Passion-Based Learning: The Design and Implementation of a New Approach to Project-Based Learning (PBL) for Alternative Education

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in the Faculty of Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors that influence the design and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum within an alternative education program in a suburban public school district. The study sought to tell the story of the implementation of PBL from the perspectives of staff and students at the school.

A narrative inquiry methodology was selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve staff members and eight students. Data also included field notes made at school events throughout the year and student artefacts of learning. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding processes.

The data from staff participants revealed three thematic categories of factors that influenced the design and implementation of PBL: (1) foundational factors (positive relationships with students, a commitment to student-centered learning, flexible scheduling, staff collaboration, and administrative support); (2) challenges (students’ social emotional well being, students’ learning fears and learning disabilities, students’ levels of interest and motivation for learning, and teachers’ concerns regarding the academic rigour of the PBL model); and (3) professional development activities (shared vision for PBL, workshops and in-service sessions, online and off-site learning opportunities, teacher inquiry and experiential learning, and staff opportunities for collaboration and reflection).

Factors that contributed to students’ engagement in the PBL model revealed both distancing and embracing narratives. Distancing narratives reflected the factors that had disengaged students from learning in their former school. These included barriers to learning, feelings of alienation, and school bureaucracies. Embracing narratives
reflected the key factors that contributed to students’ engagement in the PBL model. These included a caring environment, flexible learning, a co-constructed curriculum, personal relevancy and authenticity, and empowerment.

The findings of this research suggest that if positive inter-relational conditions are established in the learning environment among teachers and students (sense of belonging, trusting relationships, collaborative practices, ethic of care) project-based learning can be an effective curriculum model for re-engaging vulnerable youth in school. Furthermore, the study suggests that a PBL curriculum model grounded in students’ interests and passions can provide personally relevant, authentic learning opportunities that empower alternative education students and help them develop resiliency, self-efficacy, and more positive self-images.

**Keywords:** alternative education; project-based learning (PBL); curriculum implementation; teacher professional development; student engagement; social emotional learning; ethic of care
To the amazing educators and students who participated in this study. I have learned so much from all of you. Thank you for sharing your journey with me.
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I am deeply indebted to Dr. Carolyn Mamchur and her vision for a new Transformational Change doctoral program. Carolyn you taught us to know ourselves better and then encouraged us to embrace transformation through our personal, scholarly, and professional pursuits. You also opened up the doors of narrative writing and helped me to find my voice in this research.

Finally, I want to thank my husband Dan and sons Matt and Sean. Without your love, patience, and incredible support I never could have achieved my dream of pursuing doctoral studies.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>British Columbia (Canada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISP</td>
<td>Integrated Studies Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBL</td>
<td>Project-based learning</td>
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Glossary

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Education</td>
<td>Alternate education programs focus on educational, social and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. (BC Ministry of Education, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based Learning (PBL)</td>
<td>Project-based learning is a teaching approach that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through real-world investigations structured around driving questions and carefully designed products or artefacts of learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Teacher professional development is an intentional, ongoing, and systemic process aimed at enhancing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators as they attempt to better meet the needs of their student population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
<td>The extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at school, participate in academic and non-academic activities, strive to meet the formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious personal investment in learning. (Willms, Friesen, &amp; Milton (2009))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

Blackbird singing in the dead of night,
Take these broken wings and learn to fly.
All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to arise.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney

Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, are quietly chatting as I enter the classroom. I introduce myself as the researcher from SFU. They smile politely but with indifference. They are not interested in conversing with an adult stranger. They turn away and continue talking in hushed, intimate tones, heads bent, hunched over in the chairs in the corner, dark hoodies hanging loosely from slender bodies. A couple? I wonder how long they have known each other. They look like teenagers you might see in any other secondary school. I wonder, as I always do, where they came from, what their story is. What brought them here?

The classroom is old and filled with mismatched furniture, remnants from the previous junior high school tenants. The rest of the stacking chairs, arranged in a semi-circle for our meeting, are empty. The laminate floor is dirty and cracked. Dust on the windows blocks the sunlight. The only sounds in the room are the hushed whispers of the two teenagers in the corner and the distant noises of the construction crew. It is well past noon. I am worried that none of the other students will show up.

I busy myself organizing research consent forms on the wooden table at the front of the room. Suddenly the quiet is broken by the arrival of another student. Agitated and breathless, she sits down noisily in the chair beside the other two, slamming her backpack onto the ground.

“There was a bird in the school today,” she announces in a loud voice to no one in particular, although she is staring intently at me, the only adult in the room. She briefly has the attention of the other two students who look up from their conversation, but she never makes eye contact with either of them. They lose interest quickly and resume their private conversation. It’s just the girl, her story, and me.
“A bird?” I ask, smiling.

“Yeah. No one knows how it got into the school, but it was flying around and freakin’ out. It didn’t know how to get out.” Her eyes are wide, her face flushed.

“So what happened?”

“It got tired out. Landed in the corner. So I bent down and scooped it into my hands,” she tells me proudly. “Then I took it outside, to the back of the school. I thought it might be dead. You know, from the shock and from being so scared.”

“And, was it alright?” I ask quietly, hoping.

“Yeah. I just laid it in the grass and watched for a while. Then finally it moved.

“Hopefully it will be OK to fly again?”

“You never know.”

More students arrive and take their seats. The bird is gone, but not forgotten.

**Nested Stories**

The bird story resonated with me as one of many metaphors created in my mind as I began to document the narrative of one high school’s journey to implement an inquiry-based curriculum design modeled after Project-Based Learning (PBL). Within this narrative there are several embedded stories, including those of the administrators and teachers who led this curriculum implementation, those of the students who attended the school and engaged in the PBL implementation process, and my own story as a district administrator, participant-observer, and scholar-researcher documenting the process.

This school is unique in many ways. It represents the consolidation of two distinct secondary alternative education programs previously located in different sites in the school district. Through this consolidation process, several educators came together
to form a new community of practice that was committed to creating a personalized, quality educational experience for vulnerable youth. The students at this school also came together from different places within a mainstream system that had not met their needs. Each student had his or her own unique story to tell. Yet within all of the students’ stories there are common experiences and universal themes that emerged, intertwined – vulnerability, inner strength, resilience, and hope.

As a school in its first year of existence, it was struggling to shake off the Alternative Ed label and create a new identity for itself as a centre of educational innovation and high achievement. The curricular model chosen for this new school focused on making learning relevant and meaningful for students who had become disengaged from mainstream schools and traditional modes of learning. Grounded in the principles and philosophical tenets of project-based learning, the program at this school created its own brand of PBL. By co-creating curriculum with students, using their strengths and interests as starting points, teachers helped many students re-engage in learning and take flight into a more promising future after graduation. In the process, these educators developed a model for what might be called, in the future of curriculum design research, *Passion-Based Learning*.

My journey as an educator influences this research and is part of the story the dissertation unfolds. I was a French Immersion teacher for most of my career. I am currently a Director of Instruction with expertise and administrative responsibility at the school district level for curriculum and implementation. I have no formal training or experience in alternative education. I came to this research project with curiosity and an open-mind, eager to study the implementation of a curriculum model in a new school in its first year. But my focus has shifted significantly throughout this journey. What I
thought would be a study of curriculum theory soon became a study of people and dialectical relationships – the educators, the students, and the social emotional connections that create powerful learning environments and make school a safe and hopeful place.

Finally, there is one last story nested in the centre of all the others, a story that began in my childhood and emerged from my subconscious during this research project. It is the story of my brother and sister who long ago were troubled youth themselves. Like many of the students in this school, they were talented, artistic, and intelligent young people. But they suffered from mental illness, drug abuse and externalizing behaviours that prevented them from succeeding in school. The mainstream high school system of the 1970s failed them and there were no alternatives. They dropped out and never graduated.

I leave this research transformed. I have a new perspective on curriculum implementation and greater compassion and admiration than ever before for the educators and students at this school. Their stories reveal the obstacles and challenges they overcome every day.
Chapter 1. Introduction

It’s necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold.

(Lori Malaguzzi, Founder of Reggio Emilia, 1994)

The school gym is crowded when I arrive. A group of school district representatives is standing at the front. The group includes senior executive members, district administrators, and staff from the alternative programs. They patiently wait for people to take their seats at the round, cafeteria-style tables. I sit down at one of the back tables with a group of people I have never seen before. I assume they are residents from the local community. They say hello when I arrive at their table, but do not smile. There is no small talk at this table, just angry silence.

The meeting begins with a welcome from the Superintendent and several Power Point presentations from school district staff that provide information and statistics related to the alternate education secondary program that has been approved by the Board of Education for relocation to this school. The presentation has been carefully designed to address concerns that have been raised in the neighbourhood over the past few months: increased traffic, limited parking, and the renovation costs and associated impact on the local community. After the presentation there are opportunities for discussion and feedback.

The responses from the crowd begin with questions and sceptical remarks related to the information provided in the presentation. The comments become increasingly more negative and more focused on the type of students who will attend the new school. Adolescents in alternative education have all kinds of problems, the residents say. They smoke, take drugs, and have behavioural issues. Our quiet neighbourhood will be subjected to increased vandalism and violence. The comments continue in ‘town hall’
style, with most people speaking out against the alternative program in their
eighbourhood. There are cheers and applause from the crowd that grow louder after
each comment.

Suddenly a young, well-dressed Asian student stands and calmly takes the microphone. I recognize her as one of the French Immersion students who attended the elementary school where I had been Vice Principal a few years before. I knew her family well.

She speaks in favour of the new alternative school. She is articulate and poised in explaining to the crowd that it is important for them to support the vulnerable kids in our community, that it is critical for the School District to consolidate the alternative programs in order to maximize services for these youth, and that the new school will provide an enhanced program and better support for these kids to graduate through a program that honours diversity and flexibility. Then she suggests that perhaps the fears and concerns expressed by local residents have been guided by their misconceptions and stereotypes associated with kids attending alternative programs.

“I happen to be one of those students,” she tells the surprised audience.

“Do I represent your image of an Alternative Ed kid?”

The crowd is momentarily silenced.

1.1. Images of Alternative Education Students

The experience of attending the school district meeting in January 2012 resonated with me for many months, although initially I did not really understand why. Perhaps I felt a sense of pride in a former student showing such brave leadership in front of the angry crowd of residents. Perhaps I felt a personal attachment to her because I knew her family well. Or perhaps I was simply in awe of the ability of a seventeen year old girl to point out to the adults in the room what none of the school district administrators had been able to: that their negative images and stereotypes of “at risk”
youth were driving their fears, and that welcoming the alternative students into their
neighbourhood was their moral obligation as a community.

During the months that followed this meeting, I became more familiar with the
*Reggio Emilia* philosophy of early childhood development as part of my school district
leadership role in early learning. I was particularly fascinated by the concept of the
teacher’s *Image of the Child* as a unique, curious, and capable being, capable of co-
constructing his or her own learning, and full of potential for life-long success (Malaguzzi,
1994; Rinaldi, 2006; Fraser, 2012). In the *Reggio* tradition, this means focusing on the
talents and strengths of *every* child, no matter what learning or behavioural challenges
they may experience in their development. As I reflected on my experience at the
January meeting with my EdD cohort members and with colleagues in the School
District, I came to realize that Malaguzzi’s belief in the power of positive images of
children’s ability must be honoured along a continuum of development from early
childhood to adolescence. This realization has been reinforced by my doctoral
coursework, reading, and research in the area of alternative education. Alternative
education students, more than any others, need caring adults in their lives who counter
negative stereotypes of “at risk” youth.

Armstrong (2012) reinforces the importance of a positive image of the child by
urging teachers working with students with special needs to implement “strength
awareness” strategies in class, putting more energy into highlighting students’ positive
attributes than in assessing their disabilities or deficits. By celebrating *neurodiversity* and
focusing on students’ strengths, educators can build “the best ecological niches”
possible – learning environments that reflect students’ talents and help them thrive in
school (Armstrong, 2012, p. 10). This same philosophy can also be extended to students
in alternative education. Benard (1997) emphasizes the need to shift away from viewing vulnerable youth through a deficit lens that focuses on social issues, at risk behaviours and academic failure. Social science research has successfully identified many of the problems (poverty, substance abuse, family dysfunction) that put these students at risk, and has helped families and educators access appropriate support services. However, the identification process has also led to stereotyping, tracking, lowered expectations, prejudice and discrimination. It has prevented educators from developing a positive image of these students: “Looking at children and families through a deficit lens obscures a recognition of their capacities and strengths, as well as their individuality and uniqueness” (Benard, 1997, p. 1).

The deficit lens has also led to alternative education students themselves self-identifying according to their officially prescribed or described deficits and diagnoses. The term “at risk” (for failure, drop out, etc.), commonly used as a catch-all label to describe students attending alternate programs, is problematic and reductionist. It reinforces the deficit lens through which the students are viewed (and view themselves) and reduces the complex lives and personalities of marginalized youth to an artificial, simplistic label. “The discourse of at-risk does not discern individual effort; rather it pathologizes” (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p.441). Instead, we need educational practices and programs for vulnerable adolescents that value diversity and are designed to honour individual strengths, interests, and talents. The starting point must be a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006) – a belief among educators that all students have the potential to overcome challenges, cultivate their talents, develop resiliency, and achieve success, not only towards graduation, but beyond graduation. Educators have the potential to
“contribute to the gradual transformation of learners into strong presences in the world” (Freire, 2005, p. 62).

Most alternative educational programs for vulnerable youth focus primarily on developing a positive social emotional environment. Developing trusting relationships between adults and students, increasing students’ feelings of safety and belonging, and re-engaging or reconnecting marginalized youth to school are top priorities in most alternative education programs. However, there is also a need to provide challenging, engaging, and meaningful academic programs for these students. Programs designed to provide a balance of academic support and rigor, flexibility, differentiated instruction and assessment, and positive school-community relations have the potential to support students’ intellectual and social emotional growth.

1.2. Research Purpose and Questions

This study explored the implementation of a new program for alternative youth based on the project-based learning (PBL) model. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development, and implementation of a project-based learning curriculum within a newly consolidated, community-based alternative education program in a suburban public school district. The research was guided by two sets of questions related to the design and development of this pilot project in project-based learning:

1. What staff professional development requirements are necessary to enable the successful implementation of a project-based learning curriculum design in an alternative education program?
2. What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based learning curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students co-creating (with adult educators) the design of projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

1.3. Context

In April 2010, the Board of Education in a suburban school district in British Columbia passed a motion that provided the mandate for the consolidation of five different alternative education programs, located in several locations across the School District, into one secondary school site. The Board motion described the new program as one that would be designed “to support student achievement, foster social/emotional learning, and enable alternate pathways to graduation.” The new school was scheduled to open in September 2012 and would provide “a new image and identity that has an enhanced pedagogical foundation while retaining the best practices from all of the existing alternative programs, (p. 2).” The Board’s motion provided the mandate for the formation of a Steering Committee that would review current research on alternative education programs and make recommendations for the configuration, structure, and foundation of the future consolidated program.

The Steering Committee met several times between November 2010 and January 2011 to review the Ministry of Education Alternate Program Policy, research best practices and trends in alternate education, and provide broad recommendations.

1 Board of Education motion as recorded in the November 15, 2011 Administrative Memorandum. Specific reference to the School District has been omitted to protect the identity of the participants in this study.
for program delivery. In the 2011 Steering Committee Report to the Board of Education, several guiding principles related to program delivery were established. These guiding principles focused on the importance of research-based best educational practices for students with diverse social, emotional, and behavioural learning needs, including the implementation of differentiated instruction and assessment practices, the creation of creative pathways to graduation or school completion, and the establishment of teaching networks and collaborative planning to enhance educational programs for students. While the Steering Committee Report provided broad directions for the delivery of services to students in the new program, it also identified the need for a design/implementation team to develop a more specific curriculum for the new program.

The Board’s decision to consolidate these alternate programs into one secondary school followed years of public discussion, consultation, and debate, which continued in the months leading up to the school opening. The location identified for the new school was a former junior high school site in a quiet, middle class neighbourhood. Renovations to the existing site were anticipated to redesign classrooms and programs for the new school, and to accommodate the “wrap-around” support services needed from community partners and provincial agencies. Members of the local community had many questions and concerns. They formed their own committees and were well represented at School District public forums and Board meetings, in the local press, and online in their neighbourhood blogs.

The main concerns cited by residents were increased traffic and street parking, the costs and impacts associated with the school renovations for taxpayers and the local neighbourhood, and a perceived lack of transparency in the community consultation process. However, underlying these concerns were other fears, expressed by some
local residents, about having “at risk” students attend the school. People worried that there would be increased vandalism to cars and property in the neighbourhood, and that swearing, smoking, and drug use on the street outside the school would become a safety concern for neighbours and for students attending nearby elementary schools.

Further communication and consultation ensued. A Community Advisory Working Group, which included school district staff, students, parents, and community members, was appointed by the Board of Education. The Community Advisory Working Group’s mandate was to make recommendations for the design and delivery of the new alternative education program and to mediate concerns identified by the community. The Community Advisory Working Group’s report included several operational recommendations for the new school, but did not provide specific information regarding curriculum design.

Administrators for the new alternative school were appointed in the spring of 2012. They were committed to ensuring that the learning environment of the consolidated alternative school foster a sense of belonging and community for all students; however, they also recognized an urgent need to examine the traditional, paper-based teaching practices that had been in place for many years at existing alternative programs, and to develop a curriculum that would offer the “enhanced pedagogical foundation” outlined in the 2010 Board motion. The establishment of a new school provided an exciting opportunity for administrators and teachers to work collaboratively to design an educational program for students that would be academically meaningful and personalized to meet students’ needs, interests, and future goals.
1.4. Situating Myself as Researcher/Practitioner

As Director of Instruction for the School District in which this study took place, I provide leadership in the areas of curriculum design and implementation. In the spring of 2012, the newly appointed administrative team for the consolidated alternative school asked me to help them develop a curriculum design proposal. The proposal, which eventually became a major assignment for my EdD Curriculum Theory course, was intended to provide guidance in developing innovative and effective learning opportunities for students in the new program. The design proposal would serve as a service delivery model for administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and community partners in establishing a core vision for curriculum design, instruction, and assessment in the program. The core vision would align with best practices outlined in:

- The BC Education Plan
- The School District’s Strategic Plans
- The BC Ministry of Education Draft Curriculum and Assessment Framework
- The McCreary Centre Society’s (2008) publication: Making the Grade: A Review of Alternative Education Programs in BC

The School District’s 2011 Steering Committee Report had recommended that the new consolidated alternative program be designed to provide “a world class pedagogical approach to assessment and instruction.” The new program would not only provide a safe, flexible and welcoming learning environment for at-risk students; it would also aim to “increase opportunity and implement research-based best educational
practices for students with diverse social, emotional, and behavioural learning needs to reach their individual potential."

Three key guiding principles were used as a framework in designing the curriculum proposal for the new school: (1) the curriculum would be grounded in a learner-centered, inquiry-based philosophy; (2) innovative instruction and assessment practices, that honoured students’ diverse learning needs and actively engaged them in learning, would be embedded within the curriculum framework; and (3) a focus on social emotional learning would remain a key priority for the school and a core component of the new curriculum model. Educators working in the consolidated alternative program would be encouraged to work collaboratively, planning and teaching curriculum together and designing learning opportunities for students with these conceptual frameworks in mind.

The administrators of the new school were particularly interested in exploring project-based learning (PBL) as a curriculum design model. Project-based learning is an inquiry-based approach that prioritizes experiential learning opportunities, collaboration, and authentic, “real world” applications of knowledge and skills through tasks that are “grounded in the personal interests of students” (Grant, 2009, p.1). Earlier that spring the administrators travelled to San Diego to tour the network of High Tech High charter schools, which were founded on the principles and philosophy of the PBL model. After seeing PBL in action at High Tech High, the administrators were convinced that it would be an appropriate learning model to implement in the new alternative program. The administrators believed that implementing the PBL model as a pilot in the consolidated

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2 2011 Steering Committee Report. Specific reference to the School District has been omitted to protect the identity of the participants in this study.
alternative program would help to establish an inter-disciplinary and collaborative approach to instructional planning among staff. They also believed that a focus on PBL would help shift the mind-set of students and teachers away from traditional, transmission-style models of education towards the kind of in-depth learning that fosters sustained student engagement and academic achievement.

The administrative team completed staffing for the new school in the spring of 2012. One of their considerations in the staffing process was to ensure that teachers selected for the program were committed to the school-wide PBL focus for curriculum design in the first year as a means of developing more innovative, authentic, and relevant learning experiences for students. Educators and support staff all needed to work collaboratively towards the goals of increasing student engagement and enabling youth to connect more meaningfully with their interests and with the local community. Moreover, the teachers at the school needed to view the PBL model as a way of offering students alternate pathways to graduation based on their unique learning styles, interests, and strengths.

1.5. Research Methodology

This qualitative research study has both theoretical and empirical objectives. From a theoretical perspective, the study examined research on alternative education, the history and principles of project-based learning models, and specifically the application of a project-based learning pedagogy within an alternative education setting where students have diverse intellectual, social and behavioural learning challenges. Current alternative education policy documents and research were examined, in addition to the body of scholarly research on project-based learning and related implementation
considerations.

From an empirical perspective, the study documented and analyzed the process of curriculum design, development, and implementation from the perspectives of two participant groups: staff and students. A narrative inquiry approach was used to identify the factors that influenced the implementation of project-based learning in the new school. Interview transcripts, recorded observations, field notes, and students’ artefacts of learning (projects) were analyzed to develop a conceptual understanding of the design factors that influenced the development and implementation of the PBL model in an alternate school setting.

1.6. Rationale and Research Benefits

This new school-wide project-based learning program is the first of its kind in this School District and, based on the findings from my literature review (Chapter Two), the first for any alternate education program in the province. Given the vulnerable student population, the history of isolation in alternate programs previously in this School District, and the history of individual (transmission style) teaching and learning among staff and students, the development and implementation of PBL in this setting had to be carefully designed, particularly during the first year. My research study focused on telling the story of the first year of implementation from the point of view of administrators, teachers, and students in the alternative program. The active involvement of staff and students was and still is considered critical for the long-term success and sustainability of a PBL model in the school.
Through the analysis of qualitative data collected during the study, this research attempted to isolate and identify both the specific design factors that contributed to the implementation of a PBL curriculum model in an alternative education setting, as well as the challenges and obstacles that arose during the process. The conclusions and recommendations resulting from this research may provide other school districts and their communities with valuable insights relating to the design and implementation of educational learning models for vulnerable youth.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

This study considered only the self-reported experiences, perceptions, and narratives of the staff and students who participated in the implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum model in an alternative school. It does not represent the experiences of all educators and students working in educational settings where project-based learning (PBL) is in place, nor does it represent the experiences or perceptions of all those who work and learn in alternative education settings. Participation in the study may have been impacted for several reasons: some students who were actively learning through the PBL model were unwilling to participate because of on-going personal, academic, and/or mental health challenges; other students could not participate because they were not able or willing to obtain written parental/caregiver consent. Most staff members at the school were willing to participate in the study; however, many did not actively implement PBL this year and therefore were not interviewed.

Self-reported data are always subject to potential sources of bias. Administrators and teachers who were interviewed for the research may have been biased by their own
proclivities for using student-centered, co-constructed curriculum and their personal interest in piloting a project-based learning model in the first year of the program. Students may also have been biased by their positive relationships with teachers; there is a possibility that some of their responses reflected what they thought the teachers wanted them to say about the new project-based learning program.

The time frame for this study was limited to the 2012-2013 school year. Since the research was designed to explore the implementation of a project-based learning approach in the first year of a newly consolidated alternative program, the quantity of data collected was limited to what was reasonable and possible within that time frame for staff, students, and for myself as a full time Director of Instruction and doctoral student researcher.

1.8. Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter Two provides a review of aspects of current research that are most germane to this particular study. The chapter is divided into three sections that reflect the story elements of setting, plot, and characters. The first section (setting) provides a detailed profile of alternative education students, considers current research related to best practices for alternative education programs, and explores the need for further research on effective curricular models for alternative education settings. The second section of the literature review (plot) examines the project-based learning model, both from a philosophical, historical, and socio-cultural perspective, considering in particular the potential of project-based learning as an effective learning model for alternative education settings. The final section of the literature review (characters) focuses on the considerable body of research on engagement, with specific emphasis on professional
development that contributes to teacher engagement in curriculum implementation and the factors that contribute to adolescents’ social, academic, and intellectual engagement at school.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology I used to conceptualize and conduct this research study. It begins with a rationale for the choice of a qualitative research tradition and narrative inquiry genre, which align with my understanding of “self” as evolving researcher-practitioner and with the purpose of my study. Following this rationale, I provide an explanation of the methods used throughout the study, including: ethical approval, the selection and recruitment of study participants, research instruments and procedures, the processes for data analysis, and the steps taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. A final discussion is included to provide information on the processes used to overcome obstacles to the research study.

Chapter Four provides an historical context for the new alternative school. This chapter illustrates how external and internal influences provided the impetus for the consolidation of alternative education into one school, how they helped to shape the new school culture, and how they affected the introduction of a new curriculum design model during the first year of the implementation process.

In Chapter Five I use a narrative approach to present the research findings from the perspectives of the staff. The findings reflect data collected from staff during semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, and informal conversations. The chapter focuses on data that provide insight into various factors that contributed to the design and implementation of the new project-based learning model from the perspective of the administrators, teachers, and support staff at the school.
In Chapter Six I consider the data collected from the students at the school through interviews, observations, and artefacts of learning. Using the same narrative approach, I present the design factors that effectively engaged students in the project-based curriculum design. I also explore the factors that contributed to successfully engaging them in co-creating (with staff) the design of projects that were personally relevant and meaningful.

In Chapter Seven I present the findings from the staff and student participants and the relationship between these findings and the existing research on alternative education, project-based learning (PBL) and its implementation, professional development, and student engagement. Within this discussion I also consider how my research findings may have implications for other educational contexts. In addition, I discuss some lingering questions, provide suggestions for future research, and offer recommendations for practice. To conclude I present a personal reflection on my own learning and growth as a scholar-researcher and a summary of the study framed by the concept of “re-imaging” alternative education.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

My study focused on the design and implementation of a new curriculum model for an alternative education program in a suburban public school district. The staff at the school chose a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum because they believed it had the potential to provide disengaged youth with relevant, authentic, and meaningful learning opportunities to increase their engagement in school and help them connect with their personal and career interests. The purpose of my study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development, and implementation of a project-based curriculum model. Two specific participant groups (staff and students at the school) and two fundamental questions set the context for the design and development of the pilot PBL project and provided the organizational framework for this research. The two guiding research questions were:

1. What staff professional development requirements are necessary to enable the successful implementation of a project-based learning curriculum design in an alternative education program?

2. What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based learning curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students co-creating (with adult educators) the design of projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?
From a theoretical perspective, the purpose statement and guiding questions of the study potentially address a wide range of research fields, including alternative education, curriculum design and implementation, project-based learning, teacher professional development, and student engagement. Each of these areas encompasses a vast array of scholarly research, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies, a discussion of which is well beyond the scope of this literature review. A conceptual framework was necessary in order to focus on specific aspects of current research that are most germane to this particular study. Given the narrative inquiry genre chosen for this research, it made sense to consider the elements of story – setting, plot, and characters – as a framework for the literature review that follows.

The setting of this study is an alternative education secondary school in a suburban community. Several aspects of this particular setting contribute significantly to the telling of the story, including time, place and social conditions. The story takes place during the first year of the school’s existence, from September 2012 to June 2013. The new school, which represents the consolidation of two distinct alternative programs, is located in a middle class neighbourhood, surrounded by neighbours who protested against the arrival of “at risk” youth in the local community. The social context for the new alternative site reflects the conditions that exist in many other alternative education programs. Students arrive at this school because they have experienced significant challenges to their learning and development in mainstream school settings. Many have mental health issues, learning disabilities, and histories of substance abuse or at-risk behaviours. These students require a caring learning environment and programming that re-engages them in learning. This section of the literature review provides a detailed profile of alternative education students, considers current research related to
best practices for alternative education programs, and explores the need for further research on effective curricular models for alternative education settings.

The *plot* of this study is reflected in the sequence of events connected to the process of designing, developing, and implementing a project-based learning (PBL) model at the school. Like any good plot, there are conflicts, setbacks, and frustrations along the way as the characters in the story develop their growing understanding of a new model for teaching and learning. This section of the literature review examines the conceptual framework of the project-based learning model from philosophical, historical, epistemological, and perspectives and research related to the use of project-based learning as an effective learning model for alternative education settings.

Finally, there are the *characters* – the staff and students at the new school who were directly affected by the implementation of a PBL curriculum model. Despite the many challenges these characters faced, there were significant turning points for them – moments when forces of opposition and challenge were overcome, when staff worked collaboratively to move the implementation forward, and when students demonstrated resiliency, growth, and self-empowerment despite seemingly insurmountable challenges in their personal and academic lives. The major characters in the story (those whose stories are told in Chapters Five and Six) underwent significant transformation throughout the course of the school’s first year. For staff members this transformation resulted from their own professional growth and collaborative efforts to improve the learning model for students. For the youth enrolled in the program the transformation was perhaps even more significant. By re-engaging in learning through the development of meaningful projects with personal and lifelong relevance, the students began to create new images of themselves. They discovered their strengths and began to self-identity,
not as “vulnerable”, “at-risk”, “learning disabled”, or even “alternative” adolescents, but rather as capable and talented young adults. This section of the review examines both the aspects of professional development and support that contributed to teacher engagement in the PBL implementation and the factors that contributed to adolescents’ engagement in PBL learning opportunities.

Several methods were used to search for applicable literature for this review. Online searches, using Google Scholar™, Google™, and the Simon Fraser University Library search tool, were conducted to generate lists of professional books, peer-reviewed journal articles, websites, online publications, and unpublished graduate studies related to the topics in this research. The use of key terms (alternative education and at-risk youth; project-based learning; curriculum implementation; teacher professional development and collaboration; student engagement), helped to narrow the online searches. Books and peer-reviewed articles written by academic scholars, particularly those that presented meta-analyses of substantive research addressing the specific topics of this study, were reviewed. Preference was given to research published within the last fifteen years (1998-2013). In general, the scholarly work considered in the literature review was selected for its relevance to the purpose, questions and hypotheses inherent in this research study.

2.2. The Setting: A Review of the Literature on Alternative Education

In North America alternative educational programs were originally introduced in the 1960s as schools of choice for students who wanted a more liberating, progressive form of education that was uncommon in traditional, mainstream schools (Lange &
Sletton, 2002; McCreary Centre Society, 2008; Magee Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable & Tonelson, 2006; San Martin, 2008). However, these early examples of alternative schools had “a relatively short life span” (Lange & Sletton, 2002, p. 4). Beginning in the 1980s most alternative schools across North America were designed as dropout prevention programs for students at risk of failure in traditional school settings (Foley & Pang, 2006; Groth, 1998; Lange & Sletton, 2002; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Magee Quinn et al, 2006; Raywid, 1994; San Martin, 2008). Their design was generally more remedial and traditional than their original counterparts from the era of “Free” and “Open” Schools (Lange & Sletton, 2002).

Several studies indicate that alternative programs for marginalized youth are currently on the rise in the Unites States (Aron, 2003; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Saunders & Saunders, 2002), with American children “turning to alternative education programs in record numbers” as a last chance to succeed academically (Aron, 2003, p.2). The reasons cited for this increase in alternative education programs are varied. The proliferation of alternative programs may be due to an overall increase in numbers of at-risk youth in general (Wheeler, J. L.; Miller, T. M.; Halff, H. M.; Fernandez, R.; Halff, L. A.; Gibson, E. G. & Meyer, T. N., 2011), to concerns over continuing dropout rates (De La Rosa, 1998), or to a general dissatisfaction with traditional, mainstream schools in public school systems that no longer have the resources to meet the needs of vulnerable students (Magee Quinn et al, 2006).

Today many scholars lament the fact that there is no agreement or commonly understood definition across the educational community of what constitutes alternative education (Aaron, 2003; Groth, 1998; Kim, 2006; Lange & Sletton, 2002; Lehr & Lange,
2003; Magee Quinn et al, 2006). However, a review of the literature on alternative education points to several contextual descriptors (or characteristics) among these programs that have significance for this study. These characteristics reflect a student population that is considered at risk, vulnerable, or marginalized, and a learning environment that is focused on supporting the social, emotional, and academic needs of students. What appears to be missing from the research on alternative education programs is an exploration of specific curriculum design models that may be effective in these settings and the factors that contribute to their successful implementation.

