Chilliwack High School Engagement and Completion Study

Prepared by: Katherine Watson, PhD
                Martha Dow, PhD
                Victoria Bryce

For the:
Chilliwack Social Research and Planning Council

and
Chilliwack School District 33

In partnership with:
University of the Fraser Valley, City of Chilliwack, Chilliwack Community Services,
Fraser Health, and the United Way

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Chilliwack School District 33 completion rate of 71.6% for all students was low in comparison to neighbouring districts. These results became the stimulus to investigate the possible causes of this relatively low rate in District 33.
- The school population of the 11 participating schools in grades 8-12 was 4844. An effort was made to include as many students as possible whose parents/guardians had not opted out of the survey. In this manner, a sample of 2933 was collected. This is a 60% response rate resulting in a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of +/- 1.14 percentage points.
- The survey results reveal that most students in the Chilliwack District have a fairly strong (medium to high) sense of self, safety and belonging. There are however a sizeable percentage who report low levels in these areas signaling possible problems of disengagement.
- The strongest relationship(s) found in the results is the influence of how many adults at school they [students] feel they can talk to if they had a problem? This is the key finding as it impacts all aspects of engagement for high school students in the District. Being connected to adults in the institution means a great deal to students and cannot be underestimated.
- *School connectedness* is a critical factor in supporting positive and successful transitions and ultimately fostering academic success.
- A significant number of middle and high school students are identified as at risk resulting in a range of interventions including alternate services and/or programming.
- There needs to be a foundational shift from the categorical construction of the *at-risk* student to a more fluid understanding of the *in-risk* student. This shift will contribute to a more progressive, creative, fluid and holistic model of educational opportunities for the students enrolled in the Chilliwack School District.
- The Chilliwack School District has demonstrated a commitment to supporting students experiencing challenges in the school setting through various initiatives. This study emphasizes the importance of more progressive, inclusive and evidence-based strategies in terms of both practices of inquiry and school-based responses to students experiencing social, emotional, psychological and intellectual challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010-11 the British Columbia Ministry of Education released school district and provincial figures on completion rates. Completion rates represent the number of students who graduate with their Dogwood diploma within six years of starting grade eight for the first time. In the twentieth century, completing high school emerged as a new benchmark for Canadian youth. Policymakers in Canada and other Western nations came to support high school graduation for all as they linked education to the economic growth of the nation (Davies and Guppy, 2010). Currently, there is wide spread agreement amongst researchers, policymakers and educators that students should complete high school as it is strongly associated with individual upward social mobility and the stock of national human capital (Lee and Burkam, 2003). Despite the various advantages afforded youth and society, many young people do not complete their secondary studies.

The Chilliwack School District 33 completion rate of 71.6% for all students was low in comparison to neighbouring districts. For example, Abbotsford District 34 had a rate of 88.6% for all students. Mission District 75 had a completion rate of 77.1% for all students and Fraser-Cascade District 78 had a completion rate of 73.6% for all students. These results became the stimulus to investigate the possible causes of this relatively low rate in District 33.

 A brief review of the academic literature in the area reveals that "poverty, a lack of parental education, a lack of intellectual nourishment at home (or at school), a lack of support programs for these youth, or a curriculum that is insensitive to their needs…" (Davies and Guppy, 2010, 76) are all reasons that researchers have examined for their impact on student completion rates. Often this research has focussed solely on individual students deemed "at risk" in order to find the causes, assign blame and develop policy remedies (Lee and Burkam, 2003). Recently some research studies have turned away from simply understanding dropping out as a function of student background and behaviour and instead sought to understand the role of the schools in the decisions that students make.

A great deal of research focuses on individual students and the various social and academic factors that are related to dropping out. Different demographic features such as gender, socio-economic status, parental education, and family structure among others, are deemed important to school success. As well, academic factors such as students' school behaviors and performance are recognized generally as signaling disengagement from the institution.

A second approach focuses on the role of the schools in the decisions students ultimately make. In particular, characteristics such as school structure, academic organization (usually in the form of curriculum) and social organization (usually in the form of the quality of relationships between students and educators) are all examined. These internal institutional factors may

create a "push/pull" effect for students whose personal characteristics place them at risk of dropping out (Lee and Burkam, 2003). In other words, schools create conditions or engage in practices that may push some students out, while pulling others in.

Despite the division between perspectives, these factors will often overlap or intersect one another. For example, school engagement is both an individual factor of emotional connection and an internal education factor in regards to program opportunities (such as day cares and summer schools). Also it is not always clear from the literature which factor acts as "the driver" or independent variable as alienation may lead to low academic achievement but low achievement may also lead to alienation. Explaining why students do not complete high school in six years and/or why they drop out entirely is therefore a complex discussion involving several intersecting and cumulative processes at the individual and institutional levels. This study undertakes to examine individual academic factors as well as school practices.

 The principal investigators for this study were Katherine Watson, PhD. and Martha Dow, PhD., Sociology instructors at the University of the Fraser Valley, and associates of the UFV Centre for Social Research in collaboration with the Chilliwack Social Research and Planning Council and the Chilliwack School District 33.In the first phase of the project the focus was on high school students in the District, gathering information about who they are and their engagement experiences in school by asking a series of questions through a classroom survey.

In the second phase of the project, the purpose was to evaluate the transition processes within the Chilliwack School District as a vehicle to further examine high school success and completion rates. There is ample evidence to indicate that various transition points (e.g. middle to high school, to and from alternative programs) within the K to 12 system are critical to full and successful participation in school.

METHODOLOGY

Phase One

The collection of student school experiences was undertaken from March 2013 until May 2013 by asking a series of questions in a survey administered in eleven schools for grades 8-12 in the Chilliwack School District. This phase of the project was led by Dr. Katherine Watson with the assistance of Victoria Bryce. The Research Ethics Board at the University of the Fraser Valley reviewed the entire project approving how consent was obtained, and what questions were asked in the surveys and in interviews. Final approval was granted in February 2013 and a model of "passive consent" was adopted. In this model, parents and guardians of students in the target population are informed of the study, its purpose and possible benefits and harm. They are also given contact information of the investigators and UFV in order for parents/guardians to raise concerns or ask questions. They are informed that if they do not want their child to participate, they should sign the form and return it by the stated date. In addition, the same project and contact information are posted on participating school websites.

Once ethics approval was obtained, a pilot of the survey was conducted with several fourteen year olds with permission of their parents in order to assess the suitability and validity of the questions. The results were not included in the study and were later discarded.

On February 7, 2013 the project investigators Drs. Katherine Watson and Martha Dow, along with research assistant Victoria Bryce, attended, by invitation of the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, a Chilliwack School District Principal and Vice-Principal meeting (PVP) to discuss the project. After discussing logistics it was decided that surveys would be delivered to participating schools and administered by teachers in each participating school.

The school population of the 11 participating schools in grades 8-12 was 4844. An effort was made to include as many students as possible whose parents/guardians had not opted out of the survey. In this manner, a sample of 2933 was collected. This is a 60% response rate resulting in a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of +/- 1.14 percentage points.

The collected data was returned to the investigators who employed research assistants to code the survey and enter the data in SPSS software for analysis.

Phase Two

The second phase of this project focused on understanding the relationships among educational transitions, school engagement and completion rates. In an effort to add another dimension to the student data being collected for phase one, data for phase two was gathered from educational professionals in the Chilliwack School District. Nine key informant interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews explored the

participant's: view on the most critical factors as the school system endeavours to support students in their successful completion of high school; philosophy and/or understanding of the importance of and approaches to educational transitions (e.g. from middle school to high school, to or from alternative programs); understanding of the processes (administrative, pedagogical, curricular) employed by the Chilliwack School District to identify "at-risk" students, assess their needs, develop intervention strategies, and support various educational transitions (e.g. to and from alternative programs); assessment of the success of the District's approach to supporting educational transitions; view on some of the challenges that characterize educational transitions in the District; and, suggestions for improvements on the model employed by the District with respect to educational transitions.

 The interviews were audio taped and the content was analyzed using an approach grounded in Strauss' (1987) three tiered model of qualitative data coding which uses open-coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Based on this approach, four key integrated themes emerged: school connectedness; organizational structures and relations; leadership and innovation; and, the construction of risk.

After being invited by the Assistant Superintendent, it was decided that in addition to key stakeholder interviews, the Alternative Education Inquiry Team workshop sessions would be another source of data gathered through participant observation. The principal researcher for this phase of the study attended four of the full day sessions and analyzed the notes taken using the same approach employed with the interview transcripts. In order to maintain the assurances provided to the interview participants with respect to anonymity, the researchers elected not to use pseudonyms in order to further protect against any possible attribution of quotes. All of the quotes from participants included in the report are indicated by the designation of "participant".

PHASE ONE STUDY

Sample Profile

The school population of the 11 participating schools in grades 8-12 was 4844. An effort was made to include as many students as possible whose parents/guardians had not opted out of the survey. In this manner, a sample of 2933 was collected. This is a 60% response rate resulting in a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of +/- 1.14 percentage points.

48.8% of the sample were male, 50.2% were female and 1% identified as gender 'other'. The range of ages was from 12-20 with a mean of 15.32, a median of 15 and a mode of 16. The standard deviation was 1.5. Also 20.7% of the sample was in grade 8; 20.8% of the sample was in grade nine; 22% was in grade 10; 21% was in grade eleven; and 15.6% of the sample was in grade twelve.

