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An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Students who attended Supervised Alternative Learning Programs in Southwestern Ontario

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education

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Abstract

According to Statistics Canada (2021), in Ontario, 27.75% of young people age 15 to 24 attended but did not complete high school in 2020. This figure has increased in the last few years. Indeed, Statistics Canada reported that in 2005, 21% of young Ontarians did not complete high school. As a response to this worrying trend, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) implemented the System Alternative Education system (AES): a system that uses out-of-school locations as substitute-learning settings for students who may not be able to participate in regular classroom learning. One component of the Alternative Education system (AES) is the Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Despite the fact that SAL Programs have been in place for over 15 years in Ontario, there is no published research that can provide a clear understanding of the experiences of students in these programs. Furthermore, very little is known about how students who attended these programs reflect on their educational experiences. This research examines the experiences of former students who attended SAL programs. A key rationale for this study is the urgent need to fill the void in the academic literature, as well as to bring attention to the experiences of marginalized students in the education system. This study found that a meaningful academic curriculum, a positive classroom space, courses geared towards further academic opportunities and future employment capabilities, as well as teacher preparedness, are perceived as key influences in student high school graduation. It is recommended that school boards develop and provide suitable services to this population, so that they can graduate and be successful in their future employment/ educational endeavours.

Key Words

Alternative Education, Alternative Education Policies, Alternative Education Interventions, Effects of Alternative Education, Alternative Education and its Effects, Marginalization of Youth, Social Aspects of Alternative Education, Stigmatization of Alternative Education, Supervised Alternative Education Programs, SAL, Youth and Alternative Education

Summary for Lay Audiences

In Canada, high school dropout rates range between 5–14%, and can increase to as high as 50% or more in low-income communities (Statistics Canada, 2018). Statistics Canada (2018) reported that leaving school before graduation not only limits a young person's potential for the rest of their life, but it can also costs Canada billions in lost tax revenue, social assistance, and health care. My project examines the lived experiences of students who attended Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) programs. This project aims at procuring a better understanding of how students' lived experiences may relate to academic success. Despite the fact that SAL Programs have been in place for over 15 years in Ontario, there is no published research that can provide a clear understanding of how students experience SAL programs in this province. Furthermore, very little is known about how former students who attended these programs reflect on their educational experiences. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by analyzing students' lived experiences of SAL programs in Ontario.

Although SAL programs are seen as a positive conduit for students in their pursuit to graduation, to this date, this strategy has not been thoroughly researched in Canada. Research conducted in the USA, UK, and Australia has demonstrated how these programs can lead to school truancy, drop-out, and a decrease in graduation rates. These studies have found that alternative learning programs may increase exposure to marginalization, social inequity, and a negative stigma for marginalized students. Researchers have reported that these programs have the potential to create a pipeline system that may exacerbate oppression, and marginalization, promoting the idea that youth found in the Alternative Learning system belong in either the prison or the welfare system (Becker, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Livock, 2011; Sellar, 2013; Smith & Thomson's, 2014; Thompson, 2011).

This study is justified in that there is an urgent need to fill the void in the academic literature, as well as to bring attention to the experiences of marginalized individuals within the educational system. There is no recent literature about the lived experiences of students who have attended SAL programs in Ontario. This study aims to fill this gap, so that researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers may have a more informed perspective on how these programs operate.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Key Words ii

Summary for Lay Audiences iii

Acknowledgments iv

Table of Contents v

List of Figures vii

List of Tables viii

List of Appendices ix

Chapter 1 1

Introduction 1

- **Problem Statement** 4
- **Significance of the Research Topic** 5
- **Research Questions** 6
- **Overview of the Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks** 6

Conclusions 7

Chapter 2 9

Literature Review 9

- **Alternative Education in Ontario: Policy Guidelines and Reports** 11
- **Intervention and Re-Engagement Strategies** 16
- **Reported Benefits of Alternative Education Programs** 22
- **The Discrimination and Marginalization of Youth in Alternative Education Programs** 31
- **Summary and Conclusions** 43

Chapter 3 45

Theoretical Framework 45

- **Bourdieu's Toolkit** 45
  - Habitus 47
  - Fields 49
  - Capital 50

Atkinson's Reading of Bourdieu's Toolkit 52
How did the Theoretical Framework Contribute to this Research? 54
Putting it all Together: The Relevance of Atkinson's Framework for the Study 54
Conclusion 55

Chapter 4 56

Methodology 56
Where Am I Situated as a Researcher? 56
Why Am I Interested in Undertaking Qualitative Research? 57
Narrative Inquiry 58
Bourdieusian Methodological Considerations 61
Recruitment and Data Collection 62
Data Analysis 64
Applications of Coding 65
Ethical Considerations 66

Chapter 5 69

Analysis and Findings 69
Demographic Data 70
Findings 72
Curriculum Perceptions 72
Classrooms As Safe Spaces 77
Perceived Benefits of SAL Programs 81
Perceptions of Teacher Preparedness 83

Chapter 6 87
Conclusions 87
The Role of SAL Programs Within the Education System 90
Limitations and Challenges 91
Recommendations for Future Research 91

References 92

Appendices 105

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Illustration of the Supervised Alternative Learning: Policy and Implementation Pyramid of Interventions. From: Ontario Ministry of Education (2010, p. 7) 12

List of Tables

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Data 63

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Questions 105

Appendix 2 Participation Poster 106

Appendix 3 Letter of Information and Consent Form 107

Appendix 4 Interview Guide 110

Chapter 1

Introduction

According to 2016 data, in Canada, 8.5% of men and 5.4% of women aged 25 to 34 have never received a high school diploma. This means that about 340,000 young Canadians did not complete high school (Uppal, 2017). Uppal's study revealed that lone parenthood was more prevalent for women with less than high school diploma (19%) than for men (10%). Also, low employment rates (67% for men and 41% for women) were more prevalent in this population, compared to young adults who had graduated high school. Uppal (2017) found that leaving school before graduation does not only limit a young person's potential for the rest of their life, but it can cost Canada billions in lost tax revenue, increased social assistance, and increased health care costs.

In Ontario, Statistics Canada (2021) reported that 27.75% of young people who were 15 to 24 years of age attended but did not complete high school in 2020. This proportion of the population has increased in the last few years: in 2005, the high school drop-out rate was 21%. Aiming to curb this increasing trend, the Ontario Ministry of Education implemented the Alternative Education System (AES), an organizational structure that uses out-of-school locations as substitute-learning settings for students who may not be able to participate in regular classroom learning. Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) programs form part of the AES (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), a system designed to increase student retention and graduation rates in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). School boards across Ontario are using these programs with the stated goal of preventing students from dropping out of high school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

SAL programs are used as an intervention program for students that have been identified as "at-risk" (Riele, 2007; Foley & Pang, 2006). The term "at-risk" is a qualifier applied to students who have been found to not be able to successfully perform in a regular school setting, something which may lead to drop-out and failure to graduate from high school. Numerous authors have argued that the term "at-risk

student" carries negative connotations and has the potential to perpetuate marginalization and oppression within educational systems (Becker, 2010; Thompson, 2010, Tajalli & Garber, 2014). SAL programs are an option for students who have been excluded from, or are unable to, attend a regular high school setting for many reasons. These reasons can include, but are not limited to, mental health, behavioural issues, and/or learning difficulties. These issues are recognized as ones that can compromise "at-risk" youth's ability to complete the credits needed to attain a secondary school diploma (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, Becker, 2010, Tajalli & Garber, 2014).

SAL programs are often located outside of regular school buildings. Research conducted in the USA, UK, and Australia has demonstrated how these programs can lead to school truancy, drop out, and a decrease in graduation rates—this has created the negative stigma of alternative programs as "dumping grounds" for students that experience academic and behavioural difficulties in the regular system (Becker, 2010; Kim, 2011; Thompson, 2010; Tajalli & Garber, 2014; Wilson et al. (2011). This chapter introduces the research problem and its context. I will briefly describe the alternative education system in Ontario together with a discussion of how SAL Programs have been positioned as an alternative strategy for school districts to curb student dropout rates. This description of the context of the study will be followed by a formulation of the problem, a statement of the purpose of the study, and a discussion of the significance of the chosen topic of research. It also introduces the research questions and an overview of the research methods. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of the theoretical framework.

The Alternative Education System in Ontario

In 2005, the Ministry of Education in Ontario introduced an initiative called Strategies for Success (SFS). This project was brought forth to address Ontario's low graduation and high dropout rates in high schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). SFS consisted of six key areas; one of them was the creation of an Alternative Education (AE) System. In 2006 the Education Amendment Act raised the compulsory school age attendance from 16 to 18 years of age, or until the student receives a secondary diploma (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). This action led to the replacement of the Ontario

Regulation 308, titled *Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupil*s (SALEP). This replacement brought into effect the Ontario Regulation 374/10: *Supervised Alternative Learning and Other Excusals from Attendance at Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) aimed at better meeting the needs of students that were labeled to be at-risk of not graduating, or dropping out of school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The Ontario Ministry of Education adopted the term "at-risk" to describe students in high school, who may not be attending school, and may be at risk of not graduating (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

The goal of the Ontario Regulation 374/10 is to "maintain a connection to learning and support the continued progress towards the attainment of a high school diploma or other educational and personal goals" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 4). Importantly, the Ontario Regulation 374/10 stresses that the student (or the parent/guardian, if the student is under the age of 16) must agree to participate in SAL without any outside coercion or misinformation that may influence the decision (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

SAL Programs were created to help students that could not participate in the regular education settings (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) for various reasons, such as economic, family, medical (e.g. because the student requires treatment that interrupts their learning). Other personal circumstances may include behavioural issues, mental illness, and substance abuse. Additional situations include adverse experiences in the educational system, such as bullying, repeated absenteeism, difficulty with re-entering into the school system, as well as struggles in achieving academic goals due to a combination of any of the above-mentioned issues (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

The stated aim of SAL programs is to enable students to achieve their full academic potential through an individualized education plan (IEP) that could help them attain their secondary diploma in a more comfortable environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The IEP is a written plan that is drawn up by the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). This committee is comprised of support personnel, school administrators, and educators. The committee's purpose is to identify students' specific learning needs and expectations and to decide their appropriate accommodations. The IEP outlines how the school will address these learning needs and

expectations through appropriate accommodations, such as program modifications and/or alternative programs, as well as specific instructional and assessment strategies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

It is important to note that SAL programs were created with the expectation that they should be used as a last resort for student retention and student success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The Ontario Ministry of Education's *Supervised Alternative Learning: Policy and Implementation* document, states that, "all options within the school, in other schools of the board, and in the local community should be considered before board interventions are undertaken" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 8). Many educational jurisdictions seem to accept the idea that by removing students who are considered to be "at-risk" and placing them in SAL settings, the students would be able to learn in a more comfortable space, suited to their needs, which, as a consequence, would improve their chances at graduating (Riele, 2007). Although SAL programs may be seen as a positive conduit for students in their pursuit of graduation, to this date, this approach has not been sufficiently researched in Canada; this is clearly an important knowledge gap for policy-makers, practitioners, and administrators.

Problem Statement

Despite the fact that SAL Programs have been in place for over 15 years in Ontario, an exhaustive review of the literature conducted for this study could not identify substantial research on how students experience these programs (or their equivalent) in Canada, and, more specifically, in Ontario. Studies conducted in other countries, such as the UK, Australia, and the USA, suggests that alternative learning programs carry many adverse outcomes, which include student disengagement in school and an increase in dropout rates. Furthermore, these studies have found that these programs are ineffective at helping youth attain a high school diploma, which may exacerbate other social problems, such as unemployment (Becker, 2010; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Livock, 2011; Sellar, 2013; Smith & Thomson's, 2014).

Previous studies have described how some students in alternative education settings feel marginalized (Becker, 2010). These studies have found that low-income and low-achieving students are often referred to alternative education programs (Sellar, 2013). Without any formal schooling, students could be subjected to physical and mental health stigmatization, which may lead to lack of meaningful employment and overreliance on government assistance (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Livock, 2011; Smith & Thomson's, 2014; Thompson, 2011). According to these studies, alternative education programs appear to promote segregation, affecting the students' motivation to learn (Sellar, 2013). For example, Becker (2012) demonstrated that alternative education programs in the UK did not decrease the drop-out rates in high school, but rather created a pipeline system that promoted violence and marginalization, instilling the idea that youth in the alternative-learning system belong in either the prison or the welfare system (Becker 2010; Livock, 2011; Sellar, 2013; Smith & Thompson, 2014; Thompson, 2011). Clearly, a Canadian-based study would be a valuable contribution to this body of literature. This study aims to fill this lacuna by analyzing the lived experiences of students who have attended SAL programs. The aim is for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to have a more informed perspective of students' experiences who attended these programs in Ontario.

Significance of the Research Topic

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the effects of these programs, it is absolutely essential to investigate the perspectives of the students. Through an examination of the lived experiences of students in SAL programs, researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers can gain a better understanding of the outcomes of these programs: their benefits, challenges, and possible downsides. Furthermore, by providing insight into the lived experiences of these students, this research can better equip educators and administrators to become more empathetic towards this population. The findings of this study could be used as a reference in future evaluations of SAL programs in Ontario.

Research Questions

According to Patton (2015), research questions are fundamental when conducting a study; they help guide the investigation and assist the researcher in procuring satisfactory responses that can be used to attain accurate and thorough findings. The following research questions have been designed to guide this study:

1. How do individuals who participated in SAL programs make sense of their current social situation in light of their experiences in SAL programs?
2. How did the personal and educational experiences of individuals who participated in SAL programs influence, help and/or enable them to graduate, and what were their impediments to graduation?
3. How do individuals who participated in SAL programs characterize the challenges, opportunities and benefits of these initiatives?

Through the use of narrative inquiry, interviews were conducted with a group of young adults ages 18 or over, who attended SAL programs in a city in Southwestern Ontario, within the past two years. Given the nature of the research questions, former students constitute an ideal source of information, as they are able to recount their lived experiences while attending SAL programs.

Overview of the Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

In order to gain a better understanding of students' experiences in SAL programs, this study adopted a relational perspective, i.e., a view of educational experiences and practices as a "system of relations, [that is] is transformed or reproduced, based on the awareness that social structures shape perception and practice only to then be shaped by them in return" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 26). This relational framework is informed by Atkinson's (2020) phenomenological reading of Bourdieu's (1997) notions of habitus, fields, and capital. In addition to the theoretical perspective, the analysis was guided by narrative inquiry, a methodological approach that, through an examination of the participants' stories, seeks to illuminate the multiple social structures that shaped these

students' experiences. Through the accounts of their lived experience, the study encouraged participants to verbalize and reflect, while allowing the researcher to explore the participants' meanings, perceptions, and beliefs. A more detailed explanation of the theoretical framework can be found in Chapter 3. By employing narrative inquiry, this research not only encouraged the participants to share their experiences, it also allowed the researcher to attain rich descriptions that would reflect the meaning of these experiences.

Conclusions

This qualitative study has been designed to gain a better understanding of the individual outcomes of these programs, their benefits, challenges, and possible downsides for those who participated in them. This first chapter has described the alternative education system in Ontario. It has also provided a problem statement, research questions, has discussed the significance of the research topic, and has given an overview of the theoretical and methodological frameworks.

The second chapter offers a thorough review of the literature on alternative education, paying particular attention to the context of Ontario, including policies, guidelines, and reports. The study discusses key findings in the literature regarding intervention and re-engagement strategies, reported benefits, and discrimination and marginalization of youth in Alternative Education programs. Chapter three outlines the theoretical framework for this study. This chapter describes how Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice and his concepts of habitus, fields, and capital—together with Atkinson's (2020) reinterpretation of Bourdieu's (1977) toolkit—helped in the analysis of the experiences of the individuals who have been enrolled in SAL programs.

The fourth chapter provides a discussion of the research methods and a reflection on the ethical considerations. This chapter describes the data collection and analysis, the coding procedures, challenges, and limitations. Chapter 5 provides the presentation of the study's findings, including a presentation of the participants' profiles. The analysis provides four emerging themes: a) curriculum perceptions, b) classroom spaces, c) reported benefits of SAL programs and d) perceptions of teacher preparedness. Chapter 6 offers a summary of

the findings, a discussion of the study's results, possible limitations, and future recommendations. The following chapter offers a review of the literature on alternative education so as to to offer the reader an overview of the current state of the research on this topic.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on: 1) policy, guidelines and research related to the implementation of alternative education and SAL programs in Ontario, 2) studies on intervention and re-engagement strategies for students, 3) research that highlights the benefits of alternative school programs for student academic success, and 4) research on the potential for alternative programs to discriminate and marginalize youth.

Finding relevant sources regarding alternative education programs in Canada, and more specifically in Ontario, has proved challenging. It should be noted that it was particularly difficult to find relevant articles that dealt explicitly with the subject of student experiences in SAL Programs in Ontario. Apart from three studies (Dillabough & Kennely, 2010; Bascia, Fine, & Levin, 2017; Morrisette, 2011), all the Canadian research on these topics was conducted more than ten years ago. Given that recent studies are essential to understanding the current state of these programs, it was decided that studies carried out in other countries, such as the United States, the UK, and Australia, could be included in the review, as they can nonetheless offer useful insights. Although the use of these articles may not grant specific information about the alternative education system in Ontario, they could offer relevant, and perhaps transferable, findings regarding the nature, structure, and implications of alternative education programs.

This comprehensive literature review used books in print and peer-reviewed articles found in a number of databases, including: ProQuest Central, ProQuest Education Journals data base, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Database, Dissertations & Theses @ University of Western Ontario Database and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Other sources included publications by the Ontario Ministry of Education that contained most current data on alternative education and SAL Programs studies, policies and guidelines. The keywords found to be most effective in the literature search included ‘alternative education’,

‘supervised alternative education’, ‘alternative schooling’, ‘alternative school programs’ ‘at-risk students AND alternative education’, ‘disenfranchised students’, ‘flexi-schooling’, ‘marginalized students’, ‘student lived experiences’, ‘phenomenological studies AND alternative school programs’, and ‘second chance schooling’. The expression ‘AND’ is the Boolean operator used to combine terms, which narrows down the search.

During the review of literature, it was found that most studies applied a qualitative approach and only a few articles applied either quantitative or a mixed-methods approach. These studies revealed a combination of benefits and downsides of alternative education programs. These benefits included the potential to increase student retention and the emergence of caring and meaningful relationships between students and teachers/administrators. Some of the downsides included marginalization, discrimination, and the students’ struggle with the stigma created by these programs. Indeed, some studies reported that these programs are often perceived as dumping grounds for students and teachers (Becker, 2010; Thompson, 2011). Further, some studies exposed the ineffectiveness of these programs in helping students graduate from high school (Becker, 2010; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Livock, 2011; Sellar, 2013; Smith & Thomson 2014).