2.2.1. **Alternative Education Youth**

It is generally agreed that alternative education programs provide a non-traditional education for students who are considered at-risk of dropping out of school (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Magee Quinn et al, 2006; Raywid, 1994; San Martin, 2008). In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education defines alternative education programs as “programs that meet the special requirements of students who may be unable to adjust to the requirements of regular schools (for example timetables, schedules, or traditional classroom environment)” (cited in McCreary Centre Society, 2008). The BC Alternate Education Program Policy (BC Ministry of Education, 2009) outlines several intellectual, behavioural, social, and emotional challenges that often negatively affect these students’ ability to succeed in mainstream schools. These challenges include: learning disabilities, internalizing behaviours (anxiety, depression, etc.), externalizing behaviours (defiance, non compliance, bullying, fighting); drug and alcohol abuse, poor attendance, and a history of disengagement with school. Students enrolled in alternate education programs are considered by the Ministry of Education to be the most at risk and vulnerable youth in our school system:
Alternate education school programs have disproportionate numbers of children and youth in care, aboriginal students, children and youth living in poverty or the street, gifted children who have difficulty in social situations, children and youth involved in drugs, alcohol and the sex trade and youth with mental health concerns. (BC Ministry of Education, 2009, para. 2)

The contributing factors to students' vulnerability and at-risk behaviours are numerous. Many of these factors are outlined in the Making the Grade report (McCreary Centre Society, 2008), which offers an empirical review of alternative education programs across British Columbia. The McCreary research was based on a mixed-methods study that incorporated student surveys completed by 339 youth attending 34 alternative education programs in BC, interviews with adult community stakeholders, and an analysis of existing data from previous studies conducted by the McCreary Centre Society. The McCreary report describes 'at risk' and 'high risk' students in alternative education programs as:

... those youth who are marginalized, for example as a result of abuse, sexual exploitation, substance use, bullying, discrimination, mental health problems or street involvement. “High risk” youth are the “at risk” youth who have disconnected from school, family and community, compounding the risks and challenges in their lives. (McCreary Centre Society, 2008, p. 7)

The McCreary report also offers readers a detailed profile of the kinds of students attending alternative schools, a description that sheds light on the personal, family and lifestyle challenges that impede academic success for these students. Some of these challenges include a history of youth street involvement and/or sexual exploitation; unstable or challenging home environments (a disproportionate number of students reported living in government care); troubled family situations (addictions, domestic violence, suicide); and teen pregnancy, poverty, and hunger.
Given the profile of alternative education students provided by the Ministry of Education and by research, it becomes apparent that there is a need for alternative programming that provides a caring, supportive school environment where disenfranchised youth feel safe. School may in fact be the only place that is safe and stable for these vulnerable students. An earlier McCreary report (*Building Resilience in Vulnerable Youth*), cited several findings from the BC Adolescent Health Survey (2003) indicating that when vulnerable youth feel connected to school they are more likely to report better health and above average marks, and to engage in fewer risky behaviours than youth who are less connected (McCreary Centre Society, 2006). The most successful alternative programs provide multiple protective factors to address the complex social and academic profiles of at risk youth. The following section of this literature review provides a discussion of best practices common to successful alternative education programs.

### 2.2.2. Successful Alternative Education Learning Environments

Almost twenty years ago Mary Anne Raywid, American education scholar, activist for school reform, and author of several studies on alternative education, offered praise for the progressive and innovative qualities of these early alternative education programs:

> Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, alternatives are the clearest example we have of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the programmatic, organizational and behavioural regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered. (Raywid, 1994, p. 26)
Describing just what these “innovative qualities” are is a challenging process. The research base for understanding what works and for whom in alternative education is relatively new and is still evolving (Aron, 2006), but it does offer several different frameworks to describe the salient features of successful alternative programs.

In reviewing the literature on alternative education programs in the United States, Aron (2006) notes seven principles of high quality programming common to many alternative schools: (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) appropriate structure (limit setting, clear rules, predictable structure to how program functions, etc.); (3) supportive relationships; (4) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms (expectations of behaviours, etc.); (6) support for self-efficacy (empowering youth, challenging environment, opportunities for leadership, etc.); (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and community. In a qualitative case study of secondary alternative education students, San Martin (2008) further summarized the work of several researchers into three characteristics of successful alternative schools: (1) a sense of community; (2) student involvement and engagement in learning; and (3) an organized and structured program. In a Canadian summary report developed for the United Way of Toronto, and based on an extensive literature review of over 80 academic and community sector studies and reports, Bonnell and Zizys (2005) summarize three broad themes for effective youth programming that are applicable to alternative education: (1) an assets-based approach promoting the strengths and skills of youth; (2) the importance of a caring, supportive adult in making a difference in the life of a youth; and (3) the emphasis on effective program implementation, including a reliance on measurement for the sake of learning and improvement.

Although these lists of quality characteristics of alternative programs vary to a
certain extent, they do point to several common features that many researchers and advocates agree are important descriptors of effective alternative schools. Three key elements that have particular relevance to this study are: a sense of belonging and community that is enhanced by positive relationships with supportive adults; a program structured to offer personalized, flexible, and self-paced approaches to learning; and a strengths-based approach that engages students in exploring their own personal development and developing self-efficacy.

**Sense of Belonging and Community**

Creating a sense of safety (physical and psychological), belonging, and community for students is the first priority for most alternative education programs and the staff who work in them (Aron, 2003 and 2006; Aronowitz, 2005; Benard, 1997). Students’ negative prior experiences in mainstream schools often leave them feeling alienated and vulnerable by the time they arrive in alternative schools (Saunders & Saunders, 2001). Supportive, caring adults in alternative schools, who effectively build positive, trusting relationships with students, play a key role in developing the protective factors these students need to re-engage in school and envision a more positive future (Aronowitz, 2005; Calabrese, Hummel, & San Martin, 2007; De La Rosa, 1998; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletton, 2002; Morrissette, 2011; Stout & Christenson, 2009). Supportive adults intervene in the life of youth, “listening to them, validating their viewpoints and providing them with opportunities to explore their evolving roles” (Bonnell & Zizys, 2005, p. 8). Alternative youth in our province, who were surveyed for the McCreary study (2008), reported high levels of school connectedness and positive relationships with staff. For some students, the school becomes a pseudo family (Kellmayer, 1998) that addresses their social and emotional needs, and may in
fact be “the only place that is safe and stable” (Mcreary Centre Society, 2008, p. 6).

**Flexible Programming**

Most alternative schools are structured to offer flexible programming to meet the social, emotional and cognitive needs of the students (Lange & Sletton, 2002). Often the reason why students seek out alternative education is because the rigid timetables, bell schedules, and other rules and regimens of traditional schools did not meet their needs (Fraser, Davis & Singh, 1997; Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Students who have intellectual, behavioural, social, or emotional challenges often have inconsistent attendance or difficulty meeting deadlines for assignments. Family situations, drug and alcohol or mental health issues, and the need to work part-time often impact students’ ability to attend school on a regular schedule. Alternative schools offer these students programming that is flexible and self-paced, which alleviates many of the pressures they felt in mainstream schools and provides students with the time that is often needed to process unexpected life events and circumstances (Morrissette, 2011).

**Strengths-Based Approaches**

Research indicates that high quality alternative programs honour diversity by identifying and celebrating the talents and personal interests of vulnerable youth. They avoid the tendency to “pathologize” students by focusing on skill deficiencies (Bonnell and Zizys, 2005, p. 7) and instead design learning opportunities that incorporate students’ “individual strengths, learning style and life experiences” (McCreary, 2008, p. 59). Alternative programming also supports student self-efficacy by creating opportunities for personal growth, leadership (in the school and community), and empowerment. Effective programs for vulnerable adolescents “create the space for a youth to be a youth, including allowing for that intensely personal journey of self-
exploration and self-definition to take place, while at the same time supporting the emergence of an independent and capable mature adult” (Bonnell and Zizys, 2005, p. 7).

There seems to be consensus among researchers as to what constitutes a successful alternative educational learning environment, and the lists of characteristics they provide offer insight into fundamental agreements on what vulnerable youth need to feel safe, secure, and empowered. There is little doubt that these affective elements are essential in providing the foundation needed for marginalized students to begin re-engaging in school. However, alternative programs vary in their pedagogical approaches and instructional methodologies (Lange & Sletton, 2002) and there is a general lack of research focused on assessing the effectiveness of alternative education programming offered in public schools (Brown Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006; Groth, 1998; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Kim, 2006). Specifically, what seems to be missing from the current body of research on alternative education is a detailed discussion of the specific kinds of pedagogical practices and curriculum design models that have proven to be most effective in re-engaging students in learning at school (beyond just attending). The following section addresses instructional models commonly used in alternative education and considers the need for further research in innovative curriculum design for alternative program students.

2.2.3. Curriculum Models and Pedagogical Practices in Alternative Education

There is a recurring contradiction in the literature on alternative education. Many researchers and national reports have suggested that high academic expectations and an engaging, challenging curriculum are hallmarks of successful alternative education
programs (Aron, 2003; Aron, 2006; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; National Alternative Education Association, 2009), while other studies indicate that alternative schools and students continue to suffer from negative stigmas (Kim, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lange & Sletton, 2002; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Morrissette, 2011). Alternative schools are often seen as dumping grounds or warehouses for students who are falling behind academically (Groth, 1998; Kim & Taylor, 2008, McNulty & Roseboro, 2009), or places where “disruptive students are sent in order to protect and benefit the students who remain in traditional schools” (McGee, 2001, p. 589). These stigmas may indeed be due to the negative stereotypes that prevail in the public eye regarding alternative education students, but there is also an argument among scholars that alternative programs do not provide high quality instruction (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009) because they lack academic rigour and opportunities for students to engage in complex thinking skills (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Alternative programs “require academic integrity or students may be stigmatized in the outside world” (Lange & Sletton, 2002, p. 2).

It is common practice among teachers of disadvantaged students, including those in alternative education programs, to focus on individualized instruction to meet students’ academic needs (Brown Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006). Unfortunately, these programs frequently rely on traditional instructional methods, basic remediation, and a “dumbed down curriculum” (Raywid, 2001, p. 583). A transmission style methodology, based on textbooks and worksheets is often viewed as the most efficient way to help alternate students improve their skills, catch up with their peers, or get the credits needed for graduation (Kim & Taylor, 2008; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Despite their perceived efficacy, these individualized methods often address only lower order thinking skills and processes, are usually uninteresting to most students, and can
decrease students’ motivation and opportunities for future career goals (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Wheeler et al, 2011).

Kim and Taylor’s 2008 qualitative study of one American alternative school used a critical theory framework to explore the school’s effectiveness from the perspectives of staff and students. In analyzing the data from their research (observations, semi-structured interviews, primary documents), the authors found that the alternate school “provided a caring environment for students and gained their trust”, but failed to offer “a meaningful and equitable alternative education that benefitted the students” (p. 207). The school relied on a “low-level curriculum” that was “behaviouristic and reductive” (p. 216). Programming was focused primarily on helping students recover credits for graduation or obtain basic skills. The authors of the study present two compelling arguments related to alternative schools: (1) a caring and safe learning environment does not necessarily guarantee an equal and equitable education and (2) a rigorous curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking, synthesis, and higher order thinking is needed to help students achieve their long-term goals. Unfortunately, the study does not offer any concrete suggestions for the kinds of curriculum models that could contribute to a more substantive, innovative, and equitable program for alternative schools.

A review of the current research suggests that there is growing evidence that alternative programs with a strong academic focus, a challenging curriculum, and high quality teaching strategies are effective in supporting vulnerable youth and enhancing their academic achievement (Aron, 2006, Franklin et al, 2007). The McCreary Report (2008) includes descriptions of several successful programs across British Columbia that support students’ social emotional needs and life challenges in innovative ways
(providing transportation, meals, counselling, environmental connections, and art therapy). Similarly, Aron (2006) describes a host of new alternative education initiatives across the United States that are successfully re-engaging youth in school and providing transitions to career options. However, neither of these reports provides any clear insight into the specific curriculum models or pedagogical practices that actively engage alternative education students in critical thinking and challenging, authentic learning – learning that focuses on real-world issues, problems, or projects and connects students in meaningful ways to the world beyond school.

In a phenomenological study of alternative students’ experiences in high school, Morrissette (2011) identified several themes emerging from the student interview data, including the “pedagogical expertise” of teachers (p. 179). The analysis of the data confirms the importance of teachers’ abilities to develop trusting relationships, assess the emotional disposition of learners, and support vulnerable students through intuition and sensitivity. However, despite the author’s emphasis on the role of teachers in “maintaining academic integrity” and “re-engaging young people in academics” (p. 185), there is no indication in the study of the kinds of teaching strategies or curriculum recommended to meet these objectives.

Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi (2007) conducted a quasi-experimental study to evaluate the effectiveness of an academic alternative school based on the “solution-focused alternative school’ (SFAS) model. SFAS schools are characterized in the study as being student strengths-focused, with an emphasis on student choice and engagement in academic achievement. According to the authors of the study, the teaching methods at the SFAS studied are unique, with teachers acting as facilitators to “motivate students to become active learners who develop a feeling of responsibility for
their education” (p. 135). The authors report that the school is successful in its ability to “engage, retain, and graduate high-risk students” (p. 143). These are encouraging results that confirm the importance of focusing on student strengths in alternative programs; however, the study does not provide any information regarding the specific curriculum model used at the school.

Perhaps the paucity of research on curriculum design and instructional methods in alternative schools reflects the fact that there really is no one-size-fits-all solution in education, particularly for disengaged youth who have unique social, emotional and learning challenges. As Raywid (2001) so wisely remarked, “there’s no single formula yielding model that is an ideal ‘School for the Unsuccessful’” (p. 583). Nonetheless, there are a small number of research studies, identified in this literature review, that suggest promising curriculum frameworks for alternative education. These frameworks tend to be structured on inquiry-based models of knowledge construction (vs. transmission) and autonomous, self-directed learning for students.

Several years ago Leone and Drake (1999) suggested that a problem-solving curriculum model, “rooted in the ideas of John Dewey” (p. 87) would promote excellence and high expectations for disadvantaged youth. Problem-solving activities that link to the local community become the basis for instruction in literacy, math, and other core subject areas. While this study did not include any clear examples of problem-solving methodology or curriculum design, it did open the door to further research focusing on more progressive, inquiry-based approaches to teaching vulnerable youth.

A three-year study conducted in five Israeli junior high schools examined the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) as a way of creating flexible learning
environments and developing critical thinking competencies of low achieving students (Doppelt, 2003). Rooted in the theory of constructionism (Pappert, 1991) and the underlying belief that progressive educational approaches with real-world connections are essential for students who struggle with traditional learning methods, the study demonstrated, through quantitative and qualitative data, that PBL was a successful model for promoting students’ motivation and positive self-image. PBL was also attributed to helping students achieve greater academic success on their government matriculation exams. While Doppelt claims that the project-based learning model, with its emphasis on solving authentic, challenging, and interdisciplinary problems, “turned out to be the ‘crown jewel’” (p. 269) of the studies for low achieving students, it is important to bear in mind that the study was conducted in mainstream schools within computerized environments that focused on the use of advanced scientific technology (electrical equipment for building 3D models, laptop computers, simulation software, etc.). The findings, therefore, are not necessarily transferable to students enrolled in regular programs in alternative schools.

Based on a qualitative case study design, San Martin’s 2008 doctoral research also promotes the use of project-based learning as an effective learning framework for re-engaging vulnerable youth. The purpose of the study was to explore how students in an alternative school describe their “high point learning experiences” (p. 8). Data collected during the study included group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and student-created materials. The overarching question for the study was: What are the ways that student learning can be enhanced by asking students how they learn? The research took place in a school where traditional, individual, and self-paced instruction, which focused primarily on textbook readings and worksheets, was the norm. Results of
the data analysis indicated that students at the school wanted “more group projects and more hands-on participation” (p. 110). They described their ideal learning experiences as “social and group-based” (San Martin, 2008). San Martin examines aspects of the project-based learning model and its applicability to alternative education setting within the discussion of her findings, pointing out in particular the prevalence in PBL of “choices and direction in activities” and engaging students in “topics of personal interest” (p. 112). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, San Martin affirms in her recommendations the importance of listening to and learning from alternative high school students’ voices in co-constructing a more engaging, effective learning setting. “Alternative high school students are in a position to effect change at the local level and can provide a voice to better their classroom learning experiences” (p. 111).

While research on the use of PBL with alternative education students is limited, the studies examined in this literature review suggest that further research is needed to explore the concept of a project-based learning model for youth enrolled in alternative education programs. The next section of this literature review examines the PBL model, including its current conceptual framework, its philosophical, historical, and epistemological grounding, and its potential as an effective learning model for alternative education settings.

2.3. The Plot: A Review of the Literature on Project-Based Learning

The plot of the story embedded in this research study revolves around the implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) model from the points of view of the staff and students at a secondary alternative school situated in a suburban community.
Before they embarked on this journey, educators at the school needed an understanding of the PBL approach to teaching and learning. This section of the literature review provides a review of conceptual frameworks for the PBL model, explores its epistemological origins, and presents the available research findings associated with PBL, with a particular focus on investigating evidence related to project-based learning for alternative education students.

2.3.1. Conceptual Frameworks for Project-Based Learning

Project Based Learning (PBL) is a comprehensive instructional approach that engages students in sustained, collaborative inquiry based on real-world issues that capture learners’ interests and provoke critical thinking and reflection (Blumenfeld et al, 1991; Grant, 2002 & 2011; Patton, 2012; Railsback, 2002). In the PBL model students acquire new skills, knowledge and understanding within long term, interdisciplinary units of study, rather than short-term, isolated lessons (Railsback, 2002). Using principles of backward curriculum design, teachers work collaboratively with students to plan projects that engage learners in the exploration of important concepts, while developing important skills such as critical thinking, research, communication, collaboration, problem solving, time management, and leadership. Authentic, in-depth learning is at the heart of PBL; students engage in high interest tasks or performances that mirror the type of work adults do in the real world. Projects often culminate in a publicly exhibited product, publication, or presentation (developing a model, invention or business proposal; performing a play; writing a newspaper article) that may be guided and even evaluated by experts or practitioners from the field. Students have opportunities to investigate current social issues and affect change in their community or globally, or to explore areas of personal and career interests. There is a purpose and a real audience
(beyond the teacher) connected to projects, so that students recognize the relevancy and authenticity of their learning.

Project learning is not new. The use of projects as part of classroom instruction can be traced back to Kilpatrick’s *Project Method* published in 1918 (Kubiatko & Vaculova, 2011; Wolk, 1994; Wrigley, 1998). However, according to Larmer & Mergendoller (2010b) most teachers today still view projects as “dessert” – lightweight, fun activities (e.g. posters, skits, models, field trips) served up to students after they have learned the course material through more traditional methods such as lectures, textbook readings, worksheets, etc. By contrast, in project-based learning (PBL), the project is *the main course*; it is central rather than peripheral to the curriculum. More than a supplementary enrichment activity, “the project itself provides the central framework upon which the teaching and learning of core concepts is built” (Markham, Larmer & Ravitz, 2003, p.5).

Today there are numerous definitions and frameworks for project-based learning. Thomas (2000) conceptualizes project-based learning as: (1) central to the curriculum taught; (2) organized around driving questions; (3) focused on constructive inquiry and knowledge building; (4) student-driven (emphasizing student choice, decision-making, and self-direction of learning); and (5) authentic (connected to real world problems and learning). Grant (2011) emphasizes one other important aspect of project-based learning (that distinguishes it from problem-based learning): the production of one or more products (artefacts) that address the driving questions and represent student learning.

Driving questions, developed in alignment with learning outcomes, anchor the
unit of study, sustain students’ investigation into the problem or issue, and determine the learning priorities. Students work independently or in groups to pursue solutions to driving questions or problems by asking more questions, debating ideas, making predictions, designing plans, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and communicating their ideas and findings to others through artefacts of their own design that have relevance, authenticity, and transferability beyond the classroom (Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Larmer & Mergendoller (2010a) identify two important criteria for the development of meaningful projects. In addition to fulfilling well-defined educational purposes, a project must have relevancy for the learner: “students must perceive it as personally meaningful, as a task that matters and that they want to do well” (p.53). The PBL model emphasizes authentic, real-world learning tasks grounded in the personal interests of learners, making it particularly promising as an instructional method for students in alternative education programs who have become disengaged or disconnected from school and wish to imagine more promising futures for themselves.

2.3.2. **Epistemological Origins of Project-Based Learning**

The rise in popularity of project-based learning (Markham, 2011; Markham, Larmer & Ravitz, 2003) is reflective of a paradigm shift in the way that learning and knowledge are conceptualized. Current educational policies and reform initiatives in the US and in British Columbia have shifted toward more learner-centred, constructivist pedagogies. While project-based learning is a relatively new framework for teaching and learning, it is in fact grounded in epistemologies with deep philosophical and historical roots.
Inquiry-Based Learning

It may be said that project-based learning owes its philosophical foundations to the Ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Socrates who used a dialectic method of questioning to teach his students. *Socratic inquiry* is based on the belief that asking thoughtful questions stimulates meaningful learning. Inquiry, debate, critical thinking, and active dialogue between instructor and student characterize Socratic teaching (Garry, 2010, p. 10). Project-based learning is grounded in the inquiry-based tradition, both as part of the process of learning and in the creation of projects. Students work in groups asking questions, researching answers, and drawing conclusions, as they work towards the creation of a project that represents their learning. While traditional teaching follows an approach of providing knowledge and concepts to students first, followed by structured opportunities for practice and application of new learning, project-based learning adheres to the principles of backward design, beginning with “the end in mind” — the project. Project-based learning creates opportunities for students to investigate meaningful questions that require them to gather information and think critically (David, 2008).

A key component of the PBL framework is the driving question, which helps to initiate the inquiry process and maintain the focus on core learning outcomes and the project itself. Driving questions are open-ended, challenging, and have no one “right” answer. They demand relevance, “authenticity and rigorous problem solving” (Miller, 2011). They frame important issues or problems (How can we reduce pollution in the local creek?), debates (Should skateboarders be allowed to ride anywhere in the city?), challenges (What is the best design for a high school?), or personal aspirations (How can I turn my passion into a career?). Driving questions sustain further inquiry, deepen
students’ learning, and ultimately lead to the creation of an original project. The inquiry process of PBL drives the research process and allows students to apply their knowledge and understanding (Bell, 2010, p. 41). Students work as active investigators and problem-solvers to explore answers to the driving questions and learn essential content and skills necessary for the development of projects. Teachers act as facilitators of learning, guiding the learning process, fostering an environment of further inquiry, and connecting students to experts in the field. This teacher as facilitator methodology reflects the Socratic rule of non-authority – “the teacher’s task is not to teach the students but to steer them in the right direction. The teacher’s role is also one of facilitator through guiding and informing the lesson, with students being in a more proactive, reflective role” (Garry, 2010, p10).

Project-based learning is sometimes used interchangeably with other approaches from the family of inquiry-based learning, including problem-based learning (also referred to as PBL). The problem-based learning model, a “close cousin of project-based learning” (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 43), was first adopted in the 1960s by McMaster University, a Canadian medical school, as a pedagogical approach aimed at helping students apply their basic scientific knowledge to real clinical situations (Barrett, 2005). A defining feature of problem-based learning is that the problem is presented to the students at the start of the learning process, before other curriculum inputs (Barrett, 2005). In problem-based learning, students work in small groups to investigate and analyze real-world, ill-structured problems (those without a single correct solution). Before any other type of instruction takes place, a problem or challenge is presented to a group of students in the same manner that it would be presented to adults in a genuine real world situation (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). The teacher’s role
is to act as a facilitator, guiding student learning through a cycle of inquiry, known as the PBL tutorial, which includes: identifying facts in the problem scenario, generating hypotheses, identifying knowledge deficiencies (which guides self-directed learning), applying new knowledge and skills to the problem, and evaluating hypotheses in light of new learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). The problem-based method of instruction, which has been successfully applied to science learning at all grade levels, promotes collaborative inquiry and self-directed learning in response to real world problems.

While the epistemological framework for problem-based learning provides an important foundation for project-based learning, there are significant differences between the two approaches. In problem-based learning, the specific problem or topic of inquiry is specified by the course instructor, often in the form of realistic scenarios or role-plays. The problem, carefully crafted based on a set of prescribed learning outcomes, drives the inquiry and all instruction or learning required by students. Problem-based learning may or may not result in a project; the focus is on the learning process of working toward the understanding or resolution of the problem, carefully guided by the inquiry approach (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). By contrast, the hallmark of project-based learning is the project itself, which is designed by students in collaboration with their peers or with the teacher. Students construct a project in response to the driving questions that anchor the unit. The project determines the knowledge, skills and understanding that will be needed by students, and thus becomes the impetus for inquiry and self-directed learning.

**Experientialism**

The philosophical underpinnings of project-based learning owe much to the work of John Dewey, who famously said that education is not preparation for life but is life
itself. Dewey believed that deep learning occurs when students focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving genuine problems or issues. For education to be most effective, content must be presented in a manner that allows students to relate the information to prior experiences and to deepen their connection to new knowledge through direct, hands-on experiences. Dewey insisted on the “intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1938, p. 28) in order to make learning meaningful for students. Dewey’s philosophy of learning is central to the PBL model, which is designed to allow students to act, experience, and interact with the curriculum in more direct and meaningful ways.

Dewey devoted his career to overcoming what he called “dualisms” or “antithetical conceptions” (Dewey, 1916, p. 334) in epistemologies. These dualisms included: the opposition between empirical and rational knowledge; the distinction between knowledge as external/objective/passive and knowledge as internal/subjective/active; and the separation between emotion and intellect. All of these dualisms “culminate in one between knowing and doing, theory and practice...” (Dewey, 1916, p. 336). Dewey advanced a theory of knowing that highlighted the “continuity” (connection) between these dichotomies, and the need to develop a more balanced approach to learning that recognizes the importance of personal, hands-on experiences and emotional connections in the learning process. Project-based learning, which emphasizes rigorous attention to learning outcomes while prioritizing experiential, child-centred processes of learning, “overcomes the dichotomy between knowledge and thinking, helping students to both ‘know’ and ‘do’” (Markham, Larmer & Ravitz, 2003, p. 6).
Constructivism

The experientialist philosophy of learning by doing also finds expression in the field of psychology, particularly in the theories of constructivism and social constructivism. Constructivism was developed in the latter part of the 20th century as an alternative to the behaviourist approaches to education in which learning is viewed through the lens of instruction, and knowledge is considered to be external, objective reality. Jean Piaget is widely acknowledged for his contributions to the theory of constructivism. Piaget’s theory of human development was based on the hypothesis that learning is a transformative process; children learn by constructing new ideas or concepts based on their current and previous knowledge. Understanding is shaped and reshaped as new knowledge is acquired, especially when new knowledge is incompatible with previous understanding. Constructivism views learning as an active process that requires learners to construct their own understanding through engagement in hands-on learning opportunities, followed by opportunities for reflection.

Constructivism explains that individuals construct knowledge through interactions with their environment, and each individual’s knowledge construction is different. So, through conducting investigations, conversations or activities, an individual is learning by constructing new knowledge by building on their current knowledge. (Grant, 2002, p. 1)

In the project-based learning model, students focus on deep exploration of significant issues or problems. Through an on-going process of knowledge construction and reflection, students design personally meaningful projects that represent and transform their understanding of big ideas connected to the curriculum.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed his theory of social constructivism based on the idea that learners construct knowledge through interactions...
with their environment. Vygotsky believed that social learning precedes development, particularly when learners are in the presence of more competent “others”. His theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can be defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). In Vygotskian theory, and in the project-based learning model, the starting point for instruction is the learner's current knowledge and skills. The learner brings prior knowledge and experience to the learning task, which can be applied to solve problems and develop new understanding (Harland, 2003). Project-based learning reflects a Vygotskian perspective by prioritizing social interactions that allow learners to “face cognitive challenges that are just slightly above their current levels of ability” (Wrigley, 1998, p.2) In PBL classrooms students have opportunities to work in cooperative groups entering into “discussion and meaningful interaction with more capable peers or teachers. These individuals can model problem solving, assist in finding solutions, monitor progress, and evaluate success” (Kubiatko and Vaculova, 2011, p.66).

Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educator and political activist, is also considered a significant contributor to the field of social constructivism. Like other constructivists, Freire viewed knowledge not as something static that is transmitted from teacher to learner (the “banking model”), but as something that is socially constructed through meaningful questioning and dialogue. He advocated for a concept of education grounded in problematisation (or problem-posing), a form of critical inquiry. “Only an education of question can trigger, motivate, and reinforce curiosity” (Freire, 2004, p. 31). Central to Freire’s philosophy of education is the idea of dialogue, which he viewed as
“an epistemological requirement” (Freire, 2004, p. 92) that brings the teacher and student together in the “joint act of knowing and reknowing the object of study” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 100). Freire’s work focused on making education a meaningful and liberating process, particularly for disadvantaged children in Brazil, by focusing on “critical thinking, the development of self – and collective – identity, democratic participation, and cooperation” (Carnoy, 2004, p. 17). Freire considered the traditional “banking” concept of education “as an instrument of oppression” (Freire, 1970) and advocated instead for learning that focused on problem-posing and dialogue, one that would ultimately lead to critical consciousness (conscientização) – “the ability among students to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 17). Action and reflection (praxis) were important in Freire’s work and they are particularly relevant concepts to consider in a project-based learning model designed for an alternative education setting. Project-based learning, conceived in the spirit of Freirian philosophy, is an opportunity for vulnerable students to engage in meaningful projects that can transform their reality through critical reflection and action.

**Constructionism**

The Constructionist epistemology builds on both the experiential and constructivist theories of learning to view learning as a reconstruction rather than a transmission of knowledge. Seymour Papert initially proposed the theory of constructionism in the late 1980s, through a grant application to the National Science Foundation called *Constructionism: A New Opportunity for Elementary Science Education* (Macdonald and Hoban, 2009). Constructionism extends the ideas of experientialism (learning by doing), Piaget’s theory of constructivism (individuals
reconstructing new knowledge based on experiences), and Vygotsky’s and Freire’s theories of social constructivism, by asserting that deep, meaningful learning occurs through “the act of constructing an artefact or model as a representation of their knowledge” (Macdonald and Hoban, 2009, p.219). In 1991, Papert and Harel wrote:

Constructionism—the N word as opposed to the V word—shares constructivism’s connotation of learning as “building knowledge structures” irrespective of the circumstances of the learning. It then adds the idea that this happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it’s a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe. (p. 1)

The idea of students constructing knowledge in the form of an original artefact is the core element in the project-based learning model; moreover, it is what distinguishes project-based learning from other inquiry or constructivist theories such as problem-based learning, as previously noted. In project-based learning students work cooperatively towards the creation and public exhibition of a tangible, meaningful product (e.g. simulation, game, story, pamphlet, video, play, model, blog, website, etc.) that represents their personal and social construction of meaningful knowledge.

Rooted in inquiry, experientialism, constructivism, social constructivism, and constructionism, project-based learning has strong theoretical support and well-defined historical and philosophical roots. The project-based learning model also reflects the current “outpouring of scientific work on the mind and brain” (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000, p. 3) from the fields of social psychology, cognitive psychology and neuroscience. This research clearly supports the idea that “knowledge, thinking, doing, and the contexts for learning are inextricably tied” (Markham, Larmer, & Ravitz, 2003, p.3). The PBL model has received much attention since the 1990s, particularly in handbooks for teachers and popular educational websites (Edutopia, Buck Institute for
These resources offer numerous PBL frameworks, videos, and sample lessons to help teachers implement the model in their classroom. PBL is considered by many to be a promising new model for teaching and learning that successfully engages students in complex, multidisciplinary tasks and promotes inquiry, critical thinking and authentic problem solving.

2.3.3. **Project-Based Learning Research Findings**

The project-based learning model is still relatively new, and according to David (2008), “broad and varied definitions” of PBL “make it difficult to identify a distinct body of research on its practice” (p. 80). Nonetheless, a few studies relating to its effectiveness for increasing academic achievement are encouraging. In his comprehensive review of project-based learning, Thomas (2000) offers several tentative conclusions based on the research available at the time. Among them are the following findings related to student outcomes: (1) PBL is equivalent or better than other models of instruction for producing gains in academic achievement and for developing lower-level cognitive skills in traditional subjects; (2) PBL is an effective method for teaching students complex processes and procedures such as planning, communicating, problem solving, and decision making; (3) PBL has value for enhancing the quality of students’ learning in subject matter areas (e.g. higher level cognitive skills); (4) some students may have difficulties benefiting from self-directed, complex problems; and (5) PBL may provide unintended, positive outcomes for students such as increased attendance, self-reliance, and improved attitudes towards learning. With respect to teachers and the implementation of PBL models, he offers the following conclusions: (6) PBL may be challenging for teachers to plan and enact (particularly planning, management, or assessment); (7) PBL may provide beneficial, unintended consequences such as
enhanced professionalism and collaboration among teachers; and (8) the effectiveness of PBL is enhanced when it is incorporated into whole-school change efforts (Thomas, 2000, p. 34-35). Based on the limited empirical research available in books or in periodicals at the time of his review, Thomas recommended that further studies, using multiple indices, be conducted to generate more substantive evidence regarding: the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing academic achievement, including research to determine the benefits of PBL for low-achieving students; the best practices for PBL planning and management, including procedural devices that work best for different contexts; the challenges associated with teacher-initiated PBL; and the factors that influence successful PBL-based whole school change (p. 36-38).