Personal, Academic and School Factors

The survey sought to measure three areas of concern in regard to some public school students' inability to complete high school in six years and/or who drop out entirely from the system. The first area focuses on students' self-feelings and self-perception. This is closely aligned with emotional attachments or feelings of belonging in the institution. The second area examines academic factors such as students' school behaviors in regard to signaling disengagement from the institution. The third area focuses on the role of the schools in the decisions students ultimately make. In particular, characteristics such academic organization (usually in the form of academic engagement including curriculum) and social organization (usually in the form of the quality of relationships between students and educators) are all examined.
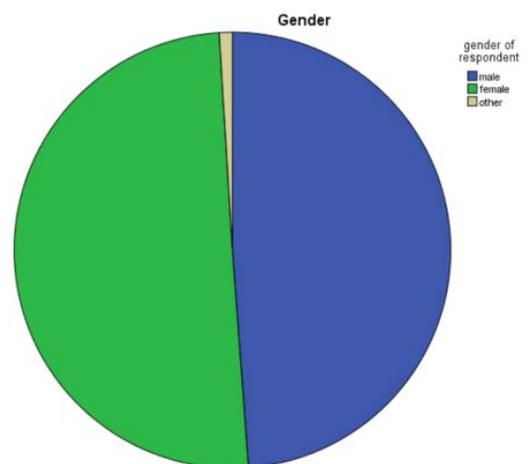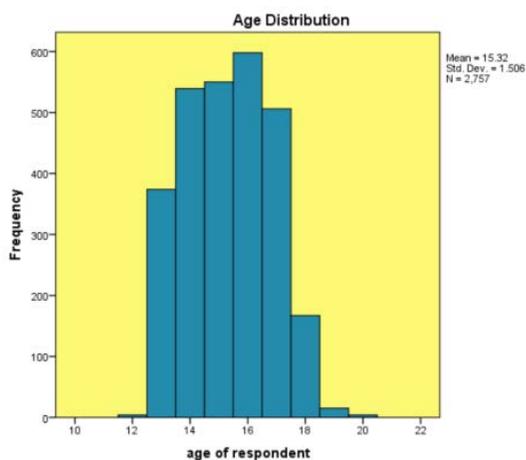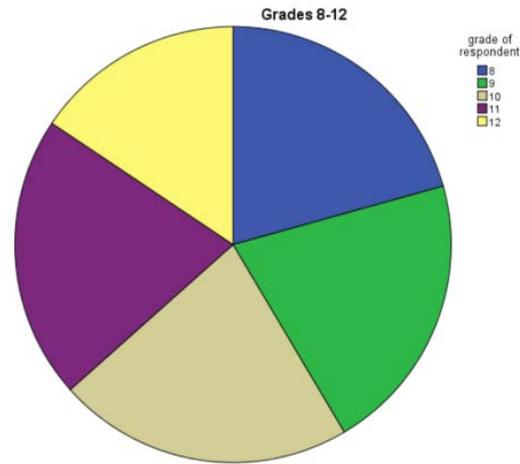
Self-Perceptions, Feelings of Safety and Belonging Measures

Self-Perception Index: Data from eight questions were combined in a composite measure of self-perception in regard to education. Students were asked to agree/disagree with statements describing how they felt about school activities such as wanting to learn, being prepared for class, and the importance of getting good grades. The results indicate that 2.5% of students in the sample had a low self-perception in regard to education; 50% had a medium self-perception and 47.4% had a high self-perception in regard to education.
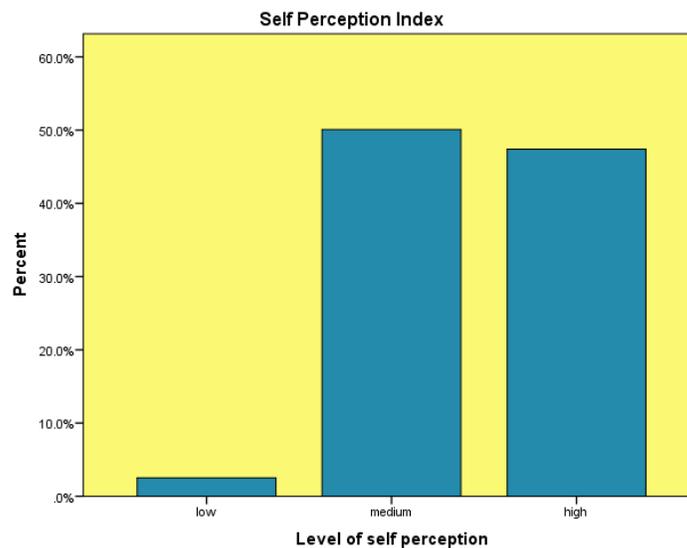
Self-Security Index: Data from two questions were combined to gage how comfortable students were being themselves in school and if personal worries distracted from school work. The more a student agreed with statements of lack of comfort and worrying, the lower their level of self-

security. 10% had a low sense of self security; 46% had a sense of medium security and 44% reported a sense of high security.
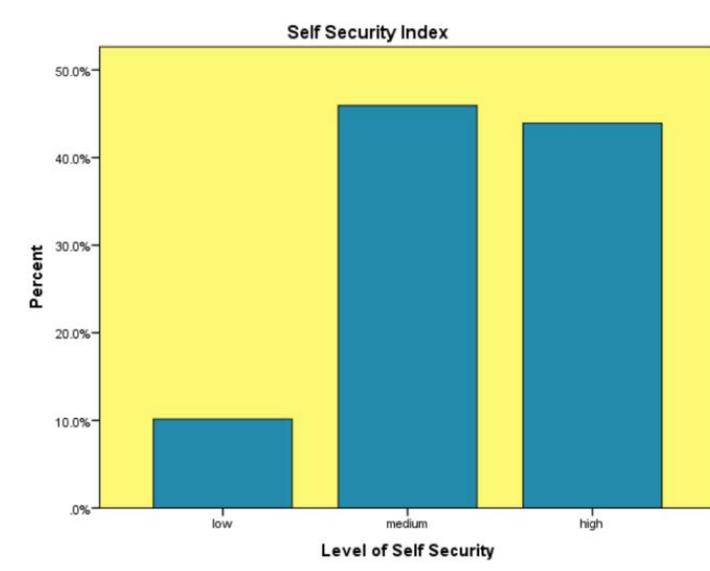
School Safety Index: Data from four questions were combined to gage how safe students felt both physically and emotionally inside and outside of classes on campus. 2.5% report a low sense of safety at school; 28% report a medium sense of safety at school and 69.5% of student report a high sense of safety.
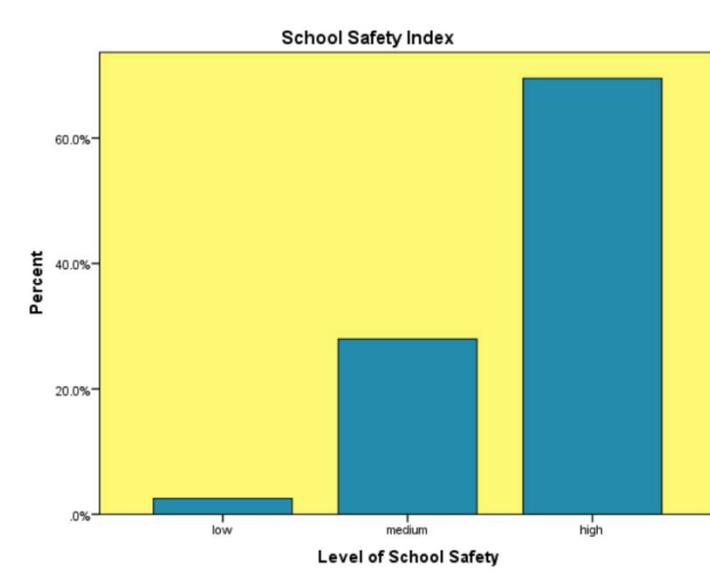
Belonging Index: Data from four questions were combined to measure students' sense of belonging or emotional attachment to the school. 7.6% reported a low sense of belonging. 37% reported a medium sense of belonging and 55.4% reported a high sense of belonging.
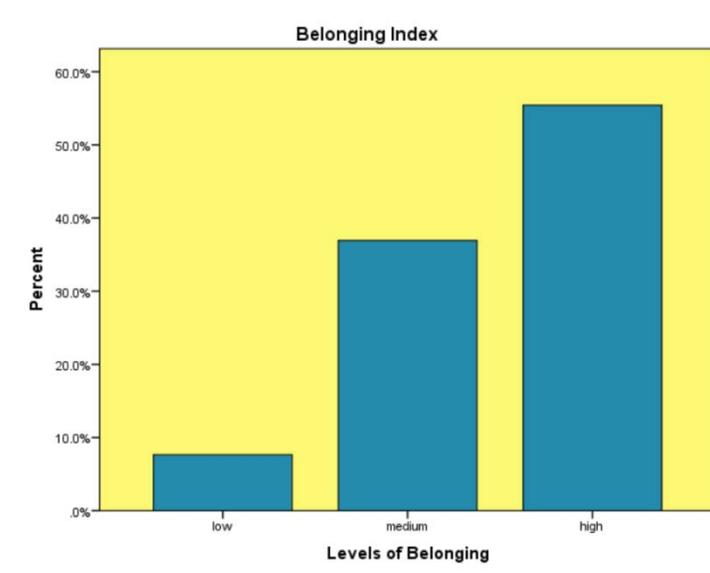
Academic Measures in regard to student school behaviours.

Self-Discipline Index: This index combines four questions to gage the students' behaviour in relation to following rules and "getting into trouble". The lower level indicates that a student is not following rules (lacking self-discipline) while a higher level indicates that the student is self-disciplined and following rules. The majority of students report that they have a high level of self-discipline at 55.4%. 40.2% report a medium level of self-discipline and 4.4% report a low level of self-discipline.
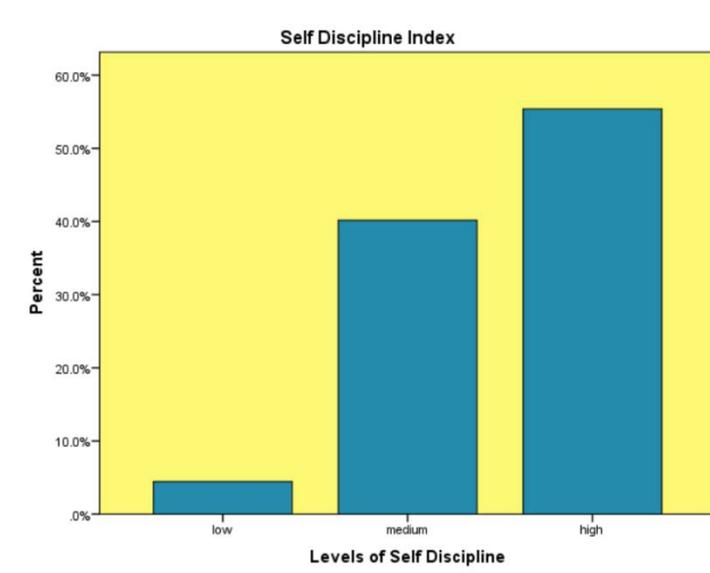
Participation Enjoyment Index: This measure combines two questions that inquiry about whether students enjoy school activities (such as sports, clubs, field trips, dances, etc.). The low level indicates that students do not enjoy these activities and the higher level indicates that students do enjoy the activities. 15% of students in the sample indicate a low level of enjoyment in school activities. 38% of students in the sample indicate a medium level of enjoyment in school activities. 47% of students in the sample indicate a high level of enjoyment in school activities.
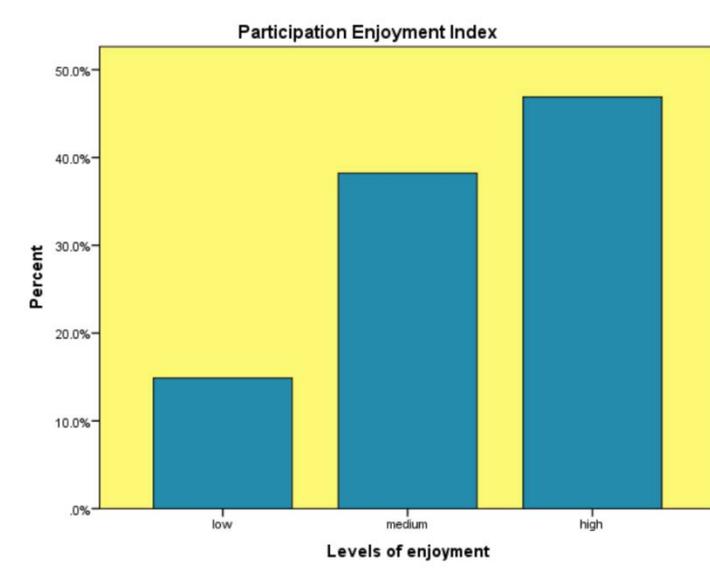
Academic and Social Organization Measures in the Schools.