The studies reviewed included participants between nine and 18 years old, and they included both female and male participants. None of the literature seemed focused on a specific gender, but did focus on race and social class (Angus, 2006; Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Farrelly et al., 2013; Fedders, 2018; Gut & Mclaughlin, 2012; Kim, 2011; Smyth & McInerney, 2013; Tajalli & Garber, 2014; Thompson, 2011). The primary focus of all studies was to identify how alternative education programs served their students. Only one article discussed the effectiveness of behavioural interventions with special-needs students in alternative education programs (McDaniel, Jolievette & Ennis, 2014). This review provides a discussion of the themes mentioned above. The literature analyzed was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the relevance of these studies for addressing the research problem?

2. What was the focus of the studies?
3. Who were the participants?
4. What types of methodologies were used in the studies?
5. What were the main findings?
6. What other relevant information do the studies provide?

Alternative Education in Ontario: Policy Guidelines and Reports

In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Education produced *The Supervised Alternative Learning: Policy and Implementation* document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). This document serves as a guide for the consistent implementation of policies and programs intended to "support students who are having trouble attending a regular school setting and are therefore at risk of not graduating" (p. 3). This document includes key changes to SAL and related policies, such as the administration process and attendance and enrollment policies. *The Supervised Alternative Learning: Policy and Implementation* document outlines the procedures that must be followed before considering an alternative-learning placement for a student, the application process, consideration, implementation, review, and re-entrance for these programs. It also describes the transition phase students must go through when enrolled in SAL Programs.

The document provides a detailed description of the SAL plan, namely, the specific strategy that needs to be implemented with each student attending these programs. Also, it includes a description of the delivery models to which SAL programs must adhere. The document states that, "all options within the school, in other schools of the board, and in the local community should be considered before board interventions are undertaken" (p. 8). Some key ideas for reengagement include: the promotion of a positive and welcoming school atmosphere and ensuring the students' well-being and safety. The document suggests the use of engagement initiatives that give voice to each student, as well as counselling, including outside agencies, that can provide support to both the student and their

family. The document provides a diagram that illustrates the range of strategies that can be used to assist students. A visualization of this process is presented in Figure 1.

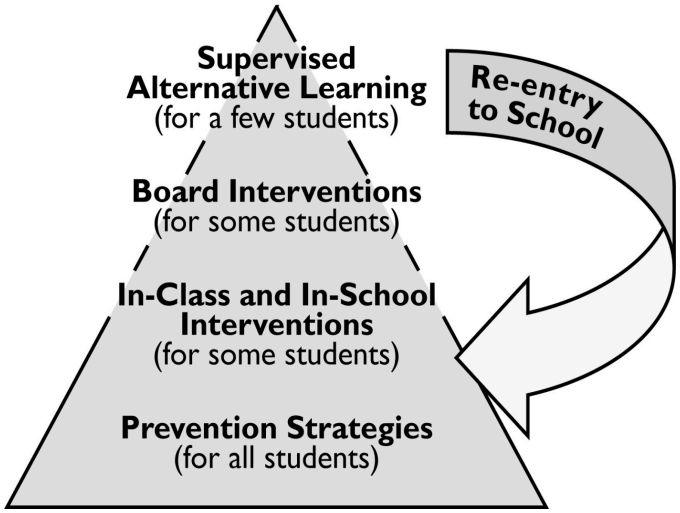

Figure 1 - Illustration of the Supervised Alternative Learning: Policy and Implementation Pyramid of Interventions. From: Ontario Ministry of Education (2010, p. 7)

Figure 1 shows the range of approaches that can be used to address the needs of students who demonstrate academic or behavioural difficulties in regular school settings. The first stage offers prevention strategies that are set in place to support, engage, and promote students' attendance in schools. The second stage is the 'in-class and in-school interventions' phase. In this phase, "all options within the school, in other schools of the board, and in local community should be considered before board interventions are undertaken" (p. 8). The third stage is the board interventions, where school boards offer alternative education programs, such as independent learning, credit recovery, and cooperative education to meets students' needs.

The last stage is the use of SAL programs. These programs are utilized only "if a student continues to avoid attending school and/or particular classes, and school staff, parents, an/or community partners have not succeeded in finding ways

of helping the student become interested in attending school regularly" (p. 9). The document outlines the procedures for the SAL application and renewal process, the development of a transition plan to regular school, the alternative education program, or the next steps after secondary school. The document also offers detailed information about the Supervised Alternative Learning Plan (SALP), which must accompany each student who enters into the SAL program, as well as the description of the delivery models each SAL program provides.

Prior to producing *The Supervised Alternative Learning: Policy and Implementation* document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The Ontario Ministry of Education published *The Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success / Learning to 18 Strategy (SS/L18): Stage 1 Report* (Ungerleider & the Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). The purpose of this study was to evaluate to what extent the SS/L18 strategy aligned with the Ministry's three overarching goals: (1) to attain high levels of student achievement, (2) To reduce gaps in student achievement, and (3) To reach high levels of public confidence (p. 5).

The SS/L18 strategy was designed to meet five key goals focused primarily on the secondary school system: (1) to increase graduation rates and decrease drop-out rates; (2) to support a good outcome for all students; (3) to provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities;(4) to build on student strengths and interests and, (5) to provide students with an effective elementary to secondary school transition (p. 5).

Ungerleider and the Canadian Council on Learning's (2007) report provided a preliminary analysis of the five key goals of the SS/L18 strategy. To perform this analysis, the researchers used 1) source documents, which were provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education, 2) information gathered from a study conducted from four focus groups that contained a total of 25 Student Success Leaders, and 3) 39 semi-structured interviews with individuals who held positions that carried knowledge of the SS/L18 strategy. These interviews included directors of education, superintendents of programs, senior managers at the Ministry of

Education and the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, seven education officers from the Ministry, and three consultants to the Ministry. It was made clear in the report that the authors did "not plan to capture the ways in which students experienced the SS/L18 Strategy" (p. 9). It was stated that student experiences would be investigated in the second and final report (Ungerleider & the Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), as the authors "looked forward to learning from students themselves whether the sentiments expressed are the rule, the exceptions or somewhat in between" (Ungerleider & the Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p.10).

The report presented the SS/L18 strategy as a coherent approach that integrated a wide range of programs, including independent learning, credit recovery, SAL programs, co-op programs, and on-line learning. Some vulnerabilities were identified, including poor school-parent communication, lack of funding and inadequate staff and teacher training. Also, the report gave a number of preliminary recommendations, such as the need to pay more attention to student needs. It advised that more funding towards staff, transportation, alternative education programs, technologies and other needed resources should be made available from the Ministry of Education in order for the SS/L18 strategy to flourish. This document is significant in that it outlines the goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education for student success. The researchers highlighted the need to include student experiences in the analysis of the initiative; they stated that direct student input was necessary in order to properly evaluate student academic success. It supports the idea that more research is required regarding students' input into their educational and life goals.

A year after the initial report was completed, Ungerleider and the Canadian Council on Learning (2008) produced a second report, titled *The Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy (SS/L18): Final Report*. The researchers found that: 1) the strategy was currently being implemented and aligned with the Ministry's goals; 2) the SS/L18 strategy was successful with regards to the encouragement of developing innovative and flexible

educational opportunities that reflected regional, social, and cultural circumstances that could be affecting students' learning experiences and outcomes, and; 3) the SS/L18 strategy was helping to foster positive student engagement with education in a manner that respects student individual needs and circumstances (Ungerleider & the Canadian Council on Learning, 2008).

Ungerleider and the Canadian Council on Learning (2008) used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The evaluation consisted of several hundred (an exact number was not provided) of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants, such as senior managers, education officers, consultants to the Minister of Education, directors of education, student success leaders, program superintendents, school trustees, college presidents and vice-presidents, principals, members of school-success teams, teachers, parents, and students. The evaluation was carried out by the Ministry of Education, Training, Colleges and Universities, and included more than 40 school boards, over 50 schools, and nearly 10 colleges across the province.

The analysis included information from quantitative data sources, such as anonymized student records and student diploma records provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The study found an increase in graduation rates, from 65% (2003-04 academic year) to 75 % (2006-07 academic year). However, after analyzing both the interviews and focus groups, the researchers concluded that they could not demonstrate how the SS/L18 strategy was directly impacting student graduation or drop-out rates. In addition, the *SS/L18: Final Report* also found a "lack of student awareness about the strategy and its different components" (p. 42). Many students stated that they were unaware of the various supports and programs that the SS/L18 offered to increase their chances of graduating.

Even though the report stated that 14,000 students and staff were surveyed, the researchers decided to only include information from the transcripts of a "proportional random sample of 117 interviews and focus group sessions" (p. 14), due to the high cost of transcribing audio files. The researchers also opted to include seven field notes and 14 transcripts from focus groups sessions that were

"composed exclusively of students identified by their schools as being at-risk" (p.14). Furthermore, the report did not indicate how many students who were labelled as "at-risk" by their schools participated in the survey portion of the quantitative data collection component. It could be argued that this report failed to include detailed and direct student input from these at-risk students, and instead, the report only concentrated on conveying what the administration and staff felt was in the best interest of students.

Since 2008, the Ontario Ministry of Education has not conducted additional studies on student-retention and student-graduation rates. Furthermore, the Ministry has not produced new guidelines for alternative education programs since 2010. The age of these documents demonstrates the need for new studies that include student input. Ungerleider and the Canadian Council on Learning (2008) noted that the value of direct student input is important for the evaluation and improvement of strategies for student academic success.

Intervention and Re-Engagement Strategies

This review identified a notable body of literature on alternative education that focused on interventions and re-engagement strategies. For example, a study by Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradway, and Ennis (2012) illustrated an intervention strategy that included: 1) gathering student data, and 2) selecting specific practices that incorporated a team-based decision-making scheme to accommodate the complex needs of students. The strategy also included an individualized intervention approach, which used a three-tiered intervention framework that included: a) a primary or universal prevention tier, where a team leader states the expected behavioural expectations, b) a secondary tier used in the identification of student needs aiming to decrease student non-compliance to educational participation, c) a tertiary tier intervention that provides supports for those students who have not been successful in the previous two tiers.

The decision to involve students in this tier included past evidence of disruptive behaviour that had negatively affected the classroom. The authors

suggested that through the use of "various types of data collection gathered through many student observations, teacher reports, rating scales and records of past failed interventions, a more suitable intervention can be planned out or modified promptly to meet student needs" (p. 17-18).

Jolivette et al. (2012) concluded that through a shared common vision, and the agreement on effective procedures to achieve goals, this framework could be successful and effective in re-engaging students with the educational system. That said, the authors did not investigate the students' experiences of being placed in such interventions or how these interventions impacted their lives; the study only focused on the success of the proposed interventions (i.e. the abovementioned three-tiered intervention framework). Also, the study did not present any possible long-term effects that the interventions could produce; this would have been beneficial in strengthening the researchers' conclusions.

In a similar vein, McDaniel, Jolievette, and Ennis (2014) focused on intervention and re-engagement strategies found in alternative education settings. Their study examined whether the use of the School Wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) system, together with an existing behaviour management system, was as an effective intervention tool in alternative education settings. The researchers used a qualitative approach, which consisted of two focus groups, composed of of staff and administrators, who worked at two similar alternative education settings. These groups administered the SWPBIS system as an intervention strategy for their students. The authors found that using the SWPBIS system had a number of negative consequences, such as poor student participation and resentment towards schooling, on the part of both students and staff. The study found that the implementation of this system was complicated and had limited effectiveness. This ineffectiveness stemmed from the lack of proper training and an unclear shared common vision of the participants' expected outcomes.

Similar to McDaniel et al. (2014), Hylen (2009) explored the impact of a character education-based interactive discipline program on students in an alternative high school setting. The study used a quantitative method to compare

two strategies for addressing student problem behaviour in at-risk students attending an alternative high school in Missouri, USA, over a two-year span. It included 97 students in the first year and 90 students in the second year. These students were placed in two groups: a treatment group and a control group. The students in the treatment group participated in a web-based computer program module called MindOH! DisciplineSeries, which consists of de-escalating student emotion at the moment they commit an infraction. Students in the control group were engaged in the typical disciplinary procedures, and were only obliged to complete a survey in which they would rate their level of emotional distress, indicating whether or not they believed were at fault. The study found that there was no significant difference between the two discipline approaches when it came to reducing recidivism or student suspension. The study found, however, that the computer program "served as an outlet for dialogue between students and administration during the discipline process" (p. 51). Even though the researcher found this specific computer program ineffective, Hylen (2009) suggested that it would be beneficial for alternative schools to investigate any long-term benefits this type of software provides in terms of mitigating students' problem behaviour.

Focusing on effective learning, Mills, Te Riele, McGregor, and Baroutsis (2017) examined interventions and re-engagement strategies in Australia. These researchers used an ethnographic approach, which included semi-structured interviews with 24 staff and 45 students across three sites. The study aimed at analyzing how the implementation of an educational environment and ethos explicitly framed by concepts of affective justice and an ethics of care could contribute to the enhancement of curriculum and improvement in the learning achievements of students in alternative education programs.

The researchers stressed the importance of recognizing that alternative programs are often seen as marginal to mainstream schooling. Mills et al. (2017) concluded that the majority of students felt unsupported and not cared for by their previous conventional schooling. Also, they found that not enough training was offered to staff to help them address student disengagement from schooling. The

authors noted the importance of providing teachers with effective interventions and re-engagement strategies framed by concepts of affective justice and an ethics of care. This approach not only gives teachers the learning tools to improve students' academic and social needs, but it does have the potential to inform change in mainstream education to re-engage students in school.

Similar to Mills et al. (2017), Golden (2018) used semi-structured interviews with teachers to examine how they interpreted the conditions, practices, and understanding of policies in an alternative high school equivalency program in New York, USA. The study found a great deal of frustration among teachers and a sense of loss regarding individualized approaches to student learning, particularly when it came to how school administrators dealt with students' needs. The study found that teachers highlighted the importance of having strong relationships with their students and emphasized the importance of making curricular decisions that define early classroom years. Teachers also felt that administrators no longer valued learners in alternative education programs. In addition, the study found that teachers were experiencing a pedagogical shift, where instruction was now more focused on their personal financial gains and the market demands rather than student interests and needs. Teachers claimed that when it came to teaching, their decision-making power had been removed, as they had to teach students in the way dictated by their supervisors and not according to their own professional competency and knowledge. Golden (2018) concluded that teachers needed to challenge these notions and be given more agency and teaching autonomy. Professional autonomy, combined with effective interventions and re-engagement strategies, would help both teachers and students succeed.

Through the use of a demographic questionnaire, various surveys, and academic and behavioural data reports, Edgar-Smith and Palmer's (2015) examined how a teacher's positive attitude and support can influence students' re-engagement in the education system. This study used a quantitative method that measured the perceptions of students in alternative education programs after four and eight months of attendance. The participants included 39 students in grades 7 through 12

who were entering an alternative education program. Researchers found that students who felt involved in their school environment through regular attendance and positive teacher-student relations, tended to receive higher grades. These factors countered any negative conduct, such as truancy and disruptive classroom behaviours. The study concluded that the students' sense of belonging was critical for them to re-engage with school. Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) recommended employing caring and compassionate professionals trained to form positive relationships, ones that involved trust and good communication with their students. Furthermore, they suggested that teachers should actively be using constructive approaches in their pedagogy, rather than employing punitive approaches. The findings of this literature review provided a depiction of how effective student re-engagement strategies are necessary, given how they contribute to the creation of positive student experiences.

Reviewing the use of successful re-engagement strategies in alternative education settings in Australia, Wilson, Stemp, and McGinty (2011) highlighted the adverse consequences of school disengagement and dropout, such as billions in lost tax revenue that resulted from these behaviours, such as increased unemployment, social assistance, and jail expenditures. The study noted that without any formal schooling, students could be subjected to physical and mental health problems, as well as a lack of meaningful employment and an ongoing reliance on government assistance. The study reviewed some re-engagement approaches, such as the creation of flexible learning options that were not only meaningful and relevant but also that facilitated students' participation. The study recommended 1) establishing strong links between school settings and outside agencies, such as social services and child-protection agencies to help promote further education, 2) employing staff with skills and qualities necessary to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with young people, and 3) delivering a curriculum that is relevant to the students' needs and life experiences. The authors stressed the importance of having staff who could support and deliver autonomy and control, in a heterarchical manner, where students experienced the sense of decision-making. Only through such re-engagement interventions, alternative settings could offer students the type

of positive experiences that could help them accomplish their future education plans.

Smyth, McInerney and Fish (2013) conducted an ethnographic study of youth experiences of re-engagement through alternative education programs. The researchers included interviews with 100 students, whose ages ranged from 13 to 19, as well as 25 adult interviews, "comprising of teachers, program managers and significant others" (p. 197). The authors provided a vivid account of the alternative education settings in these locations. The study revealed the schools' disinterest in offering a purposeful curriculum that matched these students' interests and abilities. Researchers found that school staff carried an assumption that working-class youth have limited abilities and skills, which intrinsically constrain their future job-skill qualifications. The authors suggested that the education system had failed its students in that "it did not provide an intellectual and challenging curriculum" (p. 202) which, in their view, is a necessary component of student academic success.

A structured educational environment with safe boundaries—where students feel welcomed, accepted, and respected—facilitates student re-engagement, helping them to work towards their educational goals (Te Riele, 2007). The authors recommended that educators needed to stop following what they described as "a traditional, and often punitive type of school system, where behaviour management become excessive" (p. 57). Instead, educators must give attention towards creating dimensions of schooling that would contribute to the enhancement of the curriculum and improvement of learning achievements. Te Riele (2007) revealed how re-engagement would sometimes be difficult to attain when the initial interventions and prevention strategies had not been implemented correctly, or at all.

Similarly, Hosley, Hosley and Thein (2009) analyzed alternative education policies and practices among school districts in Pennsylvania, USA. The study analyzed 141 surveys from administrators, including superintendents, principals, assistant principals, directors, deans, personnel service directors, as well as 180 surveys received from teachers. The study concluded that "a focus on behaviour

change programming, academic programming, life/social skills, and disciplinary programming that included therapeutic perspectives were necessary to employ as alternative supports within the school environment" (p. 12). Although the study concluded that alternative education settings were somewhat effective in decreasing student disengagement, all participants felt that these settings were also effective or moderately effective in helping students attain academic success, developing academic goals, reducing dropout rates and changing targeted behaviour. Analogously, Smyth (2012) proposed the idea of "socially just school settings" as an alternative to the negative connotations of "alternative education". This study carried a more utopian view with regards to minoritized students and their schooling. Smyth (2012) suggested that the inadequacies of the educational system are a result of its neoliberalization. Contemporary education reforms have promoted a competitive system based on privatization, marketization, standards-based evaluation, and accountability reforms. These approaches tend to benefit the wealthy, creating additional barriers for those in the margins. Smyth (2012) also mentioned other influential factors, which included the social construction of disadvantaged groups, ineffective interventions, the lack of social actors' ownership over their lives, and poor leadership. This study suggested that the cause of ineffective school engagement is the increasing emphasis on competition and individual success, due to market-driven reforms on education.