2.3.4. Potential of PBL for Alternative Education

In the past two decades, the majority of the research on project-based (and problem-based) learning has focused on students in K-12 mainstream or private schools and post-secondary programs (e.g. medical schools). Much of the research has focused on science and math instruction. While Wolk (1994) describes project-based learning as an “outlet for every student to experience success” (p. 44), there are very few studies available that provide data on the outcomes of PBL for low achieving or vulnerable students, and the research that does exist provides only tangential evidence.

In their review of research on inquiry learning approaches, Barron & Darling-Hammond (2008) claim “students who do less well in traditional instructional settings excel when they have the opportunity to work in a PBL context, which better matches their learning style…” (p. 42), although none of the studies they use provide examples of students in alternative education contexts. The US Department of Education’s Project-Based Learning Research Brief (2011) reviews several studies (e.g. Ravitz, 2009; Thomas, 2000) showing high levels of engagement using project-based learning with learners of varied ability levels and from diverse backgrounds. The US Department of Education (2011) and Barron & Darling-Hammond (2008) also highlight The Challenge 2000 Multimedia Project in Silicone Valley, which found increased student engagement and greater achievement gains by students in a PBL program who had been labeled low achievers (Penuel, Means, & Simkins, 2000). Barron & Darling-Hammond (2008) note, however, that there were “no differences on standardized test scores of basic skills” in the Challenge 2000 project (p. 42).
Limited research has been conducted investigating the effectiveness of PBL for students with learning challenges. Belland, Ertmer & Simons (2006) found that PBL had the potential to increase the capacity for students with varied disabilities to stay engaged in learning. Mergendoller, Maxwell & Bellisimo (2006) provide empirical evidence “supporting the efficacy of PBL instructional methodology for students with limited verbal skills” (p. 63). Gallagher & Gallagher (2013) report that using PBL in the regular classroom “can help identify students with advanced academic potential who might be overlooked using standardized testing”. While these preliminary findings are promising, researchers such as Mergendoller et al (2006) acknowledge that further empirical examination of PBL must be undertaken to determine whether this approach to learning can have a demonstrable impact on the academic achievement and engagement of “students who typically do not succeed in school” (p. 63).

Barron, Schwartz, Vye, Moore, Petrosino & Zech, (1998) argue that “the history of the idea of ‘learning by doing’ makes clear the need for informed discussions about problem- and project-based approaches” (p. 271). PBL has the potential to transform the teaching and learning process by re-engaging students in school through the use of authentic, meaningful learning tasks that enhance their social, emotional and academic development. Understanding the conceptual framework and research outcomes of project-based learning provides an important starting point for conversations about the epistemological shifts that may be required for the successful implementation of the project-based learning model, particularly in alternative settings where more traditional, transmission-style teaching and learning may be deeply rooted with educators and learners. A review of the current research offers some insights into the factors that
influence the successful implementation of project-based learning. These factors are discussed in depth in the following section of this literature review, which focuses on the characters of this study – the staff and students at the alternate school – and their engagement in the process of implementing a project-based learning model in a new alternative high school.

2.4. The Characters: Teacher and Student Engagement in Curriculum Implementation

Eisner (1985) believes that our views of education and schooling are defined by language and a particular set of images of “what schools should be and how children should be taught” and that these images are instilled over time by “professional socialization” (p. 355). Schön (1995) echoes this idea, suggesting that educational institutions, like all other organizations, have embedded epistemologies – conceptions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and learning – that are built into structures and practices. This is particularly true in high school settings, where specific pedagogical cultures have developed and become institutionalized over time. Research indicates that the PBL implementation is a complex process requiring educators and students “to redefine beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning” (Bradley-Levine, Berghoff, Seybold, Sever, Blackwell, & Smiley, 2010, p. 2).

Current school reform literature emphasizes the concept of student engagement and provides frameworks aimed at isolating the variables that contribute to student engagement and achievement. Klem and Connell (2004) summarize those conditions for student success as “high standards for academic learning and conduct, meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum, professional learning communities among staff,
and personalized learning environments” (p. 262). They believe that schools that provide these kinds of conditions are more likely to have students who engage in and connect to school. This section of the review explores aspects of professional development and other supports that contribute to teacher engagement in PBL implementation, examines the concept of student engagement theory, and considers the factors that may contribute to adolescents’ engagement in meaningful PBL learning opportunities.

2.4.1. Teacher Engagement in PBL

In their review of the literature on the goals and benefits of project-based learning, Tamim and Grant (2013) provide evidence of teachers’ positive perceptions towards project-based learning. Teachers believe that PBL benefits students’ creative thinking skills and their understanding of subject matter. Citing research by Ravitz (2008), Tamim & Grant (2013) also point out that “the strongest reasons given by teachers for PBL use was the teaching of skills beyond the content, making learning more personalized and more varied, as well as teaching academic content more effectively” (p. 3). Despite these reported positive perceptions of project-based learning among teachers, a review of the literature indicates that there are often significant challenges for educators in implementing PBL (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008; Barron et al, 1998; Ertmer & Simons, 2005, 2006; Grant, 2011; Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, & Soloway, 1994; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway, 1997).

Implementation of PBL – Staff Perspectives

Implementation of PBL requires “simultaneous changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices, changes that are often foreign to teachers” (Barron et al,
Project-based learning requires a shift away from didactic teaching and direct instruction (Grant, 2011). The PBL model may, as a result, seem inefficient for teachers who feel the pressure to cover curriculum topics and prepare students for government exams. Projects often take more time than traditional teaching, which raises the perennial question of breadth versus depth in learning (Marx et al., 1997). Other challenges for teachers relate to adjusting to a constructivist teaching approach, tolerating the ambiguity and flexibility of a student-centred environment, adopting new instructional strategies, selecting topics, managing and designing curriculum, assessing student achievement, and creating collaborative environments in the classroom (Tamim & Grant, 2013). In addition, project-based learning requires a high level of on-going teacher feedback and support in order for students to be successful: “…teachers often think of inquiry or other student-centred approaches as ‘unstructured’, rather than appreciating that they require extensive scaffolding and constant assessment and redirection as they unfold” (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 54).

Support for teachers in the implementation process is critical. They need skill in managing several different project topics and activities; a solid understanding of how to develop (or help students develop) effective projects; expertise in assessing student learning through the process; and the ability to model inquiry-based thinking and learning strategies themselves (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008). Toolin (2004) found that teachers who engaged in professional development (one-on-one Pro D and workshops) “were more inclined to embrace project-based approaches to teaching” (p. 186) but that external supports (time, staffing, equipment and funding) were still required for teachers to embrace PBL. Barron et al (1998) offer four design principles for the PBL implementation process: (1) defining learning-appropriate goals that lead to deep
understanding; (2) providing scaffolds; (3) including multiple opportunities for formative self-assessment; and (4) developing social structures that promote participation and a sense of agency (p. 306). They also underscore the need for new models of professional development, including face-to-face and online discussion groups, collaboration and reflection. Likewise, Ertmer & Simons (2006) provide specific suggestions for supporting teachers’ classroom efforts with PBL implementation that fall within the three categories of: (1) creating a culture of collaboration and interdependence; (2) adjusting to changing roles; and (3) scaffolding student learning and performance. Darling-Hammond (2008) suggests that successful professional development strategies for improving teaching in inquiry-based learning models are: experiential, engaging teachers in concrete teaching tasks; grounded in teacher inquiry; collaborative; connected to and derived from teachers’ work with students; and supported by modeling, coaching, and problem-solving (p. 205-206).

There is a growing consensus among educators and policy makers in the United States and Canada that “authentic problems and projects afford unique opportunities for learning” (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 15). The current online popularity of project-based learning in BC appears to have teachers at every grade level “jumping on the bandwagon.” However, researchers warn that interest alone is not enough to ensure the effective implementation of PBL and other inquiry-based learning models. The type of teaching needed for these approaches “is not straightforward and requires knowledge of the characteristics of successful strategies and highly skilled teachers to implement them” (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 13). Without support for learning these complex skills, teachers may succeed in “engaging students in ‘doing’ but not necessarily in disciplined learning that has a high degree of transfer” (p. 55). Teachers
need to deeply understand the PBL approach and even then they require support and resources from their colleagues to implement it successfully through a “dynamic interplay of collaboration, enactment, and reflection” (Krajcik et al, 1994 p. 483). This support for PBL implementation may be even more critical in learning environments where teachers must work hard to re-engage youth in meaningful and worthwhile educational pursuits.

2.4.2. Learner Engagement Theory

The concept of learner engagement has emerged in recent years as a key element of student success. Research has linked higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance, but engaging students in learning is an on-going learning challenge for educators (Klem & Connell, 2004). Student engagement in secondary schools in particular has become a global concern (Levin, 2010; Stout & Christenson, 2009) since research has shown that students become more disengaged from school as they move from elementary to high school (Klem & Connell, 2004). Defining the concept of engagement is challenging, but several researchers and large-scale reports have contributed to reaching consensus on the facets of engagement theory and to developing conceptual frameworks for understanding student engagement (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Shneiderman & Kearsley (1998), who developed an engagement theory for technology-based teaching and learning, posit that students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities “through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (p.1). Hume (2011) reinforces the notion of engagement as “interaction” by saying that student engagement is always about “relationship to someone or something” (p. 5).
Willms, Friesen, & Milton (2009) define student engagement as:

The extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at school, participate in academic and non-academic activities, strive to meet the formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious personal investment in learning. (p. 7)

Willms, Friesen and Milton’s conceptual framework for engagement incorporates the three inter-related dimensions of: (1) academic engagement; (2) social engagement; and (3) intellectual engagement. Academic engagement refers to students’ engagement in procedural and academic processes at school, including attendance, following instructions, and submitting assignments. Social or emotional engagement is measured by a student’s sense of belonging or connectedness to the school and the people in it. Intellectual engagement refers to a student’s investment in learning, including effort and concentration on learning tasks.

Christenson, Reschly and Wylie (2012) emphasize the importance of student engagement for discouraged learners and “those at high risk for dropping out” (p. vii). They consider engagement to be a “multidimensional construct – one that requires an understanding of affective connections within the academic environment” (p. v). Engagement involves students’ emotion, behaviour, and cognition (p. 3), which are impacted by the socio-cultural context of learning, and in particular by positive student-teacher relationships and effective instruction. Student engagement, according to the authors, is an important area of research (p. 17), and the “cornerstone of our most promising dropout prevention and intervention efforts (p. 5).

The Canadian Education Association (CEA) has adopted “a focus on adolescent learners as its core priority” (Willms et al, 2009, p. 1). *What Did You Do in School Today? (WDYDIST)*, a national initiative launched in 2007, was designed to examine the
relationships among engagement, achievement and effective teaching. Specifically, the initiative asked Canadian high school students to share their stories of life and learning. Among the youth who took part in the survey were “students whose passions do not fit within the traditional curriculum…students who tune out, and those who drop out” (p. 5). The findings of the report are broad, but several key points emerge that have particular relevance to this study. The WDYDIST report provides evidence that student engagement is closely linked to “school policies and practices, particularly the learning climate (i.e., decisions about learning time, relationships, expectations for success, and instructional design) established in the classroom” (p.31). This evidence is particularly relevant for low achieving students or those who have disengaged from school, and supports the findings from earlier research on alternative education that emphasized the need for both a caring environment and high quality instruction to re-engage vulnerable youth in school. With respect to school climate, the WDYDIST report underscores the importance of “knowledge-building environments” supported by positive teacher-student relationships and a “strong culture of learning” (p. 36). In terms of instructional design that engages students, the report suggests that “effective teaching practice begins with thoughtful, intentional designs for learning – designs that deepen understanding and open the disciplines to genuine inquiry” (p. 33) and that student work needs to be “relevant, meaningful and authentic – in other words, it needs to be worthy of their time and attention” (p. 34). Learning tasks should instil deep thinking, immerse the student in inquiry, connect to the outside world, have intellectual rigour and involve substantive conversation. These features of thoughtful instructional design align closely with the current research on inquiry-based learning models, including project-based learning. The following section provides a brief overview of research that has focused on students’ engagement as it relates to project-based learning.
Implementation of PBL – Student Perspectives

While several studies have been conducted to explore the process of project-based learning implementation from the perspective of teachers, there is limited empirical research relating to students’ experiences or engagement with PBL learning environments. Grant (2011) conducted a qualitative case study exploring how learners created projects in a PBL classroom using the following primary research question: “From the perspective of students engaged in project-based learning, what influences their project work and learning?” (p. 39). His study identified five themes relating to influences on the projects and the students' learning in the PBL environment, including: (1) internal influences (student’s perceptions of their ability, their levels of persistence and motivation, and the effort required to complete a project); (2) external influences (teacher engagement in the project, grades, and time needed for projects); (3) beliefs about projects (positive and negative aspects); (4) tools for technology-rich environments (ubiquitous access to computers, the internet, etc.); and (5) learning outcomes and products (artefacts produced and the process of learning itself). Grant’s findings provide important considerations with respect to students' learning processes and to the “elements of motivational theory (that) may be integrated into project-based learning” (p. 47). The most important result from this study was, according to the author, “the influence the classroom teacher had on the participants” (p. 62). Clearly, teachers play a significant role in guiding students’ learning through the PBL process. The findings of Grant’s study, conducted with a small number of private school students in a setting with a technology-rich learning environment, cannot be applied to all learners or all educational contexts. However, his research provides an excellent starting point for further exploration of the various factors that influence students’ engagement and learning processes within a project-based learning environment. Subsequent research is
required, in a variety of different contexts and with different learner abilities, to fully understand students’ perspectives in the implementation of project-based learning.

2.5. Summary

My study focused on the design and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) model for an alternative education program. In this chapter I have used a narrative framework to provide a review of the relevant research that reflects the context and significance of my research focus. The section on setting (the where? and when? of my study) provided a detailed review of alternative education, considered current research related to best practices for alternative education programs, and explored the need for further research on effective curricular models for alternative education settings. The plot section (the what? of my study) examined the conceptual framework of the PBL model from both current and historical, epistemological perspectives, provided research related to the outcomes of PBL, and highlighted the scarcity of research available on PBL in alternative education settings. The section on characters (the who? of my study) focused on the factors that contribute to teacher and student engagement in PBL implementation.

In this literature review I have sought to provide an unbiased examination of prior research and conceptual frameworks related to key aspects of my study within the broad domains of alternate education, project-based learning, curriculum implementation, and student engagement. Several empirical studies and theoretical discourses published by accredited scholars have been summarized, and, in some cases, critiqued. While the specific methodological strengths and weaknesses of empirical studies have not been
formally evaluated, I have identified several gaps in the current research with respect to curriculum design for alternative education and the capacity of project-based learning to re-engage vulnerable youth in school. My study aims to contribute to the existing body of research on alternative education and project-based learning by exploring the factors that influence the implementation of project-based learning in an alternative secondary school from the perspective of the staff and students. The following chapter outlines the research methodology I used to conceptualize and conduct this research study.
Chapter 3. Research Methodology

What questions one chooses to study, what procedures one chooses to follow, what interpretations one makes of ‘data’, what knowledge claims one offers – every aspect of a study is constructed from the perspective of an individual self situated within a particular psycho-socio-cultural, historical, political, and epistemological context. (Plantanida & Garman, 2009, p. xix)

This chapter outlines the research methodology I used to conceptualize and conduct this research study. It begins with a rationale for the choice of a research tradition (qualitative) and genre (narrative inquiry), which align with my understanding of “self” as evolving researcher-practitioner and with the purpose of my study. Following this rationale, I provide an explanation of the methods used throughout the study, including: ethical approval, the selection and recruitment of study participants, research instruments and procedures, the processes for data analysis, and the steps taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. A final discussion is included to provide information on the processes used to overcome obstacles to the research study.

3.1. Logic-Of-Justification

Methodological awareness in social science involves developing what Smith & and Heshusius (1986) call “logic-of-justification”, an epistemological position that addresses questions such as: What is the nature of social reality? What should be investigated? How is truth to be defined? Viewing methodology as logic-of-justification, rather than as a set of techniques outlined by theorists, allows the researcher to
elaborate on specific techniques, strategies, and decisions that inform and guide her research process within a given context. As Piantanida & Garman (2006) remind us, the persuasiveness of a research dissertation is not dependent on following the “right” method, but rather “rests upon the researcher’s ability to articulate his or her logic-of-justification in a clear and cogent manner” (p.81).

Logic-of-justification aligns with what Kilbourn (1999, 2006) calls “self-conscious method”, a fundamental quality of doctoral theses that highlights the important relationships among research purpose, genre, and procedures. Self-conscious method demonstrates the researcher’s epistemological beliefs and sensitivities regarding methodology and meaning, articulates the research conventions selected, and provides a rationale for the “conceptual and methodological moves made during the conduct of the study and in the presentation of the study as a readable document” (Kilbourn, 1999, p. 28). Qualitative research is a process of meaning making that is unique to the researcher conducting the study. Self-conscious method allows the researcher to provide justification for procedural decisions and to clarify his or her role as instrument of inquiry in the research process.

The purpose of my research study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum within a newly consolidated, community-based alternative education program in a suburban public school district. My intention in this study was not to measure the outcomes or evaluate the success of the new PBL program in terms of student achievement, teacher satisfaction, or any other assessment criteria. Nor did I wish to compare engagement or achievement levels of students enrolled in the new program with students in other alternate programs or with students in more traditional educational
programs. It was apparent from the start that quantitative research methodologies would not be relevant or meaningful for the type of research I wished to conduct.

Rather, the purpose behind my research was to tell the story of the implementation of a specific curriculum model (project based learning) in a particular educational context (an alternate secondary school) from the point of view of distinct participant groups most affected by the new program (the staff and students at the school). In telling this story, I wished to identify key factors that contributed to the program being designed, developed, and implemented in this context. Given this topic and purpose, the study naturally lent itself to a qualitative, interpretive style of research.

The next step consisted of determining a specific research genre.

The qualitative research tradition is vast and encompasses many different genres, each with its own set of conventions and procedures. Topic and purpose are helpful in determining the general type of research (quantitative or qualitative) for a given study, but the selection of a specific research genre is often determined “more by one’s instinctive proclivities for coming to know than by the topic or question to be studied” (Piantanida & Garman, 2009, p. 74). As I internalized the identity of a scholar-practitioner and began my research, I came to appreciate how my own experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and worldview contributed to my preference for interpretive, narrative ways of knowing. As I cultivated myself “as an instrument of inquiry” in my own doctoral research, dwelling in “deliberative spaces” (p. xix) with the participants in my study, listening to, reflecting on, and learning from their stories of life experience, I came to understand that narrative inquiry would be the most powerful genre for my research.
3.2. ‘Self’ as Learner, Educator and Evolving Scholar-Practitioner

To support my decision to embrace narrative inquiry, the following passage offers a glimpse into my personal journey into this research genre. As a life-long learner of languages, I have always been drawn to words, stories, and linguistic ways of knowing. I learn best when there is a compelling story attached to new concepts, and when the learning is relevant, contextualized, and authentic. Unfortunately, this was not my experience when I began learning French in high school. The design for our French courses was based primarily on the 1950s basal readers used almost exclusively as our textbooks; the consistent pattern of text passage – comprehension questions – dictation, which was regularly used by our teacher, was predictable, “quantifiable” (marks of out 10) and excruciatingly boring for the students. There were very few opportunities for oral practice or meaningful exchanges in the French language. I lost interest by Grade 12 and skipped most of my French classes. It wasn't until I began taking post-secondary French courses in college and university, when opportunities to travel and live in Francophone communities became available, that I fully engaged the process of language learning. Suddenly vocabulary, verb tenses, and grammar came to have practical and personal meaning in my lived experiences of the language – interacting with native French speakers in authentic contexts through stories, conversation, and music.

As a French Immersion teacher I intuitively understood the value of narrative as a way of building community in my classroom and engaging my students in active learning. I shared my personal stories with them and regularly used the power of stories in literary forms and every day experiences to draw students into learning complex
concepts in a variety of subject areas. My Masters thesis focused on the role of narrative in children’s literature in engaging students emotionally and intellectually in historical events (the Japanese Internment during World War II) and shared stories from our past. Throughout my teaching career, including my experiences as a Faculty Associate at Simon Fraser University working with adult learners (pre-service teachers), the role of narrative has held a prominent role in my teaching philosophy and methodologies.

When I entered into and engaged with my doctoral research topic my “instinctive proclivities for coming to know” surfaced once again. As I developed my purpose statement, conceptualized my research procedures, and began to collect and reflect on the data – stories shared by my study participants – I was drawn naturally towards a narrative inquiry approach. I share with Connelly and Clandinin (1990) the view that “education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and others’ stories”, and that “narrative is both phenomenon and method” (p. 2). By situating themselves in relational ways with their participants, researchers engage in a process of co-constructing new narratives as a way of representing and honouring lived experiences.

The narratives (individual and collective stories) that emerged throughout my research provided a natural way for me to inquire into and find meaning and universal truths in the experiences and stories of designing, developing and implementing new curriculum for vulnerable youth. Moreover, the narrative inquiry genre allowed me, as participant-observer in this process of implementation, and in my role as District Administrator, to dwell in and with the stories, and ultimately to craft a new narrative
(with emerging metaphors) as a way of reporting or “re-storying” (Creswell, 2008) the research findings.

3.3. Ethical Approval

I sought initial approval for this study from the School District in which the research took place during the summer of 2012. I met first with the school administrators and the assistant superintendent responsible for the alternative program to discuss my research purpose and study details. They agreed to support the research and offered some recommendations for the design of the interviews, the selection of participants, and the timeline for the study. I was granted official approval from the Superintendent of Schools in August 2012 following my discussions with the program administrators.

The next step entailed completing a Study Detail, with accompanying Informed Consent letters for each participant group, which I developed in consultation with my senior supervisor and submitted to the Department of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University in late August 2012. The Informed Consent letters included the broad focus topics that would be used in interviews, focus group sessions, and informal dialogue with each of the participant groups during the study. I designed separate Informed Consent forms for each group and a parent/guardian Informed Consent form for students who were minors (see Appendix A for Staff Informed Consent and Appendix B for Student/Parent Informed Consent Forms). SFU granted ethical approval for the study in October 2012 after several revisions of the Study Detail and Informed Consent forms.
3.4. Selection of Study Participants

The idea for this research initially evolved from an assignment I completed in spring 2012 for a Curriculum Theory course I took as part of my doctoral program in Transformative Leadership. The assignment was inspired by an earlier request from the new alternative school’s administrative team who wanted my help in developing a project-based curriculum service delivery model that would guide the implementation of PBL in the consolidated alternative school. I consulted extensively with the administrative team during the spring/summer of 2012 to develop a curriculum design that would be appropriate for the new school. After I completed the service delivery model, my curriculum theory professor (who later became my senior research supervisor) suggested that there was a unique opportunity for me to study and document the implementation process of the new PBL curriculum for my doctoral research project.

I proposed my research idea to the administrators of the school and worked in collaboration with them to determine the participant groups for the study and to develop semi-structured interview questions that would be appropriate for each group. Initially, the administrators and my senior advisor suggested I consider three distinct participant groups they believed would play a significant role in the process of implementation of the project-based learning model during the first year: school staff members (administrators, teachers and support staff), students enrolled at the school, and community partners affiliated with the alternative program.

The decision to include community partners in the original research proposal was based on the Board of Education’s long-term vision for the new alternative school becoming a community-based learning “hub” in which students would be supported in their social and academic development through wrap-around services provided by on-
site community partners. The intention for including community partners as study participants was to isolate the design features that would ensure their active and effective involvement in the PBL model at the school. Although I explained the research project to a small group of community partners in October, and had them sign informed consent forms, the interviews with this group were never conducted. With the exception of one community Youth Worker who became actively engaged in the development of a skateboarding project at the school, there was very little community participation in curriculum design at the new school in the first year. The school administration plans to pursue this goal in Year 2 of the program.

3.5. Recruitment of Study Participants

The first group of study participants were staff members of the school. Participants in this group included administrators, teachers, and support staff (education assistants). The administrators suggested that I participate in the school's first staff retreat, held in August 2012, to help introduce teachers to the concept of project-based learning and to explain the proposed research project to them. At the retreat, staff members responded positively to the idea of a PBL model for the new school and unofficially expressed interest in participating in the research project, once approval was obtained from SFU's Department of Research Ethics. In October 2012, after I had received Ethics approval, I provided a second overview of the official research Study Details at a staff meeting held at the school. All staff members who were present at the meeting signed the official Informed Consent forms. Staff invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews included those actively implementing a project-based learning
model in their classrooms or programs, as well as those who were learning about PBL but had not yet begun to implement it in their practice.

The second group of study participants were the students attending the alternative school. Initially I wanted to extend an invitation to any interested students in the school to participate in the study. On October 23, 2012, the principal invited all students to attend a noon hour information meeting (with pizza provided) to hear about the research project. During the meeting, which was attended by about twelve students, I explained the research and distributed the Student and Parent Informed Consent forms. The students listened politely, but it was apparent that most had come to the meeting for the free pizza. Only one of these students from this meeting (who is featured in the bird story in the Foreword) ever returned the consent forms to the school, and she was never interviewed since she did not participate in any of the project-based learning models in place at the school.

Upon further reflection of my research purpose to study the factors that engage students in project-based learning (PBL), I decided it made more sense to select students from the school who were learning through PBL to participate in the semi-structured interviews. In most cases these were students recommended by two teachers who were implementing the PBL model in their Integrated Studies Program (ISP). (See Chapter Four for more information on the Integrated Studies Program). The school principal and the two ISP teachers assisted with the explanation of the research study and the distribution and collection of student and parent/guardian Informed Consent forms. All of the students who participated in the interviews were in their senior grades (11 or 12), with the exception of one Grade 9 student.
3.6. Research Instruments and Procedures

3.6.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

I developed a specific set of questions for the semi-structured interview for each participant group. Designing my own interview questions allowed me to align participants’ responses to the core elements of my inquiry. With the staff participants I focused specifically on the types of professional development opportunities that were most effective from the point of view of the administrators and the teachers involved in the implementation of the new PBL model at the school. The focus or theme question for staff interviews was:

What professional development requirements are necessary to enable the successful design and implementation of a project-based curriculum design for a community-based alternative education program?

Additional questions for staff interviews included:

1. What have been the successes of the PBL model for you so far?

2. Have there been any challenges for you?

3. What professional development and other opportunities have been most effective to date in supporting the implementation of the PBL model in your teaching practice?

4. What other kinds of professional support do you need at this time?

A total of eleven staff members (two administrators, eight teachers and one education assistant) took part in the semi-structured interviews during the course of the year. The school principal and two teachers, who piloted the Integrated Studies Program (ISP), were interviewed on several occasions during the year. Some staff members were interviewed individually; however, when two or more teachers were
collaborating closely on the development of PBL curriculum (e.g. the two teachers who piloted the ISP program), I asked to meet with them in groups. Group interviews consisted of two or three teachers (or in one case a teacher with an educational assistant) working together in the same department or classroom. The group interviews were easier for some staff members as the discussions became animated and conversational in nature. Teachers also noted that the interview process provided valuable opportunities for their own individual and group reflection on the curriculum implementation process and for the generation of new ideas and next steps in the process.

With the student participants I focused primarily on the design elements of the program that contributed to their engagement in learning. The research questions for the student interviews were:

What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students in designing (with adult educators) projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

Topics discussed with student participants during interviews included:

1. Which aspects of this alternative program do you really like?
2. What projects or activities have engaged you the most so far this year?
3. Are learning activities at the school personally relevant/meaningful for you?
4. Do you have a voice in decisions made at the school regarding your learning?
5. Have you actively contributed to the design of learning experiences in the school?
6. Are projects and assignments open-ended enough to allow for you to pursue areas of personal interest?

7. What opportunities have you had to work collaboratively with other students?

8. Have you had opportunities in your assignments and projects to interact with and learn more about the local community?

9. Is there anything you don’t like or would like to change in this program?

10. What improvements would you like to see at the school?

A total of eight students from the school participated in the semi-structured interviews between February and June 2013. I interviewed each student only once, and only individually. I decided to conduct individual rather than group interviews based on the fact that most students were working on independent projects. Although the students interacted occasionally with their peers to share progress on their projects, they were generally autonomous in their work. More importantly, I decided to meet individually with students because some of the students interviewed were emotionally fragile and many were working on projects with sensitive content matter. Individual interviews allowed students to speak more candidly with me about their individual experiences in mainstream schools and in the alternative program and to share personal information about their projects. Each student interview lasted approximately 30-50 minutes.

After I had interviewed the first two students, I realized that there was an important question missing from my guiding questions. Although I had not explicitly asked these students about their experiences before coming to the alternative school, they each chose to share their stories in detail with me. When I recognized a trend in
the students’ need to tell me how and why they ended up in the alternative education program, I added the following question to my interviews:

Tell me what school was like for you before you came to this school/project-based learning program?

From that point on, the stories of mainstream school life flowed freely from all the students I interviewed. These narratives provided valuable data regarding the factors responsible for the students’ prior disengagement from school and helped to illuminate key differences in the environment and curriculum design of the alternative program – factors that had contributed to re-engaging the students in learning.

All staff and student interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. I chose to transcribe all the audio recordings of the interviews myself for several reasons. First, I wanted to ensure accuracy of the interview transcription; voice inflections, dysfluencies, idiomatic expressions, and physical interferences in the recording process (e.g. construction noise from the building) would have made some audio segments difficult to transcribe for someone who had not participated in the interview. Second, by transcribing what I had experienced myself in dialogue with the participants I was able to recall and record their individual emotions, interjections, and tonal qualities with as much integrity as possible. Finally, the experience of immersing myself in the voices and stories of the participants a second or third time enabled me to resonate more meaningfully with the raw text of my data. Listening to and transcribing the interviews provided me with the opportunity to probe for insights and reflect on the themes and patterns that emerged from the narratives. This was a time consuming process, but one that ultimately assisted me in analyzing and coding the data.
3.6.2. **Observations and Field Notes**

In addition to the semi-structured interviews with staff and students, I also participated in and collected on-going field notes at a number of school functions and events during the school year. I was a regular observer/participant in weekly school staff meetings, professional development sessions, district-wide events (meetings, professional development series) that included school administrators and teachers, and a variety of student presentations and exhibitions of learning. My field notes, which included descriptions of the physical and affective environment of the school, depictions of dialogue between study participants, and the activities that unfolded at these events, enhanced the rich narratives shared during the interviews.

During the year, and whenever I was in the school to attend a meeting, conduct an interview, participate in a function, or pop in for a quick site visit, I was also able to have many informal conversations with teachers and students. These casual interactions, which focused on staff and students’ perceptions of the implementation of project-based learning at the school, provided me with opportunities to gain insight into the organization’s “inner dialogue” (Bushe, 2010), which is distinct from the more formal exchanges that are typical of staff meetings, presentations, and interviews. Inner dialogues reveal “interpretations, judgments, feelings, and preferences about the discussions and decisions made in official forums, which people are not comfortable bringing up in the larger group” (Bushe, 2010, p. 39). By engaging in, recording, and reflecting on these casual interactions I was able to add to the rich and comprehensive narrative of the study.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I observed and recorded the development of the students’ own artefacts of learning as part of the process of the project-based
learning implementation. The projects completed for the Integrated Studies Program revealed the students’ life stories, their learning journeys, and their emotional and intellectual growth throughout the year. I regularly captured student artwork, blogs, journals, and other aspects of the projects in electronic files, photographs and video, which contributed to the collection of raw data for the study and to the on-going, comprehensive narrative.

3.7. Process for Data Analysis

...concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and to themselves. Out of these multiple constructions, analysts construct something they call knowledge. (Cobin & Strauss, 2009, p. 10)

I reflected on all of the narratives I collected – through interviews, recorded observations, field notes, and student artefacts of learning in order to develop preliminary hypotheses related to the design factors that influenced the implementation of project-based learning at the school for staff and students. My informal analysis of the results of this research proceeded iteratively over the course of the year as I collected and considered new stories. The more formal approach to data analysis focused on the transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews with staff and students.

