Risky Business? Understanding the Educational Experiences of Street-Involved Youth

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Child and Youth Care, Ryerson University, 2015

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis research is to better understand the experiences of street-involved youth in educational institutions. Data for this study was collected through a five-wave panel study of street-involved youth in Victoria, British Columbia (N=64). I used Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as a framework for analyzing the responses to open-ended questions regarding the participants' experience with education. At the time of first interview 89% of the participants had not continued past grade ten and their average age was 16.7 years. Salient themes throughout the analysis included not fitting in, re-engaging, and connectedness. Under not fitting in participants detailed strained relationships with peers, staff and teachers, and difficult experiences trying to engage with their education and learning that did not fulfill their natural curiosity for knowledge. The experiences of not fitting in led to a devalued view of education. Participants also spoke extensively about trying to re-engage with their education and encountering many barriers. Their experiences re-engaging highlight difficulty fitting in within the school environment, policies that prevented their full participation and continued difficulties within the school environment. Despite this, through re-engaging with mainstream schools or alternative education programs some participants were able to find spaces where they fit. Points of connection within schools including positive relationships, positive experiences, and meaningful learning opportunities worked to encourage their participation and attendance in their education. The thesis concludes with a summary of the findings, limitations, implications for practice and future research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The phrase street-involved youth refers to young people "…who lack stable residential conditions, including those who live mainly on the street or stay in homeless shelters, 'couch surfers' who temporarily share shelter with others and 'system youth' who are in and out of government care: foster homes, group care and youth shelters" (Magnuson, Jansson, Benoit, & Kennedy, 2015, p. 441-442). Many scholars have drawn attention to the fact that there is a persistent problem of street-involvement amongst youth in our Canadian society (Karabanow, Carson & Clement, 2010; Koeller, 2008). Current estimates are that street-involved youth represent 20% of the overall homeless population in Canada, with up to 6000 young people accessing the shelter system on any given night (Gaetz, 2014). In any one year, it is estimated that up to 35,000 youth access the shelter system across Canada (Thornton et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2014). The actual number may vary because not all youth who are street-involved access the formal shelter system, some are absolutely homeless sleeping in places not meant for human habitation, or are couch surfers temporarily staying with friends who have no formal place to live (Gaetz, 2014, p.7). Race, gender, non-heteronormativity, mental health and learning disabilities are often over-represented in street-involved youth populations (CAMH & CAS, 2014; Gaetz, 2010; Gaetz, 2014; Karabanow, Carson & Clement, 2010; Patrick, 2014; Springer, Lum & Roswell, 2014; Winland, 2013). There is no shortage of literature that outlines the adverse outcomes that street-involved youth face the longer they remain street-involved (Elliot, 2013; Jones, Bowen, & Ball, 2018; Rachlis et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2015).

In 2004, Gaetz brought attention to the fact that there is a scarcity of research that looks at the intersection of homeless youth experiences with education (Gaetz, 2004; Dhillon, 2011). Current research in this area points out that many young people in studies of homeless youth

often have not completed high school (Benoit, Jansson & Anderson, 2007; Kidd, Karabanow, Hughes & Frederick, 2013; Rachlis et al., 2009). There is also research looking into the protective and risk factors for school participation within this population (Greene & Winters, 2006; Hyman, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2011; Smith et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2007). There is a good understanding of the barriers that these youth face trying to participate in their education (Dhillon, 2011; Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Jones, Bowen & Ball, 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Solomon, 2013). A small portion of the research analyzes the structural factors which work to keep these students excluded from school (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Dhillon, 2011; Klodawsky et al., 2006) but there is a need for qualitative studies to help us better understand the barriers faced by street-involved youth trying to participate in their education (Solomon, 2013).

Studies of street-involved youth from Toronto and Ottawa estimate that 63% to 90% of street-involved youth have not completed high school (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2013). As a social determinate of health, education attainment has a significant effect on their overall health and wellbeing over time (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Poor quality of health and wellbeing are just some of the impacts a low level of education can have. It can also impact employment, income, low self-esteem and lessened social growth (Hankivsky, 2008; Levin, Belfield, Muenning & Rouse, 2006; Liljedah, Rae, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2013). Furthermore, upon leaving school, street-involved youth can cycle through periods of engagement and disengagement. A study of street-involved youth in British Columbia found that 68% of the youth that responded were currently attending school, and 51% planned to continue to post-secondary education (Smith, Peled, Poon, Stewart & Saewyc, 2007; Smith et al., 2015). Most research on this subject area explores the many barriers and provides insight into what is needed and what is preventing these students from being successful in school (see Dhillon, 2011;

Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Jones, Bowen & Ball, 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Solomon, 2013). Research conducted in this area demonstrates that these youth have difficulties completing their education; however, there are indicators that this group of young people want to participate in education and have goals that include future schooling. Dropout rates in Canada have been falling for years amongst the general population of young people, yet street-involved youth continue to be disproportionately represented and experience challenging and disruptive educational trajectories (Gaetz et al., 2016). Street-involved youth's experiences with education indicate structural factors that contribute to their continued exclusion from school.

This research study aims to improve our understanding of the educational experiences of street-involved youth. The study's purpose was to contribute to the research and help to deepen our understanding of the educational experiences of street-involved youth. I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis to provide the framework for "...identifying, analyzing and reporting (themes) within data" (p. 79). The data for this thesis was collected from the *Risky Business: Experiences of Street-Involved Youth* five wave panel study from 2002 to 2012 in Victoria, British Columbia (Benoit, Jansson, & Anderson, 2012; Jansson & Benoit, 2006; Jansson, et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson, Jansson, Benoit, & Kennedy, 2015). I examined the study questions that asked about participant's educational experiences while street involved to help us to better understand how they navigate educational systems. I addressed the following research questions: Why do street involved youth leave school? When and why do they start thinking about going back to school? What are the barriers/challenges to re-engaging with school? What are their opinions of formal schooling? Using thematic analysis as a research tool to answer these can "provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78).

In Chapter Two of this paper, I provided an in-depth look at the current research on street-involved youth and their experiences in education Canada. In Chapter Three, I describe the research questions this research study proposed to answer, the *Risky Business* study, participants, data, and data analysis. In Chapter Four, I present the results of this study organized under the three prominent themes: not fitting in, re-engaging and connectedness. In Chapter Five, I discuss the results and how they relate to the current literature. In Chapter Six, I conclude the paper, provide implications for practice, future research directions and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The demands of life while on the street present many barriers for young people who may want to complete their education. Research studies conducted in Toronto and Ottawa estimate that 63% to 90% of street-involved youth have not completed high school (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2013). A study of street-involved youth in British Columbia found that 68% of the youth who responded were currently attending school and 51% planned to continue to post-secondary education (Smith et al. 2007; Smith et al., 2015). While greater proportions of street-involved youth are not completing high school when compared to their housed peers, a significant portion of them are making an effort to try to further their education (Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015). There is a wealth of research that looks at the barriers these young people face while trying to get their education (Dhillon, 2011; Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Jones, Bowen & Ball, 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Solomon, 2013). Yet there is still a lack of understanding of how these young people interact with educational systems while on the street. The impacts of not obtaining an education extend well beyond not getting a job. The lower level of education that a person has the greater impact it can have on their health and well-being across their lifetime (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Broadening our understanding of the experience of street-involved youth in school can help us better support them in getting to graduation and beyond, thus also helping them to improve their life trajectories.

Canada's response to youth homeless fails to take into account the large role that schools play in the lives of homeless youth (Winland, 2013; Winland, Gaetz & Patton, 2011). There is still continued research needed to broaden our understanding of the factors that work to perpetuate this problem within the environment of schools. In this chapter, I first examine what

is known about street-involved youth and how they enter and exit the street life. Next, I examine the barriers street-involved youth face in trying to get their education and what protective and risk factors help us identify characteristics associated with completing high school or dropping out. Next, I provide an introduction to the organization of formal education in Canada with a specific focus on how education is delivered from kindergarten to grade eight in British Columbia. Then I examine the cost dropping out to better understand the potential impacts of not obtaining a high school education.

The literature search for this review was conducted by searching academic and grey literature across multiple databases using the University of Victoria's Library Summon search, Google Scholar, and Google. A combination of search terms used includes "street-involved youth", "street youth", "homeless youth", "unaccompanied homeless youth", "education", "school", "formal education", "informal education", "barriers to education", "education", and "experience" were used to identify the most relevant literature on this topic. Using different combinations of the above search terms yielded a wide breadth of literature in this area. Documents were excluded from this review if they looked at child and family homelessness or youth homelessness within a family unit.

Street-Involved Youth

There are numerous definitions of street-involved youth. The term street-involvement can apply to a variety of different social, political, and economic experiences (Dhillon, 2011). It is often used to refer to the makeshift categories or subcultures of youth who include "…hard-core street-entrenched young people, squatters, group-home kids, child welfare kids, soft-core 'Twinkies', 'in and outers', punks, runaways, throwaways, refugees and immigrants, young

single mothers and those who are homeless because their entire family is homeless" (Karabanow, Carson & Clement, 2010, p.20). "Youth" may be as young as 13 years and as old as 30 (Gaetz, 2014; Kelly & Caputo, 2007; Kidd, Karabanow, Hughes & Frederick, 2013; Magnuson et al., 2018). The definition of street-involved youth presented in the introduction chapter of this paper refers to those young people "…who lack stable residential conditions, including those who live mainly on the street or stay in homeless shelters, 'couch surfers' who temporarily share shelter with others and 'system youth' who are in and out of government care: foster homes, group care and youth shelters" (Magnuson, Jansson, Benoit, & Kennedy, 2015, p. 441-442).

Street-involved youth often turn to unstable or impoverished living situations, spend large amounts of time on the streets (still having somewhere to go at night), or living on the street full time (Kidd, 2012). Street-involved youth can be highly mobile, moving between cities or communities to meet their basic needs, access supportive services and better opportunities (Karabanow, Carson & Clement, 2010, p. 11). Youth evaluate their own safety daily and may oscillate between sleeping rough, staying in shelters, couch surfing with friends, and staying in government care (Magnuson et al., 2018). These youth often have to make decisions around making money, how to spend the money they make, finding community, and where to sleep (Magnuson et al., 2018). On the street they need money to survive and will often engage in making money through the informal economy (Everson & Barr 2009; Karabanow, 2004; O'Grady, Gaetz & Buccieri, 2011).

In a 2014 study, Gaetz found that males outnumber females on the streets 2 to 1. In certain urban centers in Canada, ethno-racial populations can be over-represented, especially when it comes to Indigenous and Black youth (Gaetz, 2014). One extensive literature review found that Indigenous youth in Vancouver account for thirty percent of the street-involved youth

population while comprising only two percent of Vancouver's total population (Patrick, 2014). In another study of homeless youth in Toronto, Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri (2010) found that one-quarter of the sample were born in another country (CAMH & CAS, 2014). Scholars have brought attention to the fact that while these populations are over-represented, there is a lack of analysis and understanding of homelessness through a racial lens (Springer, Lum & Roswell, 2014). The listed populations are not the only group over-represented in the street youth demographic. Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth make up approximately 25-40% of the population of homeless youth (Winland, 2013, p. 20).

Street-involved youth are coping with responsibilities that are more commonly associated with young people in their early 20s (Magnuson et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2006). Street-involved youth are extremely adaptable as they navigate street life. Still, as other researchers have noted, the majority of the research conducted with street-involved youth focuses on risk, highlighting substance use, sexual behaviours, victimization, and the challenges and disadvantages they face from continued street involvement (Benoit, Jansson, Hallgrimsdotter & Roth, 2008). Kirst, Frederick, & Ericksons (2011) research study with 150 street-involved youth in Toronto, Ontario found that 24% of the participants had a concurrent mental health and substance use problem. This research emphasizes that mortality rates can be up to ten times higher for street-involved youth than that of the general population, with suicide and overdose being cited as the leading causes of death (Kidd et al., 2013). Being street-involved also increases the likelihood of having interactions with the police. O'Grady, Gaetz & Buccieri (2011) found that 77.5% of street-involved youth had interactions with police, with 44% of those interactions resulting in arrests. The longer the duration of time that a young person remains street-involved, the more significant impact it has on their psychological wellbeing and overall resiliency (Clevery & Kidd, 2011).

Troubled histories and mental health, coupled with the demands of street life, often can produce negative consequences for young people who are street-involved.

Pathways to street involvement.

The population of street-involved youth in Canada is diverse, and so are their reasons for becoming involved in street life. For many young people, no single event precipitates a movement to the streets (Gaetz, 2014). Instead, it is multiple ruptures with family and community, resulting in numerous periods of leaving (Gaetz, 2014). Reasons for becoming street-involved can be broken down into three main categories: individual and relational factors, structural factors, and systems failures (Gaetz, 2014). Individual and relational factors can contribute to an unstable home life and include difficult family situations, conflict, violence, and abuse. One study found that there was the presence of multiple forms of abuse, substance use and violence in the family home and overall family instability (Karabanow, Carson, & Clement, 2010). Structural factors are the systemic and social conditions which govern the circumstances beyond the individual and their families' situation (Gaetz, 2014). Examples of structural factors include the national lack of affordable housing, discrimination against specific populations within our society, unemployment, and inadequate education (Baker Collins, 2013). The last pathway is system failures, which are failures in the systems of care and support through corrections, health care, and child protection services (Gaetz, 2014). These services often provide care and support while the youth are participating in them; however, once youth complete these services or no longer meet the eligibility criteria, they are often left out on their own.

Karabanow, Carson, and Clement (2010) state that many of the participants in their study spoke of choosing street life. Some of these youth reported that youth claim equal responsibility for their problematic family or child welfare experiences. Others said that their current living

situation, whether at home or in care, became too unbearable to stay. Lastly, some youth reported accessing the street as a "time out" to reflect on a situation with the support of other youth in similar situations. For some youth, becoming street-involved can be a temporary experience, while for others, it can be more long-term. Knowing the pathways into street-involvement helps us to better understand the nuances of this diverse population of young people. What is still unknown, is the role that education plays in contributing to the street-involvement of young people which will be discussed in the next section of this literature review.

Pathways out of street involvement.