All these articles provided useful insights on re-engagement strategies. This literature also features some promising strategies, such as the active promotion of staff participation, proper training, and improving teacher interactions with students. These engagement and re-engagement strategies have the potential to build more meaningful school relationships and positive student experiences.

Reported Benefits of Alternative Education Programs

While some literature about alternative education programs identified downsides to these interventions (Kim, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Riele, 2007),

many of these programs have been portrayed as providing a second chance for students to engage with schools and with learning. An example of this can be seen in the study by McGregor and Mills (2012); it reports on research conducted in alternative schools/flexible learning centres designed to support marginalized youth who could not attend regular schooling across South East Queensland, Australia. The study used a qualitative approach; it collected data from site visits and interviews with one parent, 26 teachers and workers, three former students, and 41 current students from five alternative schooling sites. The authors found that there "were opportunities for young people across the sites to undertake traditional subjects and curricula" (p. 853). In addition, "students also had the opportunity to obtain job related qualifications" (p. 853), such as automotive and trade certifications.

McGregor and Mills' (2012) study identified a "sense of common purpose and community as significant elements of their alternative schooling environment" (p. 854). It also highlighted positive teacher-student relationships, which consequently helped ensure that students remained engaged in school. In addition to this, the authors commented on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. In their view, the approaches adopted in these programs provided opportunities for students to feel supported and connected to learning. The study concluded by suggesting that many of the practices identified in these programs could also be used in mainstream schooling, given that "such practices would be beneficial to all students" (p. 860). This is because a "one-size-fits-all schooling model often further marginalizes those students who already face significant social and economic difficulties in their everyday lives" (p. 860).

Similarly, Kim & Taylor (2008) examined alternative high schools to determine whether students were benefiting from these programs. Through a qualitative case study that used a critical-theory perspective, the authors explored "whether the school program was beneficial to students to the extent that it provided a level playing field while breaking the cycle of education inequality" (p. 208). The study collected data from classroom observations, open-ended structured

interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. It analyzed primary documents such as curriculum materials in science, social studies, mathematics, and English classrooms. The study reported that because the focus of these programs was on credit recovery, these schools did not seem to have many behavioural problems. The study also reported that these programs gave students "self-confidence and a sense of empowerment and control over their lives and learning" (p. 214). The study discovered that these types of alternative education provided a caring environment that helped students feel comfortable with learning.

Concerned with what works in alternative schools and how alternative programs are reconnecting students to their educational futures, Mills and McGregor (2016) studied how alternative schools can engage students with their education. The study used a mixed-methods approach and collected data from 73 staff members who worked in 13 alternative sites. In addition to the staff data, the study included 154 youths (36 of whom had been considered disengaged from all aspects of the education process) from 15 flexible education sites and programs in the state of Queensland, Australia. The purpose of the study was to examine how the referral process to alternative education programs worked, and to identify the types of teaching practices that were most effective at increasing student retention and academic success. The study found that by implementing three critical elements of support—namely 1) the right material supports, 2) the right climate, and 2) the right pedagogy and curriculum—school systems could help ensure that many of the barriers that prevent students from learning could be reduced or removed.

Mills and McGregor (2016) described instances of caring teachers that provided relevant and appropriate teaching, as students appeared to be "involved in work of a high intellectual quality" (p. 211). Also, the study highlighted a number of key features about alternative schooling, and how these programs helped students continue with their learning, while feeling both respected and supported. The authors demonstrated some of the ways these programs "sought to make a difference to those young people who have exited the mainstream sector" (p. 213).

This study concluded by recommending "the mainstream needs to change to better meet the needs of young people they are currently failing" (p. 214). The authors believed that departure from mainstream education was related to "failure to acknowledge and accommodate difficult personal circumstances" (p. 213), as well as lack of economic and material assistance to students. Mills and McGregor (2016) also advocated for more supports in the form of material resources, a caring environment, community, and mental health supports to be made available for students.

Hartbauer (2015) compared the academic, behavioral, and financial effectiveness between the Pennsylvania in-house alternative education programs and the off-site alternative education programs. The study evaluated archival, quantitative, academic, behavioral, and financial data over a three-year period from 2011 to 2014. The results of the statistical analysis concluded that there were no statistically significant differences between these programs with regards to the variables that were tested. The average mean scores suggested, however, that in-house AEPs were consistent from year to year in their approach to academic and behavioral outcomes.

Donlon (2008) sought to understand the difference between the exam scores of students in traditional school programs versus students in alternative education programs, and the extent of success students gained attending alternative education programs. By using a quantitative, quasi-experimental study, the author explored what could be influencing alternative education programs with regards to grade-point average, attendance rates, course-completion rates, and discipline-referral rates. To attain her answers, Donlon used archived data about an alternative education program in the Genesee Valley in northern New York State. According to the author, there is a profound need for alternative education programs when it comes to meeting the needs of today's youth. Donlon (2008) described how these programs could help students "with social-emotional issues and with learning disabilities." (p. 63). Donlon (2018) concluded that students in these programs were seen to succeed, as long as the course content was related to future employment opportunities.

Franklin, Streeter, Kim and Tripodi (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of an academic alternative school, the primary focus of which is on dropout prevention and that used a Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) framework. SFBT is described as a short-term goal-focused evidence-based therapeutic approach that incorporates positive philosphy principles, practices and techniques. SFBT helps students construct solution-building skills to help improve their self-steem, manage and reduce negative feelings, concerns, and/or negative behaviours, and reach their academic goals. This study examined differences in credits earned, attendance and graduation rates of 85 students. The authors' evaluation led them to conclude that students in alternative schools can catch up over time, graduate, and enroll in post-secondary education. The authors recommended that "policy makers and administrators should consider setting modified criteria for alternative schools and re-evaluate the appropriateness of using the cohort drop-out rate as an outcome measure for high-risk drop-out youths entering alternative schools." (p. 142). Furthermore, the study suggested, "the solution-building alternative high school appeared to be successfully fulfilling its mission as an effective drop-out retrieval and prevention program" (p. 143).

Elias (2011) focused on achievement scores on standardized exams, and examined the time during which students remain in an alternative education setting, and how time in alternative education placements impacted achievement scores. This study used data from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) reading and math tests. In addition, the study used an adapted survey from the Pennsylvania Department of Education Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth program. The survey was administered to district staff, who were directly involved with the alternative education program within the district and focused on district demographics, focus/purpose of the alternative education program, student entrance/exit criteria and student recovery/follow-up efforts. The author concluded that there was no correlation between the amount of time spent in an alternative education program and the changes in PSSA math and reading scores. Although the survey demonstrated that school districts expected alternative education programs to address academic issues, the analysis of the test score data indicated there that there was no correlation between time spent in an alternative education program and academic improvement.

More recently, some alternative education programs have been found to respond to the needs of disenfranchised students (Mills & McGregor, 2017), who posit that alternative education offers, "alternative ways of engaging highly marginalized young people in education via their "non-school" like environment" (p. 4). The researchers describe these programs as a second-chance schooling, which caters to the needs of young people who have dropped out or have been pushed out of regular schooling. The authors reported that many students see these schools as their "only chance to access education" (p. 13), as second-chance schools allow young people who are "confronted by poverty or other difficulty life circumstances to attend school" (p. 13). The study found that the vast majority of students had highly positive perceptions about these programs. The article called these programs "flexi-schools" and described them as learning options that offered curricular flexibility. The study concluded by stating that flexi-schools are challenging traditional schooling by engaging young people in the learning process through the use of flexibility that "caters to the needs of highly marginalized young people" (p. 18).

Researchers have documented instances in which alternative education programs have enabled students to obtain a high school diploma, furthering their student academic success. For instance, Modesto et al. (2013), using a hermeneutic phenomenology together with self-efficacy theory (refers to the foundation of human agency and describes how people's self-convictions and persistent efforts can helps them be able to achieve anything they desire to accomplish), explored the lived experiences of adolescent mothers who graduated from an alternative school. The study took place in a large urban school district in South Texas; the researchers interviewed seven adolescent mothers, 18 years and older . The study used Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach, to capture the essence of these participants' experiences and explore how they gave meaning to their experiences. Researchers found that although educational attainment for adolescent mothers is challenging, alternative schools can contribute to both pregnant and adolescent mothers acquiring high school diplomas. The researchers found that young mothers were able to succeed when given the appropriate resources, relevant instruction,

and a supportive environment.

Relatedly, Harwick and Wehmeyer (2000) explored the perceptions of students labelled “at risk”, and then examined the educational and personal influences that helped them finish high school. Harwick and Wehmeyer (2000) believed that by analyzing these students’ perceptions of the educational climate, culture, and instructional practices, they could obtain a better understanding of the value of alternative education. The study took place in four alternative high school settings located in Southern California. The researchers collected data from 26 students, a mix of both graduates and current students. The study found that students perceived alternative school settings to be more caring, due to the presence of attentive adults that offered student-centered instruction, special programs, and activities that influenced students’ desire to succeed academically. In a similar study, Loomis et al. (2011) used a phenomenological approach to examine the perceptions of 10 students regarding their experiences of attending a large high school, before transferring to an alternative education high school in California, USA. According to the authors, a phenomenological approach allowed them to “understand the real-life context of the participants to gain a deep insight of their real-life events” (p. 54). The results indicated that the students felt the learning pace and teacher support were better in the alternative school than in the mainstream high school, where they had often felt discouraged, disconnected, and unsupported. Similar to the findings of Harwick and Wehmeyer (2000), the results of this research indicated the need for a smaller teaching environment, academic and personal support, and caring teacher-student relationships. These are all key elements in effectively supporting at-risk students attain academic success.

Duggan (2007) investigated the perceptions held by students in four alternative schools found in two alternative school settings in urban settings in Mississippi and in two alternative school settings in urban areas in Louisiana. A total of 104 students voluntarily participated in the project from all four alternative schools. The study’s main focus was on students’ perceptions of student-centered school culture and school effectiveness. The study was quantitative in nature and used a survey that contained

structured or closed-ended questions. The study results demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between perceptions of student-centered school culture and perceptions of school effectiveness among the four alternative schools. The study also found six independent variables, which the author described as 1) safe environment, 2) small size, 3) expanded teacher role, 4) positive student-teacher/staff relationships, 5) academic innovation, and 6) supportive services. The study concluded that "student centered alternative education is a viable public school reform" (p.95) and suggested that schools can help students, as long as they maintain a welcoming, supporting environment that reaches out and helps students to become successful.

Saunders and Saunders (2002) asked students to rate the overall experience of their past and current schools and to explain their responses. The study, which was qualitative in nature, was conducted in a newly opened alternative high school, named Walnut Creek Campus, in West Des Moines, Iowa, USA. Two questionnaires were given to students; the first focused on their perceptions of their former traditional schools, while the second questionnaire sought to discover their perceptions of their current alternative schooling. The questionnaires were administered at different times and in small-group settings, to prevent any confusion in the students' responses. The authors reported that students seemed to have had a more positive experience while they attending alternative schooling. The authors indicated that the alternative school that they had examined had a "very important purpose within the community to ensure that all students are able to achieve academic success" (p.23). Their findings underlined the importance of developing strong interpersonal relationships among administrators, teachers, caseworkers and students.

Byrne (2004) explored Miami Valley Career Technology Youth Connections as an alternative high school option. This school is located in Dayton, Ohio, USA, and has helped students who have become disconnected from regular classroom education. Byrne (2004) identifies himself as the principal of this school and stresses that he prioritizes a positive atmosphere that encourages teachers to act as mentors. Where teachers are granted the option to select the students with whom they wish to work for the entire school year. Byrne suggests that this not only helps the teachers build close relationships

with students and their parents, it also helps students to succeed in their career and academic pursuits. Byrne (2004) concluded that youth connections can be seen as an example of how school can provide "a quality education to all of its students"(p.50) and presented his school as a growing, evolving instituion that is on the cutting edge of the educational future.

Gooden (2009) examined the difference in the perceptions between alternative high school directors and teachers regarding the importance of effective alternative school practices. The study took place in the state of Missouri and was quantitative in nature. The data that was analyzed in this study was derived from a questionnaire sent out to participants—24 alternative school directors and 43 alternative school teachers. The questionnaires had two parts; the first consisted of 40 Likert-type items that were identified from the literature review, and the second part consisted of demographic questions. The study concluded that positive school climate and small class sizes were statistically significant when it came to student success. Gooden (2009) suggested that it was important for students in smaller communities to have opportunities to develop working relationships with the business community, as this could help them to access mentoring and job training possibilities. In addition, Gooden (2009) reinforced the idea that it was very important for staff and students to have a sense of community, in which students' opinions are listened to and used in the decision-making process.

Morrow-Gholson (2016) explored the key factors that contribute to alternative high school diploma graduates' success in college. A qualitative study was used to interview eight alternative high school diploma graduates in the Midwest region of the United States. Participants shared their experiences on key factors that contributed to their success in college. The author found that "self-determination played a significant role in college success for alternative high school diploma graduates"(p.118). In addition, the study found that atmosphere and attitude, as well as psychological and academic engagement, played key roles in alternative high school diploma graduates' success in college. Morrow-Gholson (2016) "discovered that college success was more associated with the students' experiences related to coursework, faculty engagement, and volunteer participation and advisor support" (p.123) and suggested for "educators to continue to

establish higher educational platforms, relationships, and learning environments to leverage the learning potential of alternative high school diploma graduates in college" (p.123).

Lastly, Herrington et al. (2012) explored student perceptions of an alternative school located in Mississippi, USA. Like Modesto et al. (2013), this study used Van Manen's (1994, 1995,1997) phenomenological approach. The researchers wanted to understand the personal experiences of the students at this alternative school. The study used face-to-face interviews with four different groups: 1) 10 students enrolled in the program, 2) their parents/guardians, 3) the program's teachers and 4) program administrators. The study found that both students and teachers "believed the alternative program is used as a 'dumping ground' for unwanted teachers and students" (p. 85). The authors suggested the implementation of intense counselling services for students with behavioural problems, and more assistance during the transition back to the regular school. Some of the literature reviewed not only offered a positive evaluation of these programs, it also provided useful insights about the benefits that alternative education programs may offer to students. This study featured some positive descriptions of teacher-student relationships that allowed students to feel safe and cared for while attending these programs. Students reported that these programs offered a second chance at attaining their education, granting them the ability to academically succeed.

The Discrimination and Marginalization of Youth in Alternative Education Programs

One prevalent theme found in this literature review was the impact of alternative education programs on the marginalization and discrimination of the youth that attend these programs. This theme offers a vivid picture of how alternative education programs may exacerbate disadvantage and marginalization of youth through stigma and segregation. In a study that used narrative inquiry to

examine an alternative education setting for high school students in the United States, Kim (2011) described such programs as "dumping-grounds" (p.78-79) that promoted the school/prison continuum. In a narrative that complemented the data collection, Kim (2011) constructed the story of a senior high school student named Kevin Gonzales. This narrative aimed to provide the reader with insights about how some students feel marginalized in alternative education settings. Kim (2011) argued that the use of policing actions such as backpack searches and the implementation of a strict disciplinary policy are detrimental to students' confidence. The study described how Kevin Gonzales, and most of the students that attended the program, felt marginalized and discriminated. The findings of this study demonstrated how antagonizing, inefficient and unsuccessful alternative education settings could be for some students. This study is particularly relevant to my research, in that it can be a useful example of an investigation on the social effects of SAL programs. In particular, it provides useful analytical tools to investigate how the marginalization, discrimination and stigma embedded in these programs can affect student experiences.

In a similar vein, Smyth and McInerney (2013) presented a series of narrative portraits to amplify the voices of the youths who felt angry, frustrated, and powerless after dropping out of school. In a span of two years, the researchers conducted an ethnographic study that included interviews with over 200 young people about their experience of schooling and the factors that led them to withdraw from school. The study examined the human impact of social exclusion and the reproduction of educational disadvantage for youths in alternative education. The researchers sought to "provide a textual strategy through portraiture that enables the voices of these young people to 'speak back' and bear witness to the way the ruling neoliberal policy regimes are deforming and disfiguring their lives" (p. 17). Smyth and McInerney (2013) argued that "as researchers, we have a moral and ethical responsibility beyond the 'thin' imposed views of university ethics committees to work with and advance the lives of those who are institutionally and systematically the most excluded and silenced" (p. 17). The authors believed this strategy could cause positive and effective re-engagement of

students in alternative education settings. In conclusion, the article recommended more advocacy for these students—described by the authors as vulnerable and marginalized—highlighting the importance the appropriate supports to help students to reposition themselves as "active agents in their own lives, agendas, and future" (p. 18).

Using a mix-methods approach, Farrelly, Daniels, Hofstetter, and Prado-Olmos (2013) examined if the needs of students in alternative schools were met; they tried to determine to what extent these programs offered opportunities for academic improvement. The study took place in the southwest United States and used a total of 183 student surveys in the quantitative phase and eight student interviews in the qualitative phase. The authors found that the participants experienced systematic marginalization within the educational system. They concluded that the discipline processes carried out by school administrators disproportionately impacted students of Black, Indigenous and Latinx descent, as well as those with disabilities, and with low academic achievement. The authors recommended that "teachers, schools, districts, states and the federal government must become accountable to each other and the students they serve" (p. 213).

Adding to the body of research on this topic in the United States, Tajalli and Garber (2014) presented a vivid picture of the prejudice, disadvantage, and marginalization experienced by students in alternative education programs in Texas, USA. This study starts with a historical review of the development of "alternative disciplinary programs", a term that is also used to identify alternative education programs. Through the collection of data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the researchers examined the impact of district wealth, size of enrolment, ethnic distribution, and type of district in which these alternative education settings were located. The authors found that racialized, low-income and low-achievement students were most often referred to alternative education programs. The study revealed how prejudicial beliefs regarding poverty, race, and disability have caused disproportionate disciplinary measures towards minoritized students.

Additionally, Lehr (2009) provides a synthesis of information gathered through 1)) a comprehensive review of legislation and policy on alternative schools/programs from 48 states and 2) a national survey about alternative schools and students served and completed by key contacts at state departments of education. Lehr (2009) found an increase in the attention paid to alternative education at the state level; however, reasons for the increases in both enrollment and in legislation were unclear. Furthermore, Lehr (200) claimed that the focus and intent of alternative education is changing and appears to be more punitive in nature. Lehr (2009) hoped that her study will provide a point of reference to begin discussions at the national, state, and local level, as there appears to be an increase in student enrollment in alternative schools and programs, which in turn has caused an increase in the number of these programs.

Examining student dropout and academic success was the subject of many of the studies that dealt with discrimination and marginalization of youth in alternative education programs. By sending out questionnaires to students, parent and educators from a rural area in Michigan, McCall (2003) examined why individual children were seen to first succeed and then to choose to dropout of school. McCall (2003) suggested that the lack of positive and productive relationships between students and school personnel was the main cause of school dropout. The author recommended the need to rethink policies that blindly shift students back to regular education without continuing academic and social supports in place.