I used an open coding process to review the transcriptions for each participant group. I analyzed and coded staff and student interview transcriptions separately since I used different focus questions for each participant group. Initially, I did a close reading of each interview transcription, highlighting key words, ideas, or phrases associated with each question, which I recorded on Open Coding charts (one for each participant group). During the initial reading of each interview transcription, I compared themes identified for
each response to other answers from the same respondent to test for consistency of the interview as whole.

I repeated the same process of close reading and analysis for each interview transcription. As I read and coded the first few transcriptions, I established provisional categories or themes based on the first few respondents’ answers. As I continued to read, I compared the responses provided by each participant to those provided by previous respondents to check for common themes and patterns of meaning emerging from each group. With each new interview transcription I either confirmed or discounted the themes I had created, rearranging sub-themes and adding new categories as needed. I repeated the process of comparison between old and new data several times until the categories became saturated. This process of analysis provided me with a general summary of the interview data from each participant group and a list of provisional codes, which was the beginning of a conceptual profile of the data for each participant group.

Axial coding was my next step in the analysis of the interviews. Key concepts and sub-themes that had appeared consistently in the transcriptions were disaggregated into larger categories to create a framework of relationships between the key ideas that emerged in the responses and the questions asked. For example, in response to the question in the student interviews “Which aspects of project-based learning do you really like?” most students talked about how the program was less structured than in mainstream schools, how they were free to learn in different ways with soft deadlines that met their lifestyle needs, how they appreciated the self-paced approach to learning when and where they felt comfortable. I organized these sub-themes into a larger
category called Flexibility. Appendix C provides an example of the coding process I used for the student data.

I used selective coding as a final step in the analysis process. At this stage of the process, I considered core themes or categories from the interviews and other data sources (e.g. field notes and other documents) to create a narrative that would provide a set of theoretical propositions related to the implementation of project-based learning from the point of view of the staff and students.

3.8. Testing the Reliability and Validity of the Data

In qualitative research studies it is important to assess the reliability and validity of the data collected to ensure that the researcher does not allow his or her assumptions or biases to interfere with the analysis of the data and/or influence the conclusions or insights offered. During this study, I used several processes to test the reliability (consistency) and validity (accuracy) of the data I collected, including: triangulation of study methods, respondent validation, constant comparison, and the establishment of a Critical Review Committee to assist with the data coding process.

Triangulation in qualitative research is essentially using two or more methods to study the same phenomenon. According to Cohen and Manion (2000), triangulation attempts to “explain the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint” (p.254). In the case of my research, I was studying the implementation of a particular curriculum model, and specifically attempting to isolate key factors that contributed to the program being successfully designed, developed and implemented in the context of a secondary alternative education setting. My narrative
inquiry focused primarily on collecting and analyzing data held in the stories, and often in powerful metaphors, as they emerged during the individual, semi-structured interviews with staff and students. However, other data collection methods were employed (observations, participation in key school and district events, field notes, informal interactions with staff and students, and analysis of student artefacts of learning) in order to cross verify the narratives and data provided in the interviews. In addition, I intentionally sought out opportunities to collect data that could provide contradictory evidence. For example, although I did not interview all staff and students at the school, through my interviews with the school administrator, several teachers and even the students, I was able to investigate many of the challenges and obstacles that influenced the implementation of PBL in the first year. These challenges often related to the essential factors I was studying: professional development requirements for teachers and levels of student engagement in PBL. My analysis and cross-verification of the data throughout the study allowed me to isolate with greater confidence common factors that contributed to the design, development, and implementation of PBL for both participant groups.

The second process used to test the validity and accuracy of the data was respondent verification. As previously noted, I recorded and transcribed all semi-structured interviews myself. After each transcription was completed, I emailed an electronic copy of the interview to the study participant. All participants were invited to review the transcription of their interview and request any revisions or additions they thought were necessary to ensure that their answers had been accurately recorded and transcribed. I explained this process of respondent verification to participants at the beginning of the interview, and again in my email communication with the attached
interview transcription. Only two staff members requested changes to their interview transcriptions. These requests focused exclusively on removing some of the dysfluencies (‘ums’ and ‘uhs’) in the interview transcription, and not on any changes to the content or meaning of the answers provided.

I used the process of constant comparison throughout this research study as a third way to test the validity and robustness of the data, and to eventually code the data. As I collected data during the year (in staff or student interviews, during key events, etc.), certain preliminary hunches or hypotheses formed in my mind, which were then compared against subsequent data collected to inductively develop theories. This ongoing process of comparison and reflection helped me to form, enhance, confirm, or discount emergent theories within the same participant group (e.g. in the open coding process), and to make decisions about the selection of participants based on the kinds of data needed to confirm or discount theoretical hypotheses in the subsequent stages of the research. I also used constant comparison between the two participant groups. In particular, with respect to student engagement in the PBL model, I regularly considered data provided by the staff in interviews and conversations to confirm the responses provided in the students’ interviews.

Finally, as a fourth and final process of data verification, I invited a group of teachers and students to participate in a Critical Review Committee. The school principal, three teachers, and two senior female students agreed to participate in this committee to ensure that my initial coding of the student data was reviewed for accuracy and cross-referenced for any biases. The two students, who were recommended for the committee by the Integrated Studies Program teachers, had participated in the implementation of the PBL curriculum model at the school through the ISP, but had not
been interviewed for my research study. At the first Critical Review Committee meeting on May 31, 2013, I distributed copies of the student interview transcriptions. The students and teachers asked a lot of questions relating to the coding of the data. I explained that the analysis of the data would focus on identifying key themes based on the core questions from the student data:

What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students in designing (with adult educators) projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

At the first meeting, I asked the committee if they recognized any obvious omissions or possible biases in the data. They noticed that I had interviewed only one male student during the study and suggested I try to interview at least one more boy in order to have a more gender balanced set of student data. Before the committee met for the second time on June 7, I completed the last student interview (on June 6) with a Grade 12 male student who was enrolled in the ISP program.

Between the first and second meetings, committee members read through the student interview data and developed their own preliminary coding system. The senior English teacher (who was also part of the Critical Review Committee) also asked the two female students to complete a “Reader’s Response”, comparing the participants’ responses to the interview questions with their own perceptions of the PBL curriculum design. The students completed this task as part of an English 12 assignment, which was evaluated for completion towards graduation. Each student also worked with a staff member to analyze and code the students’ interviews using her own set of themes related to the foundational questions from the student interviews. On June 5, two days
before the committee met for the second time I sent the members an electronic copy of my coding system (see Appendix C) for the student interviews. During the second meeting we were able to compare and discuss my coding system and the two developed by each student-teacher team. Our discussion at the June 7th meeting was rich and engaging. It was intriguing to consider the similarities and differences in the coding systems that emerged from each team (see Appendix C: Coding Systems Developed by the Critical Review Committee) and to compare them with my initial open coding of the data.

Allowing the committee to read and analyze the student data, and to provide feedback on my analysis of the data was a powerful and effective way for me to check for inconsistencies, challenge my assumptions, and identify unanticipated themes. The dialogue that occurred during these meetings reflected what Clandinin (2013) refers to as the “transactional or relational ontology” (p. 16) that is fundamental to narrative inquiry. Furthermore, the process also allowed me to consider new student voices and narratives in the composition of my findings.

3.9. Overcoming Obstacles in the Research Process

With the help of the school administrator, certain challenges were identified and highlighted at the beginning of my study, which allowed me to develop a research approach that was sensitive to the needs and working or learning styles of the study participants. The first area of challenge related to the goal of studying the phenomenon of curriculum implementation with staff members. Teachers at the newly consolidated alternative school had to confront several obstacles beginning in the fall of 2012 that went beyond the typical activities of a September school start-up. First, the staff did not
all know one another. While some had been colleagues in other schools, the staff had generally come together as a new group. The school principal knew that the topics and activities planned for the first few meetings, including the August retreat, needed to focus on the basic needs of community or team building within the group, and the development of ‘logistics’ (timetables, schedules, etc.). The administrators asked me to design a morning session (at the August 30th retreat) that would introduce staff to inquiry (project)-based learning. However, they strongly advised me not to overwhelm teachers and support staff with theoretical presentations, or to make any assumptions about the readiness of staff members to actively implement a PBL model in the new school, given the long-held practices of transmission style approaches to learning in the previous alternative programs. This background information and advice were very helpful to me, not only in designing the first PBL presentation, but also in all of my interactions with staff throughout the study.

The second major obstacle for the staff, the students, and for me as a researcher was the physical state of the school site in which the consolidated alternative program had been relocated. The building was under construction during the summer of 2012, and teachers had only two days before the fall session began in September to move into the building and set up their classrooms. The renovations to the building continued throughout the entire year. Noise and dirt from the construction and from the crews on site were often deterrents to focused learning and teaching. The on-going construction was also a factor in teachers’ readiness to take on new pedagogical challenges in the first year of the program, and their willingness to take time out to participate in the research study. The noise from the construction was also a challenge to me as a researcher in locating quiet places to conduct interviews or have an informal
conversation with participants. However, the school was large and had a relatively small student population. With the patience and help of the staff, I was usually able to find quiet places to meet with the participants.

A third area of challenge related to the students’ willingness and ability to participate in the research within the available time frame. The purpose of my study was to inquire into the factors that engage students in a project-based learning (PBL) model. But like the staff, the students had come together from various other settings (mainstream schools, other alternative programs). The teachers wanted to dedicate the fall term to the goal of creating a sense of belonging and community among students and were cautious about making any changes to the curriculum model that would overwhelm them. The IPS program was not introduced to staff until November 2012, and was only presented to students in December. The PBL curriculum (embedded in the Integrated Studies Program) was not implemented until January 2013, which meant that I could not start selecting or meeting with student participants until February. Many of the ISP students were willing to participate in the research project when it was explained to them (by me and again by the teachers), but the interview schedule was often delayed because the students either forgot to take home or to bring back their signed Informed Consent forms. Other students were reticent to participate in the interviews out of shyness, lack of interest, their own emotional challenges; or because it would take time away from other more engaging activities, like their own ISP projects. In other situations, when I had received the signed Informed Consent forms, and arranged a meeting time with the students, the interview often had to be postponed if the student was absent from the school that day. Communication with the students to schedule or reschedule interviews was also challenging because most students did not respond to
my emails.

The school principal and teachers at the school were very helpful in overcoming these challenges by explaining the research project to students, printing out new forms when needed, phoning or emailing parents to explain the study and ask for their Informed Consent forms, and letting me know (by email or text) when students were in the school and available for an interview. The process I implemented for successfully conducting interviews was to keep a running record with me of all students who had provided both sets (student and parent) of Informed Consent forms, and to simply stop by the school a couple of times/week to check on who was there and available for an interview. I am forever grateful to the staff and students at the school for their patience and help with the interview process.
Chapter 4. Creating A New School Culture: Historical Context

The purpose of my research study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum within a newly consolidated alternative education program in a suburban public school district. Before considering these design factors it is important to understand how this new alternative education school came to exist, how it was structured and staffed, and most importantly, how its cultural context was shaped. The formation of a new school represents not only a physical relocation to a new building but also the creation of a new school culture that encompasses “unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that permeate everything” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 2). School cultures, even those in their beginning stages of existence, can affect, in powerful ways, the implementation of a curriculum design model.

School cultures are largely created by dynamic relationships among individuals who work, learn, and teach together, and by the external forces that affect people and the relationships among them. This study took place in a newly consolidated alternative education high school where educators from two previously distinct alternative programs came together to form a new staff. Several political, social, pedagogical, and philosophical influences contributed to the creation of the new school culture. In this chapter I provide an historical context for the new alternative school, which illustrates how external and internal influences provided the impetus for the consolidation of the
School District’s alternative education programs into one school, helped to shape the new school culture, and affected the design and development of a new curriculum model during the first year of the implementation process.

4.1. Political, Social and Pedagogical Influences

From a political perspective, the consolidation process for the new school began in April 2010 with the Board of Education’s motion to consolidate alternative education into one secondary school site beginning in September 2012. The Board’s decision to consolidate the alternative programs into one school was part of a broader vision to improve services to students in mainstream schools and create a new identity for alternative education in the school district. Integral to this vision was the establishment of programs at each of the secondary schools to provide intervention and support to students with social, emotional and behaviour issues. These programs supported most of these students in remaining in their school communities with adaptations to their academic programs and additional counselling and therapeutic support for social and emotional challenges. For students with more complex social and emotional learning needs, plans were developed for a newly consolidated alternative school that would provide more intensive, centralized supports.

The new alternative school was envisioned to have an enhanced pedagogical foundation while retaining best practices from previous alternative programs. During the two years that followed the Board’s motion, several processes were put in place to gather input and discuss issues related to school location and educational programming. Staffing and school organization were not completed until spring 2012 when district and school-based administrators made the decision to bring together experienced staff from
the two main existing alternative programs in the creation of the new school. Each of these programs had a unique history, culture, and pedagogical practices that had been largely shaped by the needs of its students.

The first program, Forest Grove (a pseudonym), had been designed for vulnerable youth aged 13-19 who had either dropped out or been removed from mainstream schools. Many of the adolescents who arrived at the school had a history of internalizing and externalizing behaviours that had contributed to their previous challenges in traditional school settings. Forest Grove focused primarily on providing a safe and caring school environment for students through supportive relationships with administrators, teachers, and support staff. Therapeutic programs, counselling services, and teaching practices that prioritized the social and emotional aspects of learning were designed to increase students’ sense of connectedness and well-being. Academic courses and some electives were offered at the school. Staff at Forest Grove had a history of working collaboratively on programming for special projects (field trips, art exhibitions, etc.) to re-engage students in learning; however, no particular pedagogical vision or framework for curriculum design was in place at the school.

The second alternative program, the Student Completion Program (SCP) (a pseudonym), was designed for students aged 16-19 who wished to return to school to complete specific coursework needed for graduation. Students in the program often had a history of poor attendance patterns related to a variety of family, mental and/or physical health issues. As a result, many were missing credits in academic courses needed for graduation. The Student Completion Program was flexible and self-paced; students completed Grade 10-12 courses through individualized or group instruction, using workbooks, textbooks, or paper-based packages. Teachers provided small group
or remedial one-on-one support to students as needed. In general, teachers worked autonomously within their subject areas and with their students; collaboration and cross-curricular planning among staff were not goals of the program, nor were they reflected in the school culture.

Given the Board’s mandate to retain students in their home schools, the provision of new services for vulnerable youth in mainstream schools, and the creation of a District Resource Team to centralize the referral process, there was an expectation that enrolment in the new alternative high school would decline from previous total enrolments in alternative programs across the School District. The percentage of students expected to transfer to the new alternative school was estimated at only 1-2%, which inevitably caused a reduction in staffing needs. In total approximately 150-160 students were anticipated for the new consolidated alternative high school, which was designed to offer a Junior Cohort (Grades 9-10), a Senior Flex Program (Grade 11-12 with students completing coursework on half-day or flexible/part-time schedules), and a Senior Cohort (full-time Grade11-12 students requiring more intensive case management). All teachers and support staff from both of the alternative programs were considered for assignment to the new school, but with reduced staffing needs there were not enough positions for all of the teachers.

4.2. Timeline for School Staffing, PBL Implementation, and Research 2012-2013

The following narrative timeline provides information related to three important processes that occurred between April 2012 and June 2013: (1) staffing and
organization of the new alternative school, (2) the school-wide implementation of the project-based learning (PBL) model; and (3) the chronology of my data collection.

April-June 2012

During the spring of 2012, the administrators from each of the alternative programs (Trevor from Forest Grove and Mary from the SCP) worked in collaboration with senior administrators to develop a vision for educational programming and staffing at the consolidated alternative school. In April, Trevor, Mary, and a group of other administrators from across the School District traveled to High Tech High in San Diego, California to see the project-based learning (PBL) model in action. Trevor and Mary wanted to identify which aspects of PBL might be appropriate in the educational context of the new alternative secondary school. They shared their experience at High Tech High with their alternative program staffs and introduced the idea of implementing the PBL model in the consolidated alternative school.

In order to determine programming needs for elective courses in the new school, Trevor and Mary designed a survey, which was distributed to all students and parents from both alternative programs in April 2012. The results of the survey helped the school leaders determine the courses and staffing needs for the consolidated program. The next step in the process involved individual meetings with staff from both alternative programs (in total sixteen teachers and one counsellor) to determine how their teaching interests and experiences aligned with the self-expressed interests of students for programming at the new school. During the meetings Trevor and Mary also talked to each potential staff member about their vision for a project-based learning model in the new alternative school.
Given the relatively small student population of the new alternative high school (approximately 150 students), the reduced staffing needs, and the variety of elective courses the students were interested in, teachers considered for positions at the new school were expected to teach in more than just one academic or elective area. The hiring process was completed in May 2012, including the appointment of two principals to the new building. Trevor became principal of the consolidated alternative school and Mary was appointed principal of Distributed Learning (a program within the same building). Of the sixteen teachers interviewed, twelve were offered positions in the new alternative school. In addition to teachers, staffing also included one counsellor, six Education Assistants, three Youth Experience Workers, and two Food Program staff. All of the staff hired to the new school had previous experience working in alternative education programs. In June the new staff was brought together for two professional development half-day sessions to discuss programming and the curriculum design vision for the new alternative high school.

August 2012

In August, in my role as Director of Instruction for the School District, I participated in several planning meetings with the two school administrators (Trevor and Mary) to help them with the conceptual framework and professional development strategies for introducing the project-based learning model to the staff. The administrators invited me to attend their August 30th staff retreat to present a short introduction to project-based learning (PBL) starting with the backward design principles of planning as described in Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) Understanding by Design (UbD) framework. All teachers and educational support staff from the new school attended the retreat, which was both an opportunity to present the PBL framework and
build a sense of community among the group. At that point, Trevor the principal thought that the PBL design would be best implemented in the Junior Cohort Program since he believed the younger students were the most vulnerable group in the school and most in need of a new, innovative approach to re-engage them in learning. He also believed that implementing PBL in the early grades would facilitate long-term, systemic change throughout the school.

**September – October 2012**

During the first few weeks of school the staff focused primarily on getting to know each other as a group and co-constructing a vision for the new school. Time was needed to agree upon many of the operational aspects of the school such as timetables and programming schedules, as well as the on-going challenges of the renovations to the building. Staff met regularly as a whole group to discuss these decisions and to reflect on the school start-up progress. During this period less time was devoted during this period to focusing on whole-school professional development for project-based learning, although small groups of staff were beginning to collaborate on PBL curriculum planning within their departments, including three teachers (Brianne, Susan and Terri) who were developing PBL-inspired cross-curricular units of study to teach English, Socials and Math, and two teachers (John and Maya) who were envisioning an arts-based Integrated Studies Program. On October 17, I joined the staff meeting to do a formal presentation of my research study, invite staff members to participate, and explain the Informed Consent forms.

**November 2012**

By November John and Maya had completed their vision for the Integrated Studies Program (ISP), which they had discussed at length with Trevor the principal. On
November 14th I attended a meeting during which they “pitched” their idea to the rest of the staff. The ISP, envisioned by John, Maya, and Trevor as a program of choice for senior students in the school, was based on the principles of curriculum integration and project-based learning. However, the ISP proposal differed in one important aspect from most PBL frameworks: rather than starting with academic courses and then integrating electives to enrich the projects, these teachers wanted to design the ISP program using students’ elective courses and their interests and passions as the starting points. Support for the projects, and the completion of necessary learning outcomes and credits, would be provided as needed through the students’ required academic courses (English, Social Studies, Math, etc.). Key ideas discussed during staff meeting and recorded in my field notes were: co-construction of curriculum, cross-curricular planning, experiential learning, projects focusing on topics related to personal interests and social justice issues, 21st century learning skills, cooperation and collaboration, increased student engagement, and an emphasis on lifelong learning and social skills. John and Maya had developed the following mission statement for the ISP program, which they presented to the staff at the meeting: “To co-construct a cross curricular project that begins with student interest and passion, focuses on the journey, emphasizes metacognition, and culminates with a presentation of the project” (Field notes, November 14, 2013). Specific goals that accompanied the mission statement for the ISP were: building self-awareness, fostering empowerment, creating a sense of community, and providing opportunities for students to find their voices. The staff had many questions and raised some concerns at the meeting. These concerns are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five; however, in general their response was positive and they agreed to support the implementation of the ISP program.
On November 26 John and Maya invited any students in the school who were interested to attend an information session about the new ISP program. Of the total population of approximately 150 students enrolled at the school, 43 students came to the meeting that morning. John and Maya provided an overview of the program that was similar to the one they had shared with the staff, except the focus was more on asking than telling. Some of the questions they asked students were: What interests you? What change would you like to make? What courses do you like? What courses are challenging? What courses do you need to graduate? Who would you like to become?

John and Maya provided the students with some examples of possible projects they could complete in the ISP program, including: films, graphic novels, blogs, artwork, and photography. They explained that the projects would not be easy, but that if the students worked hard they could meet learning outcomes in their academic courses and get partial credits for some of the courses they needed for graduation. Throughout the presentation John and Maya emphasized that the ISP was “more about the journey than the final product”, and that students would be expected to practice self-awareness and document their processes of learning.

Of the 43 students who attended the Integrated Studies Program information session on November 26, 34 students decided to enrol in the program. All of the students who participated in the ISP were in either Grade 11 or 12, with the exception of Megan who was in Grade 9. Two teachers (John and Maya) and one Education Assistant (Cindy) designed and facilitated learning through the ISP, although the offer was extended to other teachers on staff to get involved in the program. The ISP operated in the afternoon on alternating days. Students in the ISP continued to take their academic courses in the morning and additional elective courses with other
teachers during alternate afternoons. Many of the teachers of academic courses agreed to work collaboratively with the ISP teachers to help integrate and assess specific learning objectives in the students’ project designs. Of the 34 students who originally enrolled the Integrated Studies Program in November, 29 students had completed the program (and their projects) by June 2013.

**December 2012**

The staff at the school had a professional day in December dedicated to further exploration of inquiry-based and project-based learning. A Vice Principal from the International Baccalaureate high school, and a teacher who was leading a project-based learning initiative in another local secondary school, were invited to share practical design strategies for the implementation of PBL. In December I conducted interviews with the three staff members in the ISP (John, Maya, and Cindy) to get their perspective on the professional development day and the beginning stages of the implementation of project-based learning within the arts-based ISP program. In addition, I interviewed Brianne, Susan and Terri, who were collaborating on cross-curricular PBL planning for their academic courses, and other teachers (Dan and Matthew) who taught both academic and elective courses. Dan and Matthew had not yet implemented PBL in their teaching practice, but were intrigued by what they had learned in the professional development opportunities offered in the first term and how the PBL design aligned with their current teaching practices.

**January 2013**

In January, teachers from the alternative school joined another secondary school during the Curriculum Implementation Day. The focus for the morning session was on project-based learning and featured a guest from another school district who had a
background in inquiry-based and project-based learning. Later that month, Trevor and I encouraged the five staff members at the school who were actively implementing PBL in their classrooms to get involved in the planning for *Designs 2013* – a district-initiated three-part in-service series focusing on PBL. Those five staff members and several other teachers from across the school district, who were all experimenting with PBL in their classrooms, joined the Designs leadership team that planned and facilitated the in-service series which was held on January 20, February 19 and February 26 for over 140 teachers from across the school district. Our planning sessions and the presentations during the series provided the teachers in the alternative school with rich opportunities to deepen their understanding of project-based learning, share their teaching experiences with colleagues, and reflect on their own implementation process.

**February 2013**

On February 6 the students enrolled in the Integrated Studies program presented their projects to an audience of staff members and their peers in the school. Many of their projects were still works in progress, but the opportunity to present their ideas was important in terms of giving students the momentum to finalize their project plans and continue executing them. It was also an opportunity for the ISP teachers to share their progress on the new program and broaden the engagement in PBL among their colleagues. Later in February, I attended a staff meeting where the teachers discussed some of the challenges associated with assessing the students’ cross-curricular projects for the second term report card and the processes necessary to prepare students for provincial exams in June.
March 2013

In March I conducted more staff and student interviews. Staff from the school also participated in debriefing the Designs professional development series with the school district team in an after school session hosted in my home. During the session we discussed the challenges and opportunities that project-based learning provided to teachers and students, debriefed the responses from the Designs series participants, and brainstormed ideas for future district in-service on PBL, including opportunities for online sharing. We also informally talked about teachers’ curriculum orientations (Eisner, 1985) and how they might impact teachers’ interest in project-based learning. The teachers who were present at the debrief session that night completed Babin’s (1978) *Curriculum Orientation Profile*, which indicated that all of them leaned toward either the *self-actualization* or *development of cognitive processes* curricular orientations.

April 2013

In April, Trevor (the principal), John, Maya (ISP teachers) and Anne (English 12 teacher supporting the ISP students) travelled to San Diego to visit High Tech High (HTH) – a network of charter schools with a specific emphasis on “integrated, project-based learning” (High Tech High, 2012). During a school-based professional development day later in April, the three teachers shared their observations of the schools and student projects at High Tech High with the rest of the staff. The trip to HTH was eventful for all three teachers and they reflected on it often during my visits to the school and our interviews later that spring.
May 2013

In May I conducted more student interviews and helped the Designs 2013 team put together a presentation to the Board of Trustees, another opportunity for reflection on the project-based learning model and the success of the series in generating interest in PBL across the school district. Later in the month I established a Critical Review Committee to help me with the analysis and coding process for the student data. Four staff members – Trevor, John, Maya, and Anne participated in the committee along with two senior students. We met on May 31st to review my student data and coding process.

June 2013

On June 1st the Critical Review Committee met for a second time to discuss the analysis of the student data. After the committee adjourned and the students had left, I had another opportunity to discuss the PBL implementation process in my final interview with John and Maya. Much of our interview focused on reflecting on the first year of the ISP program and making plans for year two. On June 13th the school hosted a Student Exhibition of Learning that was well attended by staff, students, and parents. The evening event was an opportunity for the students to showcase their finished projects and demonstrate their talents through performances and artwork. On June 24th I attended the school’s graduation ceremony to see many of the students I had interviewed cross the stage to receive their diplomas. Later that month I had my final interview with Trevor the school principal, which provided a final opportunity for reflection on the PBL implementation from the school leader’s perspective.
Chapter 5. Teacher Narratives

...if the philosophy is that the student needs to be changed, alternative programs seek to reform the student. If the philosophy is that the system needs to be changed, the alternative program provides innovative curriculum and instructional strategies to better meet the needs of the students. (Magee Quinn et al, 2006, p. 12)

In this chapter I present my research findings based on the staff data, which are organized into three thematic categories representing the key factors that influenced the design, development, and implementation of PBL in the alternative school setting. These three categories are: (1) foundational factors (features of the alternative school culture that provided a foundation for the implementation of PBL); (2) challenges (factors that challenged both students and staff during the PBL implementation process); and (3) professional development and growth (professional development initiatives that influenced teachers’ design and implementation of the PBL model).

5.1. Purpose of my Research

The purpose of my research study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development, and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum within a newly consolidated, community-based alternative education program in a suburban public school district. From the perspective of the educators in the alternative school, my core research question was:
What professional development requirements are necessary to enable the successful design and implementation of a project-based curriculum design for a community-based alternative education program?

Van Manen (1990) suggests that in the field of human sciences our research questions, and the way we understand them, are the most important starting points. In formulating this research question I took a broad view of professional development, one that encompasses not only the traditional kinds of formal in-service offered to teachers during workshops, conferences, and graduate coursework, but also the many site-based, job-embedded, and informal activities (staff meetings, conversations, etc.) that occur within a school culture in which teachers engage in on-going inquiry and reflection towards a common vision for school improvement. In this sense, I share with Guskey (2000) the view that professional development is an intentional, ongoing, and systemic process that includes a variety of processes and activities aimed at enhancing the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators. Professional development is purposeful; it is designed for the purpose of enhancing student learning. Professional development is continuous or sustained; it is not a one-time only event. Professional development is comprehensive and system-wide; it is about everything that educators attempt, question, reflect upon, and learn as they redesign educational programs to better meet the needs of their student population. The staff in the alternative school shared the common purpose of redesigning their school culture through the implementation of a project-based learning curriculum. My research study sought to tell the stories of their professional development journeys through the course of the first year of implementation of PBL. My purpose was to identify the many factors that influenced their professional growth and development throughout this journey.
5.2. Entering the Research: My Pedagogic Beginnings

Clandinin (2013) asks narrative researchers to reflect on a very important question before they begin their work: “Who are you in this narrative inquiry?” (p. 81). Clandinin’s question suggests that we need to think deeply about our various life roles and experiences in relation to the people and the phenomena we are researching. My answer to the question: Who am I in this narrative inquiry? is grounded in part in my professional life. As I conceptualized this research study, collected and analyzed the data, and “re-storied” the narratives from the staff participants I did so as someone who approaches and stands in the world “in a pedagogic way” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 1).

I have been an educator for almost 25 years, teaching mainly in the area of French Immersion. I have taught over 750 children during my career. Over the years, especially since I left the classroom to become an administrator, their faces and personalities have blended into a composite of generally bright, well behaved, and high functioning students. It is not that these students were not memorable or unimportant; they all had unique personalities and talents, and each one taught me in his or her own way how to be a better teacher. But there will always be one or two students who remain in your memory for a lifetime. For me the students I will never forget are the ones who were the most challenging, students who had difficulty fitting in, or those who learned in different ways. These students stand out for me because I continue to reflect, in a pedagogic way, on what I might have done differently in my practice to meet their needs. In studying the professional growth of teachers who were collaboratively designing a better learning model to improve learning for vulnerable students, my mind was filled with the memories of two such former students. In the following narrative I
share my memories of these students to illustrate how these experiences played a significant role in my development of self as teacher and educational leader.

**Tyler**

Tyler was my Grade 5 student. He was a native French speaker who had transferred to our school that September from a Francophone school in our community. Tyler was a good-looking, bright boy whose oral language skills surpassed the other French Immersion students in my class. He liked to chat a lot and could be charming when he wanted. However, Tyler also had many social and emotional issues stemming from a troubled childhood, and he often demonstrated externalizing behaviours in the classroom that were problematic. He was a hyper active child who interrupted lessons and distracted other students. I developed a good rapport with Tyler early on in the school year and wanted to help him manage his behaviour while keeping his dignity intact. Tyler and I agreed to a secret behaviour plan that allowed him to leave the classroom when he needed to, without feeling like he was being punished in front of the other students. Whenever I sensed that Tyler was on the edge of not being able to manage his behaviour in class I would ask him to help with something important. Tyler became our “repair man” for the pencil sharpener, the overhead projector, the VCR, and any other piece of equipment that was malfunctioning in class. In order to fix the equipment, Tyler would have to leave the classroom and go to the office or visit the custodian to find the right tools. He enjoyed these tasks because they gave him the opportunity to move around and take a break from the classroom. If nothing was broken and Tyler was having a bad day, there was always the recycling bin that needed to be emptied. This system worked most days to fulfill Tyler’s need to release energy and gave him special responsibilities in the classroom that made him feel appreciated. Above all, I wanted Tyler to know that I liked him, that the problem was not him but rather his behaviours, and that there were strategies we could find together to help him manage these behaviours in positive ways.

Unfortunately Tyler also had difficulty with self-control on the playground. He was aggressive with other children and got into many verbal and physical fights. Other students’ parents often called me, as the Vice Principal of the school, to complain about him. They said Tyler bullied their children and wasn’t “a good fit” at our school.
Needless to say, Tyler spent a lot of time in the school office throughout his elementary years. He had other teachers in Grade 6 and 7 who had no tolerance or patience for his disruptive behaviour in class. He was often kicked out of class to see me in the office. I tried to coach him and provide the strategies I thought he needed to be more successful with teachers and with his peers. His mother tried to help as well, and the school-based resource team tried to support, but Tyler’s negative behaviours escalated. By the end of Grade 7 Tyler spent most of his time in the hallways outside the classroom door or with me in my office. He had, by that point, given up on elementary school. He and his mother were sure that things would change for him in Grade 8 when he transitioned to the local high school. There would be new teachers, new kids, and a chance to start fresh.

Sadly, high school was even worse for Tyler. He got involved with drugs and was suspended from school on several occasions beginning in the first term. By Grade 9 he had transferred to one of the alternative programs. I ran into Tyler just once after he had left for high school. Our meeting was brief and took place in the Safeway parking. As I was getting out of my car I recognized him on the sidewalk. He was with a bunch of other teen-aged boys. His face lit up when he saw me, and he stopped to chat briefly. It was the spring of his Grade 9 year and I knew that he had been kicked out of the high school for doing drugs, but I didn’t say anything. I asked how things were going and he smiled and said, “Great. I knew high school would be better.” I said I was happy for him and we said our good-byes. I watched as he walked away with his friends towards the liquor store and my heart broke for him.