Exiting street-life can often be a complex and lengthy process. Nevertheless, as Karabanow and Naylor note "…if street youth keep trying to get off the street, they are likely to be successful over time" (2013, p. 42). There are many factors involved with a youth's decision to exit the streets, and it is often a multilayered process. In their study of street-involved youth across Canada, Karabanow et al. (2010), found that the exiting process "…consists of layers or dimensions of various activities; layers that by no means are mutually exclusive, nor representative of a linear path" (p. 13). In layer one, "street-youth re-assess their street careers in the face of traumatic experiences, their disenchantment with street culture and/or grim boredom with street-level activities" (p. 13). In layer two, there is the courage to change, which can be heightened through increased responsibilities, such as having a significant other or getting pregnant, which means caring for someone else. This enhances their motivation and the commitment towards changing their current situation. Layer three builds upon layer two and usually involves seeking formal support to search for employment, housing, or going back to school. Layer four is when youth begin to transition away from the street, which can be a complex and challenging stage as they often have to separate themselves from street

environments, friends, and culture. Layer five involves "… restructuring of their routine in terms of employment, education, and housing shifting into thinking about future aspirations and being able to acquire some form of social assistance to support their transitioning" (p. 15). Lastly is the process of "successful exiting" (p. 15), which "…exemplifies a sense of 'being in control' and 'having direction' in their life" (p. 15). As with street-involved youth's pathways into street-involvement, then, their pathways out of street involvement are nuanced and different for each person experiencing it. During the process of exiting, it is clear that education plays a fundamental role in helping these young people to regain stability.

Educational Experiences of Street-Involved Youth

A wide variety of research underlines the struggle to complete high school and the propensity to drop out for street involved youth. Kidd, Karabanow, Hughes, and Frederick (2013), surveyed 51 formerly homeless youth, and 49.1% had not completed high school. Rachlis et al., (2009) found that youth who reported being homeless were less likely to have completed high school. In a study with street-involved girls in Victoria, BC, Benoit, Jansson, and Anderson (2007) found that only a quarter of the sample was enrolled in the regular school system. Some of the girls in the study cited economic difficulties, while others highlighted a lack of support for a learning disability as reasons for not attending regular school. A study of homelessness amongst youth in Canada found that 21% had a mental or psychological illness, and 20% had a learning disability (Rodrigue, 2016). Another study found that boys exhibited more externalizing (behavioral) concerns while girls tended to internalize anxiety (Raffaele Mendez, Dickinson, Esposito, Connolly & Bonilla, 2017).

Smith et al. (2007) found that even youth who were disconnected from school had educational aspirations beyond high school. Despite have complex lives where they may face daily challenges, an overwhelming majority were attending school, working and thriving despite their circumstances (Magnuson et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2007). For those street-involved youth who do attend school, some receive support and connection from the staff, teachers, and peers and have greater overall feelings of connection to the school. Feeling connected to school has been shown to improve the mental health and living circumstances of youth who are street-involved (Smith et al., 2015). Raffaele Mendez et al.'s, (2017) study echoes these findings, with the young people speaking about frequent school changes and how relationships with school staff could either be strained or positive. School staff were seen as "[s]aving graces" to them or, by contrast, as people who did not understand their current situation. In the same study the young people saw education as a way out of their current life circumstances, helping to motivate them to continue. Teachers can often be a source of engagement that street-involved youth need when they attend school; however, not all teachers can understand or empathize with their current situation (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2017).

A study of early school-leavers in Ontario conducted by Ferguson et al. (2005) found that young people often discussed their disengagement from school within the context of risk factors perpetuated by schools. The school policies often work to keep students out of school and made it harder from them to return.. Direct or indirect messages from staff are often given to these youth, further pushing them to view schools as an unsafe space. Other factors within schools that lead to disengagement included complicated relationships within the classroom, difficult course work, lack of support around course work, and an inability to accommodate different learning

styles. All of these factors lead to a climate within schools that does not accept them (Ferguson et al., 2005).

Risk factors.

In Hyman, Aubry and Klodawsky's (2011) study, the participation rate in education was substantially lower for Indigenous youth at 9% compared to 20% of those that did not identify as Indigenous. Male youth are at an increased likelihood of having negative school experiences, such as being held back a grade or being disciplined in school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006 as cited in Hyman at al., 2011). Furthermore, Indigenous males have higher rates of dropping out of high school than their female counterparts (Hyman et al., 2011; Greene & Winters, 2006). Smith et al. (2015) found that experiencing housing instability can cause consistent feelings of uncertainty and a lack of security, which can prevent a youth who is street-involved from full participation in their education. Specifically, youth who are couch surfing or living on the street were less likely than others not living in these situations to know what their school plans were. They found that those youth with foster care histories often were more likely to have challenges or be excluded from school. Moreover, in schools, street-involved youth tended to be a target for victimization and discrimination from their peers (Smith et al., 2015).

Protective Factors.

Some studies bring attention to the protective factors that make it more likely for a street-involved youth to be participating in school. Hyman et al., (2011) conducted a study with 82 youth who were homeless for two years between the ages of 16 and 19 years. The aim was to explore any factors that increased participation in school. Longer duration of rehousing was associated with a higher instance of being in school during the follow-up time of this research study. Youth who had a stable living situation appear to access available resources and

opportunities to create stability in their lives. Hyman and colleagues did not find that having a mentor was a predictor of educational engagement or school attendance. However, the authors highlight that the short duration of the study may not have allowed for the development of a mentoring relationship in the education context of the youth participants (Hyman et al., 2011).

A McCreary Center Society study of 681 street-involved youth in communities across British Columbia found that "80% of youth who had teachers who cared about them planned to finish high school or go to post-secondary, compared to 60% who did not feel teachers cared" (Smith et al, 2015, p. 49). The same study found that the higher rate of connectedness that a young person felt to their school, the more likely they were to rate their mental health and life circumstances as good or excellent. The authors also highlight how the youth co-researchers spoke about the importance of being connected to school while street-involved as for some youth it may be the only chance they have to connect with "caring adults and positive role models and have positive relationships with peers" (p. 49). An interesting finding from this same study found that if a street-involved youth had a pet, it increased the likelihood that they would attend school and not use substances (Smith et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2007).

Other Barriers to education.

There is a wealth of research looking at the barriers that street-involved youth face when trying to get their education. Solomon (2013) looked at barriers to education for homeless youth who had a mental health disorder or a co-existing substance use issue. The study analyzed variables in the microsystem and the mesosystem involving: victimization exposure; satisfaction with family relations; housing stability; access to care; social competence and health and social service use. Out of all the mesosystem variables tested, the only one that showed a significant relationship with academic achievement was the length of time housed in the past two years,

confirming the finding from Hyman et al.'s (2011) study. Researchers found meaningful relationships between four key variables within the microsystem. First, those who were satisfied with their family relationship had two or more points of access to the care system. Second, those who were unhappy with their family relationships experienced two or more exposures to victimization in the previous six months. Third, for youth who had experienced abuse, they had an increase in victimization exposure while on the street. Last, the more the youth has experienced victimization the more they moved, and the less time they spent housed. The study used convenience sampling, so it is difficult to generalize these findings. However, the results illuminate the need for housing stability to reduce victimization and increase academic achievement (Solomon, 2013).

Jones, Bowen, and, Ball (2018) conducted a study with youth between the ages of 18 to 24 who had involvement with child protection, homelessness, and educational difficulties before 18 and found barriers to obtaining a successful education and overall well-being. Using a life course framework, interview transcripts were used to create a visual timeline to help youth recall their experiences interacting with multiple systems and the educational challenges they experienced during that time. The young people in the study had all experienced challenges meeting educational outcomes in their schooling. Factors that contributed to this included poor grades, repeating a grade, absenteeism, dropping out, school mobility, discipline, and complicated peer relationships. The authors found that 90% of the sample experienced three or more of these challenges, with 70% experiencing five or more of these challenges. The most significant barriers were mobility, lack of trust of "the system" and feeling ultimately "on their own" (Jones et al., 2018).

In Jones et al. (2018) study foster care placements had a negative impact on educational obtainment for street-involved youth. Moves during the middle school years coincided with a rise in problems at school and high absenteeism. Second, the youth felt a lack of agency because they were not included in making appropriate decisions about their housing, education, or experiences in the child welfare system. This extends to the different placements these youth often had and how they would usually be expected to adapt to new sets of rules at each placement and an overall lack of privacy. Third, the youth highlighted a lack of trust of "the system" after repeated inconsistencies across schools and the responses from child protective services. Youth with a lack of trust in the system often do not report significant events and receive less adequate support because of it. Last, it was reported that the youth felt completely "on their own" navigating multiple systems throughout their childhood. A lack of trust in the system and a lack of adult support often made it difficult for youth to stay engaged in their education. Due to the nature of this study, only youth perspectives were accessed. Adding the perspective of service providers or other stakeholders could have produced more robust and reliable results and, the findings may not reflect the experiences of all cross system youth (Jones et al., 2018).

In a research study conducted with homeless youth who attended high school, Ferguson and Xie (2012) looked at the interaction between risk and protective factors. They found that homeless youth have higher prevalence rates of substance use than their housed peers. The most significant findings are that substance use was associated with gang membership, partner abuse, and truancy. Similar to other studies, the authors link the higher the level of adult support with the lower the level of substance use. Further, lower levels of support were found with youth with pronounced substance use and truancy. There are some significant limitations to this study

because it was collected from a survey that was collected for purposes other than those identified in the original study (Ferguson & Xie, 2012).

The "politics of caring"(p.126) as described by Dhillon (2011), was found to be a way by which the young people either rejected or embraced their education. The notion of caring or what they thought was a lack of caring was often dependent on individual teachers and could have a ripple effect through their education experience. For those young people without a proper support system the inability to cultivate relationships within the school environment can contribute to a difficult experience. Dhillon's study is one of the few that look at how the structure of schools creates an environment for social exclusion (Dhillon, 2011). In Klodawsky et al. (2006), the authors implicate governmental policies and programming as having a lack of attention to "care." Specifically, marginalized children and youth are not providing adequate support to build up their social capital.

Education in Canada

Having an education is considered the "norm" in Canada, 86.3% of Canadians hold a high school diploma or an equivalent and 50.4% have some post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2017). Attending high school in Canada is considered to be a normative task in adolescence, with this expectation being reflected in provincial legislation (Hyman et al., 2011). Children and youth are required by law to attend school until the age of 16 except in Ontario and New Brunswick whose mandate requires attendance until the age of 18 (Hyman et al., 2011). Each province or territory across Canada is responsible for overseeing education delivery through the Ministries of Education (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Education delivery varies across Canada as provincial governments are responsible for the operation and oversight of this

system. Children begin elementary school in kindergarten (if they have not attended a preschool program) when they are 4-5 years of age. Some provinces and territories have kindergarten to grade eight schools while other provinces have middle schools from grades 6- 8 after elementary school. The minimum education expected of many young people is to obtain a high school diploma or a General Education Diploma (GED) (name varies by province). High school is typically grades 9- 12 across Canada, with the majority of students starting when they are 13-14 years old and finishing when they are 17-18 years old.

Secondary Schooling in British Columbia.

According to the B.C. Graduation Program Policy Guide (2018), the requirements of the kindergarten to grade twelve education system insures that students exit secondary school as educated citizens who carry knowledge, competencies, and skills into further education, the workforce or training. B.C. prides itself on its "great" education system which is guided by evidence-driven and innovative practices, advancements in technology, and evolutions within the labor market – both locally and globally. (BC Graduation Program Policy Guide, 2018, p. 4).

The majority of young people access their secondary education through the public system in British Columbia. However, according to the B.C. Graduation Program Policy Guide (2018), this is not the only way that secondary education is delivered in the province. While there are about 1,600 public schools, there are also 350 independent schools. Independent schools are an alternative education option. These alternatives often charge tuition and are chosen for their philosophical, religious, or educational approach. There are also First Nations Schools that are funded by the government and operated by local First Nations communities in BC. Parents also have the option to home-school their children. Other pathways to education that are cited in the

report are alternative education programs that attend to students' specific needs through different instructional methods and counseling services while still providing the opportunity to graduate through the graduation program. There is also distributed learning which allows students to learn from a teacher over the internet or through a blend of some in-class instruction and some online.

The cost of leaving school

There has been a decline in drop-out rates across Canada since the early 1990s (Hankivsky, 2008). Despite the fall in drop-out rates amongst the general population, youth who are street-involved remain overrepresented in experiencing challenge and disruption in their educational trajectories (Gaetz et al., 2016). Early school-leavers may need extra time to complete their education or alternative education programs, and for others, it can be a slow, gradual process of withdrawal (Hankivsky, 2008). No matter how long it takes, obtaining a high school education or equivalent is important because it has the potential to impact health status, employment, income and many other factors in a person's life (Levin, Belfield, Muenning & Rouse, 2006). Long-term impacts from not obtaining an education extend beyond the inability to get a job. For those youth who do not earn high school diplomas, they are more likely to experience unemployment or underemployment or be at risk of poverty during their adult lives (Liljedah, Rae, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2013, p. 270). The intangible costs of not obtaining an education include lessened social growth, reduced sense of control over their life, lessened personal satisfaction, low self-esteem, and emotional disturbances (Hankivsky, 2008).

According to Mikkonen and Raphael (2010), the educational attainment of individuals has an impact on their health and well-being over time. First, education levels have been correlated with other determinants of health, including employment security, working conditions,

and level of income. For those who obtain higher levels of education, they often move up the socioeconomic ladder and have better access to societal and economic resources. Second, those with higher education have access to more training opportunities and often do not have to worry when their employment situation changes. Mikkonen and Raphael point out that having a higher education provides you with more opportunities to influence the societal factors that shape health. Last, the more education a person has, the more they will understand how their actions promote health. They can evaluate their behaviors and adopt healthier choices to improve their abilities. Federal or provincial policy also has an impact on the educational attainment of people in Canada.

Conclusion

A broad definition of street involved youth allows us to encompass the nuances of a generally under-researched and transient population of young people (Dhillon, 2011; Karabanow et al., 2010; Kidd, 2012). Black, Indigenous, and refugee youth are over-represented amongst street-involved youth populations (CAMH & CAS, 2014; Gaetz, 2010; Gaetz, 2014; Patrick, 2014; Springer, Lum & Roswell, 2014). Race is not the only defining characteristic for over-representation, as LGBTQ+ youth also comprise a significant portion of the population (Winland, 2013). These youth are also navigating other factors that include mental health problems, learning disabilities, abusive families, and involvement in child welfare systems (Karabanow et al., 2010). The groups that are overrepresented in the street-youth population have already faced many barriers to their full participation within our society. These youth are navigating these identities within the context of street life. The one factor that unites these groups

is their street-involvement. (Benoit, Jansson & Anderson, 2007; Gaetz & O'Grady 2014; O'Grady, Gaetz & Buccieri, 2011).

When discussing pathways into and out of street-involvement, youth engagement plays a significant factor on both sides. Education is often one of the only formal institutions street-involved youth continue to interact with. However, for many of the groups represented in street-youth populations, they have always had difficulty within schools. Their education histories are often marred by learning and social issues that they carry with them throughout their education. Much of what we know of street-involved youth in education looks to the barriers that they face trying to complete their education while still being street-involved (Dhillon, 2011; Fergueson & Xie, 2012; Jones, Bowen & Ball, 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Solomon, 2013). This well-researched area of the literature provides no shortage of explanations on why street-involved youth cannot complete their education. There is also some information regarding the protective factors beyond a youth's current situation that help them to remain engaged. However, fewer studies have explored street-involved youth's experience over time trying to engage with their education and the structural factors that continue to work to exclude them from it (Dhillon, 2011; Klodawsky et al., 2006).

In 2004, Gaetz brought attention to the fact that there is a lack of research that looks at the intersection of homeless youth experiences with education (Gaetz, 2004; Dhillon, 2011). From the research that has already been conducted on street-involved youth and their education, many authors make recommendations for where future research should be directed. In terms of the barriers faced by street-involved youth, Solomon (2013) recommends more qualitative research to portray the experiences of street-involved youth in education accurately and to improve future orientations. More research from the youth's perspective using first-person

accounts, experiences, and participatory action research is something that many of the authors in the literature review have highlighted as lacking (Solomon, 2013). The problem is not just the type of research that is being produced; many of the qualitative studies being conducted with this population are too small to be generalized. A consistent finding across many of the research studies is that there is an important role filled by the caring adults present in the schools with whom street-involved youth engage (Dhillon, 2011; Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015). Participatory action research is recommended to include all relevant stakeholders in the process of understanding how to mobilize these individuals within educational institutions (Dhillon, 2011; Solomon, 2013). Beyond this, these caring adults could be an asset to youth by connecting with the other youth service organizations that they may be involved in to coordinate their care (Smith et al., 2015). These research recommendations are focused on helping to mitigate the micro level barriers that may be present in a street-involved youth's life, preventing them from participating in their education.

Authors such as Aviles de Bradley, Dhillon, and Klodawsky et al. focus on the environments of schools which work to exclude specific groups of students. Looking at the intersections of street-involvement, educational access, and the young people's experiences with poverty, a more detailed explanation is needed to understand better how all of these factors interact (Dhillon, 2011). The formal curriculum can "become inextricably linked with the successes of certain students and the failures of others" (Dhillon, 2011, p.113). Street-involved youth are already placed at a disadvantage in many sectors of their lives, and continuing this educational paradigm further works to reinforce this disadvantage. Aviles de Bradley (2011) point out that several studies say that the lack of coordination with schools involved in a street-involved youth's life can often be a barrier to them engaging in the necessary services. For many

street-involved youths, schools have a powerful effect on their lives, and many studies highlight how street-involved youth do see education as necessary (Dhillon, 2011; Smith et al., 2015). Understanding why street-involved youth continue to engage with a system that places them at a disadvantage in some cases throughout their entire lives is important to examine the intersections of street-involvement and educational access.

The characteristics of the street-involved youth population are nuanced and hard to capture within a single definition as detailed many times throughout this paper. Having one of these characteristics or being from a particular community does not necessarily make youth more likely to become street-involved. Despite all the research conducted with this group, street-involved youth drop out at disproportionately higher rates and are difficult to engage in educational institutions. The one factor that seems to unite this dynamic group is the fact that they are street-involved. They have taken the responsibility of their care into their own hands, exhibiting an autonomy that many youths their age do not develop until later on in life. However, this population is still predominately framed as being deviant or lazy or not wanting to follow the rules. Their actual experiences of trying to navigate street-life while obtaining an education is important to help to change the narrative. Why do street-involved youth leave school? When do they start thinking about going back to school? What are the barriers they face when trying to reengage in school? What are their opinions of formal education? This research study looks to answer these questions through the analysis of longitudinal interviews conducted with street-involved youth. Despite difficult educational experiences, the research stresses that these young people value and seek out educational opportunities. There is a lack of good quality qualitative research studies looking at the education experiences of street-involved youth , the barriers that

they face and what works to draw them into their education. In the next chapter, I present the methods used in the research study which looks to fill this gap in the research.

Chapter 3: Study and Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the research methodology, the research questions that guided the inquiry and the approach employed to analyze the data. As noted above, street-involved youth are a unique subset of the youth population who often navigate adult responsibilities while coping with the demands of street life. Prior research in this area has explored the consequences of youth dropping out to themselves and society, but there are also studies showing they remain interested in education (Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015). How street-involved youth experience and engage with education over time needs more exploration. In this study I address this with the following research questions:

1. What can we learn from the educational experiences of street involved youth?
    a. Why do they leave school?
    b. When and why do they start thinking about going back to school?
    c. What were the barriers/challenges to re-engaging with school?
    d. What are their opinions/attitudes about formal education?

In this chapter, I outline the study, specifically how the data was collected and the participants recruited, the questions asked, ethical considerations and the data analysis process.

The Risky Business Study

The data for this research is from interviews and surveys from a panel study, *Risky Business*, composed of five waves of data collection (Benoit, Jansson, & Anderson, 2012; Jansson & Benoit, 2006; Jansson et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson, Jansson, Benoit, & Kennedy, 2015). The purpose of the *Risky Business* study was to understand the impact of

street life on the health and well-being of a diverse sample of street involved youth in Victoria, British Columbia (Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson, et al., 2017; Benoit, et al., 2008). Victoria is a middle size Canadian city and the capital of British Columbia which is located on Vancouver Island, between two larger cities of Vancouver and Seattle. In all three west coast cities a prominent social concern is the street-involved youth population (Benoit et al., 2012).

Street-involved youth are defined as youth living in unstable residential conditions either living on the street, accessing shelters, couch surfing and those who are in and out of government care (Magnuson, et al., 2018). The youth participants in this study were interviewed between 2002 and 2012 in Victoria, British Columbia. To be eligible for this study the participants had to be between the ages of 14 – 18 years of age at first contact with loose or no attachment to family or school, have lived on the street part or full time in the past month and be earning part or all of their income from street activities (Kennedy et al., 2017). A portion of this sample of youth were recruited using "respondent-driven sampling" (Heckathorn, 1997). Thus the youth who participated in the study were given cards to give out to their peers with information about the study. If the young people who handed out the cards recruited peers to participate, they were given ten dollars. Other youth were recruited through contacts with the British Columbia Ministry of Health Services and through advertising that was distributed to front line services such as the Victoria Youth Clinic, a community-based resource that plays an important role in these young people's lives (Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson et al., 2017).

Participants

The first wave of the study involved 189 youth participants between the ages of 14 – 18. At time of the first interview, the average age of the participant was 16.5 years (Magnuson et al.,

2017). Over half of the participants identified as female and almost half had previous experience with being in government care (Magnuson et al., 2017). For this research study I focused on the 64 participants who participated in all five waves of data collection. Data were collected from this sample at regular intervals, beginning in 2002 until 2012. Of these 64 youth, 22 identified as Aboriginal and 38 as female. The mean age of this longitudinal sub-sample at the time of first interview being 16.7 years. One-half had experience in foster care and eight of those had experience in permanent care.

Data Collection

During each wave the participants completed an interview administered questionnaire that included open and closed-ended questions. Questions asked covered a wide variety of topics including substance use, mental and physical health, childhood experiences and education experiences (Kennedy, 2013; Kennedy et al. 2017). Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length. Interviews were transcribed by research assistants. All participants consented prior to completing the interviews with verbal informed consent provided prior to starting.

During an initial read through of the participant responses in this study, I began to familiarize myself with the data while identifying questions that solicit the participant's views, experiences or opinions about education. The questions selected were asked in waves one, two, three and four and are organized here under each research question.

1. Why do they leave school?
    - In Wave one of the study, participants were asked: "What was school like for you?"
        - Probes used to solicit more information include: Were there subjects that you liked? What subjects were you good at? Reflect on your relationships with

your teachers over the years. Talk about a teacher and what stood out about him/her?

2. When and why did they start thinking about going back to school?
3. What were the barriers/challenges to re-engaging with school?
    - To respond to sub research question number two and three I used the same questions that are outlined below.
    - In the second and third wave of the study the participants were asked: I would like to learn next when was the last time you went to school?
        - If the participant responded yes, the interviewer used probing questions to solicit more information.
            - Probes used: What was it like for you? What were some of the positive points? What were some of the challenges? Were there subjects that you liked? What subjects were you good at? Reflect on your relationship with your teachers. Talk about your favorite teacher and what stood out about him/her?
        - If the participant answered no, the interviewer used probing questions to solicit more information.
            - Probes used: did you ever think about going back to school? Do you think there was any point in going to school? Is there anything that would had to change for you to go to school?
4. What are their opinions about formal education?
    - In the fourth wave of the study the participants were asked for their views of formal education.

- Probes used: Did you think getting an education was important for young people? Was learning important to you? Did you imagine yourself going back to school or continuing with school?
    - If the participant responded yes to the last question, the interviewer would probe further by asking what needed to be in place for them to continue on with their formal education.
    - If the participant responded no, the interviewer would probe by asking are there particular skills that they would have liked to have learned?

Ethical Considerations

This study is using secondary data. The data that I analyzed for this thesis was previously transcribed from audio tapes by a research assistant and stored on the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research (CISUR) secure server. Before I accessed the transcripts the data was anonymized and stripped of all identifiers by research assistants and the principal investigator. I only accessed the data through CISUR approved software and technology.

Data Analysis

The analysis process began by accessing the transcripts for the 64 participants in this study for an initial read through. During this step I familiarized myself with the data while identifying the questions that solicit participant's views, experiences or opinions about education. New transcripts were created for the participants containing only their answers to the questions selected for this research. For the survey data, an SPSS file was created containing

only the questions selected and the responses from the 64 participants. These descriptive findings are presented in Chapter 4 Results.

I loaded the relevant transcripts into NVIVO 12 qualitative analysis software for thematic analysis. I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006), method of Thematic Analysis (TA) as a framework "…for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). The analysis presented by Braun and Clarke follows a non-linear process which involves getting familiar with the data, generating an initial coding structure, looking for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. First, I read through the transcripts (containing only education questions) noting any patterns in the data. I then loaded the transcripts into NVIVO 12 software. I auto coded the transcripts so that the participants' responses to each of the questions were grouped together in a more readable format. I then applied my initial coding structure. Once, a coding structure had been established and themes were starting to be connected, my primary supervisor and a research assistant with CISUR independently coded a select number of transcripts. The group of us then met to discuss our interpretations of the data, compare codes and identify themes (Kennedy, 2013). Modifications were made to the framework and the language used to label the codes. Subsequent meetings were held to make meaning of the codes and identify themes. I then applied the agreed upon coding structure to the entire data set to form coherent themes that are reflective of street-involved youth's experiences with education.

Summary

This chapter describes the methods used in the research process for this thesis. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data collected from a five wave panel study of street-

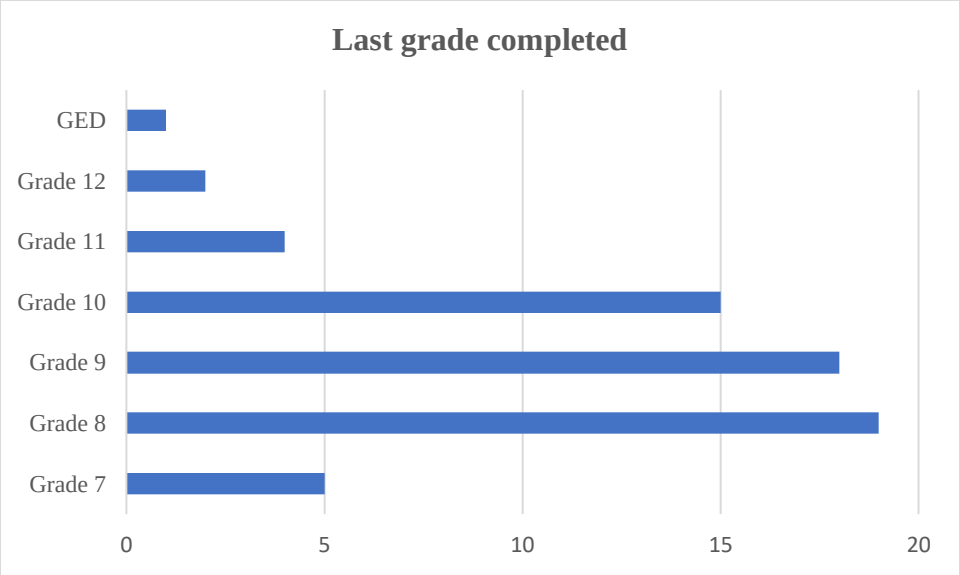
involved youth in Victoria British Columbia. The participants in the study are 64 street-involved youth who were followed through all five waves. The qualitative data consists of questions asked during interviews that pertained to the education experiences of these young people while street involved. Through the methods employed in this research study, insight into the lived experience of how street-involved youth interacted with their education is provided. In the next chapter, the descriptive results and the qualitative findings are presented.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I begin by presenting the descriptive results of the study including the gender, age, culture and last grade completed of the participants. In the second half of this chapter an overview of the qualitative findings is provided. I then present the significant findings from the three core themes of not fitting in, re-engaging and connectedness.

Descriptive Results

Table 1. Last grade completed for n=64 street-involved youth in Victoria, BC.



The street-involved youth in this study are a heterogenous group. At the first interview over half of the participants (58%) were female with 42% being male. The average age was 16.7 years. Nine percent of the youth reported that they were of visible minority status. Thirty-three percent of the youth reported that they were Indigenous. Close to half of the sample (48%), had experience with government care. Table 1 presents the last grade completed as reported during the first interview. The mean for the last grade completed was grade nine. At the time of the first interview 89% of the participants had a grade 10 education or lower. Nine percent of the

participants were in grade 11 or above. One participant was completing their General Education Diploma (GED).

Qualitative Findings

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted to answer the following research questions.

1. What can we learn from the educational experiences of street involved youth?
    e. Why do they leave school?
    f. When and why do they start thinking about going back to school?
    g. What were the barriers/challenges to re-engaging with school?
    h. What are their opinions/attitudes about formal education?

Three core themes were identified in the data: not fitting in, re-engaging and connectedness. The participants discussed their experiences being in school, after they left and how they were trying to get back in. For some of the participants their problems with education began long before they became street involved, contributing to their street-involvement. School never quite fit for them, but they continue to try and engage with the system because they see education as providing better opportunities. Many of the participants detailed their many attempts to get back into their schooling. A significant portion of the sample had plans to go back to school or to continue on to post-secondary. Unfortunately for some, the barriers proved to be too substantial for them to continue. Many of the participants described personal barriers they experienced, but also challenges with policies, finances and their living situation. The last theme is connectedness. Throughout the many experiences these youth had within the school system were points of

connection with teachers, staff or their peers, positive experiences and learning in subjects that they were passionate about.

A. NOT FITTING IN

Many stories were about youth who just did not fit within the structure of the educational system. The theme of not fitting in permeates the descriptions of the participants' accounts of their school experiences, the strained relationships they have within school, the learning they actually find value in and lastly their view of the education system as a whole. The participants spoke about strained relationships with peers, staff and teachers throughout their time in school. They also detailed experiences of the problems they had, trying to fit in and situations that made it difficult to fully participate in education.

Experience.

Many participants spoke about experiences they had within schools that had shaped the way they viewed school. For some participants these problems were always present and by the time they reached high school, those problems escalated. One participant describes their experience:

> R: Always had problems
>
> I: Always had problems? What do the problems relate to for you do you think?
>
> R: Um, back in middle school it was more of teasing and all that, teachers were pretty good until I hit high school and teachers became more of assholes […] I always had problems like doing my work and stuff and not having someone explain it clearly enough to me, without using all these big words that even, you know, I don't understand.

A significant factor for this participant in leaving school is the strained relationships that continued to become more difficult the older they got. These difficult relationships got in the way of getting the support they needed around the school work and meant that they experienced not getting help that was adequate enough to help them complete that work.

For many of the participants it was not just one bad experience at one school. They spoke about how making repeated attempts at multiple schools. One participant describes their experience:

> I've tried going to [name of school] when it was a high school, but that didn't work out, the principal is, I don't know, how I was doing my work, the fact that I'd be like ten minutes late for a class and, he would give me detention and [name of school], they like, the principal was great at [name of school], only the fact is, is that after a month or two we had, the principal from [name of school] come to [name of school], so I tried getting into sports and staying away from him but then when I was doing good in my rugby, he pulled me out cause my grades weren't high enough and I tried going to [name of school], but [name of school]'s a little more strict than [name of school] is, like I'd be less than, less or a little bit over five minutes late and they wouldn't let me into class or they'd have me wandering the halls and then principal would come and then I'd get in more trouble and principal wasn't liking me, actually at [name of school], my first day there, ah they had ah pulled me into the office and they wanted to arrest me cause they thought that I called 911, and so meeting the principal on the first day didn't get, get off to a good start.

For this participant, the policies in place within schools (i.e. schedules or grade requirements to participate in sports) prevented their full participation within schools. Making the attempt to

move through many schools and participate in extra-curricular activities demonstrates that this participant was trying, but continued to hit barriers.

Being different in high-schools already presents its own challenges when trying to connect with others. For example, the policy at one school looked to govern how this participant dressed and expressed themselves within a school setting.

> When I was I'd say about two, three years ago I started being more alternative, I had just a need to not be like everybody and I wanted, I didn't want to be so, I felt so plastic, like really fake, I was just like sheep, like … just doing the same thing and I started dressing more alternatively and doing drugs and I was, I got in a lot of fights with my teachers and my principal really hated me […] I like to express how I'm feeling in how I present myself and I was wearing like just tons of make-up, like I was wearing like black and I got, I was threatened to be kicked out if I didn't leave and all this stuff and then I started failing, I started, my grades just, then I was out of school for months probably […]

This participant spoke about wanting to express themselves through their clothing and being prevented from doing so. As well, the rise in alternative dress coincided with a rise in drug use cited by the participant. In the end, the experience this student encountered within their school only worked to push them farther away from a place that could have provided support.

Other students spoke about how their experiences being non-heteronormative led to them being outed to the school communities and eventually compromising their safety within the school setting. One participant describes their experience:

> I was outed about being gay by my friend who I thought could keep a secret but didn't and my school wasn't a very accepting school so my school, like I'm always having to watch where I am and what I'm doing because I always fear of getting beat up, I mean,

> like some days you know I just really feel like I want to beat someone up because they're being assholes and they're always being assholes and then other days I just take it passively or whatever and just, you know, but it, it, school hasn't been fun for me at all and so I'm trying to transfer to [name of school] for next year.

This unease continued after transferring to another school.

An interesting finding presented by many of the participants was experiencing difficulties with the transition from middle school to high school. "I used to be really good in school like – up until grade eight. And then in grade nine like is when I started to hang out on the streets and getting moved into foster care and all that kind of stuff […] And then... I just kind of dropped." With high school comes increased independence. Students are responsible for navigating the hallways, getting to different classes throughout the day, avoiding distractions from peers or temptation to skip class and being prepared for classes.

Strained Relationships.

A core component of the theme of not fitting is that participants often cited spoke about their relationships as strained. The participants spoke of strained relationships with their teachers, staff and peers, which interfered with their participation in school.

Teachers.

For some the participants, strained relationships with their teachers existed throughout their time in school. **"**I don't get along with teachers at all. Grade seven I got like suspended from school for not doing my homework. In grade eight I got suspended from school for almost beating up some girl. Teachers just always kicked me out of class and stuff." The participant detailed experiences where teachers were the source of a suspension for not completing their homework, further preventing them from participating in their schooling. The school work that is

missed during a suspension was hard to catch up on upon returning. The participant also described how they became aggressive in school and schools often have zero-tolerance policies for violence.

Other participants cited the authority that teachers have within schools as the reasons why their relationships with them are strained. “I was really bad to my teachers ‘cause I don’t like the whole authority thing, like people telling me what to do, I’ve never really gone for that, so me and teachers haven’t really got along.” The authority that teachers have also extends to what the students they are expected to learn while in their classes. “Well basically what I don’t like is a teacher always ragging on me, get it done by now, so ya I like the whole flexibility thing, you know, so then I have a chance to get it, all of it done at once for one subject or just little chunks, it doesn’t matter, I like having, you know, my own freedom to choose what I’d like to do.” The curriculum and classroom expectations are often strictly enforced by teachers.

Another participant noted that the teacher in one of his classes often appeared to be unprepared for lessons, which the participant experienced as making it difficult for them to learn. “He just has to like look up everything. You know? Like he doesn’t even know- like we’ll ask him a question about the work that we’re doing and he doesn’t even know. He’s like, ‘Oh.’” For this participant, the teacher not being able to answer questions on the subject matter made it difficult to understand why the teacher was teaching this particular class. While other participants highlighted that they sought support from their teachers on their coursework, but did not feel that the support was adequate while other participants wanted to be more independent in their learning process. As one participant said, “yeah they try to help me but sometimes I don’t like being helped, I like helping other people.” The participants in the study all have different

learning styles and for some of the participants they did not feel that their teachers adequately supported them in the classroom.

Within classrooms, some participants took issue with the fact that they experienced some of their teachers playing favorites as they found this made it difficult for them to participate. In this participants experience they found:

> He's the kind of teacher that plays favorites. If he likes you, he'll pass you on everything, and he'll be a lot more lenient on marks that he could either give you or not give you. He'll like, you know, if you mess up, he'll give you like an extra week to finish a project but if he doesn't like you, then you're basically on your own […] Yeah. I said I wasn't interested in the subject matter, I was interested in being in the class anymore, so I just left.

For some of the participants, their negative experiences with teachers precipitated a move out of certain classes or schools.

Staff.

There were not many participants who described difficult relationships with staff, however, when they did it was with the principal. One participant said: "There's just some of those principals that really don't like me." No reason or explanation for the dislike were given; but the perception of being dislike was noted. Another participant described feeling that the vice-principal blamed a lot on them when they were at that school:

> I: so what does that mean? Does it mean she's, strict or-
>
> R: yeah, just, blames a lot on me.

The participant does not describe what they are blamed for or if their behavior within the school warranted blame, nevertheless they felt that they were a target when anything bad would happen within the school.

Peers.

Difficult relationships with peers were cited as a reason why youth had difficulties fitting within in schools. For some participants, peer issues were experienced throughout their school histories. “I remember that I had a really bad temper in, like from kindergarten to like grade seven or something, I was always hitting people, like someone would call me a name, I would turn around and hit them and then I would be suspended…” The difficulties for this participant began in kindergarten and continued to escalate as they got older. Many of the participants described being bullied or teased by their peers throughout their schooling.

Other participants spoke of a long history of being bullied that lead to emotional outbursts. For one participant this led to them not being allowed to return to school:

> I failed grade seven and that’s when all the bullies started bullying on me and then I went up to grade nine and they were still bugging me and so I said, OK, I switched schools, it’s not for bad kids but for kids that have problems in the regular school. I went there for a bit and I got kicked out of there cause I was a little short tempered on that day and there was this guy bugging me and he said a couple bad things and then they kicked me out and said I couldn’t go back to that school.

Tired of being on the receiving end of the bullying, this participant switched the roles and suffered the consequences.

The early school experiences of difficulties with peers and within classrooms ultimately culminated to one of the participants leaving when they felt they had the choice.

> Well when I was young I was going to school, when I enter secondary school, well like people starting making up stuff about me and like making fun of me and I had my whole classroom on my back, so it was really hard to, to be focused on my work because I had like thirty people in my class that were just like making fun of me the whole time, the whole year and then it started to crash, slowly crash down, I went in a special class and it crashed down and then I went to adult school and it was all by myself and it was going good at the beginning, and then like my court stuff interfered and I just left.

With each recurrent negative peer experience within the classroom this participant's ties to the education institution weakened. By the time the participant switched to a smaller, adult-oriented classroom their strained relationships with their peers had created an intolerable school environment

Learning.

Regardless of the participants' current or past experience with their education, many of them spoke about how learning was important to them. The participants spoke about how they wanted to be active participants in their learning process but asserting their learning needs was not accepted within schools. "I'm one of those people that if they're doing something I don't like or teaching some way that I don't like I'll voice my opinion, very strongly, so I usually got in trouble for that." For this participant, they believed that being an active part of the learning process was not encouraged. Another participant spoke about having difficult relationships with teachers over the speed of the curriculum delivery. "I can't stand curriculum speed. I am a smart student when I am motivated to do school work."

One participant spoke about how learning in schools just did not work for them: "It's just-writing down stuff that you might use in the future but it's just hard-you learn more stuff just

by living on the streets than you would learn like in school." When suggesting what could be changed, one participant recommended: "A little less note taking, a little more verbal explanations and you know, making sure instead of just throwing on a movie or just having a board full of notes, actually explaining and make sure that everyone understands." In the experience of the participant engagement with the formal curriculum was difficult to do without the concepts being explained in ways that work for them. Many of the participants spoke about how they had learning disabilities, which made it hard for them in classrooms. They often spoke about how feeling that they had not received the help they needed to understand and complete their school work.

The participants saw the value in learning foundational skills like reading, writing and basic math but also spoke about believing that these skills do not prepare people to live life. As one participant stated:

> To tell you the honest truth education doesn't really matter – well it does, like you know I mean you need to know the essentials like reading, writing, you know all the skills of typing or whatever right that's, that's easy to learn on your own but you don't learn as much as you could in school than you would not going to school, because you need life experiences right and you don't get life experiences and the proper life experiences to make your brain expand to a lot more to life when you're like yeah, you can, but you'll be like fifty when you expand right, you know what I mean? It's actually better for, the, the youth to actually, well not necessarily go 'round and kind of learn it on their own 'cause they do need they do need boundaries and stuff right? But no, I've learnt way more out of school than I have in school, both counselling, drug addiction. You know, tons of stuff.

This participant seemed to see value in school subject based learning while also believing that what they learned from their street-based life experiences was more expansive and beneficial to their immediate needs and to their future. The overall emphasis in the above quote seems to be that the learning gained from life experience matters more than what can be gained from formal learning.

Some participants preferred the self-taught route for the skills they are interested in learning or the direction they want to take with their future. “Everything I know about like technology is self-taught, and is usually updated, I usually like to keep up with everything. ‘Cause if you were to spend money, ten, twenty thousand dollars every year to update with computer stuff, that’d be a waste of money.” This participant continued learning by keeping up with computer technology as a way to save money on upgrading. Another participant spoke about how being a part of a bookstore provided them with the opportunity to learn history that they felt they couldn’t learn in school.

> I mean, the academics are just as easy to learn outside of school. I learned more history being a part of a bookstore for a year than I have probably all my life in school. And it’s not nearly so slanted. But, the skills I want to learn- I’ve been learning how to play the guitar for a year, and I really enjoy that. I would want to learn more music skills, maybe trade skills, and I took a trades program in arc metal course in school, and I liked those. Yeah, skills like welding I want to learn more about.

When asked if there are any skills that they want to learn, the participants had no shortage of answers happily discussing their passion in certain subject areas. These answers, like those of the participants above were linked to future career directions which involved more schooling.

The participants also talked about feeling that the environment within schools does not work for every student who is required to participate in them. One participant talked about their passion for learning and the kinds of learning environments that they experienced as stifling and as supportive.

> I find like I'm really repelled from learning when I'm in a classroom environment. Like I love learning on my own, and I love reading, and I hate classroom environments and I can't pay attention. And, like my last year of school was entirely me just drawing pictures and throwing them at my friends and stuff like that. I did not learn a single thing, other than my English class, which was- there was no curriculum because it was honors English, so the teacher just kind of let us do whatever and she's like "This is the work" and I learned tons from that. But, when everybody was like sat down- in the honors English program the teacher had taught at universities. Like, she loved English and she would like, teach it to us because she enjoyed it and because we enjoyed it. And she would teach it how it worked for us, not, like, how the curriculum said to teach it. And, I learned really easily there and I really enjoyed it. Yeah, like the science and the math where it's just like sitting down and the teacher will draw pictures and tell you ridiculous like, facts that you don't care about. So like the science was kind of interesting because I like science, but, I also just like couldn't focus sitting there. Especially when you're sitting there surrounded by your friends and everyone's kind of hypnotized by their paper. So that just doesn't work for me.

For this participant a focus on shared teacher-student enjoyment of learning worked as did the teacher's willingness to adapt the curriculum to foster the learning for each student. So while this participant often found classroom settings as presenting many distractions, interesting subject

matter and curriculum delivery seemed to help engage this participant to move beyond these distractions.

Views of Education.

The participants' personal experiences in school contributed to their overall view of the education system. Experiences of not fitting in made their views about schools more negative. This is despite the fact that many of the participants recognized the importance that a high school education plays into getting a job to support themselves.

> Well, without a school, without education, I'm not going to get a very good job. And school is something you need. And that is why I was taking it. And being-just doing nothing all day, every day, gets really depressing and really boring and you're going to get fat and lazy. So, that's why I want to go back to school. But school's really hard for me. It's always been hard. I don't know why.

This participant's schooling experience has always been difficult, yet they know that going to school provides not only something to do during the day but better opportunities. While the majority saw the importance of getting an education, they also spoke about not believing that this has to be done when you are young. One participant noted that: "Well, I do, but like…you don't have to be a young person to get an education. You can do it when you're thirty years old, so when – now you can only be a kid once. So, you might as well just be a kid while you want, and then when you're twenty or whatever, you can go back to school then."

Other participants reflected on the type of education that they wanted to receive. For example, one participant spoke about how she was able to choose the kind of educational approach that she wanted to engage in but also spoke about how there are others who may just want to be free. As one participant describes:

> It depends what kind of life you want to live, it all depends on where you want to be. Some form of education is really good, I'm in this program, which teaches me all about permaculture and agriculture, and it's kind of like school but it's not really, I'm still getting paid for it, and these are the things that I want to learn. It's important that you get schooling so that you get a job, but some people just want to live free and, go travelling without any money, they don't really care about that kind of thing, and, so yeah, it's like if you wanna learn you can but I don't like the way that you have to pay for learning, all that kind of stuff. Or like, um, go through this like, boxed in formal school, like I know some people that are just like, they go to high school, and they finish high school but they're just like so stupid when it comes to the rest of the world, and what's going on, and, not stupid, sorry, ignorant. And they just become ignorant to what is going on in reality, and I guess in a way it's like choosing whether or not to open Pandora's Box, and once you opened it, I've, figure that most people become bitter and jaded. [Laughs] But it's kind of like a good kind of crazy in a way, it's like, you recognize what's going on, and you recognize the way that you want to live your life, and how you want to be happy.

When considering her peers, this participant seems to be suggesting that whether formal education fits for them or not at this time in their life these young people still have a desire to learn. It's just that some people may want to learn through life rather than through attending a formal education institution.

Other participants spoke directly about how formal schooling would never be relevant to their lives or what they want to do. "School is not really important to me and the things they teach isn't really totally relevant to my life, but if you want to- I don't know- if you want to live the ideal life like grow up and have a car and a home and live in a cubical then you probably

want your high school education." Another participant echoed this critique of the formal school organization:

> Largely, like the assumed roles of students and teachers; the fact that it's for profit. So that teachers exist as teachers for a job. I don't think that really makes sense, it's very impersonal. And yeah, I don't think that's what learning's about, is like sitting in a classroom and having someone decide what you need to know to leave and just telling it to you. I'm part of a bookstore called [bookstore] and it's collectively run. And they run a free school, which is just like a series of workshops that people can learn from, which are kind of like everything. Like some of them are art workshops, some of them are like how to brew your own root beer workshops, it's like everything you could possibly learn, including academics; there's like history courses and that sort of thing that are going on, and I think that's the way to do it. You show up if you're interested in the topics and it's entirely like, by donation. And the people putting on the workshops aren't making any money. And the bookstore is also not for profit, I think that's a reasonable way to learn. Like, it's not that hard to set up.

Other participants offered critiques of the structure of schools and how the structure excludes certain students while elevating others. Not fitting in for these students either occurred throughout their school history or became more pronounced when they became street involved. Experiences within classrooms, policies governing their behavior, and homophobia contributed to their difficulties in schools. Participants spoke about how they would have conflict with their teachers, while being targeted by their peers and being expected to dress and act a certain way. Relationships within schools were strained when it came to teachers, staff and their peers. The participants spoke about how they often felt unsupported with their learning in the classroom

because of not getting help from teachers, being blamed by staff for things that happened within the school and because of experiencing years of bullying by their classmates. Nevertheless, the participants expressed a passion for learning and for knowing about things that could be learned from and be useful to everyday life on the street. The participants also spoke about targeting their learning specifically to their interests and future careers and despite not fitting in, many of the participants still noted the importance of getting an education. With that, some participants expressed the wish for other options for those for whom the formal education system does not work.

B. RE-ENGAGING

Through waves two and three of the study the majority of the participants were either considering returning to school, in the process of going back or had already returned to school. Thinking about returning to school for many of the participants was connected to considering the improvement obtaining an education could make in their lives. Participants spoke about returning to a regular high school, while others explored their options of distance and alternative education, and a small portion of the sample spoke about how their experiences were so difficult they could never return. Going to school while being street-involved is a unique experience that differentiates these youth from their peers.

Thinking of Returning.

Many of the participants spoke about how they wanted to return to school and the possible impact that would have on their lives in the long term. When asked if they would be returning one participant said:

> Oh I do. Like, my idea of feeling normal 'cause I mean like people say, "What is normal?" You know, I believe that I want happiness and I want to feel normal and you know, just the vision of like a year or two down the road, if I actually try hard at doing positive things that I want- like I want my grade twelve, I want to have a job at Thrifty Foods or you know, Starbucks or whatever, working part time or full time and just kind of like paying my rent and you know, that's my idea of more confidence in my life to do more normal things.

Normal life expectations for this participant involves having a steady job and being able to support themselves. With this stability in their lives, the participant can see the happiness that can come from 'normal.' The participant also considered both the benefits and the drawbacks of what returning to school would look like for them.

> But I know that the lifestyle I'm living, it's kind of like questioning everything because if I were- then I would miss out if I was doing work all the time and school and I'd miss out on hanging out with my friends. And then I would miss them and I would feel like they miss me, and it's kind of almost like a family.

The drawbacks of not being able to hang out with friends because of these responsibilities made it difficult for this participant to think about returning to school.

The type of school that the participants would be returning to was also very important to the process of returning. The majority of participants did not reengage with mainstream school, but instead, chose to return to alternative education programs. As one participant outlined:

> R: I'm gonna go back and try and finish my grade twelve actually.
>
> I: You're gonna go back, try to finish grade twelve?
>
> R: Yeah.

I: Do you think that – are you gonna try to go regular school or alternative program or what are you ?

R: Alternative?

I: Yeah?

R: Yeah. There's no way in hell I can go back to regular school.

I: No? So what is it about the alternative program that – why would you - ? What's different from the main, main school that -?

R: It's easier and there's less people.

As the participant discussed, returning to an alternative program was the best option for them because of the structure. Alternative schools have a more laid-back atmosphere and smaller class sizes when compared to mainstream schools. One participant spoke about how the flexibility of their alternative education program allowed them some freedom. "Yeah. I never really left school. [laughs] I've been kind of-I've had my door in the whole time. I just go-it's like an alternative program, so if I go through periods of time where I'm like, 'Okay, I need to make some money,' you know kind of thing, right." When at times, the financial demands of their life took precedence over their education, they still had the chance to keep going back and continuing despite periods of disengagement.

For a good number of the participants their experience with education was so difficult they spoke about never wanting to return. One participant details Victoria as being a difficult city to go to school in. "I've been to three schools since I've been to Victoria and they haven't really worked out for me, so." Ultimately, this made it difficult for this participant to find the motivation to return to school. For other participants, since the effect of getting a high school education was so far off, they did not see the value of returning right now. "I've talked to some

old teachers of mine. I went to my school the other day just to hang out with a couple friends and I saw a couple old teachers and I've- I might think about it, but if I do go back to school, I know I'm going to be an adult by the time I wanna graduate. So it's not really on my mind for the time being." For this participant their old teachers were a draw for them to return, although not strong enough one. It seemed that for this participant, the lack of immediate tangible results and the drawn-out nature of the schooling process made it difficult to maintain focus on the end goal a high school diploma.

Experience Returning.

Returning to school brought its own set of unique experiences for the participants. For many, navigating returning while being street involved was a difficult task. Some participants encountered resistance within the administration to their potential presence. "They almost won't accept me because of my background and stuff like that. Because I've been to an alternative school and the reasons why I got kicked out of my school and stuff like that." In order to be able to attend school they had to follow some strict guidelines "They put me on a month probation for school so I can't leave the property, the teacher has to always be there with me." Meeting these requirements to attend the school can be a difficult especially for students that are used to taking care of themselves. Once in programs, some participants talked about finding the right school environment for their needs. Finding the right school or program was not easy:

> I went to [Name of school], at first and, I was really like out of place and stuff, it was not, hanging out with normal kids obviously. So it was weird, and, uncomfortable and I felt really insecure. But, then, I transferred schools to [Name of school], and it was kind of weird, but, it's a lot more easy going of an environment and I, kind of, eased back into things, it worked out.

Other participants talked about finding out that there was an age restriction for attending their current school. They were too old to continue their schooling at their current institution. One participant discusses their experience:

> Well if they didn't have the age limit on high school […] Like the "once you turn nineteen you can't enroll in high school" 'cause… I can finish the – I was supposed to graduate last year but I was several credits short. So I had to come back and do a full year this year and then I failed two classes last term 'cause I got sick. And now because of my birthday I won't be able to come back and make up the two classes to graduate.

The policy is preventing this participant from completing the two credits needed to graduate. They have the option of going to an alternative program to complete those credits. However, as the participant says: "I don't get to do… the grad ceremony with all my friends or the dinner dance or anything. Just because of two classes [laughs a bit]. And the age limit. [Laughs a bit]. […]Yep, it really sucks because… I – I was going to be the last person in the family to graduate from Vic High." Being only two credits away from graduation and not being able to complete those at the same high school you started at is very difficult. For this participant it is discouraging to miss out on the opportunity to graduate with their friends and their class. They still talk about going on to complete those two credits but feel like it is not the same as if they had been allowed to continue.

Many of the participants detailed how their return to school was different from their original experience. One participant spoke with pride about how they were able to return:

> I feel good like just knowing that, you know, it was my decision to go back to school, you know, like when I first was living on the streets and ran away from my family, I'm like, oh I don't want to go to school, blah blah blah and all this other shit, and now it's

> like I devote myself to school and I make sure I go every day and make sure I sit down and do my work because I need my schooling, to get by in life I'll need to at least graduate high school.

Setting aside the time to complete the required schoolwork was tedious but they saw how it will pay off when they graduate high school. One participant spoke about how they were able to incorporate their street experiences into their coursework.

> I was, like, one year older and it was all, [in a shocked voice] "You were on the street? Oh my god." [laughs] "Wow." […] I had to do essays and stuff, and I used to do essays on homelessness and everything […] It was like, "You wouldn't even read stuff like that in a book, wow!" That's what my English teacher said, right? As long as I keep up with my work, right?

This participant's school work was positively impacted by the fact that they were street involved. They were able to translate their experience into academic learning to satisfy the course requirements.

Other participants spoke about finding their place through alternative programs. Many students cited the large, noisy classrooms as being a barrier to their learning. In alternative programs the environment is different and there are usually fewer students per class.

> My school's pretty good, like I like it because there's not a lot of kids there, it's mainly just two little rooms and a big room with students working and it's better for me because there's not as many students which means there's not as much of an audience, and I would tend to see it as show off and be cocky in class and I'm the one who gets the attention, and lately I'm not the class clown, you know, I sit down in the room by myself and, you know, I get down to work.

In the experience of this participant, the smaller class sizes removed the audience for their misbehavior in the classroom. Another benefit of alternative education is the fact that some of these programs are now integrated with regular high schools. For one participant this made their experience better. “In regular school they’re still able to go to gym, they’re still able to go to art, they’re still you know and that’s why [name of school] is the way it is so like alternate kids that you know have learning disabilities and stuff that can’t go to other you know other schools still go to gym and art and you know still have classes that, lockers and stuff.” Being able to access a program that has the freedom to allow students to be a part of the regular school system was beneficial for this participant. Being able to participate in gym class and have lockers are all a part of the high school experience. In other programs the coursework is able to be accelerated. “I completed about a year and a half in six months. I completed seven, eight courses, or something like that. So now I’m almost graduated. I should graduate in February. Yeah. Pretty stoked. Pretty stoked I crammed it; I made it happen.” Being able to complete the coursework in a short amount of time, made it easier for this participant to get the courses they needed done.

Importance of Returning.

Many of the participants spoke about the importance of returning because it would open up more opportunities for them. At this time the participants were street-involved and were either working part-time jobs or in informal labour. Returning to school provided opportunities beyond what they were currently encountering in their lives. One participant said: “If you want to get something like a job worth something, not A&W or like... just something small for the rest of your life then you have to go through it.” Toughing out their education just to get a bit more than what they would if they did not have a high school education seemed worth it to the majority of the participants.

Others realized after the fact how leaving school would impact their future: “Because I dropped out of school for two years, and I realized what a mistake it was and how I’m not going to get anywhere unless I get my grade twelve.” This period of time helped this participant reflect on their situation and want to go back to school. They also spoke about how they felt that if they were growing up in a different generation things would be different for them. “Because things are a lot different than what they were before; like, my mom was like ‘When I was your age like you could go to law school and not need your grade twelve’ like, now, you’re not going to get anywhere without your grade twelve.” Even though times have changed, they still recognized the need to continue their education. The participants also spoke about friends who did not complete their high school.

> I have so many friends that haven’t got their grade twelve, and they’re working at McDonalds, at like twenty-five. I don’t want to do that, at all. Not at all. I already worked at McDonald’s for four months, I don’t need to go back. So I feel getting your education, grade twelve, is one of the most important things you can do. And if you drop out, you’re making a big mistake.

Not wanting to echo the mistakes of their peers, this participant is continuing their education. After dropping out and being street-involved for over two years this participant was able to recognize the need for their education on their own accord.

Another participant spoke about how difficult their relationships with peers would be. They would question why they were choosing to go back to school.

> That’s why some many of my friends are like why are you going back to school and stuff? I don’t know. When I first started here and I went to detox-the whole reason why I went to detox was because I can’t live on the streets, I need to do something with my life

> and so I went to detox and then I was like-I need to eat and I need to find a home and I need to go back to school.

Many students developed community support networks when they were on the street with their peers and service providers. The street conditions, quality of life and peers all play a role in how these youth navigate street life making it difficult to disconnect from street life. When asked why their peers could not understand why they wanted to return to school the participant highlighted that "I think they just see that they need to have it but I don't think they look to the future that much or they're just like, oh I'll hang out downtown for the rest for the rest of my life type thing and I know like some of them like go to [Name of program] and stuff but for the most part they don't-it doesn't really matter." Moving away from the street lifestyle meant detaching from these friends, which can be difficult for these young people. Wanting to advance their life while not leaving people behind is difficult especially in adolescence.

Barriers.

While attempting to return to their schooling, the participants encountered many difficulties along the way. Some participants spoke about their own personal limitations, while other were adamant that a stable living situation and financial support was essential to their participation, and others shared stories of how certain policies within schools did not allow them to take the path that they wanted. Living on the streets, these young people do not adhere to a typical daily schedule. Getting to school can be a difficult task. One participant spoke about how they would have to bus and would miss it.

> Waking up in the morning so early and like trying to get to the bus on time and then missing your bus and then having to wait for it and like getting there late and your teachers are like, "You're late! Why?" And like I don't have a good excuse. And like

some teachers, they're just like- they like wouldn't let you inside the class if you showed up late so, why go, if you're just late and not going to be let in?

This participant in particular saw no point of continuing to try if they knew this was what would happen every time they tried to go. The schedule of high school starts before 9 am and finished before 3 pm. During this time period is when most street-involved youth tend to make their money or hang out with their peers. Attending school during this time present a significant barrier with some students talking about taking a night classes to get around it.

Mental health, learning disabilities, and life stress can be a huge barrier when trying to go back to school, start at a new school, or completing homework. The participants spoke about how their mental health would sometimes get in the way of completing their work. **"**Yeah, with my depression and stuff. It's been hard to like keep up with the work and like my stress. I didn't like finish all my courses. I finished some courses so um- I'm in some classes, some grade nine, ten classes." The participant spoke about how they were able to complete some courses but the work became too much for them to manage. For those participants with learning disabilities, learning within a classroom setting means a lot of distractions. "Um, not be in such a big classroom, so I get more help, because I don't know it's really hard I don't always get the help that I need and then I just get frustrated and like freak out at them [laughs]." Not receiving adequate support within the classroom makes it difficult to complete the necessary work to pass the grade. Students not receiving support within the classroom are not getting it elsewhere either.

Navigating the school day can become difficult for those who are trying to stay engaged. Some participants spoke about the draw of hanging out with their peers and the difficulty they have in saying no. "I don't know, there's a lot of, like, drug addicts in [name of school], so [laughs]. I don't know, they were all like-they were all around and I guess one of the harder

things is being like, ‘no, I don’t wanna do drugs’.” Staying focused and on task in school can prove difficult especially while cultivating and maintaining relationships with peers. Many of the participants also spoke about substance use as being a reason they did not attend school.

Some participants spoke about the amount of time that had lapsed since the last time they attended school. One participant described how that time away made it difficult to focus on the work:

R: not being there in a while.

I: yeah, so is it hard to back in the groove or-

R: no it’s hard to like, focus more-

I: mm-

R: cause like I haven’t done it in a while-

Focusing on schoolwork can be difficult when trying to manage all the other responsibilities they have in their life. For some getting the personal motivation to go to school was cited as being the most difficult part for them. “Oh my God, I don’t know. I need to not be so lazy. I have lots of distractions in my life that are really easy to give into.” A lack of personal motivation combined with living with friends made it difficult for this participant to maintain their school attendance. “And especially living with one of my best friends. Like she’s not working or going to school. So it’s just like, oh, you want to hang out, okay. So just go out and not do – go to school. And yeah, so – yeah, I don’t know.” Having to live with friends to afford an apartment or place of their own situations such as these are unavoidable.

For many participants the choice between making money that day or learning was not a very difficult decision to make. “Trying to get work done in time, and yeah. Trying to actually get up in the morning and be there for something that I’m not getting paid for.” For others,

having to pay to enroll in their program of choice was a significant barrier. “Sort of, I want to do the [Name of school] stuff, but you need like a three hundred-dollar book deposit, and I’m barely eating [laughter] so I don’t really have money for books. I don’t wanna be like twenty-five and not have my high school, so.” Many of the participants have limited money from the income they do get to support themselves. Incurring the extra cost of having to pay for their education can present a significant barrier. Attending school also means that during that time they will not be making any money, which presents a significant drawback to attending.

Without the stability of permanent or even stable living situations, many of the participants could not even consider about going back to school. One participant spoke about their experience: “I have to get a place and, and live like with my fridge and my bed and my alarm like anybody else, you know […]That’s why I want to work, to go to school after.” For others, it was about a space they would need to be able to come back to in order to complete their work. “ I just need more space that way I can, bring home my work and it doesn’t get wrecked, I can actually have a table designated just for school work, um, money put away for computer, laptop because there’s going to be lots of projects I know I’m going to be needing those.” Living on the street can make it difficult to complete schoolwork as youth have no physical space to actually do it. On street experiences can sometimes lead to unsafe situations that can lead to higher rates of victimization. So for students who are absolutely homeless getting enough sleep at night to participate in school in the morning can add an additional challenge. The absence of stable living arrangements was cited as a barrier to attending school for many of the young people in this study.

When returning to school some of the participants encountered policies that presented them with significant challenge. One participant spoke about their experience of being placed in a class with younger students, making it difficult to stay in the classroom:

I: what were some of the challenges when you were in school-

R: staying in class with kids much younger than me

Since they had not completed the coursework from the grade they were in when they left many participants had similar experiences. Some of the participants were able to stick it out, while other participants could not manage. Other students found programs that interested them only to find out that funding had been cut:

> It's been good. My school might be shutting down though […] Yeah. Cause the government cut fifty percent of our budget. So the day-care might be shutting down. So, there's only twenty-two girls in the school and four of them don't have kids or aren't expecting, so, a lot of us will be out of school.

The program this participant was in provided day care and was engaging enough that twenty-two students were enrolled. Governmental decision-making ultimately took away the option of continuing their education for many of the girls attending that school. Another participant spoke about the Youth Agreement Program that was supposed to help pay for their schooling however that program lost their funding. "That program lost funding so now it doesn't exist. So now anyone who doesn't have parents has to do all of college on their own, which is kind of sucky. And I don't think anyone really knows about it. No one's really talking about it, so." These funding changes have had a significant impact on a good portion of the participants. For many students in mainstream schools having the money to pay for school or post-secondary will not be

an issue. However, for street-involved youth, these funding opportunities provide youth with multiple barriers a chance to finish their education.

Future Goals.

Interwoven throughout the experiences of returning by their participants were plans for the future. For some of the participants this involved post-secondary schooling: "Yeah well I already figured out what I want to be I'm going to become a vet and if that falls through I'll have like – my political science course and, and stuff so if that falls through I could become a lawyer." These are big goals which this participant speaks with confidence about eventually achieving them. Other participants spoke about how they learned from their experiences on the street and want to use that to help others. "My goal – my goal is just to - Basically, I want to become a youth outreach worker. So I want to work with kids on the street. And I want to take my social worker's degree and, yeah, and see what happens from there, pretty much." Most of the future goals cited by the participants involved further schooling but many of them did not see that as a deterrent.

C. CONNECTEDNESS

Throughout the stories of not fitting in and attempting to re-engage were many positive stories of connection street-involved youth found within schools. They spoke of positive relationships with teachers, staff and peers that made school better if not completely tolerable for the time being. Youth spoke about their relationships when asked about the positive points of school. Their positive experiences worked to remind them to keep going to school to get it finished. Additionally, they spoke about learning subjects that built upon what they saw as positive qualities or engaged them despite being difficult subject matter. The participants found

positive aspects of learning in a wide variety of subject areas ranging from math to more hands-on skilled courses. The development of relationships, positive experiences and learning that builds upon the skills the participants desire were all cited as being positive points drawing these participants to school.

Relationships.

Offsetting the stories of strained relationships within school were participants who spoke of positive ones that had an impact on them. The participants spoke about teachers who had positive effects inside and outside of the classroom. Many participants found positive relationships with teachers once they moved to an alternative school, while other participants were able to connect with the administration to receive extra support to help them stay in school. Moreover, peers can work to draw these young people away from school but many participants spoke about how they actually drew them to it. Their relationships with their peers made the school environment more tolerable. These relationships all led to redeeming experiences within schools that worked as a positive engagement factor for these participants.

Teachers.

Teachers who took extra time to check in with the students were cited as being important for the students who were street-involved.

> Well, my drama teacher was like really understanding and she would take the time to talk to you and talk things through about what you had to do in class or, or she'd even sit down and be like, how are you feeling, are you OK, what's going on right now with you, are you, is everything OK, stuff like that, like she's just a really good lady.

Teachers may be the only positive adults these young people interact with when they are street-involved. Taking the extra time to explain the lessons and check-in with the students can be

significant sources of connection for young people who are street-involved. Allowing flexibility in teaching and their approach to teaching were commonly cited as being positive attributes of teachers.

> He was just, he was really laid back, he just, the way, I don't know, he didn't teach you like, when you go into art classes they start you with that color wheel and how to mix colors and it just seems so childish, he was just like, he was cool to let you do things on your own and that's how I like to learn is just to like do it on my own, so he was the probably the only teacher that I've ever had that did that. So like that's what I like most about him.

Embracing a flexible approach to the curriculum was cited as an important characteristic among positive teachers for these young people.

The teacher student relationships that were positive within school were cited as being positive outside of school. For this participant even though they were out of school their teacher stayed in touch with them:

> I don't know, he was just one of those teachers that like actually cared cause like after, then I started going to jail and stuff, and then he came and saw me and, you know, he was just one of those teachers that like stuck in your brain, cause he'd never leave, no matter what you did, like he'd walk out and he'd come get you, he was a good teacher.

The fact this teacher never gave up on their students was an important factor to this teacher student relationship. Another participant spoke about how they ran into their teacher and ended up going for a Christmas dinner.

> And she felt bad for me how my foster parents were treating me and how my life was. So she invited me for Christmas dinner because at my foster home we didn't do anything. In

> fact, I was actually kicked out of the home on Christmas Eve […] So she um, she saw me just sitting' on the streets and she picked me up and took me to our family. And we had a big dinner.

The teaching relationship extends beyond the classroom and outside of school hours. These are the stories that stick out in their head when they speak about their school experience. The positive impact of teachers can remind these young people of what they are going back to if they chose to return.

For other participants, they finally found a positive relationship with a teacher when they moved into an alternative program. In fact, many of the participants speaking about this one program, spoke about how the teacher of that program had a profound impact on their learning experience.

> [Name of teacher] is my only teacher that I have gotten a long with and like the reason I go to [Name of school] is cause I was like expelled from other schools and a lot of those were because I would get stressed out, punch my teacher or, you know, something like that and [Name of teacher], I have gotten mad at him once in three and a half years, so […] He's a good teacher, he knows how to approach me, the other teachers, they approach me the wrong way and I take it offensively, and that's when I snap, but [Name of teacher], he knows how to approach me, he knows me, he's kind, respectful towards me and no matter how angry I get him he will, he will not raise his voice at me, he won't yell at me and tell me, get out of this class or you, cause he's a good teacher.

The teacher and the program name came up throughout many of the interviews. The teachers approach to working with these students helped to foster their learning.

Staff.

Positive relationships within the school were also found amongst the administration. On participant spoke about their experience. “No there aren’t too many teachers that were my favorites, it was a few staff members I, I talked to, like ah the secretaries, they’re the ones that were my favorites cause they weren’t there trying to teach they were, they were doing a job for all the teachers.” In their experience the participant found the secretaries to be the most supportive while at school. The assistance and support that they were able to provide left a lasting mark on this participant. While some participants had strained relationships with the principals, another participant spoke about how they had a positive one.

> He’s just so like there like we’re all in like, like he’s on like a people basis not like a principal basis like he, he took my friend [name of friend] ‘cause she moved away and she came back to visit out for dinner with him and his wife and stuff just to see how she was doing you know helped her look for an apartment and it’s like he’s not just all about school he’s like people person yeah.

Being there on a “people basis” made this principal special for the participant. Their job extended beyond the school helping students to get their life in order. The principal was able to build a relationship with some of the hard to reach students and make a positive impact.

Peers.

When speaking about positive experiences at school many of the participants spoke about the fact that the only they came to school was because of their friends. Having friends at school was an encouraging factor for this participant:

> I kind of enjoy school because not only for like, not, not really a hang out, that’s where you, that’s where you can meet up with all your friends, it’s a good excuse to come and

see each other, you know, you have to go to school and you know, you see, you get to see your friends but you know.

For another participant, having a few friends made staying in school worth it. "If I hadn't have had the friends that I did have I only had like three or four friends but if I didn't have them I would've killed myself a long time ago." Having a social outlet without the presence of friends can make for a difficult experience. For this participant their friends helped to improve their experience within school. Another participant spoke about how, despite being teased, the still had a good experience: "School[indiscernible] an amazing social outlet for me again there was awkward years for me where I was teased mercilessly but somehow I blossomed past that and then school became a great place to be as opposed to a terrible place to be how quickly that happened." Positive relationships with peers in school changed this participant's whole school experience. Having a few peers or a group to hang out with can help to ease victimization and bullying at school for many of these young people.

Experience

Through the experiences of not fitting in, some of the participants spoke extensively about how they found places they fit within schools. Many participants spoke about the fact that they were just good at school. As one participant describes:

R: I was always pretty good student.

I: Yeah?

R: Always went to school.

I: Yep. Um, do you have subjects that you like?

R: I didn't like any one in particular. I didn't really like any of them, they just all... came naturally to me.

Being able to understand and complete the work with ease was a major factor in the experience of these students. Other students found the teachers and the administration to be working for them.

> The people at [name of school] are really like, good in that sort of way and they, they're working for me and haven't kicked me out of the school yet or anything, so it's been pretty good in there with I don't really have relationships with teachers and you know? But they're nice people, I don't have a problem with them.

Knowing that people within the school were looking out for them and would help them if needed it was cited a being a positive factor in many of their schooling experiences. For those participants who school did not come naturally to, they found a way to make school work for them.

Other participants spoke about how getting up and going to school gave purpose to their day. "I don't know. It kind of gives you like a reason to get out of bed early in the morning and get ready and do stuff in the day, and like you go out and see people every single day, like you don't have a choice. You have to hang out with people every lunch and stuff. It's good." The relationships that the participant was able to develop in school were also a positive factor drawing them to school. Positive relationships within schools also helped to improve the learning of the participants. One participant spoke about how their English teacher inspired their learning process by getting them to read a certain book:

> R: I've never ever picked up a book like that up until my English teacher said, "Here, I think you might like this one." Sure enough I did and I read the whole thing.
>
> I: What was it called?

R: I believe it was called “the Firm.” I believe it’s a movie too. Everyone’s been telling me that. What book are you reading? The Firm. Oh, that’s a movie.

The positive effect on their learning extended to the rest of their schooling experience making the process worthwhile.

R: I found it really rewarding because teachers started really recognizing me at the school and when I wanted to work that’s exactly what I did. […] But no the teachers there were like, see, people are trying to work. Now sit down and work and there was no punishment for me. And for me that was like a form of respect and it was great because people knew me and they would do what they could to help me out. I found it pretty rewarding being there.

I: It kind of sounds like you challenged yourself as well.

R: I challenge myself all of the time. It’s like anything that I can’t do, I will try and do it. That’s just me, inside me.

For this participant they were able to embrace the learning process within school through the relationships they had with teachers. They were engaged with the curriculum, challenging themselves and working towards their high school diploma.

Other students spoke about the fact that they would only return to alternative schooling. Their experiences in mainstream school were so off-putting they went to alternative education programs or took distance education. One participant found that the program was more flexible: “The fact that, you can sit there, do your work and not have anybody bug you. You work at your own pace, there’s food there and coffee there, if you’re hungry, or need to –make yourself stay awake.” The presence of free food was also a benefit for this participant as they were able to ensure they had the energy to focus on their schooling. Switching to an alternative school was

seen as a way to catch up on the schooling that they missed: "Ah... there a lot of – I began to have more problems getting along with some of the teachers and [sighs] I skipped a lot and so... I ended up having to redo a grade […] So. I switched to [name of program] to get caught up." Once caught up, some students may remain in alternative school or move back to mainstream high school. Participants spoke about the positive effect of alternative schools with one perk being the modified schedule:

> R: I go to an alternative school. It's called [name of school]. It's two hours a day, four days a week. It's really good.
>
> I: And what do you like about it?
>
> R: I guess how simple it is. It's really easy to follow along. And they got me- I just got accepted into a hair school actually.

The modified schedule was not the only benefit for this participant as they were able to get a direct link to career they wanted. This positive experience with school helped these students turn their experiences around and finish their schooling positively.

Learning

When asked if the participants had any favorite subjects, the majority could name one or more. Only a very few could not name at least one that they were good at. The answers given ranges from the arts, to math science and beyond. These students have widely different learning preferences. One of the most common subjects cited as being a favorite amongst the participants was art. As one participant describes "Art. I love my art class. It's nice to have a class where you can sit and draw and not get in trouble for it." Another participant indicated English as their favorite subject:

> R: I like English.

I: What do you like about English?

R: I'm a writer

When speaking about their favorite subject, the participants were quick to cite a positive quality that made them better at that subject. Other participants were interested in the subject matter for what activities that they got to do in class. "I've always enjoyed Socials and Science. Last year I had a really great Science teacher-we got to dissect cow eyes that was so great!" Having curriculum that is interesting and hands on was cited as an engaging factor for the participants.

Other participants were able to find different ways of learning in their subjects. For some of the participants their teachers modified the curriculum to be more engaging. "There was like a math projects class and it was like all this math stuff, but you baked cookies for math and use the recipe as like fractions and divide it in half and stuff." The teacher took real life examples and applied them to the lessons adding an element of fun to learning for the students. Other participants spoke about liking the course that were more hands in on their skill development. "Ah, like the hands-on shops, wood working, welding, small engines and that." Depending on the school the participant goes to, there is a wide variety of hands on classes in different skill areas available to students. For some youth, these skill areas can be developed further into potential future professions. Having the access to and taking these courses in high school can provide the opportunity for the students to test out different areas they may be interested in.

Participants spoke about how the flexibility of their alternative program helped their learning process. "I could just relax, you know, take breaks when I need it, they have lots of cookies and stuff to munch on, and I can listen to my music with no strings, and that usually gets my work done faster so …" The freedom to move through the curriculum at their own place allowed them to learn what was need to complete their education. They were still able to receive

support within a structure environment; however, the flexible program delivery better suited their learning needs. The positive of learning through education are felt not only in getting better opportunities but also for improving yourself.

Summary

The objective of this research study was to better understand the educational experiences of street involved youth. By using thematic analysis, three core themes were identified: not fitting in, re-engaging and connectedness. The participant's experiences often included experiences of not fitting in that were present throughout their entire time in school and did not just start when they became street involved. Strained relationships, invaluable learning, and a rigid school environment were all prominent factors in why these youth did not fit. After leaving many of the participants repeatedly tried to re-engage with these educational systems. This process was often marred with barriers or rigid school environments unwilling to accept these students back in without strict regulation of behaviors. Some participants were not discouraged by their experiences and continued engaging until they found a school environment that fit with their needs. The ability of the participants to find points of connection within schools, through teachers, positive experiences or fulfilling learning opportunities worked to draw them into participating further. In the next chapter, I discuss these findings and how they relate to the relevant literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The objective of this research study was to better understand the educational experiences of street-involved youth. Through thematic analysis of interview data, three core themes were identified: not fitting in, re-engaging and connectedness. In this chapter I discuss the findings under each core theme and how they either relate or contradict the existing research on the subject. An impractical formal curriculum, defined teacher student roles and policies and procedures all work within schools to contribute to the exclusion of street-involved youth from these systems, at least as reported by the youth. Over time the participants resistance to these mechanisms within schools are either worn down until they re-engage or as was the case for some participants, they found school environments that actually fit.

The diversity of the street-involved youth sampled for the study mimic that of other studies (CAMH & CAS, 2014; Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri, 2010; Patrick, 2014). In the sample, Indigenous youth comprised 33 percent of the total participants, while another 8% identified as a part of another visible minority group. In British Columbia, Indigenous youth have a high school graduation rate of 69.6%, compared to 86.5% of their non-Indigenous peers (BCTF, 2019). The graduation rates of Indigenous students has been on the rise by over 20% in the past fifteen years. However there is still a dramatic difference from their non-Indigenous peers. The majority of these youth in this study had experience with government care. Students with a Community Care Order (CCO) from kindergarten to grade 12 have demonstrated lower academic achievement than their peers (RCY, 2017). These findings mirror the current research highlighting the over-representation of Indigenous youth and youth with government care experience in samples of street-involved youth (Gaetz, 2014; Patrick, 2014; Karabanow et al., 2010).

The reasons the young people were street-involved varied depending on the situation of the youth. It is clear that their education experience contributed to their street involvement in some way, and education became more complicated when they became street involved. During the first wave of the study, 89% had a grade ten education or lower. The participants spoke about the transition to high school from middle school as being the turning point in their educational experience, and some scholars pointing out that this transition is difficult for all students (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Eccles et al., 1991; Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991). The fact that almost 90% of the sample had difficulty moving past grade ten is may be reflective of a broader problem within schools where students do not receive adequate support during their transition to high school. For some participants during this transition, they began to use drugs, and that caused them to lose focus on their schooling. This reflects the work of McIntosh et al. (2008), who found that drop-out risk factors should be examined before grade 10, as any intervention beyond that will likely come too late.

Even so, school is one of the only formal institutions that these young people remained semi-engaged with while street-involved. A significant portion of the sample in this study was in the process of trying to reconnect to school during waves 2 and 3 of the interviews. Getting a high school diploma was discussed as being one of the best ways to get access to better opportunities. Their experiences of trying to return to school do not match their view of schooling. When thinking about returning, these young people were careful to weigh their options regarding what school they would be returning too, and what program is best suited towards their learning needs. They also described continued attempts at re-engaging clashed with school policies, adult control, and a general mismatch with the school environment. The participants also spoke at length about what was preventing them from participating in school.

While some acknowledge personal characteristics, many others highlighted structural barriers that created continued difficulties. Moreover, the participants were passionate in speaking about their future goals. Many of them talked about obtaining professions that would require more schooling or attending post-secondary.

In describing all of the difficulties that the young people in the study experienced when trying to engage with educational institutions also described experiences that involved positive connections within schools. Many of the young people had positive experiences within the school environment that worked to draw them closer to completion. These positive experiences centered on relationships with teachers, staff, and peers that encouraged school participation and attendance, fostered learning, and created a school environment that was a little more manageable for street-involved students. Despite expressions of continually not fitting in school, some students persisted and tried different learning environments until they found the right fit within a school that worked for them. Other participants highlighted how flexible attitudes and environments helped to foster their learning process in both mainstream and alternative schooling. Finally, students spoke about learning about specific subjects with passion, and noted that these were linked to the formal curriculum and in some ways therefore acted as bridges to further education.

Not Fitting In

The transition from middle school to high school was discussed as being a point of significance for many of the youth in the study. It was at this point that the continued school difficulties they encountered became too much to work through or they started to use substances, causing them to lose focus. This transition comes at a time in most adolescent's lives when they

were going through significant developmental and biological changes (Eccles et al., 1991). Another important finding is that no matter what the participant's connection to education institutions, they always spoke with passion about their learning. The participants provide insight into understanding what they want to learn and are interested in.

The participants spoke passionately about learning through informal contexts, through self-taught methods and through the formal curriculum. It can help illuminate how the education system can be better match to meet their needs. Freire's (1970) banking model of education - where teachers are positioned as experts depositing facts to the stoic pupils--is an archaic model that does little to foster learning. All of these factors combined with certain factors within the education system that contribute to broadening our understanding of why street-involved youth have difficult educational trajectories. There is no one single event or point that precipitates these young people leaving their schooling early. However, it is an accumulation of events over their schooling experiences and mechanisms within their education that lead to their eventual exit (McIntosh et al., 2008).

The transition from middle to high school.

Some studies indicate that most street-involved youth leave school by grade nine (Karabanow et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2007). What is missing is an in-depth understanding why this time period is particularly turbulent for street-involved students. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) discuss how even the most successful students are struggling during this transition time. The developmental and institutional changes that high school and adolescence bring offer a challenging set of circumstances. Young people are experiencing an onslaught of biological and developmental changes. The secondary academic environment is larger, more disjointed, and less supportive with higher academic standards than middle school. Students are not academically

prepared to transition to high school. For students already experiencing challenges, these challenges are more likely to be exasperated by the transition and lead to dropping out (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The difficulty is even more pronounced for students who are experiencing academic difficulties, strained relationships, and lack familial support. The young people in the study discussed that if they were missing school, it would be to do drugs or hang out with their friends. This finding is consistent with the research that adolescents seek out more autonomy in their environment and increasingly aligning with their peers (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Eccles et al., 1991).

Street-involved youth do not fit within the traditional education system because they are already responsible for themselves. Their participation in education means submitting to the control of these institutions. Eccles et al. (1991) discuss how adult control can affect the social and intellectual development of young people. Findings from this study suggest that early adolescents have a desire to control their educational choices. In school, there is a lack of opportunity for young people to exercise their autonomy. The students that do not "fit" tend to exhibit a decrease in school interest over time (Eccles et al., 1991). The participants discussed how they were not engaged with the formal coursework and how it would have no application to their lives. Of the required 80+ credits students are expected to earn in high school in BC, 52 of those are called compulsory credits in required course areas like English, Math, and Health (BC Graduation Program Policy Guide, 2018). The academic environment of high school does not support the autonomy that adolescents need to match their developmental level (Cohen & Smerdon, 2008; Eccles et al., 1991; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). In Cohen & Smerdon's (2008) review of the literature, they found that adolescent's expectations of the courses they are

taking are high. The classes they end up taking are uninteresting and lack opportunities for real-world learning, which was cited as a reason for leaving school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2008).

Value of learning.

The value of learning was evident throughout many of the experiences of these young people but the learning took place in other avenues outside formal curriculum. At the time of writing, there is a dearth in the literature looking at how street-involved youth learn outside of formal institutions. Not being allowed to voice their opinions on class content, the curriculum delivery, rigorous course requirements, unsupportive and distracting classroom environments all worked to perpetuate a school environment which the participants struggled with. They found new contexts to learn through their daily interactions, experiences, and more. When they found opportunities that supported their learning processes, they embraced them. Some of the participants spoke at length about exploring the "self-taught" route learning many skills. When they talked about going back to school, they spoke about entering targeted programs based on skills that would link to future employment.

These findings contradict the narrative that students drop-out because they are lazy and they do not want to follow the rules. The education system is not embracing the passion and curiosity for learning that these young people have. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Freire discusses a model of education he refers to as the banking model. The teacher-student relationship is clearly defined. The teacher deposits facts for the students to learn by receiving, memorizing, and repeating. The better a student is at this process, the less critical and creative they will be. The system of education looks to benefit those in power while continuing to the social exclusion of marginalized youth (Freire, 1970). The current system of education in Canada is very similar to the banking model, as described by Freire.

Social organization of schools.

For many of the participants not fitting in had to do with the social organization of the school that they were attending. They made repeated attempts to be a part of the school environment and encountered difficulties every step of the way. For a good portion of the participants, they were good at school but could not manage the responsibilities of their life and the responsibilities of school. This includes the school schedule, work requirements, navigating teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and a lack of engagement in the formal curriculum. Participants spoke about late policies, leading to being excluded for participating, which eventually led to them not showing up at all. When the participants would discuss their strained relationships with teachers, they would cite their authority as being the main point of contention.

In a similar vein, and consistent with the social organization of schools as described by Willis (1977), many of the experiences of not fitting in within the school environment have to do with factors the students are expected to comply with within schools. The young people in the study increasingly encounter certain factors that contribute to their continued exclusion in educational settings. The "bureaucratic and managerial 'press' of the school" (McLaren, 1989, p.183) operates as a force which requires students to comply with the ideology and social practices governing behavior and morality. These are described as "unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal content as well as the social relations of school and classroom life" (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 102). The unwelcoming school environment, the school schedule, defined teacher-student roles, and school-wide policies governing conduct and participation, were all reasons cited by some of the participants as being the reason why they did not fit within the school

system. These factors coupled with an emphasis on a formal curriculum that was disconnected from their daily lives brings attention to the fact that street-involved youth's experiences of not fitting in in schools is not for a lack of trying but could be attributed to certain factors present within the social organization of schools. Further research in this area is needed to continue to examine the factors within the school environment that work to exclude street-involved youth from educational institutions.

Re-Engaging

During the period of trying to re-engage with educational institutions, the participants outlined their experiences, the importance of returning, and the barriers that they faced trying to do so. Evenson and Barr (2009) study reflects the desire to return to school. They found that youth wanted to return but experienced barriers in being able to do so. In this study, some participants experience of returning to school was met with a lack of acceptance, behavioral monitoring, or control and policies that prevented them from continuing. These experiences were enough to lead some youth to disengage from their education for the time being. The majority acknowledged that they would be returning when the situation was right. The majority of participants saw a value in returning. For most of the participants a break from education was enough for them to realize the mistake they made in leaving. The factors which prevent youth from re-engaging also align with Willis's (1977) description of the social organization of schools, because in order to get back in youth often have to compromise and adapt to policies, procedures, learning and environments which have worked to exclude them. During the re-engaging process, however, there were stories of participants who worked to find situations

where they fit. They moved schools when the environment was not right, they had teachers who supported their learning, or they found an alternative program that did meet their needs.

Experience Returning

Detailed in the experiences of trying to re-engage were experiences encountering a lack of acceptance, behavior monitoring, and control, a lack of fit with the school environment as well as policies that prevented them from participating. For some youth, their experiences while at other schools followed them to new schools they were trying to enroll in. One participant detailed how they were almost refused entry to one school due to their background. Their eventual acceptance came with the price of intense monitoring, having to always be on the property and have a teacher with them. The adult control placed upon this participant to attend school made their experience of trying to return more difficult, yet they did not give up. Due to their backgrounds, experiences living on the street and lack of engagement in formal institutions, these youth are discouraged from attending mainstream schools. McLaren (1989) brings attention to this when he highlights that a lack of engagement in mainstream schooling often results in the students being labeled as "pathological, deviant and impulse-ridden"(p.224). In order to get back into school, the participants had to demonstrate their re-engagement with school by complying with behavior monitoring and adult control.

Being rejected by a school that a young person wants to attend sends a message that these students do not belong in education systems, unless they conform. For students that do not fit within the school environment of one school, these policies can prevent those from transferring and eventually finding somewhere that will meet their needs. One participant in the study outlined how they did not fit in one school, but were able to transfer until they found an environment that fit for them. Allowing for some flexibility is what was needed for that

participant to continue with their education and is not an unreasonable ask. Another participant clashed with age policies and was not allowed to continue attending the school because of their age. Since they were now considered an adult, they were not allowed to finish two courses up at their original high school and graduate with the rest of their class. Policies within schools can work as another mechanism of the social organization of schools to continue to exclude these students from participating in school when they are showing effort.

Barriers

There has been extensive research conducted looking at the barriers to school participation for street-involved youth (see Dhillon, 2011; Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Jones, Bowen & Ball, 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Liljedhal et al., 2013; Solomon, 2013). The current body of research lacks qualitative studies that look at the barriers from street-involved youth's perspective (Solomon, 2013). Participants in the study outlined many challenges to engaging with their education and illuminates what needs to be in place for them to continue. There was a common thread amongst some participants who had difficulties with the daily schedule in schools. Responses from school officials and teachers regarding lateness acted as a deterrent for attending school at all. Ultimately, one participant ended up not going at all due to the response they were receiving. Being late for street-involved students can be due to a number of factors, allowing flexibility in the daily schedule for students who are showing interests could help support them better. A flexible attendance policy to accommodate students who are late should be allowed to help these youth continue to engage in the school environment (Liljedahl et al., 2013).

One of the most significant barriers discussed by the participants was the lack of support they received in schools. Some of the participants spoke about learning disabilities and their

mental health. This finding reflects findings of other studies which highlight a lack of support for learning disabilities as being a reason for not attending school (Benoit, Jansson & Anderson, 2007). In the classroom, they found the environment to be unsupportive to their needs. Class sizes are large, noisy, and teachers have difficulty providing individual support for each student. Not getting the help they need to complete the coursework can be especially difficult for these young people. Some participants spoke about how they would get angry because of the lack of support they received.

The transition from middle to high school was cited as a time when many participants were beginning to experiment with substances. One of the consistent reasons participants missed classes was due to substance use. These findings are reflective of other research studies that highlight the prevalence of substance use amongst street-involved youth (Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Kirst, Frederick & Ericksons, 2011). They spoke about avoiding certain schools or areas of the city to evade situations where they would use. Substance use is usually coupled with a lack of adult support and truancy (Ferguson & Xie, 2012). The higher the level of disengagement of the students, the more likely they are to end up using substances. In fact a few of the participants spoke about how attending school was a way for them to get back to their normal lives and stay away from drugs or street life. Other participants found that being away from school for a significant period of time made it difficult when they were returning. They felt that they lacked the skills to complete the work and had trouble focusing and staying on task. Being away from school for a significant length of time can influence a youth's motivation to go to school and their confidence in the ability to complete the coursework. After having had a less structured schedule, having to adapt to a more structured one can be difficult. Currently there is a lack of

Canadian research looking at the experiences of these students returning to school and how they manage to complete their coursework.

The stability of a consistent living situation was cited as an important factor in supporting these youth in their return to school. These findings are reflected in the current literature on the subject, which advocates for the transition to stable, independent housing for these youth as soon as possible (Liljedahl et al., 2013). The young people in the present study spoke about the need to have a space they could go to after school to study and complete schoolwork. The lack of an actual physical place to live also meant no alarm clock and no breakfast making it difficult to get up and ready for school for the day. Research has highlighted that young people who become housed have more positive experiences with their education (Hong & Piescher, 2012; Liljedahl et al., 2013). These young people can access food programs through community or drop-in centers, but are only accessible during certain times. For the youth who were currently unemployed, they saw the opportunity to make money through formal and informal jobs during school hours. They felt that the need to make money trumped going to school as it met their immediate every day needs. These youth felt that there would be time for an education that would help them a few years down the road.

Many of the participants spoke about encountering policies within schools that made their time being there difficult. Participants experiencing gaps in their education were at times placed in classroom settings with at times much younger students. Being in the classroom with younger students presents many distractions that made it more challenging to complete their work. Other participants spoke about finding programs that they enjoyed and were successful in only to find out they were closing. This was usually due to a change in funding for these programs, making it more difficult for street-involved youth to access the programs that will assist them in getting

their education. In the United States, there is a nation-wide policy called the McKinney-Vento Act, which governs the delivery of education for homeless students (Miller, 2011). The act brings attention to the need for a multilevel response to help support street-involved students in facing substantial school-based challenges (Miller, 2011). In Canada currently, there are no federal policies similar to the McKinney-Vento Act that support the education of street-involved youth.

Alternative Schooling.

The participant's experiences with alternative schooling were generally positive throughout the process of trying to re-engage. For some of the participants, it was a specific teacher in a local program that made the difference for them. The teacher was supportive and flexible in their approach, and the students were responsive to this. Many students used this program to catch up on their work before returning to mainstream schools. Others found positive experiences through South Island Distance Education (SIDE). They are required to complete the coursework on all of the subjects they would be taking through school through booklets and tests. Some of these programs allow these young people to work on these booklets in a structured environment. Youth generally spoke very positively about having this option. Some students were able to accelerate their schooling process due to the alternative options available to them. Other studies have explored alternative education, and many have found that they have a positive effect on these youth lives (see Geselbracht, 2012). McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, and McLeod (2012) bring attention to the fact that there is a lack of alternative education programs for homeless youth.

Future Goals.

When asked about the importance of their schooling, many of these young people recognized that it would provide them with access to better opportunities. They spoke about future goals that involved post-secondary education or professions that would require post-secondary education. Some of the participants even talked about funding opportunities for these ventures that they would be able to access if they decided to follow through. This contradicts the finding of Rafferty, Shinn & Weitzman's (2004) study of formerly homeless adolescents that found they had lower plans for post-secondary than their continuously housed peers. Contrary to our study, homeless youth in their study reported fewer plans for post-secondary education than do youth who have never been homeless (Rafferty et al., 2004). The students in the present study, Smith et al., (2007 & 2015) and Miller et al., (2004) all found that street-involved youth have plans which include post-secondary education.

Connectedness

Some young people in the study remained engaged in their schooling process throughout the time they were street involved. There was also at least one positive experience of school for the youth in the study. Some of the young people found positive relationships with teachers, staff, and peers worked as an encouraging factor to draw them to school. For a good portion of the participants, they had found a positive connection through their schooling experience. There were certain factors that young people spoke about, which made these experiences positive. Lastly, the topic of learning in relation to the formal curriculum came up. The majority of the participants spoke about subjects that they enjoyed and subjects that they were good at linked to the positive characteristics of theirs. A common thread throughout the many experiences of

connections within schools was “flexibility”. The ability of teachers, staff, school programs or curriculum that understood their current situation and adapted to better meet their needs.

Positive Experiences.

There were a select few participants who did not seem to struggle in their attempts to obtain their education while being street involved. Theses youth spoke about how they had developed the proper study habits taught by their parents. While others spoke about just being naturally good at school even if they did not like it. Understanding the factors that contributed to these students’ specific success may broaden our understanding of protective factors. Moreover, even if their experiences were not always good, some of the participants spoke about how getting up to go to school every day gave them purpose. This finding is reflected in the literature as Miller et al. (2004) found that school was a good way for homeless youth to occupy their time. Their days are spent killing time if they are not working, which can lead to substance use. A few of the participants were able to find teachers or courses within a high school that adopted a flexible learning approach that helped to make the coursework worthwhile. A flexible approach can be beneficial in education services for homeless youth (Liljedahl et al., 2013). Some of these students found these opportunities while in mainstream high school, while others found it in alternative high schools.

Positive Relationships.

Throughout the many stories of strained relationships within schools, were some stories of positive relationships that positively affected some of the participants schooling experiences. When talking about positive experiences with teachers, they discussed how their teachers would take the time to check in with each student to see how they were doing. This small gesture was enough to make a positive impact and helped the young people to develop positive relationships

with their teachers. There were also teachers who were able to provide a flexible course delivery inside the mainstream curriculum. For some of the participants, this was through English class where their teachers inspired them to read and write through interesting materials. Other teachers modified the curriculum to make it more fun and applicable to their real life. Positive connections were made with administrators who worked to build relationships with the students daily. Positive connections with caring adults is reflected in the literature, which continues to highlight the vital role these people fill in schools for these young people. (Dhillon, 2011; Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015). Finally, peer connections made the school experience more tolerable. Having positive peer connections within the school system worked to encourage participants attend school. Street-involved youth can be the target of victimization and discrimination within schools, and positive relationships work as a protective factor to help prevent these incidents from happening (Smith et al., 2015).

Learning.

When asked what their favorite subjects in school were, a good portion of the participants did not hesitate to talk about the courses that they enjoyed. Half of the students preferred one of their core courses in English, Art, Math, Socials, Science, and Physical Education, while the other students talked about the more hands-on technology or vocational skill-based courses. Their course interest represents diversity in thought, skills, and abilities. Many of the students liked one of the core courses because it emphasized the natural talent of theirs and highlighted a strength. Many of the participants spoke about how they were good at English because they were good at reading and writing. Others found the practical application of science to be the most interesting for them. One participant spoke about being able to test out different skills like wood, working, or welding in high school to decide if they wanted to pursue it as a potential career.

Another positive attribute in the learning process was teachers who were flexible with the curriculum to match their students learning. While some participants found this in a mainstream school, other students found these opportunities in alternative programs.

It is difficult to understand why a group of students who demonstrate a passion for their learning continually do not fit within mainstream school environments. To break the pattern of banking education, Freire (1970) suggests a problem-posing way of education, whereby "through dialogue, the teachers of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges teacher-student with student teachers" (p. 80). The authority of teachers that many students have problems coping with would be eliminated through this method of teaching as the knowledge is not "owned" (p. 80) by the teacher. This method of education looks to help create, together with an environment where knowledge is in a constant state of praxis. Learning in this way allows students to develop critical and creative thinking skills, which the banking model of education does not provide (Freire, 1970). For the participants in the study, they had difficulty learning through prescribed student-teacher roles. They speak about learning experiences that are similar to what Freire poses. Ultimately, they are looking for more meaningful and collaborative learning experiences.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

The intention of this research study was to better understand the educational experiences of street-involved youth. Helping us to understand why they leave, why they start thinking about going back, and the barriers they encounter and their opinions of formal schooling. I applied a Thematic Analysis framework to analyze the data collected from the *Risky Business* study in Victoria, British Columbia. The findings provide insight into their experiences of not fitting in. Strained relationships with teachers, staff and peers, school organization that did not support their needs, formal curriculum tied to impractical learning and a lack of valuable learning opportunities all contributed to these young people's exit from their education. For many of the participants this process did not stop there; they often made subsequent attempts to reengage with their education that were often restricted by policies, behavior monitoring, increased supervision, impractical schedules and invaluable learning. Through some difficult experiences, some of the participants found points of connections within school that worked to encourage their attendance and participation in the formal institution. All of the factors contribute to a deeper understanding of how street-involved youth interact with their education over time.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study support and contraindicate other research conducted on this topic. The first way this data can be applied to practice is through the identification of students who could potentially have more difficulty with the transition from middle to high school. Recognizing the problems before they get to this transition period often is the prime time for intervention to help these young people stay in school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Many participants were experiencing some form of problems whether academic, behavioral or both

throughout their schooling experience. These students are easily identifiable by looking at grade reports and social interactions. The development of a program to help support these students before, during and after their transition may be beneficial to explore to help prevent dropping out for this group of students. Intervening before a student reaches high school is necessary to better support this transition (McIntosh et al., 2008).

The presence of a positive mentor is a factor in these young people's lives that draws them into educational institutions. Embracing a relational approach within schools can help these students to develop relationships within school systems. Dhillon (2011) pointed out that the level of caring a teacher has can influence whether a student's either rejects or embraces their education. The present study found that this rang true for all of the relationships within the education system. Strained relationships with teachers, staff and peers often made the school environment intolerable. Having relationships within at least one of these groups was a major protective factor that drew these youth to school spaces to cultivate these relationships. Understanding how to make schools more relational places for students in order to have them connect with teacher's staff and peers could be very beneficial to explore. Teachers have a tough job in schools as well; the same force they use to govern students behavior are often governing their own behavior as well. Within schools, the acquisition of more support staff could be mobilized to help teachers and staff address this. Child and Youth Care workers are often underutilized in school settings, often work from a relational approach and could easily be mobilized within the school environment.

The social organization of schools are entrenched in province wide policies and procedures, curriculum, and a lack of alternative education options. It is important for the people working within the schools to be able to recognize factors that do not work for some students and

work to be able to find some flexibility. Through points of connection, the participants often discussed teachers or staff who were able to use some flexibility in how education was delivered. Learning what works for each student and adapting the environment to meet their needs is not an insurmountable task and is being done by caring adults already within these systems. Challenging the structures in place that perpetuate these environments within schools need to be challenged at the governmental level. Failing a system wide school change, more good quality alternative education programs need to be developed that can respond to the individual needs of the student.

Limitations

This research study has several limitations. First, the data was collected form a distinct sample of street-involved youth in the Victoria, BC area and may not be generalizable to youth across Canada. Second, education systems vary across the provinces and BC curriculum is unique and varies in certain areas. Third, there is the potential that there is reporting bias as participants may have self-selected which information to share. Fourth, there may have been differences in through who participated in all 5 waves compared to those lost to follow up. Participants followed through all five waves of the study may have different experiences and possible may have been more engaged in services than the youth who did not continue beyond the early waves.

Future Research

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011) published evaluation and review of the Swedish education system provides a look into decentralised education. Since the 1980's delivery of education in Sweden is a central government responsibility specifically with the development of national objectives, guidelines

and curriculum for the education system. Within this system school districts and independent schools have a large degree of independence in "implementing educational activities, organising and operating school services, allocating resources and ensuring that the national goals for education are met" (p.23). When students are struggling to meet grade requirements, individual support is provided to assist the student in reaching the goals. Upper secondary schools have vocationally-oriented programmes and academically-oriented programmes offered within one institutions as schools are not allowed to select students by their academic ability. Further research could explore how this system of education may be beneficial in teaching street-involved youth. The focus on inclusion in the classroom, extra support for struggling students and a school environment that adapts to students needs could provide a model for how education could be improved for street-involved youth in Canada.

Future research in this area should continue to examine the structures of schools and how they perpetuate the social exclusion of street-involved youth. Continued analysis could help to provide insight into the specific factors within schools that can be changed. Barring that, continued research could ensure that individuals are equipped with the tools to work within the systems as advocates for and alongside these young people. Given the high representation of Indigenous youth and those with government care experience, further research should look at the intersections of race, gender and class for street-involved youth in education in Canada. The literature continually highlighted the fact that early school experiences play a role in the current experiences of these young people. Further exploration of how early school experiences factor into the current youths perspective of education and experience with it. Lastly, more participatory action research is needed within the programs that the youth say are working for them. Producing research to help amplify the problem and providing data could support further

funding opportunities. This research could also contribute to the development of a framework for other programs to employ that may have difficulty serving these population.

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