beliefs about their schooling experiences, and a preliminary list of code words or phrases was generated by each researcher. These lists were then compared and a more comprehensive list of 220 code words or indicators was created. This process of focused coding allowed us to make decisions about which initial codes made the most analytical sense, while also allowing us to organize the data into emerging categories.

As a way to ensure more validity, we each independently used the software program Atlas.ti to re-analyze the word-for-word transcripts and to identify phrases corresponding to our 220 listed codes. Axial coding was performed using a feature of Atlas.ti that allowed us to determine the strength of the codes we had identified and to eliminate any indicators either occurring fewer than ten times or appearing in fewer than seven of the participant interview transcripts. This process reduced the number of coded phrases from 220 to 56. Since Atlas.ti is more than simply a code and retrieve program (Smit, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 2008), its graphical network builder was used to generate a visual representation of the network of concepts and relationships. This was especially helpful in terms of recognizing, understanding and illustrating emerging concepts and themes in the participants' responses.
RESEARCH RESULTS AND INITIAL ANALYSIS

During our initial coding process, we identified 15 subthemes around student engagement: extracurricular activities; teacher skill; teacher-student relationship; teacher access; impact of transitions; attendance; self-concept; mental health factors; meaningful assignments/activities; family support; experiential learning activities; curriculum difficulty; classroom environment factors; boredom at school; and alternative education model. The indicator frequencies were organized under these fifteen subthemes (Figure 1.1).

Our initial research findings indicated that students felt most strongly about programming that was interesting and meaningful to them. Experiential learning activities were most often cited by participants as contributing to student engagement at school. Students attributed disengagement to boredom in the classroom generally, as well as to difficulty accessing the curriculum. Feelings of disengagement were most frequently cited as contributing factors to truancy (Figure 1.1).

Students said that, in order to be successful, they required schools and classrooms where they would feel welcomed and included. They valued a calm, focused classroom environment that was comfortable – physically nurturing and emotionally safe. Participants were also able to articulate the connection they saw between school engagement and self-concept. The students we interviewed wanted to be successful in life and saw school as critical to their future and their sense of self. They also recognized that mental health impacted their school performance and stressed the crucial need for mental health supports at school (Figure 1.1).

![Figure 1.1](image)

The most prominent theme that emerged from our research data was the need for curriculum that is meaningful and relevant. Asked to describe a time when they felt most intellectually engaged at school, our participants provided example after example of
experiential learning opportunities that resonated intellectually and emotionally. A second finding of our study was the centrality of the student-teacher relationship. Our participants indicated that they felt most engaged and most motivated to work when they felt that their teacher valued and understood them. Good relationships with their teachers were seen as impacting students’ self-concept. It mattered to them how their teachers felt about them. Thirdly, all participants in our study also made reference to the value of alternative education models. They identified smaller class sizes as offering improved teacher access and timely feedback that, in turn, contributed to their academic success. They valued a small classroom environment that was quiet and well managed. Fourthly, participants underscored the psychosocial significance of individual social engagement and concept of self. A number of the participants in our study also saw added value in having student access to mental health workers.

Research Results and Discussion
Atlas.ti software also allowed us to reassemble our data and generate frequency tables based on the sub-themes we had identified. Using the frequency tables generated by Atlas.ti, we were able to eliminate indicators occurring fewer than 10 times or appearing in fewer than 7 participant interviews. This theoretical coding process allowed us to further organize the remaining 56 codes under the following six themes: Classroom Climate; Importance of Teachers; Intellectual Disengagement; Programming for Students; Psychosocial Factors, and; School-Level Factors. It is these six themes that have formed the basis of our discussion.

Classroom Climate
According to the participants in our research study, classroom climate played a significant role in terms of their engagement in learning (Figure 2.1). Participants tended to value classroom environments that were calm and comfortable and helped them to stay focused (Figure 2.1). They expressed frustration over classrooms in which students were poorly behaved, strongly indicating that such environments were not conducive to learning.

Classroom climates that facilitated intellectual engagement were described as being “comfortable” and “relaxing”, “welcoming” and “friendly”, and offering a sense of belonging (Figure 2.1). Classroom climate was clearly a contributing factor in student engagement and/or disengagement. Our participant observations are supported in the research around learning environments and student engagement. Research that examines classroom climate in Elementary schools suggests that, when teachers are able to create an emotionally comfortable and welcoming learning environment, students feel more connected, are more engaged in their learning and are more likely to succeed academically (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; Ruus, Veisson, Leino, Ots, Pallas, Sarv & Veisson, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

Our participants also underscored the need for an emotionally safe learning environment in which they were free to speak what was on their minds and to explore who they were and who they might become. Again, the value of such a classroom environment in terms of meeting the learning needs of students who are at risk for academic failure is supported in
the research around classroom environment (Edgerton, Peter, & Roberts, 2008; Falconer, Edwards, & MacKinnon, 2008; Greene, 1995). Furthermore, the role of the teacher was seen by our participants as being central to creating a welcoming space where they felt emotionally safe to engage in their learning.

![Engagement and Classroom Environment Factors](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPcc2</td>
<td>Expressing frustration in classrooms where students are poorly behaved i.e. discipline issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPcc4</td>
<td>Identifying the importance of a sense of belonging in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPcc5</td>
<td>Expressing the importance of a focused and calm classroom environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPcc7</td>
<td>Explaining the importance of making the classroom environment more comfortable e.g. being able to eat and drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFss14</td>
<td>Identifying the importance of providing food for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsa6a</td>
<td>Understanding how a classroom environment led to student's sense of engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRpb10</td>
<td>Describing teachers who are friendly and welcoming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.1*

Students also spoke of engagement in terms of having an effective student-teacher relationship – one built on trust and respect (*Figure 2.2*). For example, one participant said teachers should be “a little more open and welcoming [....] It does have to do with the teacher’s attitude a lot of the time.” The importance of the teacher-student relationship, as identified by participants in this study, is supported in the research findings around student engagement. According to that research, students themselves do not identify a need for skill development. Rather, they have indicated that they want personal connections with their teachers and their peers – they want to feel like they are a valuable part of a community (Brady, 2006; Bushnik et al, 2004; Donaleen, 2005; Gould Lundy, 2006; Willms et al, 2009).
In their study of classroom climate and teacher affiliation, Brackett et al (2011) too specify the teacher-student relationship as a key factor in meliorating student behavior and increasing intellectual engagement among students at risk. In fact, students’ relationships with supportive teachers have been positively linked to engagement in the learning process in a number of studies (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004, Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2011). It is not surprising, therefore, that our participants similarly identified the student-teacher relationship as critical to their academic success.

**Intellectual Disengagement**

Intellectual engagement was another prominent theme grounded in students’ observations concerning re-engagement in Secondary school. Although participants did emphasize the importance of an emotionally comfortable and welcoming learning environment, that alone was not enough to keep them engaged in their learning. They also underscored the need for curriculum that was relevant and emotionally engaging. Participants shared stories about how curriculum that was boring and repetitive left them feeling unengaged (Figure 3.1). As one student explained, “I prefer a little more than read this book, do this sheet and come to me if you need any help”. Recent research on student engagement also reveals that at-risk students often complain of boredom at school, and of a curriculum that is not relevant to their own experiences (Blankstein, 2007; Brady, 2006; Ferguson et al, 2005; Gould Lundy, 2006; McEvoy, 2009; Field & Olafson, 1999; Willms et al, 2009). Our students were no
different. Boredom seemed to be a prime factor in their lack of engagement and early school leaving.

![Disengagement and Boredom at School](image)

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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPca5</td>
<td>Feeling bored by schoolwork that is repetitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPts12</td>
<td>Feeling bored by too many formal writing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRnb1</td>
<td>Describing teachers who are boring i.e. speak in a monotonous voice and/or talk too much</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3.1*

Our participants also cited difficulty with curriculum as a prime reason for feelings of frustration and eventual disengagement (*Figure 3.2*). They provided a number of classroom anecdotes in which their frustration levels were high because the curriculum was not accessible. For example, one student indicated that she often found herself, “not necessarily being able to understand what the teachers want from me or want me to do because my brain thinks in a different way.” She also noted that, “sometimes the teachers teach the way they think so they don’t really explain...really explain it for those that think differently.” Research suggests that there must be a fairly precise match between a student’s actual skill level and the level of challenge inherent in the task. Low concordance between skill and challenge can result in either boredom or frustration. When a student’s skill level is high and the challenge level of an activity is low, boredom can result. Conversely, if the challenge level of an activity is high and the skill level is low, frustration and perhaps anxiety are the outcomes. Only when an activity matches a student’s skill level do student concentration and engagement levels reach their optimum (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). For our participants as well, when that match was not precise, frustration emerged and feelings of disengagement followed.
According to Ferguson et al (2005), only 50% of the early school leavers in their study attributed their high rates of absenteeism to a curriculum that was too difficult for them. This suggests that academic disengagement may have less to do with overly challenging curriculum, and more to do with the student disengagement “due to boredom and alienation resulting from an uninteresting and unchallenging environment” (Ferguson et al, 2005, p. 65). Our students, however, cited difficulty with curriculum as leading quite directly to their lack of success. The disjuncture between what the literature suggests and what our participants revealed might be explained in part by the fact that the participants in our study were returning to school after significant time out of the classroom. Those periods away from school might have resulted in substantial gaps in their learning that made curriculum more challenging as a result. As one participant put it, “I’ve been out of school for almost 2 years and I’m just starting up since last April and I think I would like to do Math but I don’t think I can remember the stuff from Grade 9 or 10.”

**Importance of Teachers**

Teachers were seen as important, not only in terms of creating a safe emotional space for students, but also as playing a vital role in engaging students intellectually. Teacher access was identified as one of the primary components in intellectual engagement (Figure 4.1), according to our participants.
One student described how access to her teacher helped to alleviate her stress levels in this way: “the biggest thing is knowing I have the help when I need it...whether I need it or not, it’s still there.” Participants believed strongly that small class sizes were more conducive to one-on-one teacher support and, as such, were an essential institutional determinant of their success. Research around class sizes too suggests that, in smaller classrooms, teachers can “interact with individual students more frequently and use a greater variety of instructional strategies” (Bascia, 2010, p. 4). Certainly, the advantages of smaller class sizes and teacher access were not lost on the participants in our study.

Teacher skill was another factor identified in our study as a key determinant in student success (Figure 4.2). Participants focused on such teacher attributes as being able to scaffold learning by establishing short-term goals.

Students also emphasized the need for teachers to provide a variety of learning strategies and to be able to explain difficult concepts in simple ways. In essence, participants were identifying the need for differentiated instruction techniques whereby course content and instructional strategies could be tailored to accommodate individual learning differences. In their three-year review of the effects of differentiated instruction in Kindergarten to Grade 12 classrooms in Alberta, McQuarrie, McRae and Stack-Cutler (2008) determined that one of the advantages of differentiation in the classroom is that it “enhances student self-confidence and engagement” (p. 13). Participants in our study as well spoke of teaching

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPts4</td>
<td>Feeling empowered through one-on-one instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRpb2</td>
<td>Describing teachers who provide help when required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRpr3</td>
<td>Expressing a desire for teacher attention e.g. one-to-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.1*
strategies tailored to their own learning styles as being important to their own engagement as learners.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STRpb3</td>
<td>Describing teachers who assist students with short-term goal setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRpb7</td>
<td>Describing teachers who provide different ways to do things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRpb9</td>
<td>Describing teachers who explain things simply i.e. clear explanations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2

Programming for Students

When asked to talk about assignments they had found intellectually engaging, students became quite animated. The interviewers had been instructed to operationalize the term “engaged” by describing it as “a time when what you were working on was so interesting that you lost track of time”. In their responses, participants described in fine detail a variety of assignments that had caused them to become engaged to the point of losing awareness of time. One student described how easily she engaged during physical education this way: “During volleyball we’d keep going through the lunch bell and we’d be like, oh snap we have to go get changed and go to lunch and get ready for next class. Completely lose track of time.” Participants generally described activities as engaging whenever these were emotionally and/or personally relevant to their lives, and also were experiential or project-based in nature (Figure 5.1). For example, one student remembered, “The other kids would be cleaning up and the teacher would be like ‘You need to clean up’ and I’d be like, ‘Well I just want to do a bit more; I just want to do a bit more’ [...] And they would want me to go home, but I would lose track of time with the schoolwork.”

The opportunity for choice was also recognized as essential in promoting sustained student engagement (Figure 5.1). The research literature around intellectual engagement corroborates the principle that students want curriculum that is meaningful and relevant
to their lives. For that to occur, they need to be given choice – both in terms of assignment selection and in how they will be assessed. As such, the participant responses supported the current literature around student engagement among students at risk. In fact, lack of student choice and a curriculum perceived as unengaging or emotionally irrelevant were risk factors identified by a number of Canadian researchers who examined the issue of early leaving in Ontario’s Secondary Schools (Ferguson et al, 2005; King, 2003; Willms et al, 2009).

![Engagement and Meaningful Assignments/Activities](chart.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPca10</td>
<td>Feeling appreciative of the opportunity for choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPca6</td>
<td>Reporting a loss in sense of time when engaged in work student is good at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPca7</td>
<td>Feeling more engaged when an assignment is interesting and/or relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPca8</td>
<td>Identifying the importance of varied and novel assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPca9</td>
<td>Appreciating opportunities for creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPts13</td>
<td>Feeling more engaged when approach selected is interesting and/or geared to students' interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFrce6</td>
<td>Identifying a need for curriculum that is personally relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsa3</td>
<td>Describing an academic activity/assignment that one is good or skilled at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsa4a</td>
<td>Understanding how a school activity led to student’s sense of engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.1**

Participants similarly underscored experiential learning activities and/or project-based learning opportunities as strategies that contributed to genuine student engagement (**Figure 5.2**).
Perspectives of Older Adolescents

Arthur & Hannah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPca4</td>
<td>Expressing excitement over hands-on assignments in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPts1</td>
<td>Expressing feelings of sustained intellectual engagement during experiential learning activities e.g. experiments, models, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.2

One student described her project this way: “We were doing this thing where you put Mentos in Coke and you shake it up and smash it on the ground and it goes everywhere. That was the best time. Everyone had rain jackets on and umbrellas”. Conversely, participants disengaged when asked to complete formalized and repetitive assignments (Figure 3.1). More recent learning theories based on brain development have moved away from traditional mechanistic views of the learning process whereby learning is a matter of amassing, organizing, recalling and applying information and skills. Complexity theory, by contrast, posits that learning is a biological event involving change in conceptual structure as learners adapt actions and interpretations to new circumstances (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2004). Project-based activities are uniquely suited to a view of learning based on complexity theory. At their core, project-based activities are experiential, and are therefore authentic and emotionally significant for students – two characteristics that our participants identified as valuable in terms of their own engagement needs.

Psychosocial Factors

Participants also shared their need to feel good about themselves as people (Figure 6.1). Having seen their own share of failure while in the school system, participants in this study tended to blame themselves for previous lack of educational progress. Rather than pointing to external factors such as lack of support and/or school curriculum that was irrelevant and boring, they instead blamed themselves for their lack of success. Research studies too indicate that students who are at risk for early school leaving are often criticized for their behavioural choices (Ferguson et al, 2005; Henriksson, 2008; Field & Olafson, 1999). In
fact, Field and Olafson (1999), make the case that educational institutions tend to place blame for academic failure squarely on students’ shoulders, rather than to examine the role that institutional factors may have played in those negative outcomes.

![Engagement and Positive Self Concept](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSDm1</td>
<td>Expressing a need to pursue career, get a job and make money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsa1</td>
<td>Providing evidence of maturation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsa2</td>
<td>Emphasizing a need to meet personal educational goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsi5</td>
<td>Describing a positive sense of academic self-concept at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsoe12</td>
<td>Describing how assignment completion contributes to feelings of empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsoe5</td>
<td>Sharing future plans for the workplace and/or career options e.g. life after high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsoe7</td>
<td>Sharing a plan to pursue post-secondary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDsoe9</td>
<td>Identifying a positive change in student and student’s approach to school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6.1*

Participants in this purposive sample of students were in care, custody or treatment centres. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that they described how mental health issues had impacted their academic performances (*Figure 6.2*). What was surprising, however, was the value they placed on having access to the mental health workers during school hours (*Figure 6.2*). Students offered anecdotes of the role that school counselors had played in helping them to succeed. For example, one student described it this way: “They also had a child and youth worker so she was always there. [...] I knew if I was having difficulties or upset I could just go speak with her and I would calm down a bit and settle down and I would just go back to class.”
It is of interest to note that researchers who focus on students at risk have found that early school leavers most frequently cite psychosocial causes for their disengagement and early leaving (Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004; Ferguson, Tilleczek et al., 2005; Turner, 2007). In this study as well, students focused on psychosocial challenges in the context of intellectual engagement and student success.

![Engagement and Mental Health Factors](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABFmh1</td>
<td>Describing how mental health issues have affected academic performance e.g. inability to concentrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABFmh3</td>
<td>Describing how counselling staff positively impact school performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFss7</td>
<td>Describing the importance of having access to mental health professionals during school hours e.g. nurses, social workers, CYWs, specialized teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6.2*

**School-Level Factors**

In identifying what was currently working well for them, our participants recognized a number of school-level factors that had contributed to their academic success. For example, they perceived small class sizes as contributing to their achievement by allowing more one-on-one time with the teacher. In turn, according to participants, this diminished their sense of frustration when encountering challenging work. Students also valued the alternative education model at Grove School, both because it allowed them to work at their own pace and because it offered courses geared to their current needs. When asked what they would do if they had to return to a traditional school, most students summarized it this way: “I just wouldn’t go.”

In a research study designed to better understand student disengagement and resistance to institutional discourse, Field and Olafson (1999) found that typical signs of opposition included “refusing to work, and expressing boredom” (p. 73). Educational institutions were
characteristically found to attribute such resistance to individual students’ personal attributes and character traits, rather than to features of the institutional setting itself. To blame students for their own lack of school success is to firmly locate the roots of student failure within the individual rather than in the academic environment. This lack of consideration of the role of institutional and social factors in school failure reinforces the presumption that disengaged and resistant students are inherently prone to academic failure.

Furthermore, in making students culpable for their own lack of success, educational institutions and students themselves miss important opportunities to constructively amend the role that institutional factors have played in those negative outcomes (Ferguson et al., 2005; Henriksson, 2008; Field & Olafson, 1999).

This study was designed in part to understand those lived experiences of students at risk, and to provide them with opportunities to share their stories. It is crucial that we as educators and researchers come to know “through dialogue with them both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation – the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist” (Freire, 2003, p. 95). It is only then that we can begin to comprehend how we ourselves need to change.
CONCLUSION
A model (presented in the form of a flow chart) was designed to integrate the theoretical relationships among the coded themes in this study. This integrated model serves as a framework to highlight the system-based factors that could impact student engagement and academic success.

Students in our study indicated that they want to be successful. They articulated hopes and dreams for their futures, and the belief that they cannot reach those goals without education. It is as clear to them as it is to those of us working with them that school success has a positive impact on their self-concept. When students identify the importance of feeling welcomed and respected at school, they highlight the value of being listened to and of being known. They tell us that they disengage, not because they do not care, but because they are unable to make a connection with what they are learning, how they are learning it and/or who they are learning it from. As teachers, we must pay attention, rather than assume that our role is overshadowed by the other factors in their lives.

Relationships with teachers matter. Access to meaningful and interesting curriculum and activities matters. Support in accessing that curriculum matters. Alternative approaches that allow for student choice matter. The students report feeling engaged when working on experiential activities in comfortable classrooms where teachers care and are empowered to create appropriate choices for their students. Schools and teachers can recognize these needs. While it may seem as if disengaged students are not being impacted by their schools and classrooms, they are telling us the opposite. They are eager to be welcomed into places of learning, and carry fond memories of teachers who have cared and have provided novel activities. In fact, they can describe those activities and articulate what they have learned, years after the fact. They even remember those teachers by name, and are appreciative of all that they did. These are the teachers they mention when they talk about how proud they are to be re-engaging in school.

We have discovered, and our students confirm, that it is possible to re-engage older students who have previously left school. They feel supported in smaller classrooms that give them a chance to get to know their teachers. They feel successful when they play a role in establishing schedules and have some choice in their learning. Both schools and teachers have a role to play in creating these types of environments.
Integrated Model: System-Based Learning Requirements for Students at Risk for Intellectual Disengagement and Early School Leaving (*Figure 8.1*)

### School-Based Learning Needs of Students at Risk for Intellectual Disengagement and Early School Leaving

#### Classroom Climate & Role of the Classroom Teacher:
- Calm and focused learning environment
- Emotionally safe climate where students are free to express opinions
- Physically nurturing and comfortable space e.g. access to food and drink
- Welcoming and caring teachers
- Engaged teachers who understand and value the learning process
- Teachers who are able to scaffold learning and make the school work accessible

#### Meaningful and Relevant Assignments & Activities:
- Curriculum that is relevant and emotionally engaging
- Experiential and/or hands-on learning opportunities
- Less seat work involving repetitive assignments
- Project-based/inquiry-based learning opportunities
- Student choice in assignment selection and assessment

#### Psychosocial Factors:
- Access to mental health workers in the school
- Increased teacher availability in the classroom e.g. one-on-one teacher support
- Authentic and emotionally significant learning activities
- Supportive, caring and respectful teacher/student relationships
- Opportunities for student choice and student voice

#### Programming and School-Level Requirements:
- Smaller class sizes and more one-on-one teacher time
- Timely and specific teacher feedback
- Flexibility in programming i.e. allowing students to work at own pace
- Better match between student skill level and difficulty level of assignments
- Greater variety of instructional and assessment strategies
- Teacher skill level in simplifying difficult concepts
- Differentiated instruction – to appeal to skill level and interests
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A - Interview Schedule

Can you tell me about a time when you enjoyed school?
- Where were you attending school at the time?
- What were you doing at school at the time?
- How old were you?
- What made that time so enjoyable?
- Can you think of many times like this in your school experience? Why or why not?

Do you think you have enjoyed high school more or less than elementary school?
- Why do you think you enjoyed ______________ more?
- Why do you think you enjoyed ______________ less?

Overall, would you say you have enjoyed secondary school?
- What are the things you have enjoyed?
- What are the things that have interfered with your enjoyment?

How many secondary schools have you attended?
- What did you notice these schools had in common?
- Which of these things were helpful to you?
- Which of these things were difficult for you?

How does your current classroom compare to your other secondary classrooms?
- What are the most important differences between your current classroom and other classrooms you have been in?
- What are the most important similarities between your current classroom and other classrooms you have been in?

What are the most important aspects of your current classroom?

What has caused you to leave school or stop attending in the past?
- Why are you attending school now?

What kinds of things motivate you to get out of bed in the morning to attend school?
- Once you get to school, what kinds of things motivate you to produce work while you are in the classroom?

When do you feel most engaged at school?

When do you feel successful at school?

What do you enjoy doing at school?

What is the most interesting thing you have learned at school?
- Why do you think that caught your interest?
What is the most interesting subject you have taken at school?
  Why do you think that subject was interesting to you?

What is the most interesting assignment you have completed at school?
  What interested you about that assignment?

Why did you stop attending your last school?

Have you ever been bored in high school?
  What are you doing when you are most likely to feel bored?
  How does being bored impact how you do at school?

Have you ever been so involved in something you were doing for school that you lost track of time?
  How often do you think this has happened to you during high school?
  How often do you remember it happening when you were in elementary school?
  What needs to be going on for you to get that involved in your school work?
  What can a teacher do to get you involved in your work?

Where do you think you have learned the most in your life?
  Who have you learned these things from?
  What are some of the characteristics of people that you learn from?

What has motivated you to go to school in the past?
  How have the things that motivate you changed over time?
  What motivates you to do your best work?

What are your school plans after you are finished in this classroom?
  How has being in your current classroom influenced those plans?

If you were to return to a community secondary school at this time, what do you predict would happen?
  How would this be similar to what you experienced at high school in the past?
  How would this be different from what you experienced at high school in the past?
  What would need to be in place for you to feel successful in a community high school at this time?

In the end has high school been what you hoped it would be?
  If yes, in what ways?
  If no, how had you hoped it would be different?

In your honest opinion, what do you think schools and teachers should be doing or could be doing differently to engage students?

Is there anything you’d like to say about your high school experience that you haven’t had a chance to say?
**Biographical note:**

Dr. Anne Arthur is an independent researcher/scholar and Instructional Coach in Literacy (Grades 7-12) at the Durham District School Board. Her doctoral dissertation focused on transition strategies employed by creatively-inclined female students in their first year of high school. Her ongoing research interests include: literacy development, student engagement, alternative education models, creativity and Secondary school reform.

Erin Hannah is a Facilitator for Supervised Alternative Learning Programs at the Durham District School Board. She is also a Master’s degree candidate in Peace and Conflict Studies (MPAC) – a new interdisciplinary professional program in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo. Her current research interests include: alternative education models, peacemaking and conflict resolution.