**Oscar**

Oscar was a quiet boy with long hair and a pale complexion. He had a few close friends with whom he played at recess and lunch, but he spoke very little in class and was extremely shy with me. Oscar was in my Grade 4 class during my first year as a Vice Principal in a new school. He appeared to be tired or bored most of the time in class, often putting his head on the desk or staring out the windows. It was difficult to engage him in anything. His father came to visit me one afternoon in September. He looked different than all the other parents. He was an older dad and his uncombed, frizzy hair,
wrinkled clothes, and gumboots gave him the look of someone who spent most of his time outdoors. He said he wanted to help me to understand Oscar a little better.

“Oscar is a bright boy,” he said, “but he doesn’t like school. And he won’t learn from you unless you frame it in a way that interests him.”

“What is he interested in?” I asked, somewhat defensively. I felt my program was already engaging enough. I was incorporating lots of experiential learning opportunities and projects into the curriculum that year.

“Well, Oscar likes to work with his hands. And he is passionate about outboard motors,” he said. “So you just need to connect everything you teach to outboard motors and you’ll be fine with Oscar.”

This meeting puzzled and angered me. How on Earth would I ever be able to connect everything I taught this student in Math, English, and Social Studies to outboard motors? I didn’t know much about boats myself and certainly wasn’t qualified to begin designing curriculum using outboard motors as the starting point. Furthermore, I had close to thirty students in my class that year and thousands of learning outcomes to cover in all of the subject areas. How could this father expect me to create an individualized, yearlong plan for just this one child?

Nonetheless, I did try even harder to engage Oscar in activities I thought would interest him and to differentiate his learning whenever possible. Many of my attempts failed; he fell asleep on the floor of the museum where I thought the exhibition on the history of boat making was sure to engage him. Other attempts were minimally successful; I often allowed Oscar to present his knowledge differently than the other students by creating three dimensional artefacts of his learning with his hands, rather than writing a report or speaking in front of the class. Despite these small successes with Oscar, I think I missed the point of his dad’s message. Looking back on this experience I realize now that it wasn’t about me designing a specific curriculum or special projects for Oscar; it was more about me letting go of control and allowing Oscar to take ownership of his learning, using his personal passions to guide his explorations of new concepts and ideas.
5.3. Establishing Dialogic Relationships with the Staff

My first priority as a researcher in this study was to establish a relationship of honesty, trust, and respect with the staff. At the request of the school administrators, I attended the staff retreat in August 2012 in my role as Director of Instruction. At the retreat I provided staff with a brief introduction to the project-based learning model and an overview of the BC Ministry of Education’s Draft Curriculum and Assessment Framework. The staff retreat was also an opportunity for me to begin to get to know the staff, explain my research idea, and establish a positive rapport with the group. I described my teaching background and reinforced the idea that I was entering the research as a participant observer with a strong foundation in curriculum design and implementation but no previous experience as an educator in an alternative school. I also explained that my research would not assess the process or outcomes of their professional development experiences; nor would it seek to measure the engagement level or academic outcomes of the students in this process; rather my goal was to tell the story of an implementation journey with project-based learning. I made clear at the retreat, and throughout the research process, my deep respect for the tacit knowledge and understanding that resided in this group of teachers who had years of experience educating vulnerable youth. In the spirit of Bohm’s (1996) conceptualization of dialogue, I explained that my goal as a researcher was to enter into “participatory consciousness” (p. 30) with the staff, suspending my assumptions, listening deeply, and partaking with them to develop a shared meaning for their story of curriculum implementation. This dialogic beginning went a long way in establishing rapport with the staff in the early stages of the research process. I always felt welcome at the school whenever I stopped by to participate in a meeting or event, to interview staff, or to chat informally with them.
The staff became very comfortable with me and I with them as we embarked on this implementation journey together.

5.4. School Organization and Staff Profiles

5.4.1. Staff Organization

The newly consolidated school was organized into specific program areas to meet the needs of the students and make the most efficient use of available staffing. Since most teachers were expected to teach both academic and elective courses, the schedule was designed so that students took their academic courses in the morning and electives in the afternoon. The various program areas of the school’s design contributed in significant ways to the development of collaborative teams, which formed among teachers during the first year of the project-based learning (PBL) implementation. For example, several academic teachers (e.g. Brianne, Susan and Terri) collaborated on multi-disciplinary PBL units within the Junior Cohort program (designed for students in Grades 9-10). The Integrated Studies Program (ISP), collaboratively designed and implemented by two teachers (Maya and John) and one education assistant (Cindy), was a project-based elective program offered to students in the afternoons. The ISP was designed to allow senior students to meet the learning objectives for their arts-based elective courses while also meeting specific learning objectives for academic courses required for graduation (BC Ministry of Education, 2004). Trevor, the school principal, described the ISP not as a course, but as a “delivery model” that created important partnerships between elective and academic teachers. For example, other teachers in the school (e.g. Anne), who taught academic courses for the Senior Flex (Grades 11-12 students needing to finish off credits for required courses for graduation) or Senior...
Cohort (Grades 11-12 students requiring coursework and more intensive interventions), did not necessarily implement PBL into their academic courses, but they regularly offered students in the ISP academic support (e.g. Math or English tutoring) for certain components of their projects. Other electives teachers (e.g. Dan and Matthew), who expressed interest in incorporating PBL in their courses, were also interviewed during the study.

5.4.2. School Profiles

To help guide the reader through the findings for this chapter, Table 1: Staff Profiles provides information regarding the roles of the staff who participated in the semi-structured interviews and their involvement in the PBL implementation. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this study to protect the identity of these participants.

Table 1: Staff Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Involvement in PBL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Principal of the Consolidated Alternative School</td>
<td>Formerly administrator of Forest Grove alternative program; Co-created with Mary the vision for PBL in the consolidated program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Principal of Distributed Learning (same campus)</td>
<td>Formerly administrator of Student Completion (alternative) Program; Co-created with Trevor the vision for PBL in the consolidated program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Digital Media (Elective) Teacher</td>
<td>Collaborated with Maya to design the Integrated Studies Program (ISP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Fine Arts (Elective) Teacher</td>
<td>Collaborated with John to design the Integrated Studies Program (ISP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>Education Assistant</td>
<td>Worked with the ISP teachers; closely monitored and supported two students with a gardening project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Senior English Teacher</td>
<td>Collaborated with John and Maya to support students with the ISP projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Collaborated Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianne</td>
<td>English Teacher (Junior Cohort – grades 9-10)</td>
<td>Collaborated with Terri and Susan to create co-curricular PBL units for academic courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Humanities Teacher (Junior Cohort – grades 9-10)</td>
<td>Collaborated with Brianne and Terri to create co-curricular PBL units for academic courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>Math/Science Teacher (Junior Cohort – grades 9-10)</td>
<td>Collaborated with Brianne and Susan to create co-curricular PBL units for academic courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Outdoor Recreation/PE and Social Studies</td>
<td>Interested in incorporating more PBL philosophy in his elective and academic courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Woodworking and Metalwork Teacher</td>
<td>Interested in incorporating PBL philosophy in his elective courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5. Research Methodology

All of the staff in the school agreed to participate in this research study, but only eleven staff members, including two administrators, nine teachers, and one education assistant, participated in the semi-structured interviews. Other data included observations at staff retreats, professional development sessions, school events, staff meetings, and informal conversations with other staff members. I was a regular participant observer in staff functions and a variety of student presentations and exhibitions of learning.

5.6. Data Analysis

When my data collection for the staff participants was complete, I began the analysis phase with an open coding process by re-reading my collection of interview transcripts and field notes. As I read through these texts I highlighted key ideas and concepts that emerged. During the subsequent axial coding process I disaggregated
these initial ideas and concepts into larger themes representing key factors that influenced the implementation process. As a final step in the analysis process, I used selective coding to organize the themes into three larger categories, creating a theoretical framework of factors that influenced the implementation of project-based learning and the teachers' professional growth.

5.7. Research Findings

My findings for the staff data are organized into three thematic categories representing the key factors that influenced the design, development and implementation of PBL in the alternative school setting and the kinds of professional growth that staff experienced in the process. The first section, which I have called Foundational Factors, describes the features of the alternative school culture that were already in place as a foundation for the implementation of PBL. These foundational factors were important in co-constructing a school culture in the new building and in the design and development of the project-based learning model. The second section, called Challenges, provides an overview of some of the emotional, cognitive, philosophical, and socio-political factors that challenged both students and staff during the PBL implementation process. These challenges are important to consider because they directly influenced how PBL was conceived, designed, implemented, and evaluated in this particular educational setting. The third section, called Professional Development and Growth explains the various professional development initiatives that teachers engaged in (or considered essential) in their ongoing design and implementation of the PBL model.
5.7.1. **Foundational Factors**

The culture and organization of alternative secondary schools differ in many ways from traditional mainstream schools. There is usually, for example, a greater emphasis placed on the relational aspects of learning in order to provide the social emotional supports needed by students. Through the analysis of the data from staff participants I identified several features of the alternative school in this research study that contributed to creating the foundational elements needed for the implementation of PBL. These foundational elements included: (1) positive relationships with students; (2) commitment to student-centered learning; (3) flexible scheduling; (4) staff collaboration; and (5) administrative support.

**Positive Relationships with Students**

Data gathered from staff indicated that building trust and positive relationships with students had been a priority in all of the previous programs that were consolidated into the new alternative school. This focus on nurturing relationships to support students’ social and emotional challenges was a recurring theme in the interviews and conversations with staff. Administrators, teachers and support staff all talked about the vulnerability of the students and the need to create a “familial” environment in the school and classrooms. As building principal, Trevor said his priority for the school was to meet students “where they are at, socially and emotionally so that we can make this feel like a safe place, so that we can have conversations around academics.” He talked often during our interviews about the “kind, caring community of people” on his staff and what a difference that made in re-engaging students in school. Teachers like John considered that their “main job” as educators was to “establish relationships with the kids and help them have buy-in.” Staff members also recognized their own strengths in working with
alternative students. When I asked one veteran teacher how long he had been working in alternative education he said matter-of-factly, “I have worked in this kind of school my whole career. I guess I just have an affinity for these kinds of youth” (Field notes, November 29, 2012). Cindy, a special education assistant, spoke often in our interview about her background in drug and alcohol abuse prevention that helped her connect with many of the students who suffered from addictions and mental health issues. Her close relationship with two very vulnerable students in the ISP created the foundation needed for them to design a gardening and landscaping business as their project.

In general, teachers believed that their history of creating strong bonds with the students in their classes helped to get the buy-in needed to implement the PBL model at their school. As Maya remarked, “we built a lot of trust in our relationships, and have played with this idea already in order to be able to take it to this point.” However, they also recognized that the establishment of close relationships with students had been, at times, a distracting factor in the process of implementing a PBL curriculum model. John reflected in his interview that the relational aspects of learning often took priority over other teaching responsibilities, which could be a concern in the implementation of a complex curriculum model like project-based learning:

That history of establishing relationships definitely helps, but it also means that at any given moment you can have a student in crisis and all of a sudden that takes up everything you have and you’re not there with the rest of the students. (John)

These competing demands of supporting students’ social and emotional well-being and also supporting their academic growth became significant considerations for staff in the implementation of the project-based learning model. Trevor summarized it as a balancing act:
We do this dance all the time where we have to hook them. And once you hook them, well then you can start to leverage them into doing some of the more curricular areas, into increasing their attendance. But until you have the hooks, the emotional hooks, it’s a very fine dance. (Trevor)

Commitment to Student-Centered Learning

The teachers in the alternative school had been committed to a student-centered approach to teaching for many years. Previous alternative programs had established the foundations of self-paced, personalized learning tailored to meet the diverse needs of students and re-engage them in learning. While the teaching strategies and resources used in the previous programs and even in the new school were based on more traditional, transmission style methodologies using worksheets and workbooks, the educators reported to me that they honoured diversity among students and believed in the principles of responsive, differentiated instruction. As Maya remarked about the teaching culture in alternative education: “…you have already more flexibility and expectation of difference.”

Many of the teachers viewed the shift to project-based learning as a natural next step to the kinds of projects they had been doing in the past: “…it’s almost like we’re formalizing something that has already existed here” (John). In particular, teachers who taught elective courses commented on the fact that learning through projects was a familiar approach to them. Dan, the woodworking/metalwork teacher said, “I am always doing PBL, in the sense that we are always making things, there’s a project on the go all the time.” Another teacher, Matthew, who taught Physical Education said, “Outdoor Rec kids, I mean some of that is inherently project-based…I have done projects right from the beginning with the whole environmental thing.” The professional development sessions throughout the year extended this teacher’s understanding of project-based
learning towards service-learning, and it was evident in our December interview that Matthew was already thinking about how his outdoor experiential program could take more of a service-learning approach:

I would like to incorporate other things, like river clean-ups, getting rid of invasive species, even on our own property, hopefully next year in the fall...certainly going to the fish hatcheries, but also just doing trail maintenance, because the idea of us belonging outside...you have to contribute something to make yourself welcome in the environment. So, those ideas are yet to be hatched, but it’s definitely something I want to do. (Matthew)

Flexible Schedules

A history of flexible schedules and timetabling was also a contributing factor in the implementation of the PBL model. Staggered start times for students, soft deadlines, and a flexible schedule that allowed for self-paced learning, collaboration, and one-on-one time with students, were legacies from all of the previous alternative programs. Trevor described it as a school-wide philosophy aimed at “taking the pressure off”:

So kids that are under pressure just get to the point where they say, “I don’t want to step into the building because something is going to come at me. You’re behind, you’re late, you’ve missed something, you’re failing.” So we talk a lot about taking that pressure off for kids. (Trevor)

Having flexibility built into the school schedule and support among staff for soft deadlines went a long way in hooking students into the project-based learning model. In order to undertake and persevere with often complex and comprehensive projects, the students needed ongoing reassurance from teachers that the focus was on the processes of learning rather than the final product. There were deadlines for projects, but these were negotiated individually with students based on their emotional states, their learning
needs, and their life circumstances.

The staff in the alternative school also appreciated the flexibility of the schedule in the new school, which contributed to their ability to engage in collaborative planning and reflection needed for the development of the project-based learning model. Maya commented: “... the amazing opportunity of opening a new school, and sort of recreating it, reinventing it, doesn't happen too often. So one of the biggest things was not being tied down to a schedule.” After the school-based professional development day in December, when educators from other mainstream secondary schools presented some of their challenges in implementing school-wide PBL initiatives, many of the teachers at the alternative school realized how fortunate they were compared to their colleagues in traditional school settings: “Well, we’ve got the more flexible schedule and we’ve got the green light to do what we want, which is huge I think. That’s part of their (the mainstream school’s) struggle, which we don’t have” (John). Matthew remarked in his interview: “We are extremely lucky to be free...free, flexible schedule. That could otherwise have been part of the challenge list that I spoke to, but it’s just not an issue here.”

Despite the many opportunities for collaboration and planning that flexible scheduling provided the staff and students at the school, it was also, at times, a distracting factor with respect to students’ engagement in project-based learning. Early in the year Mary predicted that PBL would be challenging in an environment that offered students maximum flexibility in their schedules:

We have kids on self-paced programs, it’s continuous entry for our students, so there are logistic challenges around who is going to be attending on that day, at that particular time, to work on this project, because this kid’s on this program, they attend five mornings a week,
and this kid comes in the afternoon. So we have to work out those things as well. (Mary)

During the year the flexible schedule did create some challenges in terms of the continuity of students’ work on their projects and would have been more of a problem for students working on collaborative PBL initiatives; however, since most students in the school opted to develop individual projects, this became less of an issue as students were able to negotiate the terms of their projects individually with teachers and agree to deadlines. Most of the students needed a lot of encouragement and support during the process of developing their projects, which is described in greater detail in the section on challenges that follows.

**Staff Collaboration**

Collaboration was another aspect of the school culture that strongly influenced the implementation of the PBL model. Although the staff that came to the new school through the consolidation process did not all know one another, there was already a culture of collegiality that had been established among the various groups in the previous alternative programs. Teachers and support staff were accustomed to working together and with community partners and outside agencies to develop programs and services for supporting youth at the school.

We kind of built up to this and we built a lot of trust in our relationships. We’d already experimented with collaborating, and we already knew how to work together and how to partner with kids in a way to get them to their best point. (Maya)

From the beginning of the year the principal of the school emphasized team building and collaboration in all aspects of the school’s organization and programming: “We have to create that space for our teachers to work together and feel that trust and
relationship” (Trevor). Decisions about the functional aspects of the school (schedules, timetables, etc.) and curriculum design (planning, assessment and reporting, etc.) were discussed as a group and input was consistently invited from teachers and support staff. Other opportunities were less formal, but no less important. For example staff organized potluck lunches every Wednesday before their weekly staff meetings, which helped to create a sense of community among the staff and administrators in the school. Early in the year when teachers began working together on the development of cross-curricular, PBL units, their appreciation of the benefits of collaboration grew. John reflected on the development of the ISP by saying:

I would say that a really important part of this is the staff collaboration. Maya and I in particular, but there are other staff that are directly working with us, and then other staff on the periphery of it...none of this can happen in isolation. (John)

Brianne was working with a small team of teachers during the fall to collaborate on the design of cross-curricular PBL units in academic courses:

I think from our conversations one of the biggest successes for us is having more collegial input into our courses. For myself, it was easy to see the English-Socials connections, but to talk to people from the different areas, like math and science and such, that was the most helpful, You just throw out a question and everyone kind of brainstorms and shapes that question. So for me, that has been the most valuable so far, having that collegial connection. (Brianne)

Her colleagues Terri and Susan also noted that their collaboration had lead to opportunities to reflect on their practice and their developing PBL model for learning.

Reflecting on your practice – I think that is happening constantly because of the collaboration. And it doesn’t happen as much when we are not working together. So all of that has been super positive, and I think it is leading into more opportunities. (Terri)
Collaboration and support among staff at the alternative school was most evident during the second school term when issues related to assessment processes and accountability challenged the implementation process. These challenges are discussed in greater detail in the following section, but it is worth noting in this discussion the degree to which teachers, like Maya, felt supported by their colleagues:

At this point it really does feel like every single person is approachable.... I think everybody wants to be involved; everybody is excited to be involved in figuring out how to make that happen.
(Maya)

**Administrative Support**

Many teachers spoke about the importance of having strong support from administrators, both at the school district level and in their school. Some commented that they had appreciated the introduction to project-based learning and the presentation on the proposed curriculum and assessment changes outlined in the Ministry of Education’s draft framework (BC Ministry of Education, 2012) that I provided at the August retreat. They viewed the August session as an important starting point for understanding the PBL framework: “having you present in the summer was pretty empowering. We kept on hearing ‘We’re doing PBL, we’re doing PBL’, but that was the first time we actually heard a spin of it, so that morning you spent with us was huge” (Dan). More importantly though, the teachers saw the session as a representation of support from the School District for them to aim for depth of learning versus coverage of curriculum in their teaching practice. John commented “...if the boss’s bosses are good with being flexible I think that will really enable the teachers to do the things they think are meaningful.”

Teachers’ comments during interviews and informal conversations also illustrated
their deep appreciation for the ongoing support they received from their administrator Trevor “...we are so supported by admin here and that's huge. I don’t think you could do it (PBL) without admin support” (John). They appreciated in particular the ability of both Trevor and Mary, who had a deeper understanding of PBL than many of the teachers, to support without being too directive.

I think they are letting us do this and coming in with “I’d love to see this”, or “How about that?” but completely giving us the creative freedom.... I think that makes it more exciting for us to have it be ours. It’s about finding our path. (Maya)

Cindy, who encountered many administrative challenges in supporting her students’ gardening projects, said:

...trying new things, and going to the administrator and saying, “this is what I’d like to do and this is what I am passionate about, this is what I believe that the children can learn from”... if you have an idea it’s encouraged. Trevor is extremely good at listening and giving feedback. And then being like, “Go for it.” And then he’ll make it happen. (Cindy)

Overall, teachers seemed enthusiastic about embracing more authentic learning opportunities in their practice knowing that the administration would support them in their efforts. Trevor reminded them often that there was “no curriculum police” in the school and that they had his blessing to prioritize prescribed learning outcomes in their courses in order to create more meaningful and engaging learning designs for their students.

We are the teachers. We determine what kids are learning. And we use adaptations and IEPs to our advantage. If that’s where that kids learns his math content best, then that’s where he is going to learn it. I want us to be able to say to a teacher, “you are allowed to do that. That’s OK.” (Trevor)
5.7.2. Challenges

The previous section outlined several factors that were foundational to the alternative school, many of which contributed in positive ways to the implementation of the project-based learning model. There were, however, specific challenges encountered by students and staff that related to a variety of factors, some of which are representative of alternative schools in general, and others that are common to all school cultures. These challenging factors are important to consider in this discussion because they had a direct impact on the design, development, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of the project-based learning model in an alternative school, but also because they created the impetus for finding creative solutions that might inform PBL implementation processes in other settings with vulnerable students. Based on the data for the staff participants, I have identified these challenging factors as: (1) students’ social emotional well-being; (2) students’ learning fears and disabilities; (3) students’ level of interest and motivation; and (4) staff concerns related to the academic rigour of the PBL model.

Students’ Social Emotional Well-Being

Early in the fall the two administrators at the school emphasized the importance of students’ social and emotional well-being in the implementation of the PBL model.

...most of our kids are on an IEP, and they might have mental health issues, or drug and alcohol issues. We’re also dealing with getting them attending on a regular basis...so it’s going to be interesting to see how all of that works out with them. It’s very complex. This is not a straightforward place. (Mary)

Attendance was sporadic for many students as a result of their various social emotional challenges, and even when students came to school they were not always
able to work on their projects. Teachers explored solutions to meet their students’ needs, including incorporating one-on-one consultation and coaching to help them with the processes of learning and keep their projects on track. Brianne explained how their program was different from textbook and online frameworks for project-based learning used in many mainstream schools:

I think we are a little bit unique in that... a lot of the stuff that you see online, or in mainstream schools, we’re a little bit different. I think all schools have some students with issues, like FAS, or dyslexia, or issues like that. I think an added layer is that a lot of our kids have...this stuff going on at home... Our situation is unique and our challenges are a little bit different with the kids....In one way, we have to be more basic; but in another way we have to be more flexible and thinking outside the box to allow them to show their stuff. So I find that a bit of a challenge. You know when you learn things theoretically, but then you apply that in a different situation and see how that’s going to translate. (Brianne)

The number of changes the senior students in the school had experienced was also a factor that impacted their social emotional state and willingness to shift from the traditional, paper-based learning that had been in place in the alternative programs, to the PBL model in the new school. As Maya pointed out:

These kids have experienced an epic amount of change. Their school closed, their teachers changed, there’s a renovation going on. There are so many levels of change that they are experiencing all at once. ... There is some turmoil, so ...it’s a lot to say we’re going to revamp the way school is. That’s a huge change for them. (Maya)

Maya and John were surprised and encouraged when over thirty students signed up for the new Integrated Studies Program. Their expectation for the program was that students would develop projects based on their personal interests and passions; however they were surprised by the number of students who chose to design their projects on topics related to deeply personal struggles. Anxiety, depression, and other
mental-related challenges became the focus for many of the projects. The process of working through their issues and developing the courage to share them with others provided students with an important therapeutic outlet and helped them to develop greater self-awareness and understanding of their challenges. In the early stages of the ISP program, a number of students who had, in John’s mind, “picked their issue as their topic”, were doing their “own therapy.” As the program progressed, Maya remarked on the students’ growing courage and self-acceptance and the challenges and rewards of encouraging students to take personal risks:

There are a lot of little things that I am seeing in terms of self-esteem, or bravery, and just ‘this is who I am’ coming out of it. More like ‘this is who I am and I am OK with it.’ That’s really coming out of the projects...It’s hard to push them out of their bubble, especially kids who are working on a really personal project. They need that bit of a nudge to share... It’s never something you want to do – push somebody, but it’s also sometimes when you get something miraculous out of them. (Maya)

Maya noted as well that the projects had enabled them as teachers to understand “the deep layers” of their students better and to connect with them in more meaningful ways, “My ability to know a student and build a relationship with the student has shifted. And I thought that I had figured that out.”

The teachers also witnessed a change in the dynamic of the ISP group as students began to share their social and emotional challenges with their peers. The teachers believed the presentation of student projects in February was a transformative moment that helped many of the students accept themselves and feel accepted by others. In recalling the experience for Megan, Maya remarked:

I think the turning point was the day she presented her project and was brave enough to stand in front of everyone and say, “This is what I am doing. This is who I am. I have had anxiety and this is why I am
making this workbook.” It’s so rewarding to see the kids supporting each other in those moments. I have a hard time not crying, actually, because it’s so beautiful and so rich and you see them taking care of one another. Really, that’s a thousand times more effective than me saying, “How amazing.” It’s that peer recognition and support. That’s what is most important to them. (Maya)

**Students’ Learning Fears and Disabilities**

Many of the students at the school had experienced learning fears and challenges from a very young age. A lot of them were comfortable with artistic pursuits, but lacked the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed to complete certain components of their projects (e.g. blogs and other forms of writing, business plans, invoices, etc.). As Susan, an English teacher put it, “A lot of our students are missing those skills that a typical student of their age would have.” In some cases the students’ fears influenced the level of confidence they needed to get started or to follow through on projects. Some teachers, who had not yet started to implement the PBL model in their programs, expressed their concerns regarding students’ ability to complete projects. The students’ lack of skills, compounded by their frequent absences, made Matthew wary of embarking on complex projects: “These kids get really timid. The three things that I see as being necessary are attendance, interest, and being capable of doing the project.” Other teachers who were just starting with PBL also anticipated the struggles the students would face and the responsibility of the teachers to support them: “…to help them feel successful, even though they may have a lot of challenges, I think will be one of our biggest challenges” (Susan).

In December, Maya noted that fears and learning difficulties were common in alternative education and that they represented challenges the students would likely confront within the project-based model of the Integrated Studies Program. She and John were preparing themselves; they had reflected on ways of managing the process
for students:

That sense of pure ambition and drive and follow-through and completion, that attendance, all those things that sort of come naturally to a lot of mainstream students, we’re going to struggle with, with our students, especially with learning fears and learning challenges from a young age, I do see them giving up a bit easier when they meet a roadblock. And so for us, we’ve already started talking about that, before we even started. What are our strategies when this kid hits a roadblock? How are we going to chunk it up so it’s easier for them? (Maya)

“Honouring the journey” became an ongoing theme of the ISP and a message that was frequently discussed during the interviews and in meetings with staff or students. By emphasizing process over product in the PBL implementation, teachers were able to encourage students to participate in sharing sessions and to persevere with their work: “We are constantly stepping back and saying, let’s pretend the project’s not done. Who cares? This is the journey. Let’s put it on display. It is what it is” (Maya).

For some students it was a lack of confidence, and not necessarily gaps in their skill development, that created impediments to learning and progress on their projects. John and Maya shared a story about one bright student who lacked confidence as a writer. Creating an altered book of poetry as part of her project became an ongoing challenge for the student as she fought against her sense of inadequacy as a poet. Maya wanted to find a way to empower this student, so she brought in a professional recording artist who read one of the student’s poems and then turned it into a song:

And in that moment (the student) just burst into tears because she heard her own work played back to her, and she said, “It’s really good.” I mean, I was crying, everybody was crying, because it was such a beautiful, perfect moment. For her to hear someone else reading it was important. So there are these little moments when they take personal risks with their work. These are opportunities for them to really have authentic growth and self-empowerment and self-
Students’ Level of interest and Motivation

Students’ interests and level of motivation also emerged as recurring themes during my interactions with staff. Finding ways to engage and motivate students through learning activities that focused on their interests challenged and at times frustrated the teachers. The woodworking teacher Dan had collaborated with a community Youth Care Worker to design a project-based unit on skateboards. The project involved designing and building skate decks and a ramp for practicing stunts. The project also included plans to collaborate with other local businesses from the skateboard industry. The project was highly successful overall, but in the beginning stages Dan remarked that even a project with high student interest hadn’t resulted in increased attendance for some students:

There are still some kids that are super into skateboarding...they are just like “I can’t believe we get to make our own skateboards.” Yet, they haven’t shown up to class. So it’s interesting. There are still issues around attendance even with something that is their passion. It’s hard to fathom what is preventing them from coming. Something they love, something they are totally looking forward to. (Dan)

The teachers in the ISP believed that the solution to motivating students was in allowing students to design their own individual projects based on their personal interests, but they too understood there would still be challenges. As John said at the beginning of the process:

The best definition I have for alternate youth is that their reality does not meet mainstream school reality, so for me that’s all the more reason for us to come up with a program that works for them, and being student-based and co-constructed is that program, as far as I can see. But then yeah, if they are not motivated, if they have an incredibly bad morning for whatever reason then we’re still asking
them to do work... So there’s going to be limits and I think we’re going to plateau...(John)

John and Maya were committed to designing the ISP program so that students had “voice and choice” in aligning their projects to their interests and passions. A lot of work went into the planning stages of the process, conducting individual interviews with students to determine their interests, and then meeting with them individually to co-construct the design and process for the project work. The level of engagement they saw in students in the initial stages of the ISP surprised both teachers. As John said, “rarely have I ever seen, in mainstream or not, the authentic level of excitement that happened in those initial interviews.” Students’ interest in their individual projects and overall motivation continued and other teachers began to notice. John noted this in one of his interviews:

Engagement is a huge part of it. We’ve had other staff comment that they come up and they look in and everybody is engaged. It’s all relative of course in terms of end goals, but with these students any kind of engagement is huge. (John)

Even the most vulnerable, disengaged students began to demonstrate levels of motivation and engagement never seen before, including one of the students working with Cindy (an education assistant) on the gardening and landscaping project:

It’s raining outside and he’s like “so are we going?” And I am thinking, “Oh, do we really have to go?” And we would go, and he would have his boots, he would be organized, he would have his rain jacket, even though I had that kind of thing, but he would bring his own boots, and he would bring his jackets so that he was dry when he was out there. And that’s pretty amazing. That’s passion. (Cindy)

Other teachers, who were starting their own project-based learning initiatives in other departments of the school were also surprised by the students’ increased levels of engagement:
You know when you read the literature and they talk about how the kids are going to get engaged and get excited, I was a little surprised. Then you start to talk to the kids about their ideas and you realize that they are excited. You know, you can hear them talking about it with each other, and saying, “This is cool.” I don’t get that so much with my other assignments. But hearing them say, “This is exciting” to me was surprising. I hadn’t really thought so much about that. I was so focused on the design, and how to make it right, and talking to these guys. To see it translate into that for the kids has been encouraging (Brianne).

By the spring, the change in students’ motivation and engagement in learning was evident. Whenever I walked into the ISP classrooms, or talked to the students about their projects, I saw it for myself. The energy in the school felt different than it had in the fall. As Trevor remarked, “The building feels happy. I don’t know what that is, but when I see kids working on things that they are passionate about, I see them being happier in our building.”

**Staff Concerns Related to the Academic Rigour of PBL**

While the administrators and teachers acknowledged the increased levels of engagement among students, there were still concerns and doubts raised by many of them regarding the academic rigour of the projects. Engagement in learning was one thing, but some teachers questioned whether students were meeting the necessary learning outcomes for academic courses. Other teachers, like Dan, expressed concern that students might not develop the skills they needed to enter the workforce or succeed in post-secondary programs:

I don’t want them to finish and not have the skills to back it up, and then go on somewhere else to find we’ve done them a disservice…. We don’t want them to go into a trade and not be able to use a measuring tape. Oh, didn’t you have Math 11? At what point didn’t you get this? That scares me…I mean it’s great when learning is fun, it’s great when people want to be here, but sometimes learning is uncomfortable and difficult. And it’s forging ahead through those challenges, and not quitting. So you can’t water it down too much. (Dan)
Students were doubtful whether project-based learning would really enable them to get the credits they needed for graduation. Many of these concerns represented socio-political pressures related to assessment and reporting models. Within a traditional public education system driven by accountability there is an expectation for students to complete and be graded on specific courses. “How do I get credit” was the question students asked most often. Maya referred to this as having to “unteach the traditional habits of learning.” As John noted:

…the staff and all the students are so used to traditional school. A couple of the very first questions were like OK so we’re going to take this course and it’s great, but what are we going to get on our report card? And we had to reassure a couple of students...you’re taking this (ISP) course, but what will be on your report card is English 12 or Social Studies 12. So there’s...this going against the traditional school model that is so ingrained. (John)

In order to give students “the bigger picture” of PBL within the current context of progressive educational reform, the ISP teachers spent time teaching them about progressive versus traditional models of schooling. They showed them Ken Robinson’s (2011) School Kills Creativity video and discussed it in class. Students were positive and as John noted, “It seemed to make sense to them, which isn't surprising because it makes sense to us, this model.”