Lee (2008) used data from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Educational Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS 2002) to examine the contributions that students' general (i.e., personal and social) characteristics and scholastic characteristics have to do with promoting success in an alternative learning environment. The Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) "monitored the transition of a national sample of students as they progressed from the tenth grade through high school and on to postsecondary education and/or the workplace" (p.64). The study involved 750 public and private schools. Approximately 26 sophomore students were then randomly selected from each school, which provided a sample of 1,591 students. Lee (2008) concluded that, although reading ability and motivation were seen to be important for academic success,

personal outlook and level support were most important in promoting positive outcomes in the alternative learning environment.

In a similar vein, Turner (2012) examined the social and academic needs of students experiencing behavioural difficulties in schools, using a qualitative grounded theory approach. This study collected data from field observations, interviews, and students' prior performance data of two target change schools in Southern Arizona, USA. The investigator concluded that students considered having good relationships and being cared for to be more important than having good facilities, resources, or instructional methods. For instance, "data showed that students were able to excel with or without technology" (p. 112), as long as students felt cared for and felt supported. A good level of care can translate into academic success.

In England, Thompson (2011) examined the Entry to Employment (E2E) programs, a type of work-based learning program that aims to re-engage young people who may have experienced barriers to staying in school. The program's goals were to give youth access to alternative education, training, or employment. This paper is based on a study previously conducted by the author in two neighbouring local authorities in the north of England between 2008 and 2009. An ethnographic approach, including observations and 63 semi-structured interviews with educators and students aged 16 to 18, was adopted. Some of these students were unable to enter further education programs because they had inadequate basic skills, low motivation, low self-esteem, or behavioural problems. Thompson (2011) found that there was a lack of meaningful academic support for students in the alternative education sites. For instance, these programs focused on enforcing hands-on training rather than academic-conceptual knowledge, and when students asked for more challenging work in their basic skills sessions, their requests were ignored. The author found that administrators often saw parents as part of the problem rather than part of the solution, which prompted administrators to exclude parents from the students' learning. This resulted in poor school-home relationships, which in turn further exacerbated the lack of support for these students.

The literature provides many examples of how some schools and classrooms have become dysfunctional, anti-educational places. Angus (2006) argues that educators and administrators must try to “understand how education as a social institution systematically acts to disadvantage certain types of people” (p. 375). In this study, Angus presents evidence of how students were marginalized by not having relevant social and cultural resources and supports available to them. The author claimed that the school system has become too competitive and that academic competition was psychologically harmful to everyone—not only students that were disadvantaged, but also those that were academically strong. Related research (Ball, 1997, Shields, 2004: Erickson, 1987; Smyth, McInerney & Hattam, 2003) reinforces these points by reiterating the importance of recognizing student voices, values, and cultures. An acknowledgment of the students’ life circumstances must be incorporated into the school’s curriculum and teaching practices.

Marginalized groups are unable to access and engage in a mainstream academic curriculum when removed from the regular school setting. Francis, Mills and Lupton (2017) examined the educational experiences of students in alternative settings in England and Australia. These researchers observed that the staple curriculum that was offered to these students did not recognize the realities and experiences of racialized and working-class youth, and this further entrenched their disadvantage by "precluding access to high-status education and career paths” (p. 421). The study concluded that education "follows similar social-class trends in the direction of working-class students into vocational study” (p. 420). The authors claimed that the education system denies working-class students the access to powerful forms of knowledge taught in an academic curriculum, thereby preventing these students from acquiring the qualifications necessary to attain both value and recognition in their future employment.

Fedders (2018) examined marginalization and discrimination in alternative education programs by conducting a qualitative meta-analysis of the literature within the USA. The study investigated youth suspension and alternative education

program transfers, with a focus on Black students and students with disabilities. The article starts by discussing how school districts in the pre-civil-rights era justified group-based exclusion of Black students and students with disabilities; this was based on the lack of accommodations allegedly required for these groups to be academically successful. It concluded that the practice of exclusion, on the basis of race or disability, was still present in public education, and specifically in the alternative education system. The article concludes by stressing the need for school districts to commit to a notion that all students have a right to education, noting that better alternatives to alternative education programs should be found.

Examining the implications of the term "at risk" in alternative education, Te Riele (2007) noted that "the term 'youth at risk' is increasingly common in Australian policy and media with its connotations of deficiencies of knowledge, qualifications, or behaviour in young people themselves" (p. 55). As a result, "alternative projects, as well as alternative units or schools, have been established which aim to 'fix' the young person in some way" (p. 56). An alternative perspective contends that "rather than assuming that something about the young person needs to change, it suggests that something about educational provisions needs to change" (p. 56). Te Riele's (2007) research focuses on two dimensions to construct a proposed map of alternative education for marginalized youth in Australia. The first dimension is based on the purpose of the program. Its central assumption is "that a change in curriculum and/or different pedagogical approach will better meet the needs of young people" (p. 58). The second dimension describes the low and high stabilities of alternative programs, and how they operate. Te Riele (2007) cautions that this mapping exercise could be a "reduction of reality" (p. 58) and it is only provided with "the hope that it will form a useful tool for both practitioners and scholars" (p. 58) who want to change the current educational provisions for marginalized students. This study was particularly interesting in that it provided a description of what "at-risk youth" means in other countries and the connotations that such a term carries. This study can serve as a guiding tool to contrast the use of this term in the Ontarian context.

Analyzing marginalization and discrimination and how they manifest in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, grade level, and special education in alternative education programs, Booker and Mitchell (2011) used a quantitative approach to examine a student's likelihood of being placed in a disciplinary alternative education program. They compared an ethnically diverse sample of students of Black, Hispanic and White background to look at mandatory versus discretionary reasons for disciplinary action, and the probability of students returning within the same year. Samples of student attendance were taken and evaluated during the last six weeks of school, in both 2005 and 2006. The study included two schools in an urban and suburban district in the southwest part of the United States. From these two schools, more than 269 files of students in grades 6-12 were chosen. Student data were collected, and descriptive statistics were calculated to obtain a general profile of the sample. Even though the study was quantitative in nature, the authors described how participants in alternative education programs regarded these programs as a form of punishment. Although the study did not find significant differences between boys and girls in terms of their individual experiences in alternative education programs, it did find that boys make up "over 80% of students found in alternative schooling for discretionary reasons such as truancy and minor misbehaviour" (p. 199). Additionally, the study found that boys were 2.3 times more likely to return within the same school year to alternative education programs after they had been placed back in their regular school setting. Boys were also more likely to be referred to alternative education programs "due to a range of major and minor offenses, except for truancy" (p. 195). Furthermore, the study reported that White students were more likely to be given easily definable offenses that require placement supports and be placed back in their regular school setting. In contrast, racialized students were more likely to receive office referrals and to be placed in alternative education programs.

Other studies found that gender differences play a role in alternative education programs. For example, Russell and Thompson (2011) conducted an ethnographic study that focused on the different experiences of 14-19-year-olds in alternative education programs. Fifty-seven youth (42 males and 15 females) and

10 parent/caretakers took part in the study. Through interviews, the study established broad themes regarding attitudes present within the alternative education setting. For instance, the study concluded that most alternative settings marginalized and discriminated girls more than boys; this was because these programs offered an array of vocational programs aimed specifically at encouraging male over female interests. The study found a bias associated with the courses offered to female participants, as these dealt mainly with beauty, hair grooming, and child-minding, as opposed to the programs offered to males, which included mechanics, bricklaying, plumbing, construction, maintenance, and outdoor education. The set of programs offered could be seen as stereotypical and assumed that participants in these types of alternative education settings should be prepared for manual labour, as they are assumed to not be intelligent enough to be considered for anything else that would require them to use their higher cognitive capabilities. This study demonstrated the gender bias that can exist in alternative education curricula.

Aiming to study the risk factors associated to attending alternative education settings, Smith and Thompson's (2014) investigated these programs in North Carolina, North Eastern Wyoming, and Seattle, USA. The research found that alternative education programs were successful in decreasing the dropout rates and in increasing the graduation rates. However, due to the fact that other outcomes that affected the students' participation in society—including reduced enrolment in post-secondary education and poor employment perspectives—were less than satisfactory, these issues outweighed the positive outcomes. This study suggested that alternative education programs need to adopt educational methods that respond to the specific needs of the students, thus helping combat and eradicate the negative stigma associated with these programs.

Gut and Mclaughlin (2012) used a quantitative approach to examine the changes in the number of disciplinary referrals that public schools received before these schools partnered with one private alternative education provider. This study was conducted within three school districts located in a southeastern state of the

United States. The researchers identified the alternative education provider as a private, national company that offers alternative educational services to students through "the purchase of seats for a specified number of students" (p. 232). These seats cost generally less than the per-pupil funding received from the Department of Education, thus allowing the school district to "save money through this partnership while keeping students in school" (p. 232).

The programs these private providers offered use "computer-assisted learning, teacher-led instructions, mastery-based learning, group projects, service learning, low student-teacher ratios and a shortened school day" (p. 232). According to the authors, this approach gave students the ability to work on different assignments at their own pace and get back on track to working on their graduation. Through data analysis of school enrolments, the study was able to examine whether there was a statistical difference in referrals to alternative education pre- and post-partnerships.

The researchers were not able to find any difference between pre- or post-referrals to alternative education programs. However, they found that there was an increase in regular school safety after partnering with alternative education providers, given that students who presented any kind of behavioural issue were removed and placed in a privately provided alternative education program. Instead of offering students the proper social and behaviour supports that could help them address their behavioural issues within regular school settings, the school district opted to remove these students from the regular school and place them in a privatized system. This not only saved money for the school district, but also liberated them from the responsibility of having to address these students' needs.

Students in alternative education settings often view themselves as bad students, dumped in low-level curriculum settings, with no academic expectations (Becker, 2010). According to Becker's (2010) study, alternative schooling programs were "facing great pressure in the areas of academic performance, behaviour control, change in the negative reputation they were under, and most importantly, in the retaining of funding to continue to exist" (p. 78-79). This study

included 400 hours of observation, semi-structured informal interviews with the principal, six of the school's teachers and 30 students 14-18 years old who were attending this alternative education setting. This investigation reported many troubling findings, including the poor quality of the curriculum, lack of focus, deficient structure of the program, teachers' lack of training, and a paucity of adequate resources.

Livock (2011) documented the inadequacy of alternative education settings in Australia. The main purpose of the study was to obtain an in-depth analysis of students' experiences in various types of alternative education programs. Livock (2011) used three case-study sites located in the state of Queensland, Australia. Participants in her study were youth 9-18 years of age. The methodology used was qualitative and attempted to reveal what were the provisions that were working to help students with their academic and social needs. The author concluded that there was a lack of both student and staff support and insufficient educational resources within all three alternative education settings. Livock (2011) advocated for this to be remedied; otherwise, the educational system will continue to deteriorate and fail to successfully provide a decent education to its students.

Aiming to uncover the educational perceptions of former students of an alternative program located in Delaware County in Pennsylvania,USA, Beasley (2017) interviewed 11 of its former students. While the study found that most students had been able to attain a high school diploma by using this program, students also claimed that prior to attending these programs, they felt stigmatized and marginalized for attending a program that was described as dumping grounds for both under-performing students and teachers. Beasley (2017) advocated for proper funding for student resources and for more effective classroom training for teachers and administrators as ways to combat the stigmatization of these programs.

During the review of studies on alternative education, only three (relatively recent) Canadian studies were found. The first was a book edited by Bascia, Fine, and Levin (2017). In it, the contributing authors explored the unique phenomenon of public alternative schools in Toronto, Canada and other large urban areas in

North America. This book was the most recent source found to offer detailed descriptions of alternative education in Ontario. The book consists of 19 chapters in which the contributors relate their own experiences while working in mostly privately owned alternative educational settings. The majority of the chapters highlighted the role of private alternative schooling and depicted these settings as 1) a form of utopian alternative private child-centered instruction, which allowed students and teachers the opportunities to organize the school differently, 2) places that provided a greater voice for teachers, students, and parents, and 3) locations that engaged students far more with experiential learning. Of the 19 chapters, only three chapters provided an illustration of alternative education programs within the Toronto District School Board.

These three chapters offered vivid portrayals of student experiences of racism, marginalization and discrimination while attending these programs. The book does not offer concrete recommendations to ameliorate the problems of alternative school programs; instead, it proposes that these alternative programs, which are privately run, need to be more accessible to a wider audience. According to these authors, private alternative programs could encourage students' talents and serve their needs in a better manner than the regular school system. This book was chosen not only because it was the most recent source in the Canadian context, but because it also supports the claim that more research is needed to document the experiences of youth in alternative education programs that are not privately owned.

Another Canadian-based study (Dillabough & Kennely 2010) found that most students placed in alternative education programs came from low-income households. The study used an ethnographic approach to interview Canadian students13-16 years of age; it found that students did not receive the appropriate resources that could help them attain academic success. Like Beasley (2017), Dillabough and Kennely (2010) advocated for more funding for student resources and teacher training. This was the only source found to offer information about students' experiences of alternative education programs in Canada. It must also be

noted that this research was conducted in 2010, and not much has been investigated on this topic since then. Besides Bascia et al. (2017), no recent research has been conducted in the Canadian context regarding alternative education programs, and specifically student experiences in these programs.

The final Canadian study found was one conducted by Morrisette (2011); it used a phenomenological study to explore the experiences of off-campus high school graduates. Twenty students participated in the study, which consisted of 14 males and six females. Morrisette explained that participants described feeling good about providing information that could benefit learners and future program development, while sharing their experiences. Participants felt that participating in this study gave them a sense of purpose, as they wanted to have their voices heard. Morrisette's (2011) findings highlighted the importance of engaging learners at the point of initial contact and throughout their academic program. The author noted that "the alternative program engaged learners and provided them with opportunities to become introspective while feeling accepted and valued" (p.186). Morrisette (2011) concluded that this study helped her gain more awareness of the importance of student engagement and how it plays a great role when it comes to student academic success.

Summary and Conclusions

The review of the literature presented useful insights about the alternative education settings. While some studies offered positive findings about alternative education programs, particularly how they are seen as a second chance to improve student educational futures (McGregor & Mills, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2017), other sources revealed the discrimination and marginalization experienced by students in these programs. Some studies reviewed in this chapter demonstrate that most alternative education programs respond to a punitive approach to schooling (Russell & Thompson, 2011; Booker & Mitchell, 2011) targeting racialized, low-income, and low-achieving students. With the exception of one article (Smyth & McInerney, 2013), not much literature focused directly on gender perspectives in

alternative education. This gap invites further research in this area. This review suggests that additional research is needed to document the experiences of youth in SAL programs. This study aims to contribute to the literature on alternative education, filling the need for this research in Canada and particularly in Ontario. Such research may contribute to the improvement of programs, and will hopefully help reduce the negative perceptions associated with the students who attend these programs. The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework of this research. It contains a discussion of a relational approach to education research. Specifically, the chapter will demonstrate the relevance of Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical toolkit to explore the experiences of students in SAL programs.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

Within any field, there are certain theorists upon whose work researchers may draw to frame their thinking. This study was informed by Bourdieu's theory of practice and his concepts of *habitus*, *fields*, and *capital* (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In particular, Atkinson's (2020) reading of Bourdieu's concepts guided the study by providing an experience-focused framework with which to examine the multiple fields that shape the lived experiences of these students. This chapter includes an introduction to Bourdieu's theory of practice, and his concepts of habitus, fields, and capital. Then, we will examine Atkinson's reinterpretation of Bourdieu's toolkit, a framework that seeks to apply Bourdieu's theory to the analysis of lived experiences. Next, the reasons for choosing this theoretical framework are discussed, with a special focus on its usefulness as an analytical tool to examine the experiences of individuals who have been enrolled in SAL programs. The chapter concludes by discussing the use of Bourdieu's theories in the field of education, in particular, in their relation to alternative education programs.

Bourdieu's Toolkit

Pierre Bourdieu is famously known for his toolkit of sociological concepts: habitus, fields, and capital. As noted by numerous commentators, (Adams, 2010; Atkinson, 2020; Bourdieu et al., 1990; Lane, 2000; Susen, 2013) this toolkit is extremely useful in social-science research; it offers a framework with "which we may grasp the many levels of practical life, using an economic metaphor" (Bourdieu et al., 1990, p. 1). It provides researchers with "novel and often persuasive alternatives for dealing with some of the major problems which beset the work of contemporary Anglo-American social scientists" (Harker, Mahar & Wiles, 1990, p. 1). Pierre Bourdieu's works have been pivotal in the research of marginalized social groups, such as the homeless, the unemployed, undocumented immigrants, and striking workers (Harker, et al., 1990; Hart, 2019; Fourny, 2000; Lane, 2000; Punwar, 2009; Susen. 2013). Bourdieu's work was influenced by diverse intellectuals such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, de Saussure, Wittgenstein, Benveniste, and Canguilhem. As well as schools of thought that range from

phenomenology and structuralism to analytic philosophy (Atkinson, 2020; Harker, et al., 1990; Lane, 2000). Bourdieu's work has the ability to transcend the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism and transform these two conceptions of scientific knowledge into "a dialectical relationship between structure and agency" (Harker, et al., 1990, p. 1). Bourdieu's work attempts to articulate a framework that works in "a spiral between theory, empirical work and back to working reformulating theory again but at a different level" (p. 3).

It is important to note, that while Bourdieu provides a conceptual apparatus for the study of practical life, these concepts "should remain flexible and must be examined by the researcher in the empirical setting rather than being seen as a set of categorical boxes to which data must conform" (Harker, et al., 1990, p. 3). Bourdieu is seen to break and advance from Marxism, adding an interpretive perspective that makes "explicit the truth of primary experience of the social world… and excludes the question of the conditions of its own possibility" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 3). Bourdieu offers a methodology that is directed towards the analysis of social and economic practices, challenging the way researchers look at the dominant and hegemonic modes of representing and classifying the world (Lane, 2000).

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, Habitus, Fields, and Capital

Bourdieu developed a set of interdependent concepts, namely, habitus, fields, and capital. He used these concepts together as part of a framework geared to understand and explain how social structures limit and frame a person's capacity to act and make decisions (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Goldenberg, 2014). Bourdieu's theory of practice explains how, through the use of *doxa*—described as the intellectual process of common shared beliefs or popular opinion (Bourdieu, 1977a)—a person's knowledge is created. Doxa is responsible for the creation of experiences known as "doxic experiences"[1] that take place in the social world (Bourdieu, 1977a). According to Bourdieu, doxic experiences determine the way in which a group of people strives to

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[1] Subjective experiences that are associated with the idea that what is happening to a person should be accepted and not be contested, as this is the way it is supposed to happen

[2] Described as the qualitative differences between different groups in forms of attained knowledge.

produce, reproduce, or improve their social position (Bourdieu, 1977a). Doxa ensures that a consistent "corpus of juridical norms" (a collection and administration of legal patterns that are followed without disobedience) are formed and subconsciously enforced within society (Bourdieu, 1977a). Further, Bourdieu argued that the education system is used for the production and reproduction of doxa (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). For example, the doxa of meritocracy justifies the notion that students can only advance in and through the educational system, based on their own merit (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This doxa legitimizes the idea that if someone fails in school, it is because she/he is not trying hard enough. Under this doxa, any social or personal challenges —learning difficulties, poor health conditions, poverty, or any other socio-economic issues—would be irrelevant in attempting to understand student success.

Bourdieu argued that meritocracy helps disguise the practices of social inequities. He contended that meritocracy was a myth, and that the school system was fixed in favour of the dominant class, so the status quo could continue without any disturbance (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Furthermore, Bourdieu believed that the school system helped to classify students. To normalize this idea of success, it helps to reproduce doxic experiences, which in turn reinforces the belief that those in positions of power should remain there (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As previously mentioned, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, fields, and capital are not just conceptual tools that can be used on their own. He explained in many of his writings that, in practice, these concepts interconnect with one another (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu et al., 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Nonetheless, in this chapter, for the purpose of clarification, each concept will be explained separately.

Habitus

Bourdieu characterized habitus as a "system of durable, transposable dispositions, predisposed to function as structuring structures of practices and representations which could be objectively regulated without the need of enforcement or rules that would enforce these practices and representations" (Bourdieu, 1977a). Habitus allows us to understand how rules are implemented in society without the need of having laws to

reinforce them. Through habitus, Bourdieu demonstrated how social structures such as education and government could enforce ideas that maintain the social norms in society.

Bourdieu proposed that habitus "could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perceptions, conception, and actions common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and understanding of worldviews" (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 86). Habitus describes how social rules embed the ideas of those in power; these ideas inform a system that can ultimately be enforced to make others accept the status quo and act within it without contest. According to Bourdieu, habitus operates below a level of consciousness, whereby an individual may act in a predisposed manner from a particular arrangement of habits/beliefs that are unconsciously taught, carrying a specific priority in a given individual's life. Ultimately, habitus shape and structure a person's beliefs or actions (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu et al., 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Within the field of education, habitus is acquired in the family during the early years; this helps to form a child's actions/beliefs and becomes the foundation of all other dispositions to act (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). This "primary habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990) underlies the structuring of school experiences, and most importantly in the way in which a student will gather skills and new knowledge (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). Hence, any dissonance in the primary habitus of a child, prior to attending school, may create difficulties later in the child's education (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). Habitus can be seen as dynamic or singular and it is essential in the production of what is commonly known as the common-sense world (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu cautioned that habitus should not be seen through an individualist lens, as habitus is not self-sufficient. For habitus to function, it requires the existence of a social world. Consequently, we cannot blame a person's actions solely on their own volition. For Bourdieu, individual actions are always influenced by habitus (Bourdieu, 1977a). Habitus, in this sense, is a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures that influence and inform the actions of a person. For this research, the notion

of habitus will be essential to examine the participants' actions and experiences in SAL programs.

Fields

Fields are described as "structural spaces organized around particular types of capital, consisting of dominant and subordinate positions" (Power, 1999, p. 50). Fields can be seen to operate according to their own set of rules: different fields value different forms of capital and resources. According to Bourdieu, fields are also structured to form an overall field, which he called "the field of power", a field controlled and influenced by the dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2010). Each field is relatively autonomous. However, there is one important commonality among them: each field plays a role in making the field of power (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, 1977b; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2010).

Spaces in educational fields are occupied both by the institutions (such as schools, universities, colleges and or community centers) and people (who can occupy many different positions, such as teachers, students, and administrators). These spaces are uneven and heterogeneous (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990) as not all positions within these spaces carry the same value or are distributed evenly among all social actors. Many different fields seem to rely heavily upon the field of education. For instance, education mediates the production of skilled workers who can be employed at all different levels within other fields. According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990), the field of education is the primary source for production and reproduction of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that carry high value in class reproduction (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). Due to the value that is given to the field of education, it is often manipulated within political and governmental fields through economic or juridical interventions (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1977a), for example, when dictating what can or cannot be taught in the school system.

Bourdieu argued that any action undertaken by a given individual is informed by the rules of practice of each field (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Nice, 2015). Despite this apparent regulation and coordination, fields are also spaces of continuing disagreement and internal discord (Bourdieu & Nice, 2015).

Within fields, agents are always battling for a better position, struggling to maintain or improve their current position. As a consequence, fields can enact defensive or aggressive social interactions (Bourdieu & Nice, 2015). The notion of fields is essential in undertaking this research. It can provide an analytical lens with which to investigate the role of education experiences in SAL programs.

Capital

The definition of capital is very wide. Bourdieu proposed different forms of capital, each one with a different scope. Bourdieu defined capital as a specialization of consciousness and a recognized mastery of some techniques that can grant social membership into a particular status group (Bourdieu, 1977a). The first form of capital he presented is *economic capital*, which includes the assets, monetary gains, and capacity to use and have access to financial resources (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Nice, 2015). The second form of capital is *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Nice, 2015), which has both intrinsic value[2] and extrinsic value[3]. Capital acts as a social relation within an exchange system and it can be seen as a basis of domination over the lower classes (Bourdieu et al., 1990; Grenfell, 2008). For Bourdieu, symbolic capital has two forms: social capital, described as values, tastes, and lifestyles of some social groups; and cultural capital, which is seen as "the synonym for status or habitus for socialization" (Grenfell, 2008, p.99).

A third form of capital—*cultural capital*—can express itself in three different states: The first is the "embodied state", i.e., the qualities that make up a person's self-disposition to have the ability to demonstrate a social advantage (Grenfell, 2008). This concept of capital can be depicted through an individual's lifestyle choices, linguistic and/or scientific knowledge, as well as their food, clothing, music or art preferences (Bourdieu, 1977a). The second state is the "objectified state", or actual cultural goods a person possesses. This refers to the material artifacts a person owns, which can be

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[2] Described as the qualitative differences between different groups in forms of attained knowledge.

[3] Obtained through power relations in society and how these define and differentiate each social group.

sold/bought, displayed, inherited and/or collected, and thus carry value in society. The third state is the "institutionalized state", which delineates an individual's academic qualifications, and which determine their social status through any qualifications, awards, titles, or honours attained from a social recognized institution (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Goldenberg, 2014).

Bourdieu defined *social capital* as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 119). According to Harker et al. (1990), "the work of constructing visions and divisions in the social world supposes a particular kind of capital (for some), which works effectively in the mechanisms of delegation and dispositions" (p. 14). One of the features of these divisions is "symbolic violence", namely, the deprecation of people's properties or characteristics through symbols, concepts and discourses (Atkinson, 2020; Harker et al., 1990)

Following Bourdieu, it can be argued that symbolic capital is an arbitrary tool used within the field of education to maintain social order (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital within the field of education grants and maintains the social advantage that perpetuates the status of certain social groups above other social groups (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu argued that schools offer different types of cultural and social capital accumulation, which confirms the lack of a level playing field for all social actors. Indeed, capital, in its many forms is not evenly or equitably distributed among all social classes (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). This is evident when one observes that highly resourced schools are in a position to produce and reproduce the capital that their students need to advance their education, thereby granting their students the ability to occupy privileged social positions later in life (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). The possession by students to certain forms of cultural, symbolic, economic, and social capital predisposes them to gaining access to particular field options, thus enhancing their future plans and advantages.

Atkinson's Reading of Bourdieu's Toolkit

Bourdieu offers a methodogy that "seeks to avoid the subjective-objective polarizations of both phenomenology and structuralism" (Harker et al., 2009, p. 197). It offers conceptual tools that challenge the traditional oppositions that have been traditionally enshrined within the social sciences. In his reinterpretation of Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit, Atkinson (2020) claims that most researchers often confuse the "things of logic with the logic of things" (p. 36), which results in failing to interrogate their findings from a theoretical point of view. As a remedy to this, Atkinson (2017) offers what he calls "relational phenomenology", an approach that seeks to reconcile "time-geography and phenomenology with Bourdieu's vision of social structures" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 25). The resulting framework aims to provide robust sociological accounts of social spaces, concrete objects, and their abstract relations. According to Atkinson (2010), reading Bourdieu's analytical toolbox as a relational phenomenology can offer a framework to understand individuation and conscious action, and consequently presents researchers with better explanations of the processes and patterns of the social world. Atkinson (2010) describes individuation as "the ability to explain the multitude of differentiating factors among individuals in similar relational locations that make them—their habitus and hence their practices—idiosyncratic" (p. 5).

Atkinson (2010) argues that relational phenomenology reinforces Bourdieu's toolkit by 1) helping to surpass the insights that focus on the conditions of a field or social space; 2) analyzing the experiences that sediments a person's desire for its forms of capital; and 3) interpreting the nature of the indoctrination of a sense of one's place and what is possible. This helps researchers produce a deeper understanding of how the abstract relations of fields and social spaces shape and are shaped by the people, places, timings and objects of the "lifeworld". This term refers to the common-sense interpretive frames and logics by which individuals pre-reflectively conceptualize and organize their perceptions of everyday life (Fincher & Fincher, 2007). By reinterpreting Bourdieu's concepts as relational phenomenology, researchers can better comprehend why people that occupy the same social space may have different experiences, given their unique capital. By analyzing field and lifeworld as complementary endeavours, researchers can

construe how fields throw a new light on the structure and dynamics of individual lifeworlds (Atkinson, 2020). A renewed focus on the intersubjective character of field production would allow researchers to better understand the "multitude of relational structures in which an individual is situated and the relations between those relations as they manifest in the lifeworld, the social surface, and the world horizon" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 258).

Further, Atkinson's (2020) reinterpretation of the concept of field could help researchers with 1) exploring the relational nature of specific fields by examining closely which fields contribute to and characterize social order; 2) identifying the key oppositions and struggles that define fields; and 3) finding the interrelations between fields.

Other important Bourdieusian concepts highlighted by Atkinson (2020) include:

1) *Misrecognition,* i.e., a system that oppresses, establishes and legitimizes the hierarchies of social classes. This system is perceived by both the dominant and dominated as an acceptable process that acts in the best interest of all society. It operates in the intersection of fields, habitus, and capitals (Bourdieu, 1977a);

2) *Symbolic mastery*, i.e, the ability to use the knowledge and skills acquired through formal education;

3) *Practical mastery*, namely, the awareness of how things work and what they mean, without being able to conceptualize them;

4) *Hexis*, which describes the bodily dispositions, that is, the way of walking, talking, standing, and wearing clothes that are socially differentiated not only by gender, but also by class, race, or ethnic origin (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Atkinson, 2020);

5) *Hysteresis,* namely the failure of habitus' pre-conscious schemes to guide action, due to a sudden change of circumstances, which requires a shift to rational deliberation and conscious engagement (Atkinson, 2020, p. 69).

According to Atkinson (2020), all these concepts, borrowed from Bourdieu, are fundamental in making sense of people's daily struggles, experiences, and conflicts.

How did the Theoretical Framework Contribute to this Research?

Atkinson's (2010, 2017, 2020) reinterpretation of Bourdieu's toolkit provides an analytical framework for investigating the experiences of students in SAL programs, i.e., how their movements across time and space, and their lifeworlds, have been enacted, but also constrained, by circuits of symbolic capital. The framework helped to examine how the study participants navigated social life and (re)produced social structures in their everyday lives. Informed by these conceptual tools, an analysis is provided of the participants' different experiences while they attended similar educational settings (Atkinson, 2020).

Bourdieu's toolkit highlights "the necessity of putting both theory and data to work together, while carrying the assumption that "the social world is the product of social constructions, yet it is also more than such constructions" (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p. 117). According to Rawolle and Lingard (2013), the use of Bourdieu's toolkit gives researchers the ability to recognize how social phenomena are interdependent and interrelated. The authors note that Bourdieu's toolkit can assist in recognizing the uneven social relations within social fields, helping researchers to break free from pre-conceived objects of the social world (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013).

Putting it all Together: The Relevance of Atkinson's Framework for the Study

In order to reframe Bourdieu's theoretical contribution, Atkinson (2020) deployed the following three concepts:

1) *Multiplicity*, which refers to the everyday experiences, dispositions and schemes of perception that make social actors who they are. The idea of multiplicity helps to describe the pains and joys of life, and more importantly, how practices are structured by a combination of forces (clashing or harmonized) that derive from multiple fields. These can include micro-fields, where people are caught up or invested in one way or another. Each micro-field enacts its own struggles for particular recognition; includes dominant

and dominated players and its own doxa. Atkinson claimed "people and their doings are, quite simply, shaped by their membership of more than one field at the same time" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 179). The idea of multiplicity expands Bourdieu's theorization of field membership. For Atkinson (2020), "those positioned within the field of power are also positioned within the social space". He suggested, "some people can be agents within more than one field in the field of power" (p. 179).

2) *Time Spaces*, a term which represents the physical location and movement of not just the individual but the objects and entities, including specific other people, constituting the immediate material and social milieu;

3) *Social Networks*, a term used to describe existing schemes of perceptions attuned to field struggles and how these can influence an individual's dispositions and practice (Atkinson, 2010).

The use of these concepts assisted in interpreting how to apply Bourdieu's toolkit to investigate the students' experiences in schools, including the circulation of their bodies, and their interaction with social objects (Atkinson, 2020) while attending SAL programs.

Conclusion

This study aimed to produce an in-depth exploration of the experiences of a group of students who attended SAL programs in a mid-size city in Ontario. This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework informed by Atkinson's reinterpretation of Bourdieu's toolkit, showing how it helped inform the research on the role of SAL programs in relation to the participants' experiences, practices, and actions. It is believed that the use of this theoretical framework has helped to create a narrative description that enabled the research to outline the plots of human action, specifically, how these students' experiences may have changed throughout their time spent in SAL programs. The next chapter discusses the methodological aspects of the study, including the sample, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Using a robust methodological framework is an essential step in any research, as this will provide a solid foundation for a proper study (Arthur, 2012). The appropriate methodological framework can guide the research and help the researcher to be more diligent in obtaining the answers sought by the study. By choosing methodological and theoretical frameworks that are compatible, the study will increase analytical coherency. According to Modesto (2013) a good qualitative study needs to use methods that are aligned with a philosophical position. Using a qualitative research approach, I examined students' experiences of SAL programs. I was interested in investigating how the social positioning of the participants may be informed by their participation in SAL programs.

For this reason, a narrative-inquiry approach, based on qualitative research, was chosen to encourage the participants to share their experiences. Further, a narrative approach allowed me to attain rich descriptions of the participants' experiences that would provide me the conceptual space to reflect on the meaning of these experiences. Narrative studies require that research texts to be shared with participants, given that the voices are critical in developing final research texts. Research texts need to reflect the narrative quality of the experiences of both participants and researchers and the ways these experiential stories are embedded within social, cultural, and institutional narratives (Clandinin, & Caine, 2008).

Where Am I Situated as a Researcher?

My personal experiences of marginalization, racism, social inequity, and classism began for me as a child immigrant in Canada, and then as high school student who became homeless at age 14. I nevertheless managed to graduate from high school; I made the effort to do so because I believed in the value of education. In addition, I personally witnessed how marginalization, racism, social inequity, and classism affected others during my work as a support worker who worked with what the educational system

labelled “at-risk” students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Our classroom was located in an old building in an out-of-school setting. I had a small classroom, which often admitted no more than 10 students at a time. This program taught social etiquette and life-skills, and featured a specialized program that aimed at increasing students’ chances of graduating. As a working-class single mother, and also as a past homeless teenager, I was able to understand some of the issues that students and their parents/guardians had to endure.

These experiences encouraged me to seek further post-secondary education in the form of a M.A. and then PhD, with research focused on alternative education programs in Ontario. Post-secondary education has introduced me to the conceptual frameworks of theorists such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Freire, and Marx; their ideas opened my mind to concepts that helped me understand how existing social, economic, and political conditions may affect social actors and society. Moreover, these theorists helped me recognize and conceptualize the influence of critical education research in my current scholarly positionality. I believe that this positioning helped me to analyze this study in a more transparent way, and to better understand how different people may participate differently in the same field.

Why Am I Interested in Undertaking Qualitative Research?

By undertaking a qualitative case study, the research examines why and how people who inhabit the same social spaces may have different experiences, given their unique social, cultural, and economic capitals. The study investigates how the alternative educational system shapes the way in which students make sense of their position in society, for instance, how the alternative educational system shapes thought and action through normalized rules of behaviour, and/or ritual beliefs (Clandinin et al., 2016). Lastly, by using a qualitative-research approach, this study presents an in-depth examination of student experiences in SAL programs and it provides a depiction of “the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which the individual’s experiences are constituted, shaped, expresses and enacted” (Clandinin et al., 2016, p. 16). This gave me,

the researcher, the ability to report the study's findings meaningfully and concisely, allowing the reader to determine if the study's findings can be transferred to their own situation (Clandinin et. al., 2016).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry has helped the study focus on why and how certain individuals, groups, and organizations may choose specific symbols or ways of acting and speaking as a representation of themselves (Creswell, 2007). By using narrative inquiry, the language of the research becomes more personal, seeking to privilege the definitions and meanings of the participants rather than those of the researcher. Clandinin, et al. (2007) explain that narrative inquiry exists in three *commonplaces*: *temporality, sociality*, and *place*. Clandinin, et al. (2007) use the term "commonplace" to describe narrative categories that allow any researcher to organize and make sense of the inquiry, which occurs through place, time, and social context. These authors advise that in order to undertake narrative inquiry, these three commonplaces must be simultaneously explored— none can be artificially prioritized or excluded.

The first commonplace Clandinin, et al. (2007) discuss is temporality, described as a process of continuous transition. Temporality describes events and people as being constantly in flux, that is, as having a past, present, and future. The second commonplace is sociality, which these authors describe as the personal (feelings, hopes desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions) and social conditions (existential conditions, environment, surrounding factors, forces, and people that form an individual's context) of social actors. Sociality assumes that researchers have a relationship with the study's participants, which cannot be evaded or omitted. Lastly, the third commonplace is place, described as the meanings attached to the actual location where the events have occurred. A location creates an impact on the experiences of the participants (Clandinin et. al., 2007; Clandinin et al., 2016).

One of the defining features of narrative inquiry is that "all experiences should be studied as they are lived and told" (Clandinin et al., 2016, p. 18). Narrative inquiry presents a pragmatic ontology of experiences that emphasizes continuity, given that "the

stories people live and tell are the result of a convergence of social influences that not only derive from a person's inner life, but also their environment and unique social history" (p. 18). Furthermore, Clandinin et al. (2016) contend that "narrative inquiry is always with and within stories, and as narrative inquirers, we cannot try to get out of these stories" (p. 18). Clandinin et al. (2016) also warned that researchers needed to consider how they can formulate an imaginative design that enables the inquiry to unfold in the ways that ground the understanding of experience. Narrative inquiry uses the metaphor of a research puzzle to search for more profound ways of understanding the nature of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

There are seven design considerations in the process of conducting a narrative inquiry:

1) Narrative inquiry is mainly interested in responding to the questions "so what?" and "who cares?" (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin et al., 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2007; and Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), which helps with giving justification to why the study matters (Clandinin et al., 2016; Clandinin et al., 2007). This is a central feature of narrative inquiry.

2) Consideration in narrative inquiry is the need to name the phenomenon, the 'what' being studied. No matter what the phenomenon is, the narrative inquirer always will tend to adopt a narrative view of the phenomenon and assign meaning to it through conceptualization.

3) It is essential is to "consider and to describe the particular methods used to study the phenomenon" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 25). This is addressed in two parts: "The first is to think of the phenomenon under investigation and the participants as occurring in a multidimensioned, ever changing life space" (p. 25) and "to be consciously aware of everything that is happening within that life space" (p. 25). The second part includes identifying and properly describing the types of field texts that need to be collected, while being attentive to all three commonplaces (temporality, sociality, and place). 'Field texts' refer to the data that is collected in the course of the narrative inquiry. This includes the accounts from participants and other forms of primary data

connected to the phenomenon under investigation.

4) The analysis and interpretation process. This design consideration represents the hermeneutical move from field texts to research texts, that is, the interpretive work of transforming the collected data into research findings.

5) The way the narrative researchers position their research in relation to other research of the same phenomenon, related programs of research, and research that has used different epistemological and ontological perspectives. This consideration is essential as it compels the narrative researcher to situate herself in relation to other work on the same topic (Clandinin et al., 2007).

6) The unique contribution of the particular narrative study. It offers "some sense of what it is that can be known about a phenomenon that could not be known, at least in the same way, by other theories, methods, or lines of work" (p. 30).

7) The ethical concerns of the study, specifically regarding the relations between inquirer and participant(s). This requires researchers to pay careful attention to the ways participants are represented in research texts, enforcing the researchers' commitment to avoid harm to participants, always seeking informed consent.

8) The process of selecting the appropriate medium to represent the field texts. According to Clandinin et al., (2007), narrative researchers work "from a set of ontological and methodological assumptions and the questions of representational form follow from those assumptions" (p. 31).

Researchers must be careful in selecting the appropriate ways to represent the participant narratives through research texts, by acknowledging the complexities in the participants' realities.

Narrative inquiry is a deliberate research process that is founded on the idea that researchers do not merely tell a story—they "recognize the centrality of relationships, the relationships among participants and researchers, and the relationships of experiences studies through and over time and in unique places and multilayered contexts"

(Clandinin, & Caine, 2008, p. 2). By adopting a narrative-inquiry perspective, the proposed research will be able to attain an in-depth examination of the participants' experiences in SAL programs.

Bourdieusian Methodological Considerations

According to Atkinson (2020), Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit offers not only a theoretical perspective with which to analyze social phenomena, but also a useful methodological framework that could add rigour to any sociological research. First, Atkinson recommends that researchers must break with common sense, as it is full of "prenotions" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 22), namely, the everyday practical understandings, formed through experience, that help individuals make sense of their experiences. Prenotions are different depending on the position persons have in the social world and their different life conditions. These prenotions can give rise to what Bourdieu called "spontaneous sociology", namely the "common sense and "self-evident" explanations for how society, or certain aspects of it works" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 22). Furthermore, Atkinson (2020) states that as researchers, we must always strive to recognize and separate our own experiences and prenotions from the research, given societal forces of which we may not be aware or directly conscious.

Atkinson's (2020) second recommendation is that researchers practice "constructing the object" (p. 24). Researchers need to build their own models of how the world, or the particular object of study, works. This includes "an understanding of how people's everyday perceptions, constructs and practices feed into it" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 24) and must include "the perceptions, constructs and practices of the social scientists themselves" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 24). This will help researchers to think about "the 'limit case' of some particular phenomenon—an extreme or exemplary case of a particular phenomenon" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 25).

The final step recommended by Atkinson (2020) is testing out the models of the object under investigation through the careful collection of evidence. The main interest here is "in the social structures shaping perceptions and action, but also the ways in which perceptions and action shape social structures" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 27).

Researchers must be selective, as this process allows for a wide range of methods to be open for use. The choice of methods should be practical and dependent on the fit with the nature of the phenomenon or the problem to be investigated.

Recruitment and Data Collection

The inclusion criteria for participating in this study were: 1) the participant must be 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview, and 2) the participant must have participated/attended at least one semester in a SAL program in a school board in Southwestern Ontario.

This research included six individuals with working-class backgrounds, who were former students in SAL programs. The participants were recruited with the help of a recruiter, who contacted the participants and provided them with a summary of the study and the researcher's information. Following the recruitment protocols, outlined in Appendix 3, the participants were asked to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in joining the study. During the recruitment stage, 10 potential participants were invited, but only six reached out to the researcher. It should be noted that the recruitment was impacted by the lockdowns during the Covid-19 epidemic, which required for all communication between the recruiter and potential participants to be conducted via phone or online. Given these constraints, potential participants were informed that the interviews will be conducted via Zoom. This fact may have deterred some potential participants from joining the study; indeed, some individuals intimated that, given the personal nature of the discussions, they would feel more comfortable with face-to-face conversations with the researcher. A detailed breakdown of the participants' profiles will be presented in chapter 5.

The demographic data for all participants in this study is presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to identify each participant. The "time in the program" column includes how long students attended SAL programs. Each semester had a duration of three to five months. The interviews revealed that two students attended one semester of SAL programs, one student attended one and half semesters of SAL programs, two students attended three semesters of SAL programs, and one student attended six semesters of SAL programs. The participants self-identified as Black (1), Indigenous (1),

Hispanic (2), and White (2). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 20 years old. Four of the participants had earned a high school diploma and two are currently attending adult education programs to complete the credits required to graduate high school. All the participants lived in a mid-size urban centre in Southwestern Ontario, and attended a type of SAL program in the city. Only one participant attended a SAL program outside of the city, in a reserve that was near the city; its educational programs were derived from the city's public school board. All of the SAL programs described by the students used an in-person class format that allowed students to earn credits towards their high school diploma, as well as the possibility to transition into college and take an apprenticeship course.

Table 1 ***Participants' Demographic Data***

Pseudonyms	Time in the program	Reported Gender Self-Identification	Reported Racial Self-Identification	Age	Graduated
Miguel	1.5 Semesters	Man	Hispanic	19	Yes
Juan	1 Semester	Man	Hispanic	20	Yes
Rachel	6 Semesters	Woman	Black	20	Yes
James	3 Semesters	Man	White	19	Yes
Jennifer	3 Semesters	Woman	White	18	No
Rebecca	1 Semester	Woman	Indigenous	19	No

Given the limited time frame for this study, and the limitations imposed by conducting research during a global pandemic, it was decided that six participants would provide enough data to achieve data saturation. Data saturation is "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change" (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006, p. 65) to the identified categories or themes. This research employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with open-ended and semi-structured questions. For a list of the interview questions please see the interview protocol in Appendix 4.

An extensive amount of data was obtained directly from one-on-one interviews with the participants. In addition to the interview data, field notes taken by the researcher were also used in the analysis. Follow-up interviews with the participants were also

conducted in order to clarify any points from the initial interviews. Choosing this format of data collection allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth exploration of the participants' narratives of their experiences in the alternative education system. According to Arthur (2012), interviewing for research can be very different from having an everyday conversation. A "well-envisioned design that has a great deal of preparation, purposeful conduct and attentive listening" (p.171) is required to allow for an insightful and defensible study. In-depth interviews are "purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what the person has experienced, what he or she feels about it, and what significance or meaning it might have" (Arthur, 2012, p.170). Raw data, including recordings and field notes, were also transcribed into text prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

This research used deductive and inductive reasoning to analyze the data. Reichertz (2007) explained that *deduction* begins with a specific theory or theme and examines how the raw data support the theme (Kennedy, 2018, p. 51). Deduction for this study meant that the data were analyzed according to the theoretical framework and key themes from the literature review. Induction consisted of inferring categories or conclusions from the collected data to identify a pattern from which to make a general statement, thereby revealing new understandings and conclusions (Kennedy, 2018).

As a key component in the analysis, this study used coding. Coding is a central aspect of the data analysis in qualitative research. Miles et al. (2014) defines codes as "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (p. 78-79). Furthermore, these authors describe codes as being attached to "data 'chunks' of varying size [that] can take the form of a straightforward, descriptive label or a more evocative and complex one (e.g. metaphor)" (p. 79). Miles et al. (2014) also refer to coding as deep analysis, which allows for a thorough reflection and interpretation of the meanings embedded in the data. Moreover, Miles et al. (2014) presented the idea that

> codes are primarily, but not exclusively, used to retrieve and categorize similar data chunks so the researcher can quickly find, pull out and cluster the segments

> relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct or theme. Clustering and the display of condensed chunks then set the stage for further analysis and drawing conclusion (p. 79).

Applications of Coding

Once the interview data were transcribed, the information needed to address the study's questions was compiled. Miles et al. (2014) warn that all of the data may look promising and feel like they should all matter. But a serious constraint is that the researcher may "never have enough time to condense and order, much less to analyze and write up, all of this material" (p. 79). Therefore, having well-defined research questions and a robust conceptual framework will serve as the best defense against any type of overload. Miles et al., (2014) see data analysis as an "inescapably a selective process and that you cannot and do not 'get it all', even though you might think you can" (p. 79-80). Codes can serve as "prompts or triggers for deeper reflection on the data's meaning" (p. 80) and may help the researcher assemble the chunks of data together, to retrieve the meaning from this material, and to synthetize the data into analytic units.

Miles et al. (2014) describe two stages of coding: first and second cycle coding. First cycle coding is the initial assignment of codes to segments of data. It proceeds in a deductive fashion, using predetermined themes to organize the data in clusters of meaning. Second cycle coding proceeds inductively from "the resulting first cycle codes themselves" (p. 80). This cycle regroups the initial summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs to help identify emergent themes, configuration, or explanations, so that 1) later field work can be more focused; 2) it can allow for a better understanding of local incidents and interactions; and 3) it serves to lay the groundwork for cross-case analysis by surfacing common themes and directional processes.

Among the different approaches to first cycle coding proposed by Miles et al. (2014), this study utilized *descriptive coding*, which consists in assigning a label to a word or phrase, thus allowing further indexing and categorizing. This approach is very useful in studies with a wide variety of data forms such as field notes, interviews transcripts, and documents. This approach is often used in the research of social settings to construct a narrative description of the dynamics and constitution of a given social

environment. Also, using *in vivo* coding felt appropriate for the analysis. This form of coding is used when a study is "trying to honour and prioritize the participant's voice" (p. 80). This method uses words or short phrases from the participants' own language, as codes, thus helping the study identify emerging themes that were then analyzed.

A qualitative analysis software, NVivo 12, was used to organize and explore the data. Using a qualitative research-analysis software offered many advantages, such as the possibility to organize the codes by participant, by key word, or by topic. This facilitated comparisons, note-taking, and reflection, which allowed for a rigorous and efficient exploration of the dataset.

Ethical Considerations

Miles et al. (2014) discuss two models of the relationship between participants and researcher. In their view, these models are based on "meta-agreements", that is, an overarching understanding of the status and relations of those involved in the study. The first meta-agreement portrays researcher and participants as having an equal status. They join forces to address a problem in their community. The second meta-agreement is based on a traditional model that differentiates researcher from participants. In this case, the researcher has the primary responsibility for all aspects of the study. Regardless of what model is chosen, Miles et al. (2014) highlight the importance of clarifying the expectations of the study from the outset to ensure that participants are informed and their decisions are respected.

Miles et al. (2014) offer an outline of 11 specific ethical matters and issues upon which researchers must reflect prior to, during, and at the conclusion of their research:

1) the worthiness of the project;

2) issues of competence and expertise to conduct the study;

3) issues of informed consent, that is, how Institutional Research Board (IRB) regulations play a role at fully informing participants, creating a voluntary and uncoerced participation;

4) issues of benefits, costs and reciprocity;

5) consideration of possible harms and risks;

6) issues surrounding honesty and trust;

7) concerns regarding privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity;

8) intervention and advocacy;

9) research integrity and quality;

10) data ownership, and

11) the use and misuse of results.

Miles et al. (2014) advise researchers to use these ethical guidelines to advance their thinking during the early stages of the study, but also to help avoid future problems during the research.

According to the 2nd Edition of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2) (Government of Canada, n.d.), any research involving human participants must respect human dignity. This idea is expressed through three core principles:

1) Respect for persons, which "recognizes the intrinsic value of human beings and the respect and consideration that they are due" (Government of Canada, n.d.);

2) Concern for welfare, which means that "researchers and REBs should aim to protect the welfare of participants, and, in some circumstances, to promote that welfare in view of any foreseeable risks associated with the research";

3) Justice, which not only implies treating all participants fairly and equitably, but also to avoid burdening groups and individuals with the risks associated with the study.

This study followed all principles and procedures outlined in the TCPS 2, as well as Miles et al.'s (2014) guidelines to help maintain ethical awareness over the course of the research.

Narrative inquiry also addresses ethical issues in research and recognizes that ethical issues are central throughout the study. Clandinin & Caine (2008) recognize that ethical requirements "move beyond institutional requirements of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent" (p. 4). The negotiations of entry, exit, and representation of experiences can affect the way participants behave and feel about their participation. Narrative inquiry requires thoughtful sensitivity and wide awareness when composing research texts, particularly when working with marginalized and/or vulnerable populations (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Furthermore, narrative inquiry not only serves to represent a multiplicity of voices and signatures through diverse textual structures and accounts, but also represents the lived and told experiences of both the participants and the researcher (Clandinin & Caine, 2008).

Chapter 5

Analysis and Findings

Using a narrative qualitative methodology, this study investigated the lived experiences of a group of students who attended SAL programs in Southwestern Ontario. The research utilized data obtained from interview questions, field notes, and transcripts of six former SAL students' interviews. The data collected were then analyzed, using NVivo12 software to organize the data, identify themes, and find recurring patterns. This narrative qualitative study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How do individuals who participated in SAL programs make sense of their current social situation in light of their experiences in SAL programs?
2. How did the personal and educational experiences of individuals who participated in SAL programs influence, help and/or enable them to graduate or not graduate from high school?
3. How do individuals who participated in SAL programs characterize the challenges, opportunities, and benefits of these initiatives?

Despite the fact that SAL Programs have been in operation for over 15 years in Ontario, an exhaustive review of the literature conducted for this study could not identify published research on how students experience SAL programs (or their equivalent) in Canada and more specifically, in the province of Ontario, with the exception of that undertaken by Morrisette (2011). The literature indicated that low-income and low-achieving students are often referred to alternative education programs (Sellar, 2013). Without any formal schooling, students could be subjected to physical- and mental-health stigmatization, which may lead to lack of meaningful employment and overreliance on government assistance (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Livock, 2011; Smith & Thomson's, 2014; Thompson, 2011). According to these studies, alternative education programs appear to promote segregation, affecting the students' motivation to learn (Sellar, 2013). For example, Becker (2012) demonstrated that alternative education programs in the UK, did not decrease the drop-out rates in high school, but instead created a pipeline system that promoted violence and marginalization, instilling the idea that youth in the alternative learning system belong either in the prison or the welfare system (Becker

2010; Livock, 2011; Sellar, 2013; Smith & Thompson, 2014; Thompson, 2011). In an effort to gain a better understanding of the social effects of these programs, this study investigated and analyzed the experiences of students who attended SAL programs in a large city of Southwestern Ontario.

Demographic Data

The initial intention was to interview 10 individuals who are former students in SAL programs. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 and some mental health issues that some of the participants were experiencing, only six participants were successfully interviewed. To be included in the study, participants must 1) have attended at least one semester in a SAL program from a school board in South-western Ontario, and 2) have been 18 years of age or older at the time of the study.

All interviews were conducted over a nine-week period in a designated space using videoconference software (Zoom) at a time and date convenient for each participant. Prior to the interview, the researcher emailed the consent form to each participant, and obtained signed consent forms before conducting the interviews. During the scheduled interview, the researcher once again advised each participant of their right to participate and obtain consent to audio-record prior to commencing the interview questions. Each interview began with the researcher asking 16 semi-structured open-ended interview questions (Appendix 1).

Participant Profiles

Miguel is a 19-year-old Hispanic man. He graduated in June 2020 and is now attending beauty school at the time of the study. He is currently working part-time in a factory. His educational goal is to become a barber and own his own barbershop. Miguel has been diagnosed with depression and severe anxiety; he is currently under treatment for these conditions. Miguel currently lives with his father and is the youngest brother of three. He hopes to live on his own once he finishes beauty school and find employment in this field.

Juan is a 20 year-old Hispanic man. He graduated from high school in June 2019 and started college in September 2019. He enrolled in the social work program, but only completed one semester. Due to the fact that he was homeless, and that he was dealing

with mental health issues—depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—he had to drop out. He currently lives on his own and is looking for work. He hopes to attend college once again in the upcoming year, and to take the diesel-mechanic trade program.

Rachel is a 20-year-old Black woman. She graduated in June 2020. She lives on her own and has her own apartment, of which she is very proud. Rachel currently works full-time at a factory and was very happy to have obtained her high school diploma, as she believed this achievement helped her get the job that she presently has. Rachel is looking forward to finally having some stability in her life. She found herself having to move a lot since her father passed away, which happened when she was in high school. Rachel intimated that she has had to deal with a learning disability, mental health issues, and depression, which in her view, were some of the reasons why she was not able to attend school regularly.

James is a 19-year-old White man. He graduated from high school in June 2020. James currently works full-time as a line cook. He lives with his girlfriend, and they just had a baby together. James loves his job and, although he reported that he suffers from mental health issues and depression, he is an optimistic young man that looks forward to raising his daughter.

Jennifer is an 18-year-old White woman. She did not graduate from high school, and is currently in an alternative adult school, trying to complete her credits to graduate. Jennifer is a very soft-spoken young lady that loves to create art. Jennifer has been in and out of high school and was finally admitted into a mental health program that deals specifically with youth mental health issues at the local hospital last year, so that she could have help dealing with her eating disorder and depression.

Rebecca is a 19-year-old Indigenous woman. She did not graduate from high school but plans to continue taking courses in an adult education centre, so that she can attain her high school diploma. Rebecca has just had a baby and currently lives with her boyfriend. Rebecca reported having mental health issues and depression, and she is receiving professional help. Rebecca plans to work full-time after she returns to adult education to get her high school diploma. She doesn’t know what type of employment she would prefer.

Findings

The analysis provided four emerging themes: 1) curriculum perceptions, 2) classroom spaces, 3) reported benefits of SAL programs, and 4) perceptions of teacher preparedness. The first two interview questions were demographic in nature and asked about the gender and ethnic/racial background each of the participants identified with(Appendix 4). As noted above, there was an equal gender distribution of women and men in the study and they came from a variety of racial backgrounds. Interview questions three through 16 provided key information that helped identify the analytic themes. In the following sections, I discuss each theme.

Curriculum Perceptions

The theme of curriculum perceptions refers to how former students of SAL programs perceive the relevance of the SAL curriculum for their learning/employment goals. During the analysis of the interview questions, 76 references were found to connect with this theme, which incidentally, was the theme with the clearest results found during the analysis. This theme helped to provide possible answers to the research questions two and three.

A memorable quote that surfaced during the interviews was Juan's report that SAL "helps you get a high school credit and a college credit, and anything that you're looking more forward to be in, you could take that course in the college". When asked the question: What classes did you take in the SAL program? Juan stated, "Multiple, multiple college courses […] I did photography, and I did avionics". Juan continued to explain that he believed that the classes he took in SAL helped him with his future post-secondary educational goals. Currently, he is looking into taking a college program for auto mechanics.

When asked the same question, Miguel also made a similar comment and stated that when he took credit courses in SAL, he felt that they were similar to university courses: "[R]eally we would just have to start off wherever we wanted to, is kind of like the University college type thing, where you have like your list of things and whatever you want to get to is what you do". It should be noted that course selection at college or university level is more rigid and sequential than what Miguel described. Like Juan,

Miguel also explained that he would eventually like to go to college once he finishes the barbershop program he is currently taking. He noted that he did not know what he would like to study but mentioned that perhaps it would have something to do with the courses that he had taken in then SAL program. SAL introduced him to the apprenticeship programs offered in the dual credit courses.

Based on participant interviews and the review of the alternative educational policy documents, SAL programs were found to much more focused on vocational skills than on academic skills. These findings resonate with what Smyth, McInerney, and Fish (2013) found: alternative education programs often carry an assumption that working-class youth have limited abilities and skills, thereby limiting their future job skill qualifications. The authors suggested these programs may lack relevance because they do "not provide an intellectual and challenging curriculum" (p. 202) which, in their view, is a necessary component of student academic success.

During the analysis of curriculum perceptions, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital were employed to help understand and explain how social structures could be seen to limit and frame these former students' capacity to act and make decisions (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Goldenberg, 2014). These three concepts were strongly present in this analysis, and helped to identify the social advantages that perpetuate the status of certain social groups above other ones (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu argued that schools offer different types of cultural and social capital accumulation, which evidences an uneven playing field for all social actors. Within the theme of curriculum perceptions, participants reflected on some of the reasons that, in their view, influenced their placement into SAL programs. As noted in chapter two, the SAL program is the last step in the "pyramid of interventions" (OME, 2010, p. 7). It is used after other in-school alternatives have been offered. Also, they discussed how being in SAL programs would help them graduate and lift their hopes of attending post-secondary education.

In relation to the concept of fields, this study focused primarily on the field of SAL programs—looking at these programs as a field—reveals a social structure and a exchange system used for the domination for the lower classes. According to Bourdieu, the education system is the primary source for production and reproduction of

knowledge, skills, and dispositions that carry high value in class reproduction (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990). According to Bourdieu, there is great value given to the field of education, and consequently the field of education can be manipulated within social, political, and governmental fields through economic or judicial interventions (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1977a). Since SAL programs form part of the education system, it can also be said that SAL programs contribute to the production and reproduction of knowledge, skills, and dispositions of their students, they carry a high value in class reproduction. For example, when school boards dictate what can or cannot be taught in SAL programs, this in turn helps to determine what type of employment and future education students attending these programs will be able to receive.

This was evident when Miguel was asked: "what classes did you take in the SAL program?" His response was: "[T]here was never any real lessons… a lot of it was online work when it came to math" and when asked about post-secondary school, he replied:

> [T]hey actually offered a lot, we have a program at [local college] school called SWAC[4], and they automatically gave us a dual credit course so that's already a college level course for hands on work there, and that definitely was like a big help for some, but… I don't know, if you are trying to be a scientist or something, it wouldn't be a job like that for what SWAC and the apprenticeship programs that they offer. It was definitely for hands-on work like if you're trying to be a construction worker, if you're trying to be... a barber like I'm trying to do, then they definitely offered that, they offer courses for that, that's very just hands-on work.

When asked the same question, Rachel responded:

> So, I did all of my extracurriculars like, all my actual courses already, but then I had to take more courses… like, the free classes you would have had to take in high school, so I did things to boost my thing up, so I took a class for Microsoft, so that I learn about computers, I took a course for … budgeting and things like that, so that was actually a math course, so I did do one sort of math course and then I also did, just like boosting some classes up, I don't know what that's called.

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[4] The School Within a College (SWAC) program was designed for struggling students who are in their last year of secondary school. See: https://www.fanshawec.ca/programs-and-courses/continuing-education/school-college-work-initiative-scwi/school-within-college.

Additionally, when participants were asked how SAL programs helped their education/employment plans, the majority similarly responded that it helped them a great deal in being able to get jobs in the factory, food, and service industries. Rachel reported that SAL helped her gain her job in an ice cream factory run by Nestlé. Miguel reported that he was training to become a barber. James worked as a cook's assistant and Rebecca worked at Tim Horton's.

Participants' responses serve to help us understand how students may experience the field of SAL programs, when it comes to the type of production and reproduction of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (capital) attained in these programs, things that will affect what choices students may have when it comes to the types of employment and/or future education they may be able to attain. Lastly, participants' responses gave us a glimpse of how class production takes place, as these students are being offered employment opportunities that are considered semi- and low-skilled work in the trades, primary and manufacturing industries, and sales and services (Government of Canada, 2021), thereby maintaining them in a specific social class position.

To better understand class reproduction in educational systems, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) proposed the concept of "Doxa of Meritocracy". This is an intellectual process framed by a set of commonly shared beliefs or popular opinion that disguises the practices of social inequities. Here, discourses of normalcy and deficiency are used to determine the way in which SAL students strive to produce, reproduce, or improve their social position (Bourdieu, 1977a). Meritocracy uses the discourses of normalcy and deficiency to maintain and reinforce the common shared belief that places sole blame on students directly for not trying hard enough to succeed. Meritocracy legitimizes the idea that any social or personal challenges, such as learning difficulties, poor health conditions, poverty, or any other socio-economic issues, would be irrelevant for understanding student success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Discourses of normalcy and deficiency associated with the idea of meritocracy became evident in the interview data. As noted above, the majority of the participants explained that they were placed in SAL programs because of personal academic challenges, as well as social, and/or emotional traumas. Furthermore, when it came to describing SAL programs, participants said they were a "second chance" to graduate, get

a job, or get into a skilled trade. Their responses evidently indicated that they carried a lot of self-blame for being placed in SAL programs. Not once did any of the participants place blame or mention any outside social force or structure as part of the reasons for them not being allowed to attend regular schooling. For instance, Miguel reported that he was placed in a SAL program "from almost failing in regular high school, so I was given this opportunity to come and finish up all the work I had left. He reported later in the interview that he believed that the SAL program "allows students who are either incapable of regular high school or who are in a situation where… they are failing… [and] gain a chance to regain the credits that they missed and go to college."

Similar to Miguel, Rebecca stated that she had been placed in a SAL program because of her "moving a lot" due to her father's death. These events not only caused her significant emotional trauma, they also prevented her from being able to complete her high school credits. Later in the interview, Rebecca reported that she believed that SAL programs had helped her gain confidence and gave her hopes that she would be able to graduate in the future and go to college.

Miguel's and Rachel's statements serve as an example of how through meritocracy and discourses of normalcy and deficiency, these participants place blame on themselves for not succeeding in regular schooling. Similar findings were evident in the other participants' descriptions of their experiences in SAL programs. Moreover, none of the participants challenged the idea of meritocracy when discussing their challenges to succeed, nor did the participants challenge their lack of access to certain forms of cultural, symbolic, and economic capital, which may have predisposed them to access particular field options, as well as direct their future plans and advantages (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Several of the participants' responses advanced the idea that they felt stigmatized and marginalized because of their challenges, intimating that they had been placed in these programs as punishment for underachieving in high school. This sentiment was clearly seen when Juan stated his reasons why he was placed in SAL: "Due to me [being] unable to getting credits, obtaining all my credits in grade 10 year … and that the other one was me getting into a fight at school." Juan later in the interview expressed his disappointment for having to attend a SAL, as he felt he was being labelled as a troubled

youth, and that the school system had given up on him—a common sentiment found among all participants. Juan's statement can be seen to reinforce the idea that students in alternative education settings often view themselves as incompetent, dumped in low-level curriculum settings, with no academic expectations (Becker, 2010).

Juan's responses exemplified the prevalence of normalcy/deficiency discourses when the participants were asked to reflect on their situations. His explanation for his placement in a SAL program seemed to place blame on himself. His refection focused on his perceived inability to complete his grade ten credits, and on getting into a fight in school. He thought of his SAL placement as a form of punishment. Interestingly, he also described that the SAL program "helps you get a high school credit and a college credit, and anything that you're looking more forward to be in, you could take that course in the college." These seemingly contradictory accounts from the same participant were not uncommon in this study. Participants used the language of normalcy and deficiency to explain their exclusion from the regular classroom and their placement in SAL programs.

These participants' responses demonstrate how their exclusion is rationalized through the endorsements of discourses of normalcy and deficiency, instead of considering the structural forces that placed them in a position of deficit. These discourses can be seen to legitimize the idea that if someone fails in school, it is because they are not trying hard enough to succeed, and any social or personal challenges—such as learning difficulties, poor health conditions, poverty, or any other socio-economic issues—would be irrelevant for understanding student success.

Classrooms As Safe Spaces

Another strong theme that emerged during the analysis relates to classroom spaces. This theme focuses on the participants' perceptions of the classrooms they attended while in SAL programs. Also, this theme looked at 1) how former students describe their experience of being in these classrooms, 2) what a SAL classroom looks like, 3) whether SAL classrooms are open and welcoming spaces and 4) whether SAL programs are being managed according to the participants' expectations. Te Riele (2007) suggested that alternative education programs need to have a structured educational environment with safe boundaries, where students could feel welcomed, accepted, and

respected. This would not only facilitate student reengagement, but would help students work towards attaining their educational goals. There were approximately 35 references from the participants' responses that dealt with this theme. The data analyzed related to this theme helped obtain answers to the research questions one and three.

In relation to this topic, all participants coincided in describing SAL programs as private sites outside regular high-school buildings. When asked to describe what SAL classrooms looked like, the participants, with only one exception, described these programs as having one to two small classroom spaces, with computers and desks for about six students. Rachel reported that her SAL program was located in a large gym and stated, "I personally wasn't in a classroom. They do have classrooms, but I was in like the gym, so there was, and I think it's like the classroom is just so big, so it's just tables, and then the teacher sat at the front". Even though Rachel was not in a small classroom, she still reported that there were not many students in her classroom and that it was very different than a regular classroom setting.

All participants reported that the SAL programs they attended were very welcoming and open and that they felt safe. James reported that one of the things he liked most was that he was able to focus better: "The thing I liked most about it was, easier to get help from the teachers, and then… it was easier to focus because there wasn't as many students distracting me". All participants described SAL programs as open, welcoming and good places for students that needed one-on-one personal attention. Furthermore, the participants depicted SAL programs as a place that allowed them to focus and work on their assignments with minimal distractions. This seems to support Kim and Taylor's (2008) conclusions that alternative education programs should provide students with self-confidence, empowerment, and control over their lives and learning, given that this helps support their academic success.

The theme of classroom spaces was found to carry lots of positive descriptions, and most students reported that they liked their classrooms, felt safe, and were able to get help when they needed it. Regarding classroom management, most participants agreed that there was a lack of consistency from teachers, when it came to enforcing rules and making sure the students stayed focused. Miguel stated that "there was a lot of students who were trying to get a lot of work done, but who were constantly being distracted by

the students who weren't trying to" and he mentioned that some of the students that went to his SAL program "messed around" and were disrupting the space, which prevented some students from being able to learn. Miguel also complained that some teachers were not proactive in addressing negative or disruptive behaviour: "I think that the teachers didn't seem like they were all that involved either. They seemed like they were kind of, they would see the students being like that and it would be a very nonchalant". Other participants' responses supported Miguel's perceptions regarding classroom management.

Once again, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital were employed to help understand this theme. Habitus, field and capital were seen to work together to help understand how through doxic experiences, students in SAL programs are taught to act in a predisposed manner from a particular arrangement of habits/beliefs. According to Bourdieu (1977a), habitus operates below a level of consciousness, whereby an individual may act in a specific way, influenced by a particular arrangement of habits and beliefs that have been unconsciously taught. These beliefs carry a specific priority in an individual's life (Bourdieu, 1977a). This is seen in Miguel's explanation of trying to "fit in" while attending SAL, when he states, "I wanted to feel comfortable, yeah comfortable in… like I wanted to be able to work, but also be able to talk to the guys and everything like that you know… I think it was kind a like fitting in thing, where I was kind of like wanted to, you know I just didn't wanted like being sitting there miserable doing homework".

Bourdieu's concept of fields plays a great role in the theme of classroom spaces. from the fields' perspective, SAL programs can be seen as operating according to their own set of rules, valuing different forms of capital and resources. When participants were asked to described SAL programs, they described them as hospitable small classroom spaces that helped them complete their high school credits. Moreover, they described SAL programs as having different set of rules than regular high schools, where students had to stay in the classroom and complete their work until it was time to go home. The teachers did not reinforce attendance, and even the breaks given over the course of the day were done differently in SAL programs than in the participants' former high schools.

Participants explained that their breaks and lunch break took place within their classroom. Although they were given the opportunity to grab a free snack from the kitchen area, they still had to remain at their desks at all times.

When it came to describing the capital and educational resources provided in SAL programs, all participants indicated that their learning came from workbooks, or that it was computer work. Participants also mentioned the ability to take dual-credit courses that allowed them to attend an apprenticeship program at a local college. Although students were very happy to have this as an option, most students felt that SAL programs lacked access to the resources found in regular schooling. Furthermore, some participants felt that they were prevented from learning what other high school students were learning. For instance, Miguel claimed that "it didn't seem like it was really like what we were supposed to be learning… I felt like it just seemed like there was a lot of like um...work pages and a lot of book reviews … it didn't seem like we were actually learning, it seem more so, like we were just given work to do."

Similarly, Juan stated:

> I felt like when they put me in the SAL program, they're like, like as much as I put in my English work, they wanted me just to finish my English work, as in, in class I did my English work, they wanted me to have the best of the English work, they would correct, I had someone to correct my, my like stuff and fix my grammar, Math I would have someone to correct my stuff, fix my answers, help me get the right answers, as in they just wanted me to hand it all in.

In this statement, Juan complained that SAL programs lacked access to the resources found in regular schooling. He felt he was not being taught English and math in the same manner that would be taught in his former high school. Instead he claimed that teachers in his SAL program only cared that he completed the work and hand it in. Similarly, the rest of the participants described the inability to attain the credit options offered in their former high schools, which would have enabled them to attain better skills and knowledge and thus would allow them the access to more options, thereby offering them better advantages in life.

Participants also expressed their dissatisfaction of SAL programs. When asked the question "If you could change anything about SAL programs, what would you change?"

some participants responded that they often felt locked up in a small room, without the ability to move around. An example of this theme can be seen when James stated:

> Doesn't make you feel like you are in high school because you are stuck in that classroom, and you are not allowed to go out or anything, you are not allowed to go anywhere, you are just stuck in there all day.

In summary, even though their responses carried both positive and negative descriptions, in the end, all participants agreed that they liked their classrooms, felt safe, and were able to get help when they needed it. While they perceived classroom spaces as welcoming and safe, the participants did not elaborate on the institutional and systemic exclusions that they encountered.

Perceived Benefits of SAL Programs

This theme looks at the former students' perceptions of SAL programs as a "second chance" that helped them to engage with learning once again. This theme looks at how former students experienced these benefits. Also, this theme looks at the additional programs that were offered to these students during or after completing SAL programs. There were approximately 33 references from the participants' responses that dealt with this theme.

This theme was evidenced in Miguel's reflection when asked about the program's impact: "[Y]eah, like all I understood about it was that…it's a program that allows students who are either incapable of regular high school or who are in a situation where… they are failing and but they have a chance to regain those credits that they missed."Similarly, James responded, "[I]t helped me actually get my diploma, a little bit later than I was supposed to, but it helped me get my diploma." Participants expressed their belief that SAL programs were a second chance to graduate, to improve their lives, and to gain meaningful employment. For example, James stated:

> It did help me … somewhat with my employment, but, it actually it did help me with my employment, cause it help me get into a dual credit, it help me get into a culinary dual credit, which help me, which has help where I am working right now, which as a line cook at [restaurant's name].

The the participants' reflections on their experiences with SAL programs were seen to be rewarding. They described SAL programs as a second chance to attain a high school diploma and be successful in their lives. Some participants advocated for these types of programs, and invited other peers that were having difficulties in regular schooling to attend SAL programs. James described his SAL experience as beneficial when he stated,

> I benefited from the experience, because I was able to actually get all my work done, I was able to do it, I was actually able to do it quicker than I would have done in an actual classroom and, it helped me actually get my diploma, a little bit later than I was supposed to, but it helped me got my diploma.

James explained that being in SAL helped him greatly, as the small classroom settings allowed him to better focus on his work, without too many distractions. He also explained that the low student ratio allowed teachers to help him when it came to learning and completing his work. According to James, being in a SAL program helped him to complete the credits needed to graduate. When asked if he would recommend these programs to other students, James answered:

> It depends on the student… if the students is having struggles with um, like in class learning, like in a big school, I would recommend it for them, but if not, if someone, someone is learning fine in a regular classroom, then I would not recommend it.

Similar responses were found among the other participants, as they all agreed that SAL programs allowed them to complete their credits and do their work with little distraction. In addition to these expressed benefits, participants also appreciated having a second chance to graduate, and felt empowered with the tools and confidence needed to navigate towards their future life goals. Rachel commented that SAL programs taught her how to pay bills and prepared her for out-of-high school life. She liked the fact that most of the school course and assignments were done individually and not in groups. This helped her complete work, as this helped remove all distractions that she had found in her former school, and allowed her to focus on her work. Rachel shared how she liked individual work:

> I liked the fact that it was like, more or less like you are not working on group projects at all really, so like you had to sit alone and you had to be quiet, so and

> like for me personally, I feel like in high school, I had a hard time, cause people would be talking, clicking a pen and or something and I just could not focus at all, so it's nice that there, they like made you sort of hush down and just be like people are here to finish their education.

Another reported benefit participants mentioned was the support services offered for future employment. Participants were grateful of the job/apprenticeship opportunities offered in SAL. Rebecca mentioned that her SAL program had several job opportunities for students, both in and out of the classroom. Juan and Miguel also mentioned the option to take dual credits in their program, which later on could be used in their local college and help them graduate faster from the chosen post-secondary studies. Participants felt excited at having these opportunities, and most mentioned that they either had used or would use these opportunities once they graduated high school. James shared how he took advantage of the opportunities his SAL program offered,

> It did help me with my employment, because it helped me get into a dual credit, it helped me get into a culinary dual credit, which helped me, which has help where I am working right now, which as a line cook at [a local restaurant].

The analysis of the participants' responses confirms Mills and McGregor (2017), findings, which noted that alternative education could be seen to offer "alternative ways of engaging highly marginalized young people in education via their 'non-school' like environment" (p. 4). All participants commented on the importance of low student-teacher ratio and small classroom sizes as key factors that contributed to their success in SAL programs. Furthermore, participants expressed their appreciation at being offered an opportunity to graduate from high school. Lastly, by offering SAL students the opportunity to be engaged in a college experience out of the classroom, they benefited by being able to make connections with college staff and faculty. These connections are valuable, as they could help them succeed in their future post-secondary academic careers, facilitating a positive transfer from high school to college life.

Perceptions of Teacher Preparedness

The theme of *perceptions of teacher preparedness* revealed the way former students perceived teachers' preparation and ability to help them with their education

while attending SAL programs. There were approximately 30 references from the participants' responses that dealt with this theme. Francis, Mills and Lupton (2017) reported that marginalized students are often prevented from accessing and engaging in a mainstream academic curriculum when removed from the regular school settings. Furthermore, these authors found that the education system often denies working-class students the ability to have access to powerful forms of knowledge taught in an academic curriculum, thereby preventing students from acquiring the qualifications necessary to attain both value and recognition in their future employment.

The participants' perceptions of the way teachers were equipped or qualified to help them was very similar. Participants described teachers as often being confused and not knowing the subjects. All participants reported being left to work on their own and only being helped when actively requested help. Also, some participants described some teachers as passive and less proactive that what they expected. When asked the question, "what did you like the least about being in a SAL program?" Rachel stated,

> I think what I did honestly liked least is that a lot of the like teachers helpers honestly didn't really understand the work that like we were even doing, so like to get the help, to understand it, it was more or less just confuse you a bit more.

Rachel continued to describe teachers in her SAL program, as not well-equipped with appropriate instructional knowledge and skill, which impacted her ability to understand the contents. Rachel also mentioned "teacher helpers", namely educational assistants (EA) and others as volunteer adults that helped in the classroom. This instructional vacuum created a great deal of confusion to the extent that Rachel felt it would be better to learn on her own.

> Besides maybe … making sure that the teachers … understand … the contents that actually put there, so … we are not more confused on it, because … we are basically teaching ourselves with the help of somebody else, but if the help is … sort of confusing…

Similar statements were made by Juan:

> The teachers there I realize are … younger, some of them are more …EA's like educational assistants, none of them are more like teachers that actually know the subjects, actually know the math, actually know the science… actually have

> teachers that know the subjects, actually are able to help students to achieve their work.

In the same vein, James stated, “[T]he teachers would come and help me if I asked for help, but if I did not need, if I wasn't asked for help then I would be left by myself.” All participants commented on the importance of teacher preparedness and stressed the fact that teachers needed to be better prepared, more present, and most importantly, to know the subjects sufficiently to effectively help the students succeed academically. Previous research on alternative education programs has found that a smaller teaching environment, academic and personal support, and caring teacher-student relationships are key factors effectively supporting at-risk students attain academic success (Wehmeyer, 2000).

Participants agreed that the courses offered in SAL programs are geared towards training for apprenticeship/trade programs, which assumed that students would not need to be prepared for college and higher education. Many of the participants mentioned pre-training course credits that could be later used towards apprenticeship programs in college, after their graduation. A popular program participants mentioned was the Secure Worker Access Consortium (SWAC), a program “designed for disengaged, underachieving students who are in their last year of secondary school and require eight to 10 credits to graduate” (Fanshawe College, 2021, November 17). The SWAC program allows students to attend classes on a college campus for five days per week. Four of those days are spent with a secondary school teacher working on Ontario secondary school diploma credits, and the remaining day is given to students to attend a dual-credit course, where they can obtain up to four college credits over two semesters.

This program is offered across all Ontario school boards who have partnered with their local college. Francis, Mills and Lupton (2017) found that alternative education students are less likely to access and engage with mainstream academic curricula once they are removed from the regular school setting. Furthermore, the Francis et al. (2017) described the curriculum offered to these students as one that rejectis the realities and experiences of racialized and working-class youth. This further entrenches their disadvantage by "precluding access to high-status education and career paths” (p. 421).

Miguel's statement offers us a confirmation of Francis et al.'s (2017) findings when he states,

> I don't know if you are trying to be a scientist or something, it wouldn't be a job like that for what SWAC and the apprenticeship programs that they offer, it was definitely for hands on work like if you're trying to be a construction worker, if you're trying to be um... a barber.

This finding aligns with Becker's (2010) report that alternative education programs often exhibit low quality curriculum, lack of focus, deficient program structure, teacher's lack of training, and lack of adequate resources.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to investigate the experiences of students who attended Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) programs in one urban centre in Southwestern Ontario. The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the social and personal outcomes, benefits, challenges, and possible downsides of these programs. In this final chapter I provide a brief summary of the findings, discuss limitations and challenges, and suggest possible directions for future research in this area.

The literature reviewed for this study suggested that in some cases educators and administrators rely on the assumption that working-class youth, like the participants in this study, have limited abilities and skills, which ultimately impact the students future job prospects and qualifications (Mills & McGregor, 2016). The literature reveals that one of the reasons why education systems may be failing these students is because schools do not provide a relevant and challenging curriculum (Francis, Mills and Lupton, 2017; Smyth, McInerney and Fish, 2013; McGregor, 2016; Thompson, 2011). This study confirmed these findings by noting that some participants questioned the quality of some of the contents in the SAL curriculum, particularly math and sciences. The main concern was that the perceived lack of rigour in these subjects may hinder their opportunities to access higher education.

Similarly, Thompson (2011) found that there was a lack of meaningful academic support for students in the alternative education sites. For instance, these programs focused on enforcing hands-on training rather than academic conceptual knowledge, and when students asked for more challenging work in their basic skills sessions, their requests were not fulfilled. Mills and McGregor (2016) advocated for more supports in the form of material resources, a caring environment, community, and help with mental health issues to be made available to the students. The reasoning behind these suggestions

is to ensure that all school systems remove or disrupt many of the barriers that prevent marginalized students from learning. Within the theme of curriculum perceptions, participants discussed the benefits of having an alternative setting to pursue high school graduation, which would result in future employment opportunities and in some cases, a path towards post-secondary education.

Classroom spaces played a significant role in students' experiences of SAL programs. Herrington et al. (2012) suggest that having classroom spaces that foster strong teacher-student communication and relationships, allow students to feel safe and cared for while attending these programs. This theme focuses on the participants' perceptions of the classrooms they used while in SAL programs. This theme focused on 1) the students' experiences in these classrooms, 2) what a SAL classroom looks like, 3) whether or not SAL classrooms are open and welcoming spaces, and 4) the SAL classroom management practices, according to the participants' perceptions.

All participants coincided in describing SAL programs as sites outside regular high school buildings. These programs were described as small spaces that had one to two small classrooms, with computers and desks for about six students in each classroom. Some had a kitchen and an office space for the teachers, administrators, and counselors. Even though these spaces are small and isolated from regular school buildings, the participants in this study described them as inviting and welcoming.

It should be noted, however, that participants expressed mixed emotions about being placed in these programs, often suggesting that SAL programs were only for "troubled", "bad", "at-risk", "problematic" or "students that cannot be in regular school", which reflects the negative stigma often associated with alternative education programs. Smith and Thompson's (2014) recommend the adoption of instructional methods that respond to the specific needs of the students as a possible solution that could help address the negative stigma associated with alternative education programs. Through classroom spaces, participants depicted SAL programs as a place that allowed them to complete their work with minimal distractions. Kim and Taylor (2008) recommend that students in alternative education programs need the tools to develop self-confidence, and to be

empowered. These programs must strive to give these students control over their lives and their learning, given that these factors will support academic success.

Another theme that emerged from the study was the reported benefits of SAL programs. The former students discussed their perceptions of these programs as being a "second chance" program. This theme also provided insight on how former students experienced these benefits. The study found that the participants agreed that SAL programs allowed them to complete their credits and do their work with little distraction. In addition, participants mentioned improved access to vocational programs, such as job/apprenticeship opportunities offered for future employment. McGregor and Mills (2012) suggested that alternative schooling offered many opportunities to obtain job-related qualifications, such as automotive and trade certifications. Further, these authors noted that positive teacher-student relationships help ensure that students remain engaged in school.

Participants suggested that having a low student-teacher ratio and a small classroom setting was very important and contributed to their success in SAL programs. Similarly, McGregor and Mills (2017) suggested that programs must emphasize a sense of common purpose and community, as these are significant factors in engaging highly marginalized young people in education. Relatedly, most participants in this study were glad to have an opportunity to graduate from high school. McGregor and Mills (2012) found that the vast majority of students had highly positive perceptions about alternative education programs. Many students facing difficult life circumstances often see these schools as a realistic pathway to graduation.

The last theme that emerged from the study was related to perceptions of teacher preparedness. This theme explored students' perceptions of the teachers' professional knowledge and skills in the context of the SAL program. Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) suggest that alternative education programs need to employ caring and compassionate professionals, who are trained to form positive relationships, which involved trust and good communication with their students, as these are important factors for ensuring student success. Most participants in this study described teachers and educational

assistants as often being confused and not knowing the subjects very well. Additionally, some participants reported being left to work on their own and only being helped when they sought or requested help. Some participants described their teachers as passive and less proactive than what they were expecting.

These findings confirm the conclusions of previous studies. For example, Mills et al. (2017) stressed the importance of recognizing that alternative programs are often seen as marginal to mainstream schooling. They suggest that many students in alternative education programs feel unsupported and not cared for. In addition, Mills et al. (2017) found that not enough training was offered to staff to help them address student disengagement from schooling. Similarly, the participants in this study stressed the fact that teachers needed to be prepared, present, and most importantly, knowledgeable about the subjects to effectively help them succeed academically. The findings of this research suggest that a meaningful academic curriculum, a positive classroom space, courses geared towards further academic opportunities and future employment capabilities, as well as teacher preparedness, are perceived as key influences in student high school graduation.

The Role of SAL Programs Within the Education System

Even though the Ministry of Education portrays SAL programs as a positive conduit for students in their pursuit to graduation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). This study offers an alternative reading of these programs. The analysis demonstrates the stigmatization and marginalization experienced by students who attended SAL programs. Despite the fact that all of the participants felt that SAL programs was their last resort at graduating, they believed that they had been placed in SAL programs as a punishment for not conducting themselves in accordance the accepted norms.

These findings confirm findings from other studies which found that alternative learning programs may increase exposure to marginalization, social inequity, stigmatization, as well as segregation, which may affects the students' motivation to learn (Becker, 2012; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Livock, 2011; Smith & Thomson's, 2014;

Thompson, 2011). More research needs to be conducted to explore the role of SAL programs within the education system and to reveal how these programs are affecting, not only those who are using them, but also other social actors that are actively involved or may have a role in these programs.

Limitations and Challenges

After conducting the study and examining the results and findings, it was found to have a few noteworthy limitations. One of the limitations for the analysis was the small sample size. The study sought to interview at least 10 participants. However, it should be noted that the recruitment and data collection took place during the global Covid-19 pandemic. The isolation requirements and the restrictions on personal contacts had an impact both on the communication with potential participants and the interview process. Adding to these challenges, some potential participants were not comfortable with on-line interviews and had seome personal and health issues. As a result, only six participants were successfully recruited and interviewed. Despite this limitation, the study was successful in exploring a seldom researched issue, and in identifying promising themes for further exploration with larger samples. This study should be seen as exploratory in nature, since it reflects just a fraction of the possible experiences of former students who attended SAL programs in Southwestern Ontario.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this study's findings, several recommendations can be offered for further studies. A qualitative study that includes the perspectives of administrators and educators in SAL programs would bring additional insights on these programs. Furthermore, the findings from this research could be incorporated in professional development and training programs and a subsequent study could examine the outcomes of this training in a SAL program.

Only former students of SAL programs participated in this study. Interviewing current SAL program students could provide another viewpoint and could provide important insights to gain a better understanding of students'

experiences of SAL programs. Parents were not included in this study. Interviewing parents about their perceptions and experiences with SAL programs could result in important perspectives that could help researchers, educators, and administrators identify key factors that can help improve students' academic success.

It is recommended that a comparative study be conducted with other SAL programs between the province of Ontario and across Canada. This would offer a better understanding of the nature, implementation, and implications of these programs in the Canadian context. Despite the popularity of these programs, there are no public available statistics on the use of these programs at the provincial or school board level. For example, it would be very helpful to know the number of students in these programs, their demographics, graduation rates, and post-graduation outcomes.

The results of this study have the potential to add empirical data to the study of alternative education programs, iluminating some factors that former students of SAL programs attribute to their graduation success. Important themes that emerged were curriculum perceptions, classroom spaces, reported benefits of SAL programs, and perceptions of teacher preparedness. This final chapter provided a summary of the finding, a discussion of the results, limitations of the study, future recommendations for further research and recommendations to educators and administrators. The aim of this study was to provide researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers with an informed perspective of students' experiences while they attended SAL programs. SAL programs represent a concrete opportunity for many high school students to graduate. It is important that school boards develop and provide suitable services to this population, so that they can graduate and be successful in their future employment/ educational endeavours.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 *Interview Questions*

1. What gender do you identify with?
2. What is your ethnic/racial background?
3. Please describe what is the Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) program
4. How long were you enrolled in the SAL program?
5. What circumstances led you to join the SAL program?
6. What classes did you take in the SAL program?
7. What did the classrooms look like?
8. Please describe a typical day in the program. What did you do there?
9. What did you like the most about being in SAL?
10. What did you like the least about being in SAL?
11. Did the SAL program help you graduate? Why or why not?
12. Would you recommend SAL programs to other students? Why or why not?
13. If you could change anything about SAL programs, what would you change?
14. Are you currently working or going to school? How did attending SAL help you with your education/employment plans?
15. Thinking back to your experience in SAL, how did you benefit from this experience?
16. Do you have any final comments?

Appendix 2 ***Participation Poster***

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of former student experiences in Supervised Alternative Learning Programs who meet the following criteria:

Must be 18 years or older and have attended at least one semester in a Supervised Alternative Learning Program from a school board in Southwestern Ontario.

If you are interested and agree to participate you would be asked to: contact Rafaela Lopez-Cobar, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education, Western University

Your participation requires one (1) on-line interview that will be about 60 minutes long.
In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $5.00 Tim Hortons gift card.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Appendix 3 ***Letter of Information and Consent Form***

Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title
An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Students who attended Supervised Alternative Learning Programs in South-western Ontario

Principal Investigator
Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education, Western University

Co-Investigator
Rafaela Lopez-Cobar,
PhD Candidate,
Faculty of Education, Western University

1. **Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in this research study about the student experiences in Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) programs because you were enrolled for at least one semester in a SAL program in a school board in South-western Ontario.

2. **Why is this study being done?**

We want to better understand the experiences of students in SAL programs. Through an examination of the lived experiences of students in these programs, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers can gain useful insights of the outcomes, benefits, challenges, and possible downsides of Supervised Alternative Learning initiatives

3. **How long will you be in this study?**

Your participation in the study will consist of one interview that will take approximately 60 minutes. Providing (optional) feedback on the transcribed interview may require 45 additional minutes of your time.

4. **What are the study procedures?**

After agreeing to participate in this study, you will be required to attend an interview for approximately 60 minutes. With your consent, only the audio of the interview will be recorded; no video or pictures will be taken during the interview. The interview will take place using videoconference software (Zoom) at a time and date convenient for you. The audio from the interview will be transcribed verbatim by the co-investigator. About four weeks from the interview date, you will receive the transcribed interview via Microsoft SharePoint. This will allow you to provide any feedback you consider necessary. Providing feedback will require around 45 minutes of your time.

5. **What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. However, you will be free to stop the interview or withdraw your participation from the study at any point.

6. **What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole, including a better understanding of the outcomes of SAL programs, their benefits, challenges, and possible downsides.

7. **Can participants choose to leave the study?**

You can withdraw from the study at any point. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by phone, in writing, etc.) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know, and your information will be eliminated from our records and destroyed. Once the study has been published, we will not be able to remove your information.

8. **How will participants' information be kept confidential?**

Data gathered in the interviews will be stored in an encrypted and password- protected laptop computer. Participant's direct identifiers will be removed from the resulting data and replaced with a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Any digital backups will be saved on dedicated encrypted external USB storage devices. Both the USB devices and any hard copies generated as a backup will be stored in a safe box in the personal office at the co-investigator's home. Following Western's NMREB Confidentiality and Data Security Guidelines, this study's information will be retained for seven (7) years from the date of project completion. After that period, all the information will be securely destroyed. If the results of the study are published, your name will be replaced by a pseudonym and anonymized quotes may be used. Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

9. **Are participants compensated for being in this study?**

You will be compensated with a $5 Tim Hortons Gift card for your participation in this study. You will receive your compensation at the end of your interview session.

10. **What are the rights of participants?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or leave the study at any time, it will have no effect on your employment status. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study.

11. **Whom do participants contact for questions?**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact:

Principal Investigator
Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera, Ph.D.
Faculty of Education, Western University

Co-Investigator
Rafaela Lopez-Cobar
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education, Western University

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, 1-844-

720-9816, and email: ethics@uwo.ca. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Consent Form

Project Title
An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Students who attended Supervised Alternative Learning Programs in South-western Ontario

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
YES o NO o

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.
YES o NO o

_____ _____ _____
Print Name of Participant Signature Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

_____ _____ _____
Print Name of Person Obtaining Consent Signature Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

Please scan and email the signed form back to rlopezco@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Appendix 4 ***Interview Guide***

Interview Guide

Project Title

An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Students who attended Supervised Alternative Learning Programs in South-western Ontario

Principal Investigator

Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education, Western University

Co-Investigator

Rafaela Lopez-Cobar,
PhD Candidate,
Faculty of Education, Western University

Procedures

Before asking the interview questions, the co-investigator will:

1. Welcome the participant.
2. Provide the participant with a brief description of the study's purpose.
3. Confirm with the participant if they have given their consent to record the audio of the interview.
4. Remind the participant that they have the right to not answer individual questions or stop the interview at any time

Interview Guide

2. What gender do you identify with?
3. What is your ethnic/racial background?
4. Please describe what is the Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) program
5. How long were you enrolled in the SAL program?
6. What circumstances led you to join the SAL program?

7. What classes did you take in the SAL program?
8. What did the classrooms look like?
9. Please describe a typical day in the program. What did you do there?
10. What did you like the most about being in SAL?
11. What did you like the least about being in SAL?
12. Did the SAL program help you graduate? Why or why not?
13. Would you recommend SAL programs to other students? Why or why not?
14. If you could change anything about SAL programs, what would you change?
15. Are you currently working or going to school? How did attending SAL help you with your education/employment plans?
16. Thinking back to your experience in SAL, how did you benefit from this experience?
17. Do you have any final comments?

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Rafaela Lopez-Cobar

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada
2010-2016 B.A. of Adult Education

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2016-2018 M.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2018-2022 Ph.D.

Related Work Experience

Adult Teaching Instructor
YMCA of South Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2020-2022

Research Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2018-2022

Publications:

Lopez-Cobar, R. (2017). Review of Effects of the Socially Just School: Making spaces for youth to speak back. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy,* 182(1), 34-37.