Academic Engagement Index: Four questions were combined for a measure of academic engagement at schools. These questions asked students to agree/disagree about whether classes were challenging, their assignments were creative, the importance of learning and if they were bored in class. A low level of indicates that students are not engaged with classes and material and are often bored. A high level indicates students are engaged with classes and material and are not bored. The results indicate that 18% of students in the sample have a low level of engagement with classes; 75% have a medium engagement with classes and 7% have a high engagement with classroom learning.
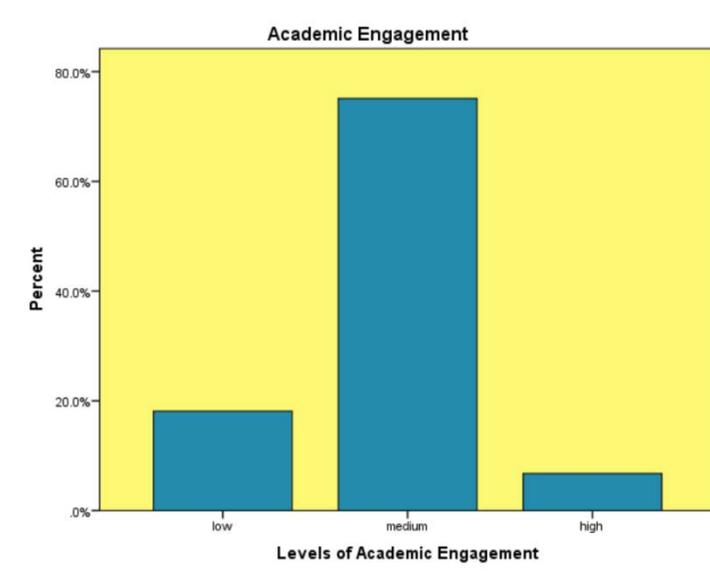
Boredom in general and irrelevant courses and curricula are often cited in the literature on school dropouts as a cause of early school leaving (Gilbert et al. 1993; Tanner et al., 1995). A recent study based on qualitative interviews, argues that teachers also need to hold the students attention and stress the relevance of the lesson to real life in order to keep the student engaged and interested in what they are learning in order to prevent dropping out (Bridgeland et al 2010:103). Explanations within the research heard from students who reported they were far less likely to attend class when they felt it was of no importance to them and therefore they did not pay attention. Student dropouts who were interviewed felt if the instruction was more interesting and they believed it had real world applications, they would have paid more attention and tried harder in class (Bridgeland et al 2010:103). These results are noteworthy and need further investigation.

Quality of Relationship Index: This measure combines six questions on the quality of relationships that students have with educators in the school. Respect and feelings of being known and liked by teachers is key in this index. A low level indicates a poor quality of relationship and a high level indicates a high quality of relationship between students and teachers from the students' perspective. 3.4% of the sample indicated a low level of connection with educators. 44% indicated a medium level of connection with educators and 52.6% indicated a high quality of connection.
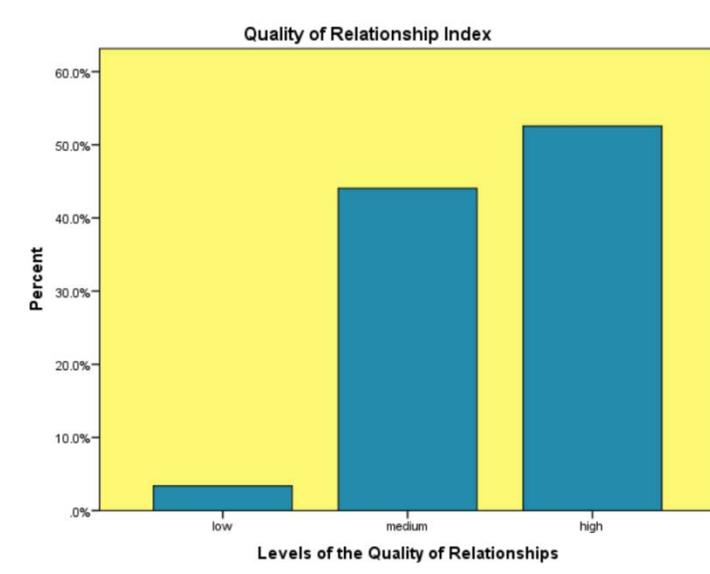
Interaction Index: This measure combines seven questions that ask about the frequency of educators speaking with students about negative items such as poor behaviour and poor academic performance or positive items such as student interests, future plans, and academic good performance. The less a student is spoken to about negative items the higher the score, while the more a student is spoken to about negative items the lower the score. The reverse is true for the positive items where the more a student is spoken to about positive items the higher the score. The results indicate that 2.8% of students have a low level of positive interaction. 76% have a medium level of positive interaction and 21% of students have a high level of positive interaction.
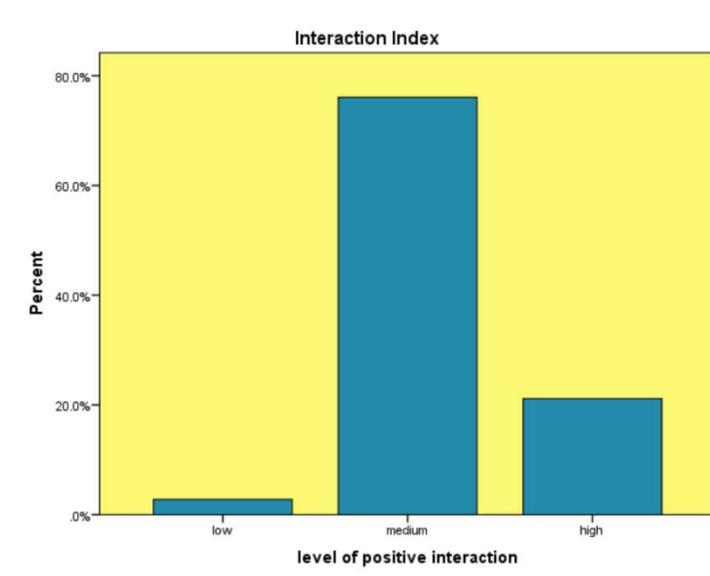
Connections to Adults: This is a single item that asks students how many adults at school they feel they can talk to if they had a problem? 22% indicate they have zero adults at school to talk

with. 24% indicate one adult. 25% indicate 2 adults and 29% indicate they have 3 or more adults to speak with at school.
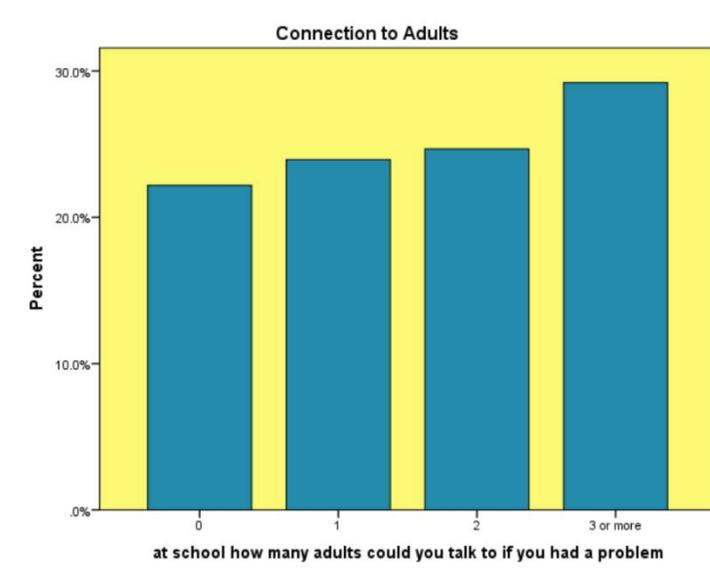
Discussion of Association:

An analysis of the indexes in association with other factors was undertaken. Various hypotheses were constructed and tested in order to find possible associations between variables. By far the strongest positive associations were found between the number of adults at school a student could talk to if they had a problem (indicating a connection) and every index. Assessed using a gamma measure of association, the strongest association (gamma=.500) was between number of adults and the Quality of Relationship. This means that the more adults a student has to talk to at school, the higher level of quality of relationship. These two measures should on the face of it be related and this verifies the validity of the measures.

The second strongest relationship (gamma=.454) was between number of adults and level of positive interaction. The more adults a student has to speak with about problems, the higher the level of positive interaction. The strength of association varies but is again seen across all the indexes and all results are significant at the .000 level.

Belonging (gamma=.371)

Self-Security (gamma =.289)

Self-Perception (gamma= .277)

Discipline (gamma=.315)

Participation Enjoyment (gamma=.226)

Safety (gamma=.291)

The importance of connections to adults at school for students cannot be underestimated as it influences student perceptions of self and security, feelings of attachment, self-discipline, and feelings of safety. The basic concept that underpins these findings is social capital. "The concept of social capital identifies a crucial observation about collective life: that the quality of social relationships themselves either enhances or hinders individuals' capacity to attain desirable social goods." (Lee and Burkham, 2003, 62). In particular the role of educators and school staff are seen as crucial to establishing quality relationships as well as teaching students how to access various types of resources. (Nixon 1999; Lee and Burkham 2003; Bridgeland 2009; Meeker et al. 2009; Bridgeland 2010; White and Kelly 2010).

Other research confirms that schools where there are positive, supportive relationships between the staff and students are found to have fewer drop outs (Lee & Burkam, 2003, 375; Irvin at al 2011: 382). Meeker, Edmonson and Fisher's study interviewed students regarding their decision to leave high school and found that many of them identified teachers as a major factor influencing why they dropped out (2009: 44). Many students indicated a perceived lack of support and caring by teachers as their main problem. Some students discussed how they felt teachers targeted them as trouble makers as they were "expected to get in trouble" (2009: 45).

Students, who are disaffected with school, report being unconnected to teachers, despite having made efforts to gain assistance from school personnel. Unengaged students claim that teachers don't care about them, are not interested in how well they do in school, and are not willing to help them with problems. Interviews with dropouts as they left school revealed that half said they were quitting explicitly for social reasons: because they didn't get along with teachers or other students (Lee and Burkham, 2003: 363).

Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) indicate that for Aboriginal students having teachers who understand the history and culture of Aboriginal people and are sensitive to the specific needs of Aboriginal learners is crucial. They argue that honest, caring relationships with teachers are favoured by Aboriginal students over professional approaches. Understanding and responding to issues that students bring with them to the classroom are key components in creating trust with students and families. This is also part of why there are increasing demands for aboriginal teachers and the involvement of Elders in the classroom as a sign of "openness and acceptance by the school system" (Schissel and Wotherspoon 2003: 118).

Educators and other school personnel are therefore seen by students as a vital part of their school experience. Perceiving educators and personnel as unwelcoming, uncaring and uninterested in them and their issues creates disengagement and pushes students out of the

institutions. Clearly, relationships with adults at school are a meaningful central connection for students and needs to be enhanced for all students.

Other Findings of Interest

Skipping Class or School – 53.8% indicated they had skipped school. Some of the reasons for skipping school included 31.5% who indicated that was school was boring. 35% indicated another unspecified reason for skipping. This bears further investigation.

Dropping Out – 18% indicated that they had thought about dropping out of school. Some of the reasons for thinking of dropping out include 5.7% indicated that it was because of bullying or harassment by other students. 10.2% indicated it was because school was boring and 12.4% said it was for other unspecified reasons. This also bears further investigation.

Most important reason to go school for the majority of students (61%) in the sample was to get their high school diploma and go on to higher education. The next most important reason was to get a good job (28%).This demonstrates that the majority of students have economic reasons for staying in school and expectations of higher education. This bodes well for improving the post-secondary attainment rate in Chilliwack. The remaining 11% were either keen to see friends (4.4%), or were concerned about the law (1.8%) or their parents' expectations (4.6%).
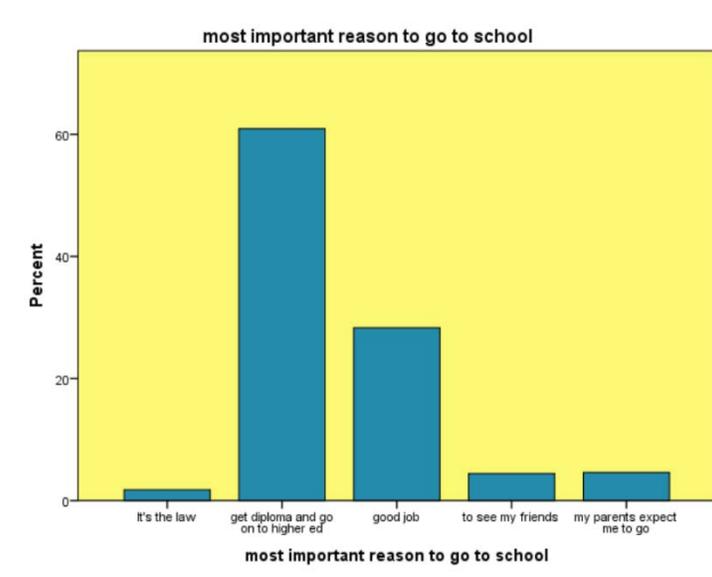
Possible Actions

Students were asked about seven possible steps and whether these would help them to learn. From the results below it is clear that a large majority would like more attention from educators, more real life examples and more help with homework. While some believe that more challenging classes would help, a large percentage (42%) disagrees. In addition to academic help, students were also asked in this survey if help with their problems and

acceptance from other students would help them learn. A majority (58.5%) do not think having more help with the problems they have outside school would help with their learning, but it is almost an even split in regard to whether other students being more accepting would help. 51% indicates this would not help at all but 49% believe that it would help a little or a lot.

More one-on-one attention from teachers: Most students indicated that this would help a little (48%) or a lot (39%), while only 12% indicated that it would not help at all.
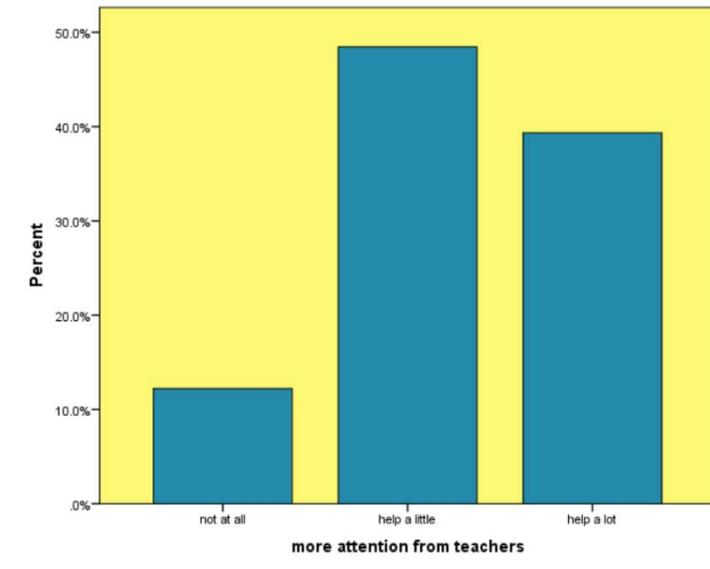
More examples of how things I learn in school matter in the real world: Most students again indicated that this would help a little (43%) or a lot (42%), while 15% indicated this would not help at all.
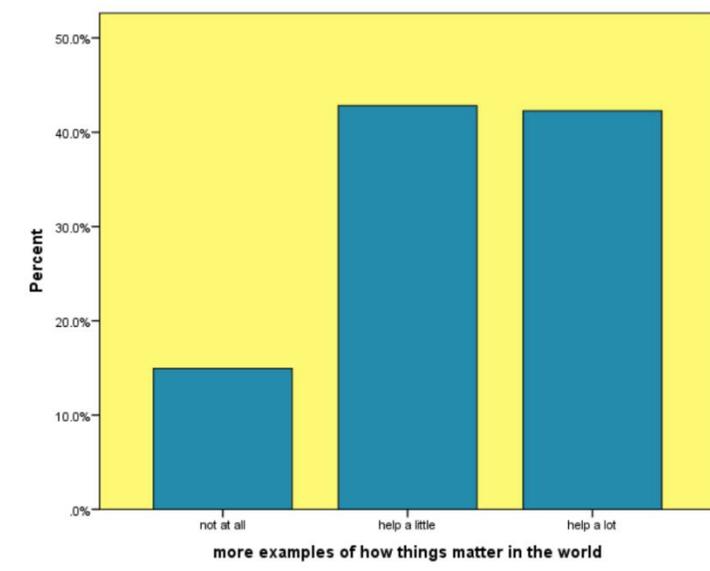
Classes that are more challenging: 42% indicated this would not help at all indicating that they do not want more difficult classes. However, a clear majority thought it would help either a little (41%) or a lot (17%).
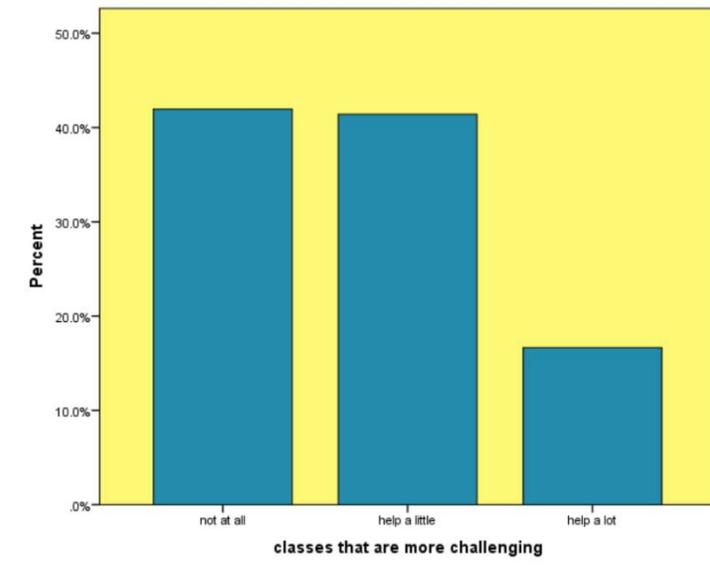
More help with my homework: Students again indicated that help with homework would help a little (49%) or a lot (32%). 19% indicated that it would not help at all.
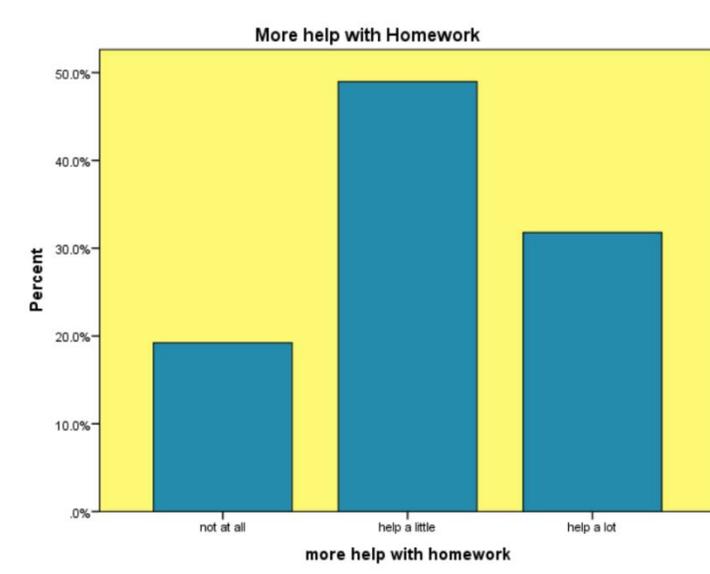
More help at school with my problems outside of school: The majority of students 58.5% indicated that this would not help at all, while some (29%) indicated it would help a little and 12.5% indicated it would help a lot.
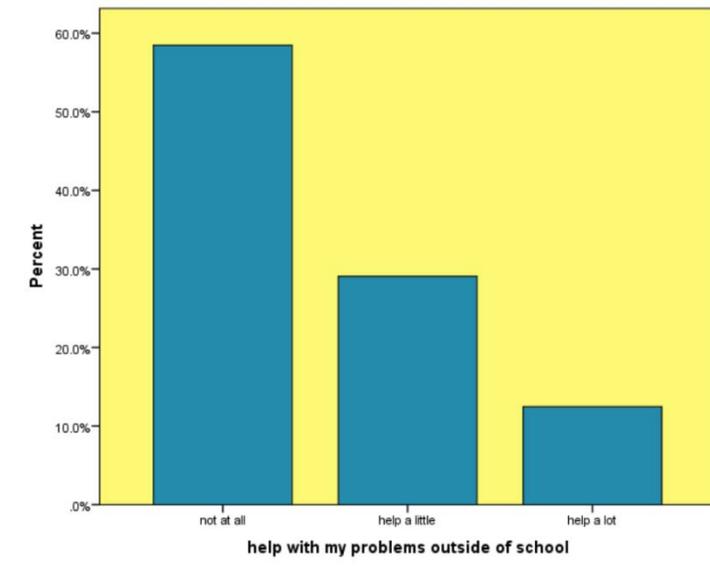
If other students were more accepting of me: Again a slim majority of students (51%) indicated this would not help at all, while 31% said it would help a little and 18% said it would help a lot.
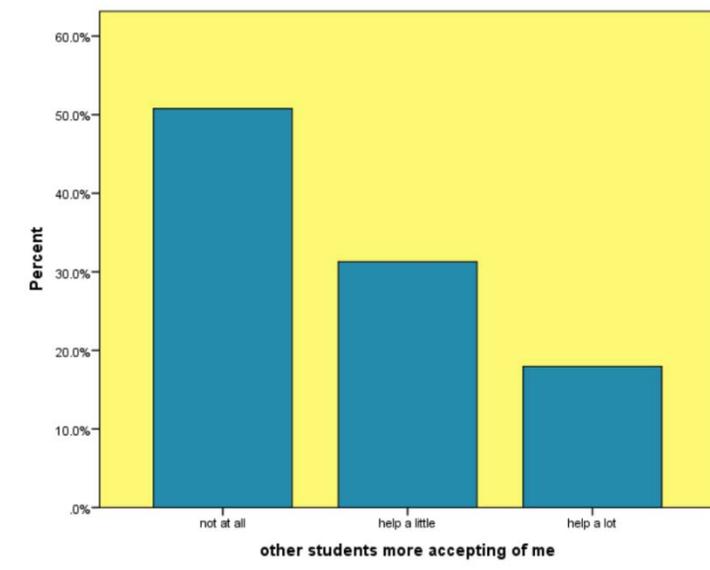
Conclusion

The survey results reveal that most students in the Chilliwack District have a fairly strong (medium to high) sense of self, safety and belonging. There are however a sizeable percentage who report low levels in these areas signaling possible problems of disengagement.

Additionally, a majority of students (75%) report a medium level of academic engagement. Also a majority of students (76%) report having a medium level of positive interaction. These are areas that come under the rubric of the district and can be improved. Further investigation of best practices to enhance these areas is warranted. Students' opinions on possible actions that would help them to learn better should also be taken into account.

The strongest relationship(s) found in the results is the influence of how many adults at school they [students] feel they can talk to if they had a problem? This is the key finding as it impacts all aspects of engagement for high school students in the District. Being connected to adults in the institution means a great deal to students and cannot be underestimated. All students would benefit from enhanced and supported adult attachments and, as will be discussed in the next section on Phase two of the study, from the District taking 'ownership' of all students.

There are very clearly a multitude of intervening factors that play a role in the chances of a student successfully completing high school within six years. While it is unlikely that educators and the District can compensate for many of the social issues such as poverty that affect their students, they can enhance factors under their control such as academic organization (usually in the form of academic engagement including curriculum) and social organization (usually in the form of the quality of relationships between students and educators). Many of these internal institutional factors are explored in phase two of project. In particular, the role of effective and supportive transitions in fostering school connectedness and promoting academic success in the Chilliwack School District are explored.

PHASE TWO STUDY

Introduction

The Chilliwack School District has demonstrated its commitment to developing supports for its students as they transition at various points in their educational journeys. Previous external reviews as well as various internal documents, and most recently the work of the Alternative Education Inquiry Team (AEIT) all point to the District's continued efforts to improve the experiences of its students. It is within this framework that this project explores the role of effective and supportive transitions in fostering school connectedness and promoting academic success in the Chilliwack School District.

The literature consistently highlights that what is variously described as *school* connectedness or engagement is critically important to understanding the school experiences of young people irrespective of their backgrounds and communities (Hamilton et al., 2012; Pickett et al., 2009). Peled and Smith (2010) report that "youth with high levels of school connectedness were more likely to report better health, post-secondary educational aspirations, and positive feelings about their lives" (p. 59). Generally, it is estimated that "at-risk youth make up about 25% of youth in Canada and the United States" (Hutchinson et al., 2011, p. 196) with further research indicating "that social resources such as parents, teachers, and school support contribute to resilient outcomes" (Hutchinson et al., 2011, p. 196). The relationship between school connectedness and risk has been extensively documented and provides a backdrop for the exploration of these issues within the Chilliwack School District. Pirbhai-Illich (2010) asserts that "students attending alternative schools have been labeled as at risk of educational failure for reasons that include low academic achievement, disruptive behaviour, suspensions, and erratic attendance" (p. 258).

The purpose of this component of the project is to contribute to the conversation about success and completion rates initiated by the student surveys by exploring transition processes within the District. Well supported transitions (e.g. middle to high school, to and from alternative programs) within the K to 12 system are critical to full and successful education experiences. This discussion uses the interviews with key stakeholders, the notes from the researcher's participation in the AEIT sessions and draws on relevant literature to contextualize the experiences of those working within the Chilliwack School District.

"Coming Along Beside Them": School Connectedness and Resiliency

In describing the "connectedness slump", DeWit et al. (2011) assert that "between one quarter and one third of students in Canada and the U.S become disengaged from school by the time they enter high school" (p. 557). School connectedness is described in a variety of ways, including "the belief among students that teachers and other adults within the school care

about them as individuals and about their learning" (Hamilton et al.'s, 2012, p. 26) and "whether students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported by others at school" (Langille, 2012, p. 760). For many of the participants in this study, connectedness was more effectively fostered in schools that were characterized by "collective 'ownership'" of the students:

> There's a recognition that these are our students …. There is a sense of loss when one of our students is asked to leave … [our staff] feel genuine remorse that they couldn't help this student. (Participant)

> If the kid is connected to someone in the building you have a way better chance with them. (Participant)

Generally, there needs to be greater attention paid to thinking more holistically and creatively about what school connectedness looks like for all students. For some participants, simply establishing these connections should be articulated more convincingly by administrators as an integrated goal and ultimately a measurable construction of success. The importance of relationship building was central to all participants as they spoke about the most critical intervention for students experiencing challenges in school. However, this orientation too often acts as a blinder to the educational needs of the student:

> We are absolutely developing positive relationships and that's all good but in terms of resources, tools, learning strategies --- those are not being addressed [with these students]. (Participant)

> Yes, sometimes they really are the 'throwaway kids' and we put them all in this place where people will care for them but are you putting the appropriate resources in place to give them a chance. (Participant)

These observations are important as the literature indicates that connectedness is critical not as a singular and isolated goal but as a foundation to support engagement with pro-social and positive academic experiences.

In a discussion of these complexities Faulkner et al. (2009) argue that "school connectedness enhances a social bond between the student and school, which in turn 'inhibits behaviours inconsistent with the beliefs held and behaviours practiced by the socialization unit [the school] through establishment of an individual's stake in conforming to its norms, values and behaviours'. From this perspective, the intervention target has typically been to facilitate positive changes to the school setting to promote changes in positive and problem behaviours" (p. 317).

One of the most difficult challenges in responding to this lack of engagement are the mental health issues faced by so many young people (Quiroga, 2013) with DeWit et al. (2011) indicating that "in Canada, estimates suggest that 15% of children and youth (1.2 million < age 19) suffer from mental illness that impact their growth and development and day-to-day activities" (p. 556). According to the 2006 Canadian Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey, "by grade 10, 38% of girls and 22% of boys reported feeling low or depressed in the previous week" (DeWit et al., 2011):

> Our students aren't going to say "I'm sad, I'm depressed, I'm anxious" … it's our job to be, to be detectives but then we start saying we don't have the time. (Participant)

> We must do more to recognize the connections … between our students' non-academic realities, their mental health, their family, and then what we're trying to do … what comes first and what do we do to sort those connections out and then to do what's going to be helpful. (Participant)

DeWit et al. (2011) argue that there are "moderate to strong correlations between declining classmate and teacher support and diminishing mental health suggest that all teachers and students have a role to play in the prevention of student mental health problems and call for a concerted effort from school administrators, educators, and political decision makers to implement policies and practices aimed at improving the quality of interpersonal relationship between students and their teachers and classmates" (p. 569). A key theme in the AEIT sessions focused on imagining what a District-driven response to students' mental health challenges might look like within a more fluid construction of those needs in place of the current category-driven approach:

> Most students' needs can be met at our mainstream schools, but not in the existing model. (Participant)

> There's a need for an evidence-based approach to helping these students that elevates their needs above the constraints of our system. (Participant)

Intricately connected to mental health issues and school engagement is working with children in the care of children's services as "such youth may lack a strong sense of belonging to their immediate families and so strong connections to school may be of significant value, both psychologically and socially … schools are a practical alternative for youth seeking connections and a sense of belonging" (Hamilton et al., 2012, p. 26):

> These young people have to be connected to their home schools … there has to be hope, there have to be mental health supports. (Participant)

Many of the children that are accessing off-site and on-site alternate services are associated with some form of governmental service provision making the need for school connectedness even more pressing as they generally have fewer familial or community options to form these relationships. Hamilton et al. (2012) note that "strengthening the connections that youth with CPS involvement have to school may contribute significantly to reducing the risks of negative outcomes. Youth who sense that adults within schools care about them and who feel that they are a part of particular school are likely to do well in school. Success in school is likely to promote a positive dynamic of increasing opportunities that can place youth on a path to future success rather than greater risk and negative outcomes" (p. 32):

> These [alternate] programs are about creating opportunities for kids to meet adults who can make connections and make them feel valued. (Participant)

> Kids need connections to as many staff members as they believe will help them be successful … kids having them believe in them sets the stage. (Participant)

> There's a personal connection to the kids, I understood their stories. (Participant)

A key challenge within an alternate philosophy relates to how the educational system integrates the foundational educational goal of connecting with students, without getting stuck in the matrix of relations and consequently marginalizing the academic potential of all students.

A further complexity is the cultural context that characterizes the relational and structural potential for school connectedness. This reality is exemplified in this District as in many Districts cross Canada as "the cultural divide between Aboriginal and mainstream ways causes distress and disorientation which in turn is associated with Aboriginal students' educational disengagement" (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010, p. 258). According to MacIver (2012) "teachers hold considerable power in influencing Aboriginal students' sense of belonging in school, through their interactions with their students, the curricula taught, and the instructional strategies selected" (p. 161):

> The idea of working on an individual package is not the best model for these students … they have anxiety, behaviour issues and are not sure they have a voice. (Participant)

> How can we teach in a different way so that our [Aboriginal] students are feeling it's meaningful. (Participant)

Connectedness can become even more tenuous when exploring the stories of students and the professionals working with those students who identify as sexual minorities, particularly in Districts that do not have strong and comprehensive anti-homophobia policies. Heck's (2011) study examining Gay-Straight Alliances finds that "youth who attended a high school with a GSA report significantly more favourable outcomes related to school experiences, alcohol use,

psychological distress" (p. 161). While there were a few comments regarding the transitional challenges faced by LGBT aware and/or identified students, there also seemed to be a more prevalent silence with respect to these issues. This silence did not seem to be fuelled by discomfort but appeared to be rooted in assumptions of "acceptance" and positive school climates based on broader societal signals such as the legalization of same-sex marriage:

> I don't think [sexuality] is an issue … our students and staff are very accepting … I think society has changed so much. (Participant)

> The students that seem to be in need don't identify that as an issue … so I don't think so. (Participant)

Rayside (2012) explains the complacency of school districts in Canada in regard to activism in support of sexual minorities as a result of a complex web of factors including: provincial control over curriculum, a move toward greater amalgamation of school districts resulting in more diversity of opinion on school boards, lack of teacher preparation on these issues, a perception of low administrative support for teachers to explore these issues, relatively low levels of student activism, inadequate organizing on these issues at a national level, and finally the assumptions with respect to gains made highlighted above. Almost all of these factors were cited in the few comments made by participants with respect to the relative invisibility of Gay-Straight Alliances in the District and the palpable resistance to these types of efforts felt by some participants.

This conversation regarding school connectedness is about the development of relationships that are grounded in the structural constraints and opportunities embedded in the school system. More explicit celebration of these relationships as foundational to academic success, in all its forms, requires District leadership in addressing organizational constraints and promoting pedagogical and programmatic innovation in schools.

Meaningful Transitions: Structural Challenges and Relational Opportunities

Langille (2012) points to "four school-related factors [that] contributed to school connectedness: organizational structure (for example, smaller schools an smaller class sizes); functional aspects of schools (for example, fair and clear disciplinary expectations an increased parental involvement in school); the school's built environment (for example, well maintained facilities and interesting architecture); and, interpersonal support (for example, positive relationships among students and staff)"(p. 763). There were a number of threads associated with this broader theme of structure and relations in particular as they relate to the role of staffing, transition teams, assessment, teacher training and professional development, and organizational structures in shaping the experience of students.

<u>Staffing</u>

A wide variety of staffing issues were raised by participants including teacher training and the roles of EA's, LA's and Resource Teachers. Concerns were raised regarding the criteria and qualifications for each of these roles, the tendency for EA's to perform tasks beyond their formal duties due to perceived necessity, and the emphasis on behaviour management as opposed to teaching and learning:

> We don't have enough resources and when we do … too often we can't use our EA's and resource teachers effectively. (Participant)

> They end up helping us manage our classrooms instead of educating our students. (Participant)

Interestingly, it was noted that "everywhere else in society" individuals have choices about the size and the intensity of their interactive groups (family, work, volunteer) and yet in school, during the most challenging developmental period in their lives, students do not:

> What inhibits us is our structure and our imagination … not the kids. (Participant)

There is extensive research supporting the instrumental and protective role that teachers and other school staff can play in relation to emotional and even mental health challenges (DeWit et al., 2011). School staff are critical as "caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation are protective factors for young people … as is the availability of consistent adults who provide a base for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative" (Tilleczek, 2012, p. 260). How is this robust observation operationalized in the Chilliwack School District?:

> We all care about kids, but I don't know if we do a good job of letting our students know they're valued. (Participant)

> I feel like too often, too often I miss moments because I'm running, running to the photocopier … just running. (Participant)

The structural and relational challenges and opportunities associated with Aboriginal students and found in alternate sites, alternate services and mainstream settings "either fail to recognize or dismiss the glaring fact that urban Aboriginal students are attempting to function in an educational system that is hostile to them while at the same time trying to integrate into the dominant society that has been and is still oppressive to them" (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010, p. 258):

> We're a policy-driven system, a comprehensive system but that doesn't serve all of our kids. (Participant)

> Some of the well-intentioned efforts to address Aboriginal students' needs … some of those, I think some of those continue to do harm as we're so constrained by the system. (Participant)

Finally, there was a concern raised by many participants that too often alternate programs provide a space for students and for teachers that do not fit into the "the system" and that both of these potential manifestations need to be explicitly addressed:

> Alt Ed has this reputation of being second best and part of that was well earned because a lot of the time we are addressing a staffing problem instead of addressing the best needs of our students. (Participant)

> If I'm being completely honest, there's no after school stuff because let's face it … there's a five hour day and … that attracts a certain type of individual … we're 24/7, it doesn't shut down, I see teachers arriving at 6 am and leaving at 10 at night and can I say that about alt ed teachers? (Participant)

In various discussions of staffing, pedagogical conversations about the delivery of curriculum and the structure of classrooms pointed to the need for greater differentiation and the requisite creativity necessary in that differentiation for more responsive classrooms:

> I'd like to see more kids out of the building …. Why do we have them at desks? (Participant)

> Teachers need the latitude to innovate … but innovation is a lot of work … and there needs to be a whole re-culturing of how we teach. (Participant)

While these conversations were imbued with a great deal of energy and a clear demonstration of the commitment of the District's staff, there was a concomitant recognition of the challenges teachers and administrators face in implementing these strategies in a more comprehensive manner:

> Principals must have the supports necessary … but then, then principals must have the fortitude and tenacity to act. (Participant)

> Something always comes up … the constraints, the union concerns, 5 by 8 timetable, block scheduling, all of that. (Participant)

Transition Models

There is a perception that there is greater room for a District model for transition teams and an urgent need for more resources to support greater attention to transitions, preparation, information-sharing and teacher training specifically around the facilitation of transitions.

Further, there was a great deal of discussion at the AEIT sessions exploring greater District involvement in transitions perhaps through a District Transition Team that would have specialized expertise and resources that would be accessible to school-based transition teams. Critical to this type of organizational model would be appropriate resourcing at both the school and District level as well as a uniform model of implementation for the District with an associated understanding of accountability:

> We need to share more information … not just within our schools, but across our schools. (Participant)

> Maybe not every school needs the same resources but we need to be able to access the resources … and we need District leadership, a model. (Participant)

A consistent theme was having the right staff, whether in an off-site alternate program or in a mainstream setting, and yet there is a parallel concern about how to get and keep those individuals:

> Personality is 100% … you need the right people. (Participant)

Finally, the majority of participants felt that there was greater room within the existing calendar constraints to do more transition planning and interventions.

> We have time but only if we make it … if the District makes this a priority and makes us organize that space differently. (Participant)

Assessment

While there have been purposeful efforts to establish more uniform protocol with respect to assessment and the transition into alternate services, there was a general perception that a shift away from an *at-risk student* model (discussed in more depth later) might provide an opportunity for a much more progressive assessment orientation. There was a consistent thread with respect to needing earlier assessments that are framed within a recognition that a great deal of risk behaviours are rooted in the experience of academic challenges:

> We've had kids come to us in grade 10 who can't read but there is no assessment to say they're not capable. (Participant)

> We know they have issues … but we don't know the nature, the extent …. We aren't mental health specialists, we need that assessment. (Participant)

> Why do we wait til the problem manifests itself … what would preventative assessment look like …. A lot different, I can tell you that. (Participant)

It seems that a special education or resource background is associated with a more holistic response to transition challenges. If this is the case how might the District support the role of this expertise and broaden the opportunities for training in this area?

<u>Teacher Training and Professional Development</u>

An aspect of the juxtaposition of what is going on and what could be going on is captured in the ideas shared regarding teacher training and professional development. With respect to teacher training it was suggested that the profession and consequently the teacher education programs have not kept pace with the complexities associated with the expectations of the classroom teacher. Particularly in relation to students as transitioning through risk within an academic orientation committed to keeping all students within the mainstream school:

> It starts with teaching trainer … there's too much fluff. (Participant)

> You learn on your feet, learn on the fly. (Participant)

> How are we being prepared? … I don't think very well … it hurts us, it hurts our students. (Participant)

There was consistent reference to more effective use of PD and the subsequent sharing, follow-up and school and District-based supports to implement the learning that would occur through well-conceived professional development:

> PD is a waste of time … I mean how many times can we hike up Elk Mountain? (Participant)

> There needs to be greater attention to understanding behaviour. (Participant)

Langille (2012) noted "that teacher training in classroom management to enhance school bonding, parent training to promote family and school boning, and student training in social competence positively affected students' attitudes toward school and increased levels of measures of school attachment" (p. 763).

<u>Organizational Structure</u>

An additional key thread relates to the structural constraints embedded in the organization of our schools. As participants reflected on key components of a successful Alternate program, several commented that those elements should be embodied in mainstream schools:

> Our schools need to change … we need to be able to tap into the creativity of our students and our staff … be more flexible with our kids. (Participant)

With middle and high schools on the same site, there is greater potential to find opportunities for staff crossover so that teachers who will be working with students in high school have an opportunity to work with these students in middle school:

> It would be great, within the model we have, to have students and teachers connect earlier … then see and interact again … it's part of transition. (Participant)

In looking at the off-site alternative programs (CHANCE, Sto:lo, Education Centre) there are very different issues highlighted once we drill down past that very obvious sense of marginalization as exemplified by physical plant concerns perceived by various stakeholders throughout the District. Interestingly, there was a great deal of discussion regarding "thinking outside the box to keep kids engaged in school" and clear recognition in many conversations of the need for flexibility and creative problem-solving in response to students who experience difficulties. In the face of an apparent commitment to the integration of home, school, community and peers, the zero tolerance policy on drugs and alcohol seems incongruent.

As discussed above, relationships are integral to students' sense of belonging and yet there was an interesting tension raised with respect to the potential disservice done to students by overemphasis on relations and an under-emphasis on the curriculum:

> At the end of the day, we still have an academic agenda so it can't just be relationships. (Participant)

Given the factors that impede school connectedness for certain individuals and particular groups of individuals, it is critical that the District devotes its energy to modifying the structures that are in place that appear to exacerbate the negative experiences of students, whether they are formally identified as at-risk or not. For example, the thread of teacher training, teacher selection, and in-service professional development came up repeatedly during the interviews and the AEIT meetings. The need for District leadership as opposed to management of these "issues" was palpable at every meeting and in every interview.

Leadership and Innovation

An overwhelming theme represented in the conversations with participants related to District leadership and the associated vision of the District. While there were a number of comments about laudable efforts to shine the light on some *best practices* in the District through local media and internal communications, participants expressed a frustration with the perceived lack of an effective District strategy for looking at inter-school sharing and integrated District-wide models of transition. While there was some appreciation for the attention to transition and alternate services demonstrated by the work of the AEIT and this study there was more obviously a deep sense of frustration and cynicism:

Do I see lots of change coming from this? … no, no I don't … 5 years from now I think CHANCE and the Ed Centre will still look the same. (Participant)

Even if there's money dumped in, does it mean a fresh coat of paint but the philosophy, the program still run the same. (Participant)

I think everyone has the best interests of students in mind … there's a lot of pressure around these graduation rates that really drives things. (Participant)

Alt is an afterthought … but now with the push to have these kids graduate maybe there will be some more emphasis. (Participant)

If they really wanted real change then they wouldn't be presenting what they are going to do … they would have included staff … they would have made staff part of the process. (Participant)

There were strong sentiments expressed that there needed to be greater leadership in engaging in creative, outside the box programming looking at the construction of success that has the potential to really have an impact. There was a clear recognition that completion rates are the dominant measure of success; however, there was a concomitant acknowledgement that the emphasis on this yardstick is inadequate and that discussions of successful educational experiences need to become more varied:

This process has gone on before and nothing's ever been done. (Participant)

The District needs to prepare for the pushback …. You're going to get pushback … their worlds are going to change. (Participant)

There just needs to be somebody willing to do it and willing to deal with the pushback because there will be resistance. (Participant)

Define what CHANCE is and then leave it as that. (Participant)

A number of participants raised the need for more transparent and evidence-based decision-making with respect to transitions and risk and alternative education with one participant capturing this sentiment in this way. Any "policy activism with and for youth in transition through public education must reduce vulnerabilities which compromise young people through the delivery of good services especially for those needing support, the monitoring and reporting of trends, the drafting and enacting of protective legislation, the supporting of research and practice innovations in these areas, and overseeing capacity building in families, schools, and communities" (Tilleczek, 2012, p. 264):

> Where was the assessment of what was going on with the middle school alt programs? … felt like they were just gone instead of a real review of what they were doing. (Participant)

> It's always politics … if politics got out of the way … it's always, here's an idea, but let's talk about it for 3 years …. I think that's why we're, we're so afraid to make mistakes, so afraid of being judged …. It's like we'll get an idea and then the response is let's go out and look at other Districts, at what they're doing. What's wrong with being the innovator? What's wrong with going for it and seeing what happens? (Participant)

An example of the types of ideas invoked by participants as they talked about leadership, innovation and District vision is work-based education:

> There needs to be more recognition that more needs to be done to support students not going to university … we're so focused on a system that's geared toward students getting their 80 credits for preparation for post-secondary opportunities but the reality is we're not doing enough to prepare them for work when the truth of the matter is that most of our students will graduate and go to work. (Participant)

There is a strong body of research that highlights the critical role that *work-based education* plays in strengthening weakened ties to school and even repairing those that have been severed (Hutchinson et al., 2011). Given the success of these types of orientations, and while there are clearly efforts by the District to engage in these types of initiatives, many participants suggested that there were repeated examples that highlight a perceived absence of a well-supported and authoritatively conceived exploration of work-based programs.

While Hutchinson et al. (2010) note "that the kinds of WBE programs that met the needs of at-risk youth provided these students with consistent, supportive, accommodating environments that were emotionally safe and included an adult role model for appropriate social and vocational behaviour. We recommend that schools design alternative, somewhat protected contexts that help at-risk youth to gain control of their behaviour and their attendance because it is critical to keep them in school where they can learn employability skills and gain the credits necessary to graduate" (p. 307). What might these programs look like with District leadership that responded to student observations that describe these opportunities as "controlled, but not controlling, environments which provided increasing challenge and greater success than they had attained in academic schooling" (Hutchinson et al., 2010, p. 207)? What might mainstream schools look like if this orientation was the cornerstone for all educational programming in the District?

Additionally, participants voiced full and strong support for the hiring of District youth counsellors as a meaningful yet insufficient response to the front-line challenges being

experienced in the schools. Participants indicated that leadership in this regard would entail a meaningful assessment of how this model can be strengthened perhaps through increasing the number of youth workers and expanding the approach to include District-based drug and alcohol counsellors. At a more basic level, participants repeatedly emphasized the need for increasing the number of school counsellors and attending to the need for these resources at an early elementary level. Given the robust nature of the literature with respect to the resiliency associated with supportive and involved adults and the importance of that resiliency in relation to academic success, additional resources would be very well utilized:

> CHANCE and Sto:lo need full-time counsellors. (Participant)

> We need to start [providing counselling services] really, really young if we think about what makes sense developmentally. (Participant)

> If school staff and administrators have the luxury of having those resources within the context of their schools then I think that the flow of students moving from bricks to Mortar schools to Alternate would be minimal. (Participant)

The consideration of the mental health needs of many students is discussed in the next section as it relates to constructions of risk. However, there is a leadership component to this issue that was raised throughout the data collection phase and that relates to the resourcing of counsellors, professional development, teacher selection, and program structures. At a macro-level participants articulated a need for the District to be part of the collective voice of the community challenging the provincial government as it continues to cut back funding in the areas of mental health and other protective services for youth.

While expressed in a variety of ways, claims of restricted resources were challenged by participants who connected the marginalization and associated silence of *at-risk* students and their families being an important determinant in the lack of resources often attributed to these programs. A number of participants referenced the District's recent allocation of $600,000 from the reserve fund and the socio-economic differences between French Immersion parents and families of *at-risk* students and their families:

> It's where the priorities are … who decides and who has the loudest voice … maybe the most persistent voice. (Participant)

> Yes, budgets are tight, yes, we can't do everything we want to do … but are there different ways we could use the money we do have? Yes. (Participant)

> Programming decisions, when there are budget implications … those decisions need to be more transparent ... they need to relate to need, real need. (Participant)

Challenging the Construction of the "At-Risk Student" Identity

A majority of participants argued that there needs to be much greater attention paid to the underlying issues that are impeding the successful integration of students in their schools and that by focusing on the symptoms we are increasingly drawn to the construction of the *at-risk* student as opposed to the more complex construction of risk as a contextual and fluid reality. This orientation is framed by Tilleczek (2012) as he notes that risk "is better understood along a continuum (Catterall 1998, Schonert-Reichl 2000) and `in-risk' better depicts a situational rather than individual process as recommended by the phrase 'students in at-risk situations'" (p. 259).

Critical to understanding the need for this shift from thinking about *at-risk* as a status and *in-risk* as a contextual experience is that in the middle and high school transition periods there is "increased emphasis on the peer group for defining feelings of individual self-worth" (DeWit et al., 2011, p. 557). As noted by Langille (2012), "adolescence is a period that often involves changes in behaviour and psychology that can put young people at risk, including risks related to sexual activity, substance use, and depression" (p. 760).

Further, DeWit et al. (2011) point to research that

> attribute[s] the decline in student feelings of social support to a widening lack of fit between the changing developmental needs of adolescents and the social and learning environment of middle and high schools. The transition to these schools is believed to exacerbate adolescent psychological vulnerabilities because the new environments possess features (ie. Larger sizes, instruction from several teachers, multiple-age cohorts) that fall short of satisfying changing student needs for greater autonomy, more support from nonparental adult authority figures (ie. teachers), and closer relationships with peers. Middle schools and high schools also tend to judge student academic performance using achievement goals that emphasize relative ability, competition, and social comparison when adolescents are acutely self-conscious of how they are viewed by their peers" (p. 557).

These sentiments were echoed by the majority of participants:

> How do we recognize that when we have them … in middle school, that they're struggling with so much … even the ones that get through … is getting through enough? (Participants)

> Are there ways that we can get peers more involved … we're doing some of that … could we do more? … and what would that look like? … what could it look like? (Participants)

There needs to be greater emphasis on congruence between school-based models of transition and the developmental realities that young people face on a daily basis. Importantly, "the most

pervasive source of anxiety is the loss of status precisely when negotiating moves towards adulthood" (Tilleczek, 2012, p. 255):

> Classroom practice needs to change … why are they disengaged? … that's work, but that's what we need to address, that's what needs to happen. (Participant)

> I worry that so many of our students are experiencing stressors … hard moments but because they have outside school supports they muddle through and are marked as successes … they graduate but have those students lost opportunities that we'll never know about because of their experience of risk … their difficulties weren't sufficient to officially attract our attention … all kids experience important experiences of vulnerability … I worry we miss them. (Participant)

In these reflections of risk assessment, one of the key questions that arose in workshop sessions and interviews was the determination of threshold with respect to off-site alternative programming and consequently on-site program alternatives. The majority of the participants took the position that off-site programs should be reserved for those students who are a threat to other students and/or who are not able to function in a mainstream setting:

> It's where I struggle because there's a part of me that thinks that if we're doing our job then we don't need an Ed Centre …. I don't think a kid in middle school should be leaving to go to a CHANCE type program. (Participant)

> I think students are best suited in the mainstream if they can manage it …. Don't combine CHANCE and the Ed Centre. It's an awful idea …. The ED Centre, it's a bleak place … I'm sorry, but it is. (Participant)

There is a perception among many of the participants that if the alternate programs, particularly CHANCE, were set aside for only those students that cannot function in mainstream schools then additional resources could be redirected into the mainstream schools while still attending to the marginalization of the actual physical settings of these off-site programs.

Those who held the minority opinion that a mix of students requiring alternate services was a far better model as those higher functioning students draw out the other students and provide positive experiences for those students and teachers and increase the likelihood that you are not simply managing behaviour:

> The mix at CHANCE is the right mix … is there room for growth if you put like individuals together? (Participant)

> If you only have the high flyers in the [alternate] programs then I don't know what that looks like for the students … what does that look like for teachers? (Participant)

This question is central to the District's vision and merges all four of the themes highlighted in this report. Having said that, there was repeated mention, even by those who wanted a higher threshold, of the need for off-site availability for the most severe needs. In that regard, a number of participants suggested that if progressive, outside the box thinking was considered then what that off-site program looks like might be very different:

> If we are doing our job then we would keep all but those kids who need a very different "it". (Participant)

> For those students, for those students do they need something, something more like a Maples-type program? I don't know. (Participants)

In the absence of the shift to a higher threshold for off-site programming and more inclusion in mainstream schools, there are very strong feelings about the inadequacies of the current model of service provision:

> It's very inefficient and not very useful to have someone [at CHANCE] one day a week … it's about putting out fires, it's not preventative … it's reactionary … If you're going to have an Alt site and you're going to have the neediest kids all planted in one place then a full-time counsellor and a full-time LA should be in place with no question ... how can there even be a question? (Participant)

Again, thinking about school environment "most aggressive behaviour is episodic and transient and associated with the interaction between adolescent development and environmental factors. Self-control develop gradually during adolescence and, in the absence of the socializing influence of attentive adult, minor interpersonal conflicts can escalate into physical violence" (Pickett et al., 2009, p. 161). These types of escalations are more likely in the absence of structures and relationships that have the potential to diffuse these difficult but likely moments of tension:

> Aside from dealing specifically with violent students … those students putting other students at risk be it drugs or violence, but otherwise I can't see why students couldn't be served within the mainstream schools at least at the middle school level. (Participant)

One of the most critical challenges with respect to the mental health dimension of school connectedness is assessment and diagnosis and there was a loud and harmonious chorus highlighting the barriers to timely mental health assessments within the District:

> We need a much easier process for diagnosing kids, it's very taxing right now to get a student assessed. It could be months before we have any type of accurate diagnosis on a student and of course if you're trying to plan for that student, until you get an

accurate diagnosis, it's hit and miss, you're guessing … we're not health professionals … until kids get a diagnosis and help, academics come second, they have to. (Participant)

A critical leadership challenge is that we can't know what educational experiences might look like for students who have been traditionally challenged in the school setting until we rethink the structures within which they are `failing' (Ferguson and Wolkow, 2012). As noted by one of the participants, "would you deliberately break a child's legs and then tell them they can't run?"

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A majority of students (75%) report a medium level of academic engagement. Also a majority of students (76%) report having a medium level of positive interaction. These are areas that come under the rubric of the district and can be improved. Further investigation of best practices to enhance these areas is warranted. Students' opinions on possible actions that would help them to learn better should also be taken into account.

- All students would benefit from enhanced and supported adult attachments and from the District taking 'ownership' of all students.

- Explicit and targeted connectedness programs need to be implemented and framed by a whole school approach and grounded in a District vision and commitment.

- The current "at-risk" student model of alternate programs, services and transition strategies needs to be restructured and reconfigured as a more progressive "in-risk" paradigm. This shift should include:

  i) A higher threshold for off-site alternate programs and consequently the services provided by these off-site programs;

  ii) The implementation of meaningful District-level accountability structures assessing the transitions and alternate services provided in schools that expects all students to experience risk at some point in their K-12 years.

  iii) Re-visioning of academic, social, emotional and mental assessments as part of a preventative model as opposed to the necessarily reactive orientation currently in place in the District.

  iv) The development of a District plan for school-based transition teams with accountability frameworks for the operation of these teams that recognizes school-based differences and the need for flexibility within a framework of clear guidelines. This framework should include strategies for information-sharing, intervention protocols, and "in-risk portfolio" development. Further study of how these teams might be supported by a District Transition Resource Team is warranted given the results of this study.

  v) There needs to be dramatic strengthening of the counselling resources in each school and the implementation of District-based specialized supports. This strengthening would be characterized by both increased numbers of counsellors and a meaningful discussion of qualifications and roles.

- The District needs to continue its efforts to make better use of in-service educational opportunities such as staff meetings and professional development days. In addition, the District needs to develop mechanisms that support a culture of learning in part through collegial sharing of these learning opportunities and most importantly, supports for the implementation of new ideas in the classrooms across the District.

- The staff in the District need to be involved in the development of a collegial mentoring system that begins by defining a vision for excellence in teaching in the District and frames this conversation within a sustainable structure of supports.
- The District's commitment to a philosophy of schools "keeping" their students needs to be core to its administrative and organizational responsibilities such that it becomes the touchstone for its operations including: hiring decisions, budgetary allocations, contract negotiations, programming decisions, and professional development activities.

REFERENCES

Bridgeland, J. M. (2010). The New Dropout Challenge: Bridging Gaps among Students, Parents, and Teachers. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 101-110.

Bridgeland, J. M.; Balfanz, R. (2009). The High School Dropout Problem: Perspectives of Teachers and Principals. *Education Digest,* 75(3): 20-26.

British Columbia Ministry of Education, (2011). 2010-11 Completion Rates. http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/news/docs/2011/fs_CompletionRates_111110.pdf

Davies, S. & Guppy, N. (2010). *The Schooled Society, 2nd Edition*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

DeWit, D.J., Karioja, K., Rye, B.J. and Shain, M. (2011). Perceptions of declining classmate and teacher support following the transition to high school: Potential correlates of increasing student mental health difficulties. *Psychology in the Schools*, 48(6), 556-572.

Faulkner, G.E., Adlaf, E.M., Irving, H.M., Allison, K.R. and Dwyer, J. (2009). School connectedness: Identifying adolescents at risk in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of School Health*, 79(7), 312-318.

Ferguson, H.B. and Wolkow, K. (2012). Educating children and youth in care: A review of barriers to school progress and strategies for change. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 1143-1149.

Gilbert, S. Barr, L. Clark, W., Blue, M., & Sunter, D. (1993). *Leaving School: Results from a National Survey.* Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.

Hamilton, H.A., Wekerle, C., Paglia-Boak, A. and Mann, R.E. (2012). The role of school connectedness in the link between family involvement with child protective services n adolescent adjustment. *Advances in Mental Health, 11(1), 25-34.*

Heck, N.C., Flentje, A. and Cochran, B.N. (2011). Offsetting risks: High school gay straight alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 26(2), 161-174.

Hutchinson, N.L., Versnel, J., Poth, C., Berg, D., deLugt, J., Dalton, C., Chin, P. and Munby, H. (2011). "They want to come to school": Work-base education programs to prevent the social exclusion of vulnerable youth. *Work, 40*, 195-209.

Langille, D., Rasic, D., Kisely, S., Flowerdew, G. and Cobbett, S. (2012). Protective associations of school connectedness with risk of depression in Nova Scotia adolescents. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(12), 759-764.

Lee, V., & Burkham, D.T. (2003). Dropping out of High School: The Role of School Organization and Structure. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(2): 353-393.

Lee, V., & Loeb, S. (2000). School Size in Chicago Elementary Schools: Effects on Teachers' Attitudes and Students' Achievement. *American Educational Research Journal.* 37: 3-31.

MacIver, M. (2012). Aboriginal students' perspectives on the factors influencing high school completion. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 14(3), 156-162.

Meeker, S. D., Edmonson, S., & Fisher, A. (2009). The Voices of High School Dropouts: Implications for Research and Practice. *International Journal on School Disaffection*, 6(1): 40-52.

Nixon, L. A. (1999). The Educational Attainment of Young Women: Role Model Effects of Female High School Faculty. *Demography*, 36(2): 185-194.

Peled, M., & Smith, A. (2010). Alternative education programs in BC: Meeting the needs of vulnerable students. *Education Canada, 50*, 56-59.

Pickett, W., Iannotti, R.J., Simons-Morton, B. and Dostaler, S. (2009). Social environments and physical aggression among 21,107 students in the United States and Canada. *Journal of School Health,* 79(4), 160-168.

Pirbhai-Illich, F. (2010/2011). Aboriginal students engaging and struggling with critical multiliteracies. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 54(4), 257-266.

Quiroga, C.V., Janosz, M., Bisset, S. and Morin, A.J. (2013). Early adolescent depression symptoms and school dropout: Mediating processes involving self-reported academic competence and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 105(2), 552-560.*

Rayside, D. (2012). Canadian school lethargy. Queerly Canadian: An introductory reader in sexuality studies, 293-310.

Schissel, B., & Wotherspoon, T. (2003). *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People: Education, Oppression and Emancipation*. Don Mills, On: Oxford University Press.

Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tanner, J. K., & Krahn, H. (1991). Part-Time Work and Deviance amoung High-School Seniors. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 16(3): 281-302.

Tanner, J. Krahn, H. Hartnagel, T.F. (1995). *Fractured Transitions From school to work: Revisiting the Dropout Problem.* Toronto: Oxford University Press,

Tilleczek, K. (2012). Policy activism *with* and *for* youth in transition through public education. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44(3), 253-267.

White, S. W., & Kelly, F. (2010). The School Counselor's Role in School Dropout Prevention. *Journal of Counseling and Development,* 40(1): 87-106.