John and Maya had developed a more comprehensive view of student progress that honoured students' learning outside of the school, particularly when it contributed to the development of their projects: “…the work you did on the weekend, outside of school, it's OK if you bring that in. We're going to include that and count that.” Nonetheless, assessment of the projects and reporting on student progress were concerns for staff, and Maya was sensitive to her colleagues’ questions and protective of the students in the early stages of the process:
I think one of the hardest things right now is we’re not meeting opposition, but we’re meeting some questioning and how to respond to that questioning would be really good, you know… to be able to say, OK this is how we’re going to meet those learning outcomes and expectations. I feel protective of (the students) already… especially those who are doing deeply personal projects. You just don’t want them to meet with any sort of accusations…when you are feeling personal about it already, ‘how are you going to assess that?’ can feel a bit like an attack. (Maya)

The staff worked collaboratively to find ways to overcome these challenges. They had many sharing sessions and staff meetings where they talked about how the project-based learning model was working, what needed to be changed, and how teachers could collaborate to support students’ cross-curricular projects and ensure that they were meeting the learning outcomes on the courses they needed for graduation. They talked about considerations related to preparing students adequately for post-secondary and career choices. The second reporting term was a turning point for staff. As Trevor had anticipated early in the process, teachers were making a big shift in their assessment practices:

People are used to, with paper-based, self-paced, they hand it in and I can mark it, I can give them a mark and that’s how I get to the report card. Or, I can count how many days they were on task, and give them a grade based on that. But what happens when I actually have to assess what they’ve done, what they’ve learned? (Trevor)

After several meetings they agreed to a collaborative process for second term reporting. Maya expressed her hope that the second report card would allay some of the students’ fears as well:

I think this will be the moment when they see those courses on their report card and they recognize the value in the work they are doing. It’s valued. It’s official. (Maya)
5.7.3. **Professional Development and Growth**

Teachers’ professional development and growth were critical factors in the implementation of project-based learning. I asked teachers what professional development opportunities enhanced their understanding of project-based learning and what other learning experiences they believed were necessary in the future. Having defined professional development as broadly as possible during the interviews, I invited teachers to consider not only formal kinds of in-service such as workshops, conferences, and graduate coursework, but also the kinds of site-based, job-embedded, and informal activities (staff meetings, conversations, journaling, etc.) that occurred throughout the year. Based on their responses and my observations of the process of PBL implementation during the year, the following kinds of professional development and growth contributed to the design, development and implementation of project-based learning in the school: (1) a shared vision and philosophy for PBL; (2) workshops and in-service sessions; (3) online professional development; (4) off-site learning opportunities; (5) teacher inquiry and experiential learning; and (6) opportunities for collaboration and reflection.

**Shared Vision and Philosophy**

Early in the planning stages for the implementation of project-based learning at the school I shared an article by Larmer & Mergendoller (2010) with the administrators of the school. The article outlined the difference between *project-oriented* learning (projects as “dessert”) versus *project-based* learning (projects as “main course”). During our interview in the fall, Trevor and Mary mentioned how many of the teachers in the previous alternative programs had regularly incorporated projects in their practice as a way of engaging adolescents in their learning. While they applauded the teachers’
efforts to engage students, their concern was that these projects were often designed as add-ons or rewards for students; the projects were engaging but often disconnected from real learning outcomes.

I do think that our teachers, even now, they have been doing “dessert” projects not project-based learning. Limited because a lot of our core subjects are self-paced and paper-based packages which have been a challenge for our teachers. But they have been trying to incorporate those end-of-unit projects. I think shifting the thinking to get them to think of the project as the learning is going to be a big shift for us. (Mary)

The August retreat was an important starting point for developing a shared vision of what project-based learning could and should look like in an alternative setting. Written feedback, that was collected from teachers by the administrative team and shared with me after the retreat, was largely positive. It was evident that the staff was open to a change in curriculum design. One teacher wrote: “I 100% believe that this is the way our students should be taught.” However, by December it was apparent that different frameworks for project-based learning were taking shape in various departments of the school and that some teachers were not embracing the PBL model with as much enthusiasm as others. The administrators were patient. They supported the teachers who wanted to move forward and put the brakes on when needed to avoid balkanization between the departments. They embraced variations in PBL that emerged throughout the school and were respectful of teachers who were reticent to implement PBL in their classrooms. They knew it would take time to develop a school-wide vision for project-based learning and they resisted the urge to rush the process. As Guskey (2000) reminds us, “The most worthwhile changes in education require time for adaptation, adjustment, and refinement. …The first year is a time of experimentation” (p. 9-10).
John and Maya embraced the PBL approach from the start and began working in the fall on their framework for the Integrated Studies Program. From their perspective, the ISP was not “textbook project-based learning”; they were developing their own version of PBL. They recognized that initially the important element would be “a shared vision and a shared philosophy” between themselves and among the students in the program. A shared vision, they believed, would help to define their co-constructed, student-centred program. In true *backward design* fashion, they asked students to create vision statements for their individual projects and then used the vision statements to create an overarching mission statement for the ISP. In reflecting on their program at the end of the year they talked about challenges and the changes they wished to make the following year to enhance the program, but as John remarked, “I feel really good about our vision statement. I don’t think our vision statement would change.”

**Workshops and In-service Sessions**

During the first year of implementation several site-based professional development days were organized to help the staff understanding of the project-based learning model. The August retreat provided an introduction to the theoretical framework of PBL, while subsequent presentations focused on more practical strategies related to planning and assessment. Other professional development days were dedicated to less formal opportunities for the staff to reflect on the PBL model and plan for future classroom, department, or school-wide initiatives. The teachers said they found all of these professional, collaborative experiences successful and helpful to their practice, but they particularly appreciated Pro D provided by other teachers that focused on practical PBL planning and teaching strategies.
It clarifies the challenges, the messiness of it, and then kind of lets you realize that it’s OK that it’s messy, that you are going to make mistakes. That was really valuable. (Maya)

Several teachers also commented on how much the school district’s *Designs 2013* series (January-February) had contributed to their understanding of project-based learning.

My favourite Pro D is always seeing what other people do. Watching the HTH films, or having Kyle demonstrate the Viking Ship project at the Designs series. I loved that. Any time that you can share ideas and see what other people are doing are the best examples of Pro D. (Anne)

Maya appreciated being able to participate in the Designs leadership team.

Doing the series was great. It was exciting to be in the position of sharing what we had done with a group of people, and really thinking about what you want to say, what you are doing. It was exciting and challenging. (Maya)

Among teachers’ “wish list” items for site-based Pro D for the future were more opportunities for seeing examples of other teachers’ project-based learning ideas. “I would like to get exposure to just what projects people have tried that have worked, or didn’t work” (Matthew). In addition, teachers said they wanted language and documentation in responding to the tough questions concerning assessment and reporting.

**Online Professional Development Opportunities**

Many of the teachers on staff discovered the myriad of websites and blogs dedicated to project-based learning. One teacher said her preference for professional development was doing Internet research: “Just watching lots of videos and reading lots of websites… I like the *Buck Institute* and the *High Tech High* site.” Others said they
used websites like Edutopia to find good articles and You Tube videos. While few teachers had explored collaborative online opportunities (e.g. Twitter, Webinars, Blogs), many of them indicated that they would be interested in online exchanges within the school district to share ideas and student examples with their colleagues.

Teacher Inquiry and Experiential Learning

Some of the teachers considered their own teacher inquiry and experimentation in their classes to be the best professional development for understanding and implementing project-based learning. Comments about “flying by the seat of our pants” or “jumping in and learning as we go” were frequent, particularly from the ISP teachers.

I think that a lot of what we’re doing is going on our “gut” to be honest...we had essentially three days as a whole school staff to put together a philosophy, a direction, a logistics of everything, including the schedule. So we sort of found ourselves at a place where we’re calling it practitioner research because we’re doing this and learning as we go as well. (John)

Maya talked about needing to experience PBL with the students first and then reflect on her understanding of what worked or didn’t based on their projects. She also emphasized that her own professional development was ongoing and holistic:

I am a teacher 24 hours a day. I am Maya 24 hours a day. And there are just these little things that I’ll change in my professional hat. It’s that reminder that we’re just this whole person, and that’s what we are really doing with the students. We’re saying, “School isn’t separate from who you are.” It’s just your learning and your development as a person that we’re supporting. (Maya)

Off-site Professional Development Opportunities

The trips to High Tech High in San Diego (spring 2012 and 2013) were inspiring for administrators and teachers. They had opportunities to see examples of projects that students had created and talk to the HTH staff about their planning and assessment.
processes. The three staff members (John, Maya, and Anne) who toured HTH with Trevor in April 2013 came back with many ideas, which they shared with staff during professional development days and staff meetings. However, the teachers and support staff were all aware that their students were not like the students in charter schools. Many questioned the “one size fits all” Core Standards driven approach that seemed to permeate HTH and other PBL schools in the United States. In a session with the HTH teachers in San Diego, the teachers from the alternative school were surprised by the advice given to leave student voice and choice out of PBL planning. For John in particular this advice from the HTH staff confirmed that their American version of project-based learning was at odds with his vision for a student-centered, co-constructed curriculum.

That stayed with me, but I think it was good...I was always worried about having blinders on and having my ethical dilemmas... But when they said that voice and choice is not their thing to do...I really had to consider it. Is it a mistake to actually start with voice and choice? And the bottom line, in observing what was going on and taking a step back, was that none of those projects would have happened without starting with voice and choice. It wouldn’t have been meaningful and engaging. We would have lost a lot of kids right off the bat. (John)

John’s experiences with the project-based learning model and the implementation of the ISP were also influenced by off-site professional development in his graduate studies. His Masters research, framed as teacher inquiry, focused on his experiences in facilitating the development of cross-curricular, co-constructed learning experiences in the ISP:

So at the same time that we’re doing this work in here, it’s essentially my Masters work. I am linking that to educational theorists and really delving deep into what is my philosophy? Who am I as a teacher? How am I growing? That is constantly there as part of it. (John)
Time for Collaboration and Reflection

Several times during our conversations teachers mentioned how much they valued opportunities for collaboration and reflection with their colleagues. Meetings with colleagues to discuss, plan or review the progress of the PBL implementation were valuable opportunities for professional growth. The ISP teachers viewed participating in the interviews with me as an opportunity for reflection. Maya remarked, “... it’s a good time to look back and think about where we’re at. Opportunities to work with colleagues helped teachers clarify their vision for project-based learning and think deeply about their practice: “time and people working together is what we need.”

Teachers offered suggestions for future collaborative initiatives and partnerships focused on project-based learning. Anne said she wanted to see teachers meeting in subject areas to agree on a common set of essential learning outcomes for courses: “That’s a worry, that we won’t have consistency with the curriculum. We need some general guidelines...” Other teachers indicated that they would be interested in exploring more partnerships with professionals from the community who could help with student projects by offering their expertise in the planning and assessment phases.

Overall it may be said that the teachers’ professional development initiatives throughout the year, and their wish lists for future Pro D, varied widely and were based on individual preferences for learning. In terms of their professional growth as educators, the project-based learning implementation process provided the opportunity to question their educational philosophies and reflect deeply on their practices. Many of them came to understand that project-based learning requires that they think less about their teaching and more about students’ learning. As Maya so eloquently said in her final interview:
...you have to really have faith in the students that what they are saying they want to do is valuable to them and valuable to the class, to the course, to their life, and that it’s worthy learning, rather than what you think you are supposed to be teaching... So...it’s about teachers shifting, then letting go. (Maya)

5.8. Summary

This chapter summarized my research findings from the staff participants in three thematic categories representing the key factors that influenced the design, development and implementation of PBL in the alternative school setting: (1) foundational factors; (2) challenges; and (3) professional development and growth. Professional development is a complex process in education, particularly when it focuses on the school-wide implementation of new curriculum model. The professional growth of educators needed for such an endeavour encompasses both individual and collective processes and a strong commitment to a shared vision for school improvement. At the heart of this process is the understanding that teacher professional development is an intentional, ongoing, and systemic process that encompasses a variety of processes and activities.

The forms of professional development and growth undertaken by teachers in this study were influenced by the culture of the school, the educational needs of the youth who attend the school, and the opportunities made available to the staff. Not every form of professional development, even with those with the greatest evidence of positive impact, is of itself relevant to all teachers (Alvalos, 2010, p.10). The factors that influenced the professional growth of teachers may be unique to this study. However, there are salient themes in the findings of this research that may provide insight into the factors that could influence the implementation of project-based learning and other curriculum models in other school contexts.
Chapter 6. Student Narratives

...humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories (Clandinin, Steeves, Mickelson, Buck, Pearce, ...Huber, M., 2010, p 59.).

In this chapter I present the findings from the student participants. These findings are organized into two categories of distancing and embracing narratives. Distancing narratives, which reflect the factors that had disengaged students from learning in their former school, include three resonating themes from the data: (1) barriers to learning; (2) feelings of alienation; and (3) school bureaucracies. Embracing narratives, which illustrate the many factors that re-engaged students in learning in the context of an alternative education program and within the project-based learning environment, include five resonating themes: (1) caring environment; (2) flexible learning; (3) co-constructed curriculum; (4) personal relevancy and authenticity; and (5) empowerment.

6.1. Purpose of my Research

The purpose of my research study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum within a secondary alternative education program. For the student participants my focus was on identifying the factors that contributed to their engagement in the PBL model.
6.2. Research Methodology

I selected a narrative inquiry approach to explore the students’ stories of their engagement with project-based learning. Story is defined by Connelly & Clandinin (1990) as “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (p. 375). Narrative inquiry is a way of thinking about experiences through the stories that are shared with us. It differs from other forms of qualitative research (e.g. narrative analysis or narrative research) in that the narrative is both the phenomenon studied and the methodology used throughout the research (Clandinin, 2013; emphasis mine). This ontological and epistemological definition of narrative inquiry guided my research process as I recruited student participants for my study, conducted interviews, observed and recorded field notes, presented the student narratives, analyzed the data, and composed my research findings. Like project-based learning, narrative inquiry has deep roots in inquiry-based learning and Dewey’s, pragmatic, experiential approach to learning. “Narrative inquiry is relational in all the ways that our Dewey-inspired view of experience makes visible; that is, it is relational across time, places, and relationships” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 19). Narrative inquiry allowed me to enter into narrative relationship with the students, to inquire into their lived experiences, and to represent their storied lives through my own narrative forms of representation. In presenting the students’ stories in this chapter I have tried to remain faithful to their unique personalities and experiences by injecting their voices as often as possible into my narrative. Direct quotations from the participants’ stories are used to enrich my descriptions and provide support for the findings that emerged from the data. Throughout the presentation of the
students’ narratives I have used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the students.

6.3. Narrative Beginnings

Clandinin (2013) reminds us that narrative inquirers must begin their research by “justifying the inquiry in the context of their own life experiences, tensions, and personal inquiry puzzles” (p. 36). This advice aligns closely with Piantanida and Garmin’s (2009) notion of “the researcher as instrument of inquiry” (p. 59), which entails examining what one brings to an interpretive inquiry. Reflection, self-awareness, and self-disclosure help to cultivate a heightened awareness of one’s worldview, personal experiences, and preconceptions and enhance the researcher’s capacity “to resonate more deeply and fully with the information you gather from participants in your study” (p. 61). In the spirit of justifying my narrative research inquiry and developing myself as an instrument of inquiry, I offer the following personal narrative.

6.3.1. Autobiographical Narrative

I am alone in the back seat of the blue Dodge Dart sedan. It is the fall of 1974. My dad is driving us into the Vancouver Airport and my mom, nervous and small, is beside him in the passenger seat. They are silent and I can feel the tension in the spaces between us. My parents rarely drive into town and when they do it’s always during the day – a trip to my Aunty Ruby’s for Christmas brunch, or a visit with my cousins in New Westminster. This is different. It’s dark outside. My dad hates driving at night. He says the lights from the other cars in the rear view mirror make it hard to see the road. I stare out the windows and watch the other cars pass us on the highway.

We are picking up my older sister Sharon from the airport. She has run away from home again. I heard in my parents’ hushed conversations on the phone this morning that the
RCMP picked her up in Halifax this time. My sister runs away a lot. They always find her and bring her back to us like some lost dog. But it’s getting harder and harder for her to be happy. And I know she’ll leave again.

I was too young all those years ago to really understand what caused my sister to want to escape her life in our home. My parents had adopted all three of us as infants and they had tried their best to give us the most normal and loving upbringing possible. My dad was the shop teacher at the local high school. My mom worked as a secretary in one of the elementary schools. We watched Mash in our small wood-paneled den on Friday nights, ate pancakes together after church on Sundays, and spent our summers camping. It was a typical middle-class 70s upbringing, except that, beneath the surface of our “normal” lives, both my older brother and sister were battling their own personal demons.

My brother Norman was two years older than my sister and eight years older than me. He was smart. Mom used to talk about how good he was at math and how well he was going to do in university. But he began experimenting with marijuana at the age of fourteen and then went on to even more addictive narcotics throughout his adolescence. By seventeen his substance abuse was so intense that he started to lose interest in most things, including high school. He dropped out in Grade 11.

My older sister Sharon had many talents – she was an artist, a writer, and a musician. I always marvelled at the way she could sit down at the piano and play by ear, from her heart. But she suffered from depression and other mental health issues, which were never diagnosed by medical professionals or even discussed by my family. She didn’t fit in at school, was socially ostracized by her peers and misunderstood by most of her teachers. The pressures of high school eventually became too much for her. She
had difficulty completing her assignments, fell further and further behind, and eventually just stopped attending school altogether.

My parents never spoke much with me or to their friends about the issues my brother and sister were facing. I think they just hoped that they would get over their troubles on their own and finish school. But there was only one high school in our small town and no other options for either of my siblings. They never did graduate.

6.3.2. Naming My Research Puzzle

Inquiring into our autobiographical narratives helps us understand how our own experiences frame our research beginnings (Clandinin 2013). Sometimes we may “reach back as far as childhood to understand and, at times, to name our research puzzle” (p. 55). I began this research study believing that I was studying the implementation of a curriculum model. My narrative inquiry into the lived stories of the youth in my study taught me that my research was also about the social, emotional, and relational aspects of schooling that help support vulnerable youth. As I began to reflect on the narrative accounts the students shared with me and attempted to understand their life experiences, I was pulled back in time and place to my own familial narratives and the moments of tension that arose from my siblings’ unresolved challenges in and out of school. I came to realize that my personal justification for my “research puzzle” was in part driven by a subconscious need to better understand my sister and brother’s life stories. In thinking narratively about my own family history, I was able to enter into the relational experience of inquiry with my adolescent participants with greater understanding and compassion.
6.4. Entering into Narrative Inquiry Relationship with Students

The students who participated in the semi-structured interviews were all enrolled in the Integrated Studies Program (ISP) and all, with the exception one girl, were in their senior grades (11 or 12). A total of six girls and two boys participated in the interviews. I purposely chose to not seek out information ahead of time about these students’ personal histories because I wanted to minimize any preconceptions or biases I might develop as a researcher; however in some cases the students’ project work had been shared with me during the staff interviews. Most often, this background information helped me to build a relationship with the students at the start of each interview. In addition, I consciously chose to get to know the students on a casual basis before the interviews started by stopping by the school on several occasions in January and December to say hello to them in class and chat with them about their projects. By February when the interviews began I had become a familiar face to most of the students.

I met and interviewed all of these students at the school. I chose to do one-on-one interviews with the students rather than focus group or paired interviews because the teachers had told me that some of the students might be emotionally fragile and that many of them were working on projects with sensitive content matter. At the beginning of each interview I reviewed the Informed Consent form information with the participant and ensured that students understood the purpose of my research. In some cases I explained through paraphrasing the overarching questions for my research:

What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based curriculum design? Which factors contribute
to successfully engaging students in designing (with adult educators) projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

I then asked the students the following questions individually:

1. Tell me what school was like for you before you came to this school/project-based learning program?
2. Which aspects of this alternative program do you really like?
3. What projects or activities have engaged you the most so far this year?
4. Are learning activities at the school personally relevant/meaningful for you?
5. Do you have a voice in decisions made at the school regarding your learning?
6. Have you actively contributed to the design of learning experiences in the school?
7. Are projects and assignments open-ended enough to allow for you to pursue areas of personal interest?
8. What opportunities have you had to work collaboratively with other students?
9. Have you had opportunities in your assignments and projects to interact with and learn more about the local community?
10. Is there anything you don’t like or would like to change in this program?
11. What improvements would you like to see at the school?

6.4.1. Crafting the Container

Relationships between researchers and study participants are critical to the process and success of narrative inquiry, making narrative inquiry a “relational methodology” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 83). In preparing for the interviews with the students I reflected on Isaac's (1999) notion of "crafting the container" for dialogue and Well’s
(1999, 2001) concept of “dialogic inquiry”. I knew it would be important for me to make the space for generative dialogue to happen during the interviews by paying close attention to the setting, the student’s (and my) physical and emotional state, and my own communication style. I worried that students would not be interested in sharing their experiences with PBL with me, or that they would be intimidated by me because of my position as an administrator in the school district. For the interviews I ensured that our meeting spaces were set up to be comfortable and that my approach was as casual and conversational as possible so that students felt at ease and we could begin to develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Although I followed the list of questions I had developed during each interview, my conversations with the students took unexpected detours from time to time to explore interesting personal stories or experiences. From that point on, all of the students shared their stories of mainstream school life with me. These narratives provided valuable data regarding the factors responsible for the students’ prior disengagement from school and helped to illuminate key differences in the environment and curriculum design of the alternative program – factors that had contributed to re-engaging the students in learning.

Data for the student participants in my study included semi-structured interviews with the eight ISP students, interviews with the ISP staff and school principal (who often discussed the students’ progress and projects), field notes based on my observations of students as they worked and interacted with their teachers and peers, and their artefacts of learning (the projects). The artefacts of learning were captured through primary documents, photographs, videos, and online blogs created by the students. (See Appendix D for examples of student projects). I observed and made continuous field notes throughout the study for all of the students involved in the project-based learning
model, but I was particularly focused on inquiring into the experiences of the eight students who participated in the interviews.

In presenting my findings from the student participants I sought to honour the uniqueness of the eight young people I interviewed. I wanted to maintain the integrity of their lived experiences and resist the urge to embark too quickly on an “analytical method of deconstructing stories into coded piles” Gergen (2003, p. 272). There are diverse ways of retelling stories, and narrative inquiry researchers are often “tempted to create smooth texts that suggest that lives are smooth and narratively coherent in the living and the telling” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 48). I did not want my representation of the students’ interviews to distil down the richness of their individual narratives to a summary of coherent patterns or themes disconnected from the storytellers themselves. Instead I sought to “make the complexity of storied lives visible” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 50) by incorporating their voices as often as possible into my narrative. I begin with a narrative introduction to each of the eight student participants who shared with me their lived experiences.

6.4.2. Narrative Introductions

Justin

Before I met Justin in person I received an email from his grandmother, which was helpful in providing a context for entering into my research relationship with him. In her email his grandmother said: “I would like to add important information regarding (Justin’s) progress and background. Things I don’t think the school will tell you” (email communication, February 2013) . Justin had moved up from the States at the age of sixteen to live with his grandparents. When he arrived in BC he couldn’t read or write.
His grandmother told me he had been diagnosed with “dyslexia, dyspraxia, word retrieval, and short term memory and speech problems.” In the alternative programs he received speech therapy and some reading intervention methods that were, according to his grandmother, “still geared to scholastic normalcy.” She wanted the school to aim for practical “life skills” so that Justin could graduate and fulfill his dream of becoming an electrician. With the help of assistive technology, and a special reading and spelling intervention program his grandmother used at home with him, Justin had made a lot of progress in his literacy development by the time I met him.

During our interview Justin was positive and upbeat. He seemed happy to meet with me. He smiled easily and laughed at my questions and his own jokes. He talked a lot about his learning disabilities, but said he appreciated the flexibility of the school and the way the staff understood how he learned “in a different way.” Justin had a passion for story telling: “In my head I always think about random stories. It just keeps me entertained” and appreciated that he was able to work on projects that reflected his interests. He had joined the Integrated Studies Program (ISP) and was working on a digital media project based on a story he was writing about “mythical creatures trying to destroy humans.” His plan was to turn the story into an animation video. Justin expressed pride in his progress on the story many times during the interview: “I am writing a story. A lot of people are surprised because I never read a book in my life pretty much…I am writing a story and I am completely bad at English!”

Justin had lots of interests and hadn’t decided what his plan would be after high school. He was thinking about becoming an electrician or a plumber, or maybe working with animals or computers.
Kim

Kim arrived on time for our interview, shook my hand, and sat down on the couch across from me. She was dressed completely in black – black dress, torn black tights and black boots. She wore heavy make-up and had several body piercings. Kim was polite and answered all my questions willingly, but seemed guarded and withdrawn. She was serious and her face was expressionless for the first few minutes of our meeting. I found her sombreness intimidating and noticed my own attempts to make her warm up to me. I wondered how I was ever going to engage in narrative dialogue with someone who seemed so closed off.

Despite her guardedness and often-brief answers to the questions, Kim eventually became more comfortable and shared a lot of her personal life with me. She told me about her ongoing challenges with eating disorders and depression that made it “hard to be around people at times.” She talked about being labeled as different in her former school and how she enjoyed the “open-minded” atmosphere of the alternative school setting. She said she liked creating vision boards in art class and working on her projects for the ISP program. She was creating a children’s book for her nephew and another book of poetry. She was proud of her involvement in the Social Justice Squad at the school: “I’m helping out with the community, to improve the community. We’ve done a lot in the downtown eastside to help the homeless people.” Kim also shared her passion for industrial (electronic base) dance, “an underground dance that not a lot of people know... it’s good music to dance to because it adds more emotion and more power and it’s just raw energy in it.” She appreciated the personal growth she had experienced as a result of leadership opportunities for the school, including the Social Justice Squad and leading the Remembrance Day Assembly.
I did a presentation, which I thought...was going to be one of many, but it turned out to be the only one, which was really scary. I was so nervous I couldn’t even stand up and wave to people. But I did good on it.”

I noticed that Kim seemed to want to talk more about the social and cultural aspects of schooling than about curriculum design. Her answers to my questions about the project-based learning model were brief – usually no more than one or two sentences. Often she would start off talking about project-based learning, but then drift back to her experiences in mainstream school, as in this exchange:

JR: And so the projects are open-ended enough so that you are able to pursue your own interests?
Kim: Yes.
JR: Can you give me an example of that?
Kim: Well they are very open-minded with the fact that everyone is not the same. I feel that in mainstream high school everyone wants to be the same. And if you’re not the same, like if you are somewhat different and unique, they don’t like it. Teachers in my experience in mainstream, they do not like people being different. They would treat people differently and I didn’t like that. There was a time when I was in Grade 8. I used to be really, I guess, “girly”. I would wear all pink, I’d be overly happy and talkative. Then one day I just didn’t feel good in my own skin. So I started to change and people hated me for it, but I still did it.

Kim’s responses during the interview reflected her view that the alternative school setting and project-based learning allowed her be her own person and to express herself freely. “I think everyone should be who they want to be and not who someone tells them to be. That’s what I was doing before and I didn’t feel comfortable.”

Lisa

Lisa had a beautiful, quiet voice and a gentle spirit about her that made her seem older than the other students. She was very proud of the project she had chosen – a
documentary about people living in the Downtown Eastside. She told me she had chosen that topic because she had an uncle living there and she wanted to create a project that would help other people better understand the experiences of the homeless in that part of town. She had created a blog about her project and was beginning to post her own personal photographs and narratives.

During our interview Lisa demonstrated the same quiet confidence and calm energy that I noticed at our first meeting. She talked openly with me about the many challenges she faced in mainstream school – both academic and social. “I didn’t really learn that much. I was just there, and I didn’t want to be there at all.” She lost her dad when she was in Grade 11 and dropped out for a while. She later enrolled in one of the alternative programs and spoke about how welcoming the new school felt. “It was a different sort of group of people. They were really accepting.”

Lisa talked a lot about her ISP project during our interview. She said she enjoyed the flexibility of project work and being able to learn about a topic that she was personally interested and invested in… “Since it’s a topic you like, and you want to explore and get into, it’s something about you and you want to share it with people, it’s motivating to get your work done because it’s something you want to learn about.” Lisa had started off thinking she would create a film, but then realized her passion was more for photography. In the end she created a photo journal and blog about the downtown eastside, for which she received credits for English 12 and Info Tech 12 and partial credit for Math.

Lisa had not been a writer before. According to the ISP teachers, she had procrastinated on an essay writing assignment for months. “However, when the
opportunity to write about homelessness was offered, she had two pages completed that afternoon” (John). Her blog illustrates not only her growing sense of self-as-writer, but also her ability to engage in her own narrative inquiry with sensitivity and compassion:

I became interested in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side when I was a really little girl. As my family would drive through the area I would look out the window and feel a connection to the people who were living there. I was always intrigued about their stories. Why did they end up there? What circumstances took place in their lives? How can I be involved in changing that story? (Lisa, excerpt from project blog).

She was proud of the project she had completed and talked a lot about the authentic audience she wanted to see her work. When I asked Lisa if she had plans to share her project with the larger community she replied quietly:

That’s a direction I want to go in, to make people aware, create awareness and change people’s opinion maybe on this neighbourhood because people have such negative, black and white opinions. So yeah, I think if I got this out there to people in my community it would open people’s eyes and change some people’s opinions on it.

I asked Lisa how she felt about the current gentrification of the downtown eastside. Her response demonstrates deep interest in and familiarity with the topic of her project:

It really bothers me. I just feel that they are ignoring the fact that there are low-income people and they don’t even want to see it. They are putting in these places for wealthy people. Three dollar donut shops and there is no way that people living there are going to go there. They are just trying to make the area look nicer. I don’t like it.

At the end of the interview, when I thanked her for participating in my research, I was taken aback by Lisa’s response, which illustrates her passion for project-based learning:

Ever since I met you and I heard what you were doing with your research, I wanted to be interviewed. I really think what they (the
teachers in the ISP program) are doing here is cool. I really believe in it.

I saw Lisa frequently at the school. Whenever I stopped by the classroom she greeted me with a warm smile and showed me her progress on the ISP project. I followed her work on her blog throughout that spring, but I was really touched when she personally gave me a copy of her final written project report at the end of the school year. I watched her graduate in June. She carried herself across the stage with the same quiet humility and grace that I had seen during the interviews.

**Tammy**

The first time I noticed Tammy she was dressed in an *Iron Maiden* black hoodie, ripped jeans with heavy chains across the pockets, and dark army boots with wool work socks. Her long copper-coloured hair was covered that day with a red baseball cap. Her physical appearance and loud, take-charge voice definitely gave her presence in the classroom.

The group in the ISP class that day watched a TED Talks video with Brené Brown (2010), who spoke for 20 minutes on the topics of vulnerability, shame, and the neurobiological need for humans to feel connected. Vulnerability, Brown says in her talk, is “the birthplace of joy, belonging and love. To feel vulnerable means to feel alive.” The students seemed to enjoy the video and the messages about fully embracing vulnerability as a kind of spiritual awakening. After the video was over, the students all applauded. John, the ISP teacher, then asked them to do a written reflection in their journals focusing on key themes from the video that had personally resonated with them. I watched as students took out pens, notebooks and their handheld devices to reflect on the video. My eyes were drawn towards Tammy who was furiously writing in her journal,
head bent close to the page. At the end of the personal writing session John asked if there were any students who wished to share their ideas with the group. Tammy was the first to put up her hand. She shared three key messages with the group: “Be real. Be vulnerable. Love with your whole heart.” A few other students shared some ideas and the two ISP teachers offered their thoughts as well. Tammy spoke again near the end of the discussion, saying: “You can’t give a crap about the high school stuff – talking about each other. You can’t hold onto all the negative shit. I put it all into music.”

The interview with Tammy happened on a day when I was scheduled to meet another girl who wasn’t at school. I saw Tammy in the hallway. She agreed to take the other girl’s place for an interview, but told me with a smile I would have to wait for her to have her “smoke break” before we started. I waited in the ISP room for 20 minutes while she took her break. When she came back she was carrying a stack of notebooks, which she placed on the coffee table between us before settling into the couch. “Those are my journals,” she said proudly.

During the interview Tammy was outspoken, confident, and energetic. She told me she had attended “many, many schools” in the past and talked about her challenges to fit in socially: “I was ridiculed, bullied my entire childhood.” In Grade 9 she started getting sick a lot and missed classes. She had trouble keeping up with assignments and going to school “was a drag.” Eventually Tammy transferred to an alternative school where she loved the program and the teachers. She spoke enthusiastically about the project-based learning model at the new school.

I love everything that this school stands for. And especially now that we have this Integrated Studies Program it makes it even better! The fact that we can do a project that we want to do. It just opens up so many more doors for so many more people.
Tammy explained that she wanted her ISP project to somehow represent herself and her life. She had decided to create a teenage survivor guide using her own experiences chronicled on her Facebook page and in her sketchbooks and artwork, which she had collected since she was five years old. She also interviewed other students and teachers to get their input for the guidebook. As she explained her project to me during the interview, Tammy showed me examples from her journals, places where she had juxtaposed old pieces of poetry with new images from her original artwork, sharing with me evidence of her development as an artist and a writer, and allowing me to participate in the “temporal flow” of her personal narrative (Carr, 1986, p. 95-96).

I’ve been literally taking pieces of when I was really little, like if you look closely at say this page, you can tell the difference in the writing. That was when I was only five years old. So having those memories, writing those (poems) for my mom.... My favourite part is going through all my old sketchbooks and seeing the growth of my artwork slowly change and get better and better and better.

Tammy’s narratives during the interview reflected her independence and fierce determination. When she was young she had wanted to play guitar. Her parents gave her brothers lessons, but she learned on her own. “I never went to a teacher. I have just been learning myself off YouTube and my friends...You don’t need more lessons, you just need the attitude to put towards it, and actually go get it done.” Even though Tammy lives on her own she got herself to school every day, determined to complete the many credits she needed for graduation through her project and other coursework. When I asked if she thought she had a voice in the design of the projects she replied: “I am my voice. With my project I knew what I was doing from the start.” She had big dreams for herself and lots of confidence in her future: “I don’t know where I am going to go. I have so many options.” The only sign of vulnerability I ever saw in Tammy during
our interview was when she admitted to being scared to leave the safety of the alternative school environment: “I want to graduate, but I don’t. I want to stay at this school. I don’t want to leave and that is my biggest problem.”

I continued to see Tammy in class during my visits and at various events in the school. She was consistently enthusiastic and friendly with me, and our research relationship was enhanced by the many opportunities we had to interact informally. At the student art show in June I bought one of Tammy’s original paintings – a whimsical picture of traffic crossing a city bridge on a rainy day. The joyful, busy scene of cars battling for their place in line will always remind me of her courage and determination. At the end of the year I watched as Tammy, grinning proudly and dressed in an evening gown and army boots, crossed the stage to receive her graduation certificate.

Elizabeth

The Friday in early May when I met Elizabeth she was offering a free manicure to Maya the ISP teacher who was going to a wedding on the weekend. I chatted briefly with Elizabeth and she showed me some of her original art designs (on her finger nails and in her brochure), but mostly I just watched as she did Maya’s nails. Elizabeth was focused and chatted quietly with her teacher as she worked. Once in a while they would share a funny story and laugh together. I could see her potential as an aesthetician and business owner, creating a calming and comfortable space to provide her services.

I interviewed Elizabeth the following week. She had a serenity and openness about her that made it very easy to talk with her. She told me she had moved to BC from back east when she was in Grade 4. Her experiences in elementary school were
not positive. She recalled two teachers in Grade 6 who humiliated her in front of the class and made her feel stupid.

One cornered me in a coatroom and said I was going to work at MacDonald’s for the rest of my life because I was dumb. And the other one called out my grades in front of the class, and said I was a failure and that I wasn’t going to get anywhere with life.

Elizabeth’s experiences in high school were also troubling. She had developed an anxiety disorder and got easily overwhelmed. She felt “embarrassed” and “uncomfortable.” She stopped going to school, missed a lot of work, and had difficulty catching up. She didn’t feel there was enough support in the mainstream system for her. “I had people who helped, but I just didn’t feel that they cared whether or not I was getting help.” She dropped out of school in Grade 9.

Elizabeth knew she needed to finish high school so she enrolled in one of the alternative programs where she said she realized that “school is worth it, and that people really do care about your education.” She felt she finally had a connection with the teachers. “They were like friends to us rather than people who were just teaching us because they had to.” She also liked the fact that she could work at her own pace, although she said the program was similar to other schools: “We were working on the same stuff, mostly worksheets or workbooks.”

She enrolled in the ISP program because she liked the idea of working on a project. “You get to work on something that you are passionate about, something you love, and get credit for the classes that you need to get done at the same time.” Her project was aligned with her goal of starting her own business. She had completed the nail parlour program at one of the local professional aesthetics schools while she was attending the alternative school so that she would be ready to start her business as soon
as she graduated. For her project she had created a business plan, business cards, and brochures. She viewed project-based learning in very pragmatic terms:

I figured, hey, why not take something I love, and something I am already working on in another school, and bring it into this school to really focus on what I really want to do. Not only for now but also for my future.

When I thanked Elizabeth at the end of the interview she smiled and said:

I don’t mind being interviewed because I feel that all students, or all people who are having problems with school, should have the chance to speak up and really have a say in what can be changed, or how they feel about something that’s going on in their life. The school system needs to change. It does. Definitely.

In discussing the importance of the relational throughout an inquiry process, Clandinin (2013) reminds us that narrative inquirers often “negotiate ways they can be helpful to participant(s) both in and following the research” (p. 51). I found myself experiencing that sense of the relational with all of the students, but particularly with Elizabeth. The day after my interview with her I had an appointment with my hair stylist Louisa whom I have known for over 15 years. Louisa has her own studio and often sponsors young female apprentices or rents out chairs to stylists who are just starting out. While I was having my hair done I told Louisa about this amazing young woman I had met through my research who had just completed her professional training and was about to graduate from high school. Louisa just happened to be looking for an aesthetician to rent one of the rooms in her studio. She gave me her card and told me to ask Elizabeth to call her. The next day I went to the school and told Elizabeth about the opportunity. She was very excited and couldn’t wait to make the call. In the end the business opportunity did not work out for her in Louisa’s studio, and I worried that Elizabeth would be discouraged by the news. However, she seemed to bounce back
easily and later told me how much she appreciated my efforts to help her get started on
her career path. “Something else will come along,” she said with a bright smile. I like to
think that the experience of calling a community business owner and beginning to
negotiate her own place in the profession gave Elizabeth the confidence she needed to
pursue other options in the future.

Megan

Despite my best intentions to not seek out background information on any of the
students before I interviewed them, Megan was an exception. I had heard a lot about
her in the interviews and in my conversations with teachers. It was important that I be
aware of her situation. Megan was only in Grade 9. Unlike the other students who had
spend several years in alternative programs, Megan had just arrived at the school that
year. I was told that in her previous school she suffered from high anxiety. Every
morning she would leave the house to walk to her high school, but would be overcome
with panic and have to return home.

When Megan first came to the alternative school she was only enrolled in a part-
time therapeutic program where she learned to develop strategies for managing her
anxiety. After a few months, the staff cautiously approached her to see if she was
interested in trying project-based learning in the ISP program. Although she showed
trepidation at first, eventually Megan agreed to meet with the ISP staff. The staff told me
that they were nervous during the meeting with her. The last thing they wanted to do was
overwhelm her with the idea of learning through projects, especially in a program that
was designed for older students. To their surprise, Megan expressed great interest in
joining the program. What was even more surprising was the topic she chose for her
project: a “How-To-Survive-Anxiety” guidebook for youth and their parents. In early
February she amazed staff again by agreeing to share her idea for her project to an audience of teachers and ISP students. While some of the senior students were too shy to present their work in progress in person and had to be videotaped instead, Megan boldly walked to the front of the class and shared her idea for her anxiety workbook:

I am writing this workbook because I don’t want youth or adults to feel alone with their anxiety. So many teens and adults suffer silently with anxiety or other mental disorders because they are afraid of being judged.

In May Megan and her parents agreed that she could participate in my research study. Before our interview I was uncertain how things would go. She was younger than the others and given her history of anxiety I wondered how much she would open up to someone she really didn’t know. When we did meet I found Megan to be warm and friendly. She spoke with confidence and a maturity I had not expected.

Like all the other students, Megan wanted to share her lived experiences in mainstream high school. Elementary school had been fine for her and she was looking forward to the transition to secondary, “but high school was, for Grade 8, really bad!” She talked about the peer pressure from other students, but her stories mainly focused on the academic pressure she felt from teachers. She talked about the “overwhelming amount of work” and not being able to “find a place to just be by yourself” in the large secondary school she attended. “So I would end up just leaving. There was nothing else to do.” When I asked if she found the level of the work too difficult she said: “I have never had a problem doing the work, but the problem was just having…to switch from this class to that class in a matter of two minutes.”

In the fall the administrators and counsellors and other members of the District Resource Team had been worried that Megan’s transition to the alternative school would
be difficult. She was young and came from a completely different school environment. Given her history of anxiety, they were concerned that she might be intimidated by some of the older kids and that the environment of the alternative school would a cultural shock for her. So when I asked Megan how she felt when she got the alternative school her response surprised me:

Just coming in here felt better. I could just tell by the surroundings and the size. There are like 100 kids here. And we’re never here at the same time. And the teachers are nice and actually care about you. That’s what I figured out right off the bat. They are just really nice.

I asked Megan what aspects of project-based learning she was enjoying the most. She talked a lot about choice in topics. “Here you pick your own project, and do what you want and what you like. So I think that’s cool. I like working on my project the whole time.” She shared details about her anxiety survival guide, explaining to me that most anxiety guidebooks on the market are “too big and daunting.” She wanted to create something that kids would actually read, something authentic that was written by a kid. “Each chapter is only one page. And it includes my experiences through anxiety and panic attacks, and that kind of stuff.” When I asked why she had decided to produce the anxiety survival guide she explained that she had had really bad anxiety since grade 2. Counsellors had tried to help, but they didn’t really know how: “…when they say they understand they really don’t understand because they don’t know what it’s like. They’ve heard what people read in books, but…” Megan’s book included her writing, some artwork and photographs of other students’ artwork. She also included a section of rants: “That’s just me kind of ranting about anything that might have to do with anxiety, but more in a funny, relaxed way.” I asked her to give me an example of a rant and her answer illustrates her wonderful sense of irony and humour:
When counsellors tell you to “take a step back into things” I find that really stupid! If you are out of your panic attack or your anxiety why the heck would you want to go back? You don’t want to think about it. You want to throw it out the window! I don’t get that logic. Where does that come from? It doesn’t make sense.”

When I asked Megan what hope she had for her book she simply said: “…it would be cool if some people read it and if it helped them.”

Claire

“Not today, I have somewhere I need to be. Maybe tomorrow.” Claire’s excuses for not meeting with me helped me realize how naturally shy and withdrawn she was. Claire was often in the art room working on her paintings or project and quietly chatting with Maya the ISP teacher. It was apparent that they had a close relationship with one another. Although Claire’s Informed Consent forms were completed early in the process of research study, my initial attempts to meet with her were not successful. Maya did her best to try and encourage Claire to be interviewed, but she was reticent. I was patient and waited until the end of May before Claire finally agreed to be interviewed. The timing was good for her and she was ready to talk. Her project was almost completed and it was obvious she was feeling really good about herself that day. Although her nervous, somewhat fragile character was apparent throughout the interview, Claire spoke freely and proudly of her tremendous personal growth throughout the year.

Like the other students, Claire shared her story of how she came to the alternative school and the challenges she faced in mainstream schools. She was in modified classes and had difficulty making friends and fitting in. She also spoke about the number of school changes she had experienced and the anxiety it caused in her:
I have had so many changes in the last two years – going from elementary to high school, then to a different high school, and merged with a bunch of different kids... I don’t like change. It’s one of my difficult things I try to get over, but I like routine and I don’t like things changing because I have to start all over again. You know, people do say change is good. I don’t like it.

She got kicked out of her regular high school in Grade 10. They were just like, “OK we’ve had enough. We have given you so many chances to change and you’re not changing.” She remembered being told she would be going to a “school for bad kids” and thinking, “I’m not one of those kids.” She was nervous about going to the alternative school. However, once she got there she found that the teachers were warm and welcoming: “They actually cared. That was the cool part.”

Claire’s transition to the new school and her positive experiences there made her sensitive to the negative stigmas associated with alternative education programs: “…when people think of alternative they think of bad kids. They think of monsters. And it wasn’t fair because they (students) just didn’t fit in anywhere else. That’s what upset me the most.” She praised the school for the safe and caring environment that was created for students and the positive impact it had had on her: “I finally have a sense of belonging, instead of being pushed around and moved around.” She also said she was happy when the school changed its name and dropped the “alternative”: label. “It was like a new identity. It wasn’t adopted or anything, it was like, this is Us. This is an actual school.”

When Claire talked about her project she said the idea had made her nervous at first. Her initial reaction at the first student meeting was: “What is this? We just got to a new school and now you guys are throwing this at us?” She described it as “scary,” but was intrigued by the idea of designing a project that could incorporate her interests.
“When they explained it to us, we were like OK we get to do what we love? And everyone was thinking Oh my God! I love Art!” Claire’s project was centered on the theme of artistic exposure. It included painting, photography, and writing:

It’s just about letting people know about my art and my life I guess. I don’t really like sharing. It’s just a way for me to talk about how I’ve come such a long way from being an at-risk teen-ager to becoming a young, mature adult. This is me showing how art helps me reconnect with the real me. It’s just going through the steps of what it took for me to reconnect with my friends and family and my teachers. It’s just basically about having a second chance, I guess. It’s having art as my outlet instead of drugs and alcohol.

Claire was aware that the project-based learning was being piloted in the ISP program and shared her thoughts on its success: “They did this as a test. And they weren’t sure if ISP would be for everyone. And it isn’t. But I think every school should have a choice. It’s what’s keeping me in school.”

Claire had other projects she was working in at the school and in the community. She enjoyed being active on the Social Justice Club and had set up her own business online creating and selling her sock monkey creatures. When I asked Claire which aspects of the project-based learning model she liked best she talked about being able to work at her own pace, about the flexible deadlines, and about the freedom to work on projects of interest. She also talked about how the project work had helped her to become more responsible and take ownership of her learning:

It makes you kind of grow up a bit. You think, OK I can't be doing the same things I used to do. I have to do work. I have to do stuff. I have to figure out what I like. This is about growing as a person. And to grow in all sorts of ways, not just growing up.
Brennan

When I met Brennan I noticed right away that he was the frontline salesman for the jewellery-making business that he and his friend were developing as a collaborative project for the ISP program. They had been using chain mail to create medieval-inspired jewellery and other items that they were hoping to sell to the public. At the student presentations in February the two boys set up a “booth” to showcase their products. Brennan did lots of chatting with his customers about the products and several women (myself included) purchased jewellery.

During our interview Brennan provided straightforward answers to my questions. He described his former school experiences as “crappy.” He disliked the highly structured environment where “everything was down to the minute” and the transmission style of teaching in traditional schools:

I hated sitting in a classroom and listening to someone talk at me for 45 minutes straight, and then say, “Observe all of what I just said and fill in this 20 page workbook,” or whatever. I felt that I could teach myself better. So I left the school.

He also talked about the lack of personal connections with teachers and other students at his previous school:

If you wanted to talk to your teacher you’d have like two minutes in between class, or you’d come after school...there was about 800 kids and half the teachers barely remember your name. Students even more.

Brennan transferred to an alternative program in Grade 9 and never went back to mainstream schools. He liked the project-based learning model in the ISP program at the new school because it offered him more choices: “I like the fact that I can explore something that I am interested in, not just something that is assigned by the district.” He
talked about his project as “a business around jewellery, mostly, and a modern look at medieval clothing and armour.” He and his partner had big plans to rent a table at the Night Market and sell their products. His interest in jewellery making began with an after-school introduction to jewellery-making course he had taken with some friends. He loved the course so much he took it four times in a row. Brennan laughed when he told me about the book on chain mail jewellery he and his friend had found: “I picked it up and never really put it down!” I asked Brennan if he was interested in all things medieval he replied: “If I could be born in any other era…”

Brennan and his partner’s project was comprehensive. It included the plans (marketing strategies, financing, etc.) for the jewellery making business as well as a video representation of armour testing and some written work (essays, etc.) focusing on the medieval theme. Through the project they were earning some credit for English, Math, History, and Marketing. When I asked which aspects of the project he enjoyed the most Brennan said it was the business. “I really enjoy planning it out.” But he also enjoyed the process of creating jewellery, which he found therapeutic: “It’s probably the most relaxed that I can get. I don’t know you get into this zone….”

Brennan and I chatted a while about he and his partner’s marketing strategies. They had a Facebook page and plans for renting a table at markets across town. I suggested he look into the new local Night Market, which he had not heard about: “Wow! That’s only five blocks away from my house. That’d be awesome! I am going to look into pricing.” Brennan confirmed my earlier assumption about the roles he and his partner had taken on with respect to the business. “(He) is more into production and I am more into the business side. And then we come together to do planning.”
In his final comments Brennan talked about improvements that were needed in the ISP program, recognizing in particular the experimental nature of the pilot program:

I think it needs a bit more direction because half the time I think the teachers are just as confused about what to do next as we are, but they are really good with encouraging us and getting us to start doing things we believe in.”

6.5. Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry is a continuous process of reflection. The stories the students shared with me during the interviews resonated with me for weeks, as I transcribed the interviews, read, and reread the transcriptions. New narratives emerged through the process of inquiry in other field texts (observation notes, photos of artefacts, videos of the students) that shaped and reshaped my thinking and preliminary hypotheses about the factors that had engaged students in the project-based learning model.

I used open coding to review the transcriptions for the student participants and identify preliminary themes and sub-themes, axial coding to disaggregate sub-themes into larger categories, and selective coding as a final step in the analysis process, to create a theoretical framework of resonant themes related to the implementation of project-based learning from the point of view of the students. I used several processes to test the reliability and validity of my research methods and analysis of the student data, including triangulation of study methods, respondent validation, and constant comparison. In addition, the Critical Review Committee, discussed in Chapter Three, read and analyzed the student interview transcriptions and then developed their own preliminary coding systems.
6.6. Resonant Themes

My findings for the student data are divided into two sub-sections. The first section, called *Distancing Narratives*, describes the factors that contributed to students’ prior disengagement from traditional/mainstream schools. The second section, entitled *Embracing Narratives*, presents the key factors that contributed to students’ engagement in the project-based learning model at the alternative school.

6.6.1. *Distancing Narratives*

While it was not the purpose of my research to explore students’ experiences in their previous school, or the specific reasons why they enrolled in the alternative program, it was important for me to inquire into “the temporal unfolding of their lives in different places and in different relationships” (Clandinin et al 2010, p. 68) in order to really understand the factors that caused them to re-engage in school through the project-based learning model. During the semi-structured interviews, students shared many stories about the challenges and obstacles they had experienced in traditional, mainstream schools. Their narratives closely resemble the responses given by the twenty-five alternative education students interviewed by Fraser, Davis & Singh (1997) in a study that analyzed the ways in which alternative students “symbolically distance themselves from certain features of their home school and embrace certain features of their alternative school” (p. 221). Distancing and embracement processes lie at the heart of students’ struggle “to assemble a sense of self” (p. 221), including their “ideas about their former problems and their current standing” (p. 223).

The student participants in my study engaged freely in describing distancing narratives throughout the interview, regardless of the questions I asked. I have
organized their distancing narratives into three resonant themes representing the factors that caused them to disengage from their mainstream schools: (1) barriers to learning (e.g. physical or mental health issues, learning disabilities); (2) feelings of alienation (e.g. negative relationships with teachers and peers, a sense of being lost in a big school); and (3) school bureaucracies (e.g. rigid timetables, traditional teaching methods, strict school rules).

**Barriers To Learning**

Students described a variety of physical and mental issues that affected their learning. Many had been formally diagnosed with eating disorders, anxiety, and depression. Their physical and mental health challenges often caused them to be absent from school or tardy in submitting assignments. Many of the students talked about falling further and further behind and not feeling supported by their teachers in giving them extra time to complete homework. Tammy, who missed a lot of school in Grade 9 because of respiratory issues, said she had two weeks to catch up on two months of missed work or she would be kicked out. Kim, who suffered from anorexia and missed more than three months of school, described her teachers as “verbally abusive:”

Yeah...they were pressuring me to do things. They didn’t understand that when I said I was feeling light headed and about to collapse they were just screaming at me, saying I had to do this, I had to these ten assignments. Due tomorrow. And I couldn’t do that. (Kim)

Several students who suffered from anxiety disorders described the pressures they felt to stay on top of their assignments when their mental illness caused them to miss school:

I developed an anxiety disorder, which I was trying to push through. When I got overwhelmed I would shut out. I shut out the world. I stopped going to school. So I missed a lot, and when I went to go
catch up I wouldn’t have that reassurance and that help that I really needed. (Elizabeth)

You had so much homework and the teachers never really understood well if you were late for class because you had a hard morning. They wouldn’t care. They would just give you a zero for the whole class, which I couldn’t deal with. That would freak me because I had always been a really good student all through elementary school. (Megan)

Other students spoke about their learning challenges. Justin had been diagnosed with multiple learning disabilities before he came to the alternative school and his narratives (and his grandmother’s email) suggested that his challenges had not been addressed or supported in his previous schools.

I have always had stories in my head, and I always told my friends about them, and they really like them, but I never could write them in words...I couldn’t survive mainstream because I had no freedom, no opportunity, and also because they didn’t know what was wrong with me. (Justine)

Lisa reflects on how many of the students felt about the lack of support in their former schools by saying, “The teachers just kind of let me slip through the cracks.”

**Feelings of Alienation**

During the interviews several of the students talked about their sense of alienation or lack of connectedness in their previous school. In some cases these feelings stemmed from negative relationships with teachers or peers. Lisa said that in her former school most of the students felt disconnected from their teachers: “I remember at my old school no one really talked nicely about the teachers.” Megan described the teachers in her previous school as “really mean.” Kim said that in her experience teachers in mainstream schools “do not like people being different.” Elizabeth described how her experience in elementary school with two teachers who told
her she was “dumb” and a “failure” affected how she felt about school, about herself, and about life. These feelings continued throughout her secondary years: “You have to learn things like English and Math, without having teachers that you feel connected with, or you feel you have a relationship with. You become embarrassed, uncomfortable.” Even when Elizabeth got some help with her work she still sensed an ambivalence on the part of the teachers: “I had people who helped me, but I just didn’t feel that they cared whether or not I was getting help.”

Other students struggled to fit in socially and felt alienated by their peers. Tammy talked about being bullied her whole childhood and not having friends in her previous high school. Claire said she didn’t fit in. Her sense of isolation in her former school was evident when she quietly said: “I know what it feels like to not belong.”

For other students the size of the school made them feel lost and disconnected. Lisa said: “If I kept quiet, kept to myself, no one would really notice. It was a big school. So it wasn’t really for me, and I didn’t really learn that much.” Megan talked about feeling overwhelmed in a school of close to 2000 students and anxious when she could not find space to just be alone. Even Brennan, who attended a small high school of about 800 students, spoke of feeling invisible to teachers and peers: “Half the teachers barely remember your name.”

**School Bureaucracies**

Many of the students talked about the rigid timetables, strict school rules, and traditional teaching methods used in their former schools. Justin said that his learning disabilities had made it difficult to sit and read for long periods of time in his other school. Students talked about teachers’ unrealistic expectations and deadlines for assignments
and homework. The theme of falling behind and not being able to catch up was common in their narratives. Looking back on her mainstream experiences, Kim said, “at most high schools if you don’t catch up then you won’t catch up.” Brennan talked about the rigid timetables in most high schools that made it difficult to connect with teachers and get help with coursework:

Everything was so organized. They didn’t allow you to have your own life, in a way. Everything was down to the minute... So if you wanted to talk to your teacher you’d have like two minutes in between class, or you’d come after school.

Brennan also complained about the transmission style approaches to teaching at his former school where teachers “talked at” him and learning was about regurgitation of textbooks and lectures. Lisa’s reflection on learning mainstream school is representative of the lack of relevance that many of the students experienced in the learning tasks of mainstream schools: “There were a few things that I just didn’t get. It was not interesting to me and it was really hard for me to focus and do something that I didn’t want to do.”

Inquiring into students’ lived experiences in their previous schools allowed me to identify the factors that had disengaged these youth from school in the first place. Moreover, inviting students to reflect on the challenges and problems they had experienced in the past allowed them to distance themselves from their former identities and embrace new self-images in their current school landscape. Factors that engaged them in learning in the project-based design emerged in sharp contrast to those that had disengaged them in the past.
6.6.2. **Embracing Narratives**

The student interviews also included embracing narratives that illustrated the many factors that re-engaged youth in learning in the context of an alternative education program and within the project-based learning environment of the Integrated Studies Program. These embracing narratives have been organized into five resonant themes: (1) caring environment (positive relationships with teachers and peers, support for personal challenges, welcoming environment); (2) flexible learning (flexible schedule, self-paced curriculum); (3) co-constructed curriculum (student voice and choice in process and products of learning); (4) personal relevancy and authenticity (topics of interests or personal passions, understanding personal challenges, real world connections, authentic audiences, career aspirations); and (5) empowerment (self-expression, self-determination, self-actualization).

**Caring Environment**

All of the students spoke about the warm and welcoming environment that had been established in previous alternative education programs in the school district and at the new school. They described the staff as caring, accepting, and open-minded. Their descriptions often emphasized the contrast they noticed between their previous school and the alternative setting, which Lisa described as more personalized: “The teachers were amazing. They made me feel so welcomed. It was a different sort of group of people. They were really accepting... I am so pro-teacher now.” Claire’s narrative reflects the deep connection she felt with the staff that helped her feel accepted when she arrived at the alternative school:

They actually cared. That was the cool part. It’s because of the teachers. They are more like acquaintances and friends. You actually connect with them. It’s very comforting. You can literally sit down and
talk with them about anything and they won’t judge you. That’s the cool thing about this school. They see the real you, but they don’t judge you. (Claire)

Elizabeth talked about the sense of belonging and ethic of care she felt in the new school that gave her renewed confidence in herself:

I felt like I was part of something. I wasn’t just there. I felt cared for. I felt like people wanted to help me. I felt a connection to the teachers. We actually used their first names. They were like friends to us rather than people who were just teaching us because they had to...I know I am not dumb. I am finishing school. I am somewhere where people care about me. They care about my well-being. They care about where I am going in life. (Elizabeth)

Tammy also talked about the positive connections she had made with teachers, referring to the ISP teachers as “the parents of the school,” and spoke of her positive relationship with peers. She commented many times on the sense of community in the school.

Yeah, just the personal level with your teachers is so much better here. I had problems with not having any friends back then, but now I have problems having too many friends! Every single person that comes into this school I basically know and I am friends with and have some history with... They are all good people coming to this school. It’s amazing how this school is a community-learning program. It is what it is. It’s amazing! (Tammy)

Students talked about the support they were getting from staff to help them face mental health or cognitive challenges. They worked closely with the teachers in the ISP program, but also received extra support and tutoring from academic teachers and support staff in the school. Justin said the program was easier for him because the teachers “are always there to help you.” Several students mentioned the English teacher Anne who took time out to help individual students develop the literacy skills needed to complete their projects. Lisa’s description of the relief she felt in getting support for her learning challenges is particularly poignant:
And then I got diagnosed with a learning disability through the school, and once that happened I was put on medication to help me focus. I remember coming to school and reading one of the assignments. I went to the bathroom and I cried because I could focus on it. I was so happy that I could read and understand it.... So that was really amazing to just figure that out. And if I had been diagnosed in the mainstream school I don’t think it would have been as great as being in this alternative school because they were so...they just helped me so much and are just there for you. (Lisa)

Flexible Learning

The staff at the alternative school had agreed to establish an open and flexible learning environment for the students. Although there was a distinction between the morning program (academic courses) and the afternoon (electives, including the ISP program), there was no bell schedule at the school, and students could move throughout the school and take breaks when they needed. Many of the students spoke about how they appreciated the freedom they experienced in the alternative school setting and through the project-based learning model, including the flexible schedule, which Justin described as a good fit for his learning challenges:

It’s more free. I learn a different way. I learn by hearing and I memorize things really well. But I can’t remember by reading because I have Dyslexia. So it’s really hard to sit at the table and read. There are no bells so you don’t feel pressured. So it’s nice. I like the freedom. Sometimes I actually work past my break, and I notice that, so I just get up and walk for a little bit and then come back. Some people use it really badly, but I don’t. (Justin)

Tammy appreciated the ability to move from one learning task to another whenever she wanted or needed to:

The fact that you can do more than one project, you are not set on one thing. Like I am doing this, but say I am having a writing block, or drawing block and I can’t think of what to do.... So you are not stuck doing one thing, and you are not stuck doing it all by yourself. You have all these different people to help you. (Tammy)
Claire liked what she called the “open schedule” which gave her “more time to think” and do stuff on her own. “It’s just awesome!”

Many of the students talked about the self-paced aspects of project-based learning, which relieved the pressure they had felt in mainstream schools. As Kim said, “It makes things a lot different. I can’t find a word for it. It’s just different from other schools with what I would be learning. Here you learn at your own pace, which is good.”

Megan talked about the soft deadlines for projects:

The due dates for those projects aren’t as intense as it would be at another school where it would be like it’s due Wednesday or you fail. We can take our time, and we can put it away for a while. There are definitely still some days when I don’t feel like coming. And there’s basically just some days where I can’t go, or emotionally can’t go. It’s easier to know that you won’t get a pile of work on you when you come back because if I missed a week at my old high school then I would be screwed. I would basically have to restart the year because I would have missed so much. But here they just say you can start on what we are doing now, or they let you do it on your own time.

Elizabeth’s comments reflect similar themes:

You get to choose what you want to do. So if you miss two weeks you come back and start right where you left off. You’re not coming back missing like 10 different lessons and having to catch it all up. You’re working at your own pace and your own speed. I think it’s a better learning model.

**Co-constructed Curriculum**

Students in the Integrated Studies (ISP) program all engaged in a process of co-construction of curriculum with staff to develop the process and outcomes for their projects. They met individually with the two ISP teachers to design their projects and had frequent touchback interviews and group sessions with other students to report on their progress and make revisions to their project designs. Students like Claire
expressed their appreciation for having choice and voice in their learning: “With ISP they give you choices, and it’s like, oh wow! I don’t know why everyone doesn’t do this!” For Tammy the co-constructed curriculum represented respect for and acknowledgement of her ability to direct her own learning:

A lot of the other students didn’t know what they were doing, so with me I am my voice to my project. I tell the teachers what I am doing instead of them coming up to me and saying you have to do this, this, and this now. And this is the next step. I go up to them and say, “OK, this is the next step to my project.” I am my voice. The teachers don’t even…they kind of just watch me. It depends on whose project it is. With my project I knew what I was doing from the start. (Tammy)

Other students spoke about how the teachers helped them find inspiration for their projects without being overly controlling in deciding what they chose for their topics:

Well they give me ideas of how to do things and I just…usually I start out by listening, but then I end up doing my own thing. And they end up liking it, so it’s not like I get in trouble or anything (Kim)

They asked us what we were interested in. That was the first question. So we looked at that, and I thought of a few different things, but it just kind of kept coming back to we could do jewelry and have a lot of fun doing it. There are things that we have to go to the teachers with and they will give us their honest opinion. But the sole decision is coming down to us and which way we want to branch with it. They are all really supportive, which is nice. (Brennan)

When it comes to my projects, I ask Maya for insight. When I come to do a project I want to do ten things at once. And I sometimes have to slow down and just try to do one… (Claire)

Students acknowledged the ownership they felt over their projects but also recognized the support the teachers provided when they needed to overcome challenges:
They are a little bit behind me trying to navigate me, but it’s our responsibility to get it done. Since this is an option for us, and a lot of people really like this option, there is no reason why they want to avoid it or anything. So if people need help they are behind us, they give us a push. I needed some motivation and Sara stepped in and said, “This is what you can do.” That pumped me up so much to do my project! (Lisa)

Students’ descriptions of the co-constructed projects reflect the concept of negotiated learning. Brennan talked about how he worked with teachers to design projects that would align with course outcomes he needed for graduation:

When we were laying out the project we figured out what we could get, and then we went to those individual teachers and said, “OK, if we present this and this, are you able to give us marks for these courses”?

Students’ comments also reflect the important role that student voice and choice played in the project-based learning pilot:

The teachers make sure that things are working for the students. If there is something not working for you they will try to change that, or work around it by trying to make it more interesting or exciting for you. So you have a say in what you are learning, and how you are learning. (Elizabeth)

I always talk with (the teachers) and ask “Is this OK?” Can I have this? Can I say this? It’s kind of back and forth. They shoot ideas at me and I will either deny or confirm, or I will take things into consideration and think about them if there’s something I don’t like. You know the teachers here always have that bit of control but they are trying to see you in the right way. They listen to you. They ask and listen. They don’t just tell you and ignore. They sit down with you and talk to you as an adult. They don’t treat you like a little kid. And I think that helps everyone. (Claire)

**Personal Relevancy and Authenticity**

Students all expressed their appreciation for being able to explore their own individual topics for their projects. Megan said she liked “that you can choose what you
want to do. Not everyone is doing the same project like you would do in a normal school where the teacher would assign it.” Having to learning things she wasn’t interested in had frustrated many students, like Claire. “It was lack of interest that stopped me from going to school. If there’s no interest, then what’s the point?” Tammy’s enthusiasm for students being able to choose their own topics for learning was evident throughout her interview:

That’s what I really like about the school... The fact that we can do a project that we want to do. It just opens up so many more doors for so many more people that I know that have dropped out of school and think that they’ll never finish. (Tammy)

The students’ projects reflected topics of deep personal interest. For Kim and Claire it was artwork, for Justin stories, for Brennan jewellery-making, and for others, like Lisa, it was a topic that connected with her family history:

It was really cool that they thought about us and how it would be better for us to learn something that interests us. I was really interested in that and I chose to do a project on the Downtown Eastside. I have family down there, so it was really cool for me to explore that.

Many of the students had chosen topics to help them understand their own personal challenges or to explore career options. As Elizabeth remarked about her peers:

All the kids here are doing something, either it’s opening up other people’s eyes to what’s going on with youth, or working on what they are going to be doing when they are done school. It’s something that they are really interested in. (Elizabeth)

Artwork and journal writing helped students to express themselves emotionally and explore their on-going challenges. Megan’s guidebook was helping her to understand her anxiety disorder and even to find humour in it: “That’s just me kind of
ranting about anything that might have to do with anxiety, but more in a funny, relaxed way.”

Other common themes in the interviews with students related to the relevancy and authenticity of learning through projects. Students like Tammy said how much easier it was for students to engage in learning that was relevant to their interests or ambitions:

Now what I am seeing is the schools systems are trying to support us doing our own things. Like, OK, you want to become a musician? Then work your ass off and become a musician! Don’t sit there and focus on the stuff you don’t need to do. You don’t need Socials to become a musician. You don’t need science. It’s so much more helpful knowing they are sending you towards what you want to do, instead of “you need to do all this math.” It’s so much easier knowing that you’re doing what you need to know. (Tammy)

Connections to the real-world and real audiences were also significant aspects of the projects that engaged students in their learning. The idea of having her book published online in a professional way was motivating for Megan:

It will be binded. It will be in a book. So we are doing it on mypicturebook.com. It won’t be like paper stapled together, which I thought it would be, but now it’s going to be a legit book. That makes it cooler. (Megan)

Lisa and Claire and others had posted their work online in blogs and websites and were especially interested in the responses they got from others. Students sought out authentic assessment of their work through exposure to real audiences. Feedback on their learning from real audiences was significant to students like Lisa: “Apparently people do like these photos and they are commenting on them and sharing them with people. So that kind of inspired me to do more.”
Students like Elizabeth and Brennan found the relevancy in projects that allowed them to begin designing their career path:

I feel like the projects were a really good idea. You get to work on something that you are passionate about, something that you love, and get credit for the classes that you need to get done, at the same time. ... I am working on a project. I am starting my own business. I am opening up a nail bar. I have a Facebook page. That’s what I really love to do. I am passionate about it. Not only for now but also for my future. What I am doing now is to finish school, but it’s also opening doors for me when I am done. So I am not just done school and then have no idea where I am going after that...I want to focus on going to work and doing what I really love. (Elizabeth)

**Empowerment**

The final resonating theme in the students’ embracing narratives was empowerment through self-expression, self-determination, and self-actualization. Students’ projects had allowed them to find their voices, understand their own learning processes and challenges, develop greater autonomy in their learning, and begin to see their own strengths and talents. For these students, who had not experienced success in previous learning environments, the process was transformative.

Many students talked about how liberating it was for them to express themselves through their projects. As Justin remarked: “They let me do my thing!” Claire liked the ability to express herself through various art forms in her project: “ISP gave me the freedom to do what I want. And I was like, Wow! I am in charge. I am my own boss!” Kim’s comment reflects her deep appreciation for the freedom to express herself in the projects “I am able to show who I am without people labeling me.” All of the students participated with enthusiasm in opportunities to share their project work, including online blogs, student presentations to staff and peers, the public exhibition of student learning in June, and video interviews that were shared at school district meetings and
professional development sessions. Many students also expressed interest in pursuing other audiences for their work, like Tammy and Megan who said they wanted to share their guidebooks with other students.

Kohn (1993) posits that allowing students to have more control and choice over their learning helps them to develop “self-determination,” a key component of healing, emotional adjustment and general well-being. The students in the ISP program shared many narratives that reflected their growing self-determination, motivation, and sense of ownership of their learning. For many, like Elizabeth, their attendance improved because they were engaged in their learning and wanted to work on their projects.

In my experience I have had a hard time with school. I have had a hard time waking up and wanting to go to school. But now I wake up and I think, I get to work on my project. I get to go work on something that I love, doing something that I love, being a part of something that I care about. It makes you want to be here. (Elizabeth)

Kim also said that her project was helping her to attend school more regularly: “I am supposed to complete these assignments, and that is something I want to do ...If I didn’t have this project, I think my attendance would be a little lower now.” She was learning to persevere with learning tasks. When I asked what aspects of the project-based learning model she enjoyed the most she replied:

The feeling of finishing something that I started. That has taken me a very long time because my Vision Board took me over two weeks and I finished it maybe three weeks ago. Like very late in the morning and I still went to school that day, which is really amazing. So I finished at 3 and then I woke up two hours later and got ready for school. (Kim)

Perseverance was also a theme in Lisa’s experience with her project.
This is not just an easy way to get passed through English, or anything like that. The writing was really hard to get into at first. Just giving people my story and figuring out what I wanted to talk about, my direction of it. I learned what direction I want to go with it, and it made it a lot clearer for me. Yeah, I wasn’t sure where to go with it, and I’ve learned a lot of things. It’s such a cool thing to have this project. When everything is going crazy, and you just want to do that. (Lisa)

Tammy, who lived on her own without parent support, was putting in extra work on her project outside of school hours.

I am trying to find a lot of quotes and other things to bring that into my project. I do a lot of my research at home for my ISP project. I will be on Facebook and I will find a picture and I will think Oh that will go good in my book. So I will send it to myself. Or I’ll be on YouTube and I’ll find a good quote or something and I’ll write it in my book or I’ll send it to myself. It’s slowly, slowly coming together. (Tammy)

The narratives shared by the students in the project-based learning pilot also reflect their individual processes of self-actualization. Self-actualization is commonly understood to be the achievement of one’s full potential through creative expression, the pursuit of knowledge, or the desire to give to society (Wikipedia, 2013). For Maslow (1943) self-actualization is situated at the highest level of the hierarchy of human needs and can only be fulfilled when other more basic needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem) are met. Maslow defines self-actualization as “the desire for self-fulfillment, namely…to become everything one is capable of becoming” (p. 382).

The project work in which the students were engaged was intrinsically motivating and contributed significantly to their social emotional and cognitive development throughout the year. Students like Claire spoke excitedly about her personal growth in the program: “It’s hard to explain. It’s just growing in every kind of sense.” Lisa found her sense of fulfillment in focusing her energies on those less fortunate: “Yeah. I have
always wanted to help the community and the fact that I am now is really enriching. I am very happy about that.” Elizabeth acknowledged that the program boosted her confidence and self-esteem:

It made it easier for me to be comfortable being me. Once you are put into a situation where you have to make your own decisions, and you have to stand up for what you believe is right, it helps you bring that into other places, like a work area or another school area. I have always had a problem speaking in front of other people. Once I started doing ISP we would sit down and talk as a group, say what we were working on and what we were doing. It became easier for me over time. And I felt more confident about talking about things. (Elizabeth)

Students like Claire talked about overcoming their fears by taking on new challenges and finding herself through leadership opportunities:

I never knew I would learn so much with the photography. It’s just...I don’t know. I get to do a lot more. Like take pictures for the yearbook; I never had anything like that, so it was kind of scary. The project is not just about you learning new things. It’s about you learning about yourself, how to connect with yourself, and how to get to know yourself. People think Oh I know myself, but when you do this program you actually dig deep. It’s cool, but it’s also scary because you don’t know what you are going to find. You end up finding this really joyous, happy person and you think, “I never knew that about myself.” (Claire)

The students spoke eloquently and passionately about their experience in the project-based learning model. Many of them recognized that they were involved in a pilot project that was unique to the school district and wanted to share how successful the program had been for them. Tammy told me a story about the day the water pipes broke in the school. The teachers told them they would have to go home but the students protested:

What are you doing telling us to leave? We are here to work There was like four or five of us protesting. It was so funny. You don’t
normally see students not wanting to leave. You seem them running out of the class saying “Yah Hoo! Free afternoon!” But no, that’s not the way it is with a lot of us. We want to stay. (Tammy)

When I asked if it were the teachers or the project-based learning curriculum that was making the difference for her, Tammy replied: “It’s both.” She said she would not be as successful with project-based learning without the support of the staff in the school, but that she wouldn’t be graduating without PBL: “…it’s helping me a lot!”

Other students, like Elizabeth wanted her voice in my research to provide the impetus for systemic change in education.

The school system needs to change...It doesn’t work for everyone. It’s just like playing an instrument. Everybody plays it differently. Give five people a guitar and I guarantee all of them are going to play it differently. It’s just like school. You can’t throw all the kids into school and say, “Here, learn.” There are going to be kids, like all of us here, who don’t learn like that. And their minds don’t work like that. Having this opportunity to be a part of something like this...It means a lot to be able to have a say. (Elizabeth)

6.7. Summary

The resonating themes from the student data presented in this chapter form a kind of tapestry of the stories and voices of the small group of students who participated in my study. Through a narrative inquiry approach, I was able to inquire into the lived experiences of these youth and investigate the factors that transformed distancing narratives into embracing narratives and allowed these students to re-engage in school through the project-based learning (PBL) model. While this is a small participant group within the context of alternative education, the students’ stories contain powerful, universal themes that may provide important insights for educators in other contexts.
Chapter 7. Summary, Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

...reshaping imagination may be released through many sorts of dialogue: dialogue among the young who come from different cultures and different modes of life, dialogue among people who have come together to solve problems that seem worth solving to all of them, dialogue among people undertaking shared tasks, protesting injustices, avoiding or overcoming dependencies or illnesses. When such dialogue is activated in classrooms, even the young are stirred to reach out on their own initiatives. Apathy and indifference are likely to give way as images of what might be arise. (Greene, 1995, p. 5)

In this chapter I discuss the relationship of the findings from the staff and student participants to the existing research on alternative education, project-based learning (PBL), professional development, and student engagement. Within this discussion I consider how my research findings may have implications for other educational contexts. In addition, I present some lingering questions, provide suggestions for future research, and offer recommendations for practice. I then provide a personal reflection on my own learning and growth as a scholar-researcher in this study and a summary of the study framed by the concept of ‘re-imaging’ alternative education.

7.1. Purpose, Context, and Methodology for the Research

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the factors that influence the design, development, and implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum within a newly consolidated alternative secondary school. I used a narrative
inquiry methodology to inquire into and tell the story of implementation from the perspectives of the staff and students. The two guiding questions for my narrative inquiry were:

What professional development requirements are necessary to enable the successful design and implementation of a project-based curriculum design for a community-based alternative education program?

What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students in designing (with adult educators) projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

Data collected during this study included semi-structured interviews, observations and field notes from school functions and events held during the school, and students’ artefacts of learning (projects). I used open, axial, and selective coding processes to analyze the semi-structured interviews and other field texts collected during the research and to identify and organize resonant themes and categories for my findings. These coding processes allowed me to develop a theoretical framework of factors that influenced the implementation of project-based learning from the perspectives of both participant groups.

7.2. Summary and Implications of the Findings – Staff Participants

The data collected from staff participants revealed the following three thematic categories: (1) foundational factors; (2) challenges; and (3) professional development and growth.
7.2.1. **Foundational Factors for Successful Implementation**

Staff identified several foundational factors that enhanced the implementation of PBL, which were organized into the following sub-categories: (1) positive relationships with students; (2) commitment to student-centred learning; (3) flexible scheduling; (4) staff collaboration; and (5) administrative support. These foundational factors are important to consider in the implementation of any new program or curriculum model because they represent the school’s culture—a powerful element in determining the success of any educational innovation. As Bransford, Brown & Cocking (2000) contend, “all learning takes place in settings that have particular sets of cultural and social norms and expectations…these settings influence learning and transfer in powerful ways” (p. 4).

**Positive Relationships with Students**

All staff members who participated in the study emphasized the importance of caring, trusting, and positive relationships with students. This focus on nurturing relationships to support students’ social and emotional challenges had been a priority in all of the previous alternative programs, and was a natural expectation in the newly consolidated school. During the research study, many staff came to realize that this foundational aspect of their school was also a key factor in the implementation of the new project-based learning model, particularly in encouraging the most socially, emotionally, and academically vulnerable students to undertake personal projects. This finding aligns with current research in the areas of alternative education (Aron, 2006; Aronowitz, 2005; Bonnell and Zizys, 2005; Calabrese et al, 2007; De La Rosa, 1998; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletton, 2002; McCreary, 2006 and 2008; Morrissette, 2011) and learner engagement theories (Christenson, Reschly &
Wylie, 2012; Levin, 2010; Klem and Connell, 2004; Willms et al, 2009), which consistently identify caring relationships and a sense of belonging at school as critical elements in engaging or re-engaging students in school. It also reflects what Nel Noddings (1999, 2005, 2010) has long referred to as the ethic of care required for successful learning in all schools.

The foundational element of positive relationships among staff has implications for the implementation of PBL (and other curriculum design models) in different educational contexts. The current popularity of the project-based learning model is reflected in news reports, online blogs, and social media sites in which daily announcements are made about new public education and charter schools implementing project-based learning across North America. The language is invariably the same in these PBL news stories; the emphasis is almost always on the potential of the PBL model to align “core standards” of learning with “career, life, or technical skills” required for the “21st century”. Rarely do the reports speak to the relational aspects of learning among staff as foundational requirements of the school culture in which the PBL model is implemented. Clearly in an alternative education setting these aspects cannot be ignored. Nor, I contend, should they be overlooked in mainstream school settings.

**A Student-Centered Philosophy**

A strong emphasis on a student-centered philosophy was another important foundational component of the alternative school setting that contributed to the implementation of the project-based learning model. Learner-centered educational environments “pay careful attention to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that learners bring to the educational setting. (Bransford et al, 2000, p.133). It was clear from the staff data collected during this study that administrators, teachers and support staff
at the alternative school valued pedagogical approaches that honoured and prioritized students’ learning styles and preferences, prior learning experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

Many North American schools currently approach the PBL design methodology from the starting point of learning objectives or core standards (see for example Boss & Krauss, 2007; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010a, 2010b; Markham, 2011). Although collaboration among students is encouraged, it is assumed in these models of PBL that all students in the class complete the same teacher-designed project. By contrast, educators at the alternative school in this study chose to use students’ interests and passions as the starting points for individual projects. This approach embodies the principles of responsive, differentiated instruction and has important implications, not only for other alternative programs, but also for mainstream classes where ‘one size fits all’ approaches to learning do not meet the needs of all learners. Webster (2006) reminds us that educative teaching cannot be reduced to a simple application of pedagogies proposed as “best practices”:

> Teaching is not a value-neutral technicism but involves decisions to be made by the teacher. The nature of this decision-making requires that attention be given to the end or the purpose of the experiences being offered to the learners and within this context to decide what is best for them (Webster, 2006, p. 11).

During the School District’s Designs 2013 in-service series on project-based learning, mainstream classroom teachers appreciated learning how teachers in the ISP had adopted more student-centered approaches to PBL. Participants in the series from mainstream schools acknowledged that the personalized, ‘passion-based’ approach to PBL could and should be extended to learners in regular classrooms.
Flexible Scheduling

A history of flexible schedules and timetabling was also a contributing factor in the implementation of the PBL model at the alternative school because, as staff reported, the flexibility provided students with the time needed to adjust to the PBL model without feeling the kind of pressures they had felt in their previous schools. Emphasis was placed on the processes of learning rather than final products, and deadlines for completion of projects were negotiated between teachers and learners to accommodate learning challenges and emergent personal circumstances. This commitment to flexibility to meet the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of the students is consistent with the research on best practices for alternative education (Lange & Sletton, 2002; Morrissette, 2011). This study offers insight into a more process-oriented, self-paced, and individualized approach to PBL, which may be of value to other students in mainstream schools who require more flexibility in learning because of learning challenges, health issues, or other personal circumstances.

Flexibility in the alternative school schedule also contributed to the teachers’ ability to meet and work collaboratively on the implementation of the PBL model. Teachers at the alternative school acknowledged how fortunate they were to have this kind of flexibility in the schedule. They commented often on how difficult it would be to implement PBL in mainstream high schools where collaboration time is limited.

Staff Collaboration

An even more important factor that contributed to staff collaboration in the alternative school was the sense of collegiality, community, and deep respect that existed among the educators. Establishing a sense of community among two merging school cultures was a priority of the school administrators and staff who enacted a
collective, democratic decision-making process and organized several informal (but no less important) opportunities for colleagues in the new building to get to know one another throughout the year (e.g. retreats, pot luck lunches, etc.). Yet these efforts were secondary to the close bonds that had already developed over time among small groups on staff. Staff members from the two alternative programs were accustomed to working collaboratively with each other, with community partners, and with outside agencies that provided support to students. Small groups of educators in each of the separate alternative programs, including those who developed the Integrated Studies Program, had formed strong relationships after many years of working together. A strong ethic of care, which had developed naturally from working collaboratively to support vulnerable youth, was also apparent in the ways educators approached their relationships with colleagues. Respectful exchanges, deep listening, suspension of judgment and a strong sense of moral purpose ("what's the best course of action for our students?") consistently marked the social discourse among educators at staff meetings and professional development sessions. This dialogic approach was evident when the idea for the PBL model was first proposed to staff (spring 2012), when Maya and John pitched their idea for the Integrated Studies Program (November 2012) and even more so when staff worked together to find solutions to challenges in the implementation process (spring 2013). Whenever I observed the teachers in these situations I was reminded of Wenger's (2000) concept of social learning systems; true collaboration occurs when members of a group develop modes of belonging – engaging in a collective purpose (informed by shared histories and common practices), imagining better possibilities, and aligning or coordinating their efforts to reach their goals (p. 228).

Teacher collaboration is a relatively new phenomenon in education, which has
traditionally been an isolating and often solitary profession. For many years teachers have withdrawn into their “classroom cocoons” (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009, p. 92), which has often resulted in non-innovative cultures of conservatism and individualism within schools (p.91). Today educational scholars emphasize the importance of collaboration among staff as a critical component for school change and innovation (see for example Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009; DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Wenger, 2000). If collaboration is a requisite for successful educational reform, and in particular the implementation of new curriculum, then it stands to reason that several conditions must be established to foster genuine collaboration among educators prior to and throughout the implementation process. At a very basic level, time must be built into the daily or weekly schedule to allow teachers to engage in collective inquiry – discussing, planning, reflecting on, and assessing their curriculum designs. Yet timetabling alone will not ensure the development of what Bryk and Schneider (2003) call “social trust” among staff, an essential ingredient for the kind of meaningful collaboration and support that can lead to sustained school improvement. The development of social trust takes time to establish and often requires the implementation of both formal and informal processes that foster relationship-building and respectful interactions.

Relational trust entails much more than just making school staff feel good about their work environment and colleagues. A school cannot achieve relational trust simply through some workshop, retreat, or forms of sensitivity training, although all of these activities can help. Rather, schools build relational trust in day-to-day social exchanges (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 43).

Collaboration and teacher inquiry are effective processes that inspire and sustain educators through the challenges of innovation and change, provided that they are driven by a genuine desire on the part of educators to work together to improve student
learning and achievement. Creating an authentic and effective collaborative culture in a school is not as simple as merely forming committees and handing teachers data-driven Professional Learning Community (PLC) models (see Dufour et al, 2006) or manufactured teacher inquiry cycles, which often result in “rituals of contrived collegiality” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 92). Rather, genuine collaboration occurs in schools where there is a culture of mutual trust, care, and respectful relationships. These aspects of collaboration cannot be mandated but may be cultivated over time through professional learning initiatives and opportunities to work together for common, worthwhile purposes, such as the development and implementation of a new curriculum model.

**Administrative Support**

Many teachers in this study emphasized the importance of having strong support from administrators, both at the school district level and in their particular school. Positive relationships had developed over time between Trevor, the principal (who had worked as a teacher and administrator in one of the previous alternative programs) and several staff members. These relationships contributed in significant ways to the culture of trust, compassion, and interdependency that was evident in the principal’s interactions with staff and in his style of leadership. A model of distributed leadership practice was evident at the school, not only in the actions of the principal, but also in the interactions of the staff in relation to the implementation of the project-based learning model. A shared vision was articulated clearly and often throughout the year in staff meetings and professional development sessions. Respectful dialogue, questions, and collaborative practices were encouraged to ensure that teachers felt empowered to experiment with various models of PBL and comfortable with the timing and process of implementation.
This finding aligns with Lambert's (2002) suggestion that an effective school leader is one who constructs a shared vision with staff, poses questions, facilitates dialogue, and models collaborative practices.

Trevor also recognized that teachers learn in different ways and at different paces and carefully controlled the pace of PBL implementation. It is often a delicate balancing act to support teacher innovators on staff who want to charge forward with new ideas while simultaneously providing additional time and encouragement for those staff members who may not be ready to implement the changes. Effective school principals “establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 44). During this study, implementation challenges related to the PBL model were acknowledged and discussed frequently with staff at the alternative school during staff meetings aimed at collective problem solving and long-term visioning. The principal of the school remained firmly committed to the PBL implementation, but never rushed the process or ignored issues and complexities that arose. As Fullan (2001) remarks, in a culture of change effective leaders “value and almost enjoy the tensions inherent in addressing hard-to-solve problems, because that is where the greatest accomplishments lie” (p. 8).

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) remind us that educational change is “easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain.” (p. 1). Exciting new ideas and innovations, championed by only the most enthusiastic teachers on staff, rarely result in successful system-wide change. Like teachers, many school principals are influenced by the latest educational trends (particularly those that bombard them on popular social media sites). They are often eager to support staff members who want to
implement popular new approaches like project-based learning by providing resources and in-service opportunities. However, effective leaders understand that sustained school-wide change requires more than resources and workshops that explain new approaches to learning. Careful, collective consideration of the proposed curriculum model is required by all staff members to determine if it is in fact the best ‘fit’ for students in their particular educational context. This kind of consideration requires leadership that recognizes the importance of strong relationships, respect, and purposeful interactions among staff. The current study confirms the key role that school leaders play in fostering and sustaining relational trust through distributed leadership that is grounded in authenticity, moral purpose and dialogic processes. Duignan (2007) refers to this as authentic leadership:

Authentic educative leaders challenge others to participate in a visionary dialogue of identifying in curriculum, teaching and learning (especially pedagogy) what is worthwhile, what is worth doing (moral purpose) and preferred ways of doing and acting together. They encourage all who are engaged in the educational enterprise to commit themselves to quality professional practices that are, by their nature, reflective and educative (p. 3).

7.2.2. Challenges to Implementation

Staff encountered several challenges during the first year of the PBL implementation process. These challenges, which related to a variety of factors, are important to consider since they had a direct impact on the design, implementation, and on-going evaluation of the project-based learning model. They also created the impetus for finding creative solutions that might inform PBL implementation processes in other educational settings. Challenges identified by the staff focused on issues related to students' social emotional well-being, learning fears and disabilities, and levels of interest and motivation in learning activities. An additional challenge that surfaced from
the data reflected teachers’ concerns related to the academic rigour of the project-based learning model.

**Overcoming Students’ Challenges**

Challenges identified by the staff during the implementation of the PBL model focused on several issues related to students’ social emotional well being, their learning fears and disabilities, and their interest and motivation for learning. While many of these challenges are confirmed by current research on alternative education (Aron, 2006; Aronowitz, 2005; Bonnell & Zizys, 2005 Fraser, Davis, & Singh, 1997; McCreary Centre Society, 2008), they are not exclusive to alternative education. In fact, students enrolled in mainstream schools sometimes face the same issues relating to mental or physical health, drug and alcohol abuse, family crises, and learning disabilities that result in sporadic attendance patterns, difficulty completing assignments, and in the worst cases, suspensions from school. These challenges made the implementation of PBL at the alternative school difficult at times; however, teachers were able to find creative solutions to meet their students’ needs, including flexible deadlines, targeted tutoring for academic challenges, and one-on-one coaching to encourage students to stay on track with their projects. Similar supports can be made available in most mainstream schools for students with social, emotional and learning challenges.

Teachers in the Integrated Studies program made the conscious decision to emphasize voice and choice by having students co-construct their projects. This process contributed significantly to overcoming challenges related to student engagement and motivation for learning, even for the most vulnerable, disengaged students. For students who chose topics related to personal challenges, including anxiety, depression, and other mental health-related issues, project-based learning provided them with an
opportunity to “testify about their lives” (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p. 458) and “see themselves reflected in the classroom curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 451). For example, Megan chose to write a book on anxiety, and Tammy developed a teenage survival guide to help her work through issues related to bullying and peer pressure. In a sense, the students became their projects. The process of working through their challenges and developing the courage to share their stories with others was an important therapeutic tool that allowed students to develop greater self-awareness, self-efficacy, and resiliency. This healing approach to project-based learning also has great potential for vulnerable students in mainstream schools and programs, provided that teachers establish supportive classroom cultures that foster risk-taking, compassion, and mutual respect among youth.

**Overcoming Staff Concerns Regarding the Academic Rigour PBL**

During the implementation process several staff members expressed concerns regarding the academic rigour of the project-based learning model. Teachers questioned whether students who were pursuing topics based on their interests were meeting the necessary learning outcomes required for academic courses and developing the skills they needed to succeed in post-secondary programs and careers after graduation. These concerns naturally lead to other questions related to how students’ work in the project-based learning model would be assessed, graded and reported. The teachers’ doubts and concerns regarding project-based learning, particularly in the beginning of the implementation process, reflect the views of many educational scholars who have studied the phenomena of “professional socialization” (Eisner, 1985) and “embedded epistemologies” (Schon, 1995) that develop within school cultures. Teachers who work for extended periods of time within a particular educational setting often develop deeply
held convictions of what defines legitimate knowledge and approaches to learning, and these convictions, shared and affirmed by the group, become entrenched in the culture of the school. As noted in the literature review, the PBL approach is a significant departure from traditional instruction and assessment practices, which often requires a collective redefinition of teachers’ beliefs about instruction and assessment practices, a process that Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refer to as “re-culturing” (p. 105).

The BC Ministry of Education’s proposed changes to curriculum and assessment in the BC Ed Plan (Ministry of Education, n.d.) promise significant reforms that will transform instruction and assessment practices in this province. The government is developing a new “curriculum built around fewer but higher level outcomes” that will provide “more time and flexibility to explore students’ interests and passions” (BC Ministry of Education, n.d., p. 4). In addition, the Plan’s proposed changes to assessment and reporting practices will allow educators greater autonomy in deciding “how and when each student is assessed” (p. 4). Teachers in the alternative school were intrigued and encouraged by the future directions, particularly the reduced emphasis on “curriculum coverage” and greater flexibility for assessment. They viewed the provincial changes as consistent with their vision for a learner-centered approach to education for vulnerable students. In addition, they believed that the Ministry’s reform plans lent credibility and legitimacy to the project-based learning model being implemented in their school. Nonetheless, many staff still worried about students’ ability to meet the current learning outcomes through the project-based learning model and found being in the transitional period between the “old” (existing) curriculum expectations and the Ministry’s proposed changes somewhat unsettling.

These concerns reflect what Aoki called the tension between the “curriculum-as-
According to Aoki, most educators still conceive of curriculum implementation as “instrumental action”, whereby teachers follow curriculum frameworks developed by Ministries of Education (or new instructional approaches popularized through social media sites) within a producer-consumer business paradigm inspired by instrumental frameworks used in the business world. “In program development under this paradigm experts produce for non-experts who consume” (p. 113). Teachers apply the curriculum-as-plan (the ideal) as faithfully and as efficiently as possible in their practice. This view of curriculum implementation ignores the tacit knowledge of teachers and the lived world of the students. By contrast, Aoki proposes a more humane view of curriculum implementation as “situational praxis” (p. 116) whereby teachers understand, interpret, reflect upon, and transform curriculum based on the educational context and needs of the students.

Teachers and students can be seen as co-actors acting within and on Curriculum X, as they dialectically shape the reality of classroom experiences embedded in a crucible of the classroom culture of which they are a part and in which they have inserted themselves. This reality is the situation meaning that the teacher and students co-create, guided as they are by their personal and group intentionalities. (p. 121).

7.2.3. **Staff Professional Development and Growth**

In examining staff responses to the kinds of professional development and growth that contributed to the implementation of PBL, six predominant themes were identified: (1) the development of a shared vision and philosophy for PBL; (2) workshops and in-service sessions; (3) online professional development; (4) off-site learning opportunities; (5) teacher inquiry and experiential learning; and (6) opportunities for collaboration and reflection.
As previously noted, while many teachers positively perceive project-based learning, current research indicates that there are often challenges associated with its school-wide implementation (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008; Barron et al, 1998; Ertmer & Simons, 2005, 2006; Grant, 2011; Krajcik, et al, 1994; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway, 1997). Specific challenges depend on the nature of existing school cultures and prevailing epistemologies; therefore, professional development must be carefully designed to support the needs of the staff and students in a given educational context. Project-based learning was in some respects a natural fit for the alternative school in this study, where a learner-centred philosophy and a history of personalizing learning through self-paced programming were already in place. Nonetheless, buy-in among staff for the new curriculum model was dependent on educators at the school understanding the theoretical foundations of PBL and its relationship to current provincial-wide reform movements.

The staff engaged in a variety of formal and informal in-service professional development opportunities aimed at deepening their understanding of project-based learning and its applications in their school setting. Developing a shared understanding of PBL among staff and students was a priority at the beginning of the year given that the new curriculum model represented a significant shift away from more traditional, didactic teaching methods and created the need for more intentional, collaborative planning on staff. Formal school and district-based retreats, workshops, and in-service sessions helped create a shared foundation of knowledge about project-based learning and build enthusiasm among staff for its implementation at the school.

As many researchers have suggested, formal workshop approaches are usually insufficient in fostering meaningful, system-wide changes to teaching practices (Darling-
Hammond, 2008; Chappuis, Chappuis, Stiggins, 2009; Dufour, 2006). Data from the study confirmed the importance of less formal professional development opportunities that enabled staff to put new learning into practice through authentic, on-site, job-embedded experiences with students. While the staff acknowledged the benefits of formal in-service for learning about project-based learning from the “experts”, they placed a far greater emphasis and value on long-term collaboration and reflection with their colleagues. Informal learning teams on staff developed naturally and contributed in significant ways to the implementation of the PBL model.

Collaborative learning teams provide more than one-time exposure to new ideas. Over time, they can change day-to-day teaching by giving teachers the ongoing opportunity to learn together, apply learning to the classroom, and reflect on what works and why (Chappuis et al, 2009, p. 60).

7.3. Summary and Implications of the Findings – Student Data

Several predominant themes emerged from the student data that were organized into the broad categories of distancing and embracing narratives. Distancing narratives, which reflected the factors that had disengaged students from learning in their former schools, included three resonating themes: (1) barriers to learning; (2) feelings of alienation; and (3) school bureaucracies. Embracing narratives, which illustrated the many factors that re-engaged students in learning in the context of an alternative education program and within the project-based learning environment, included five resonating themes: (1) caring environment; (2) flexible learning; (3) co-constructed curriculum; (4) personal relevancy and authenticity; and (5) empowerment.
7.3.1. **Distancing Narratives**

The student participants in this study engaged freely in describing their distancing narratives – powerful stories that revealed the extent to which these youth had felt disengaged, disconnected or disempowered in their mainstream high schools. These stories emerged in every interview, regardless of which questions I asked. The three resonant themes (barriers to learning, feelings of alienation, and school bureaucracies) surfaced often in the students' stories.

**Barriers to Learning**

All of the students in the study reflected during the interviews on their personal barriers to learning while they were enrolled in mainstream schools. Students described a variety of physical and mental issues that affected their learning, including eating disorders, anxiety, and depression. Their physical and mental health challenges often caused them to be absent from school or tardy in submitting assignments. Many of the students talked about falling further and further behind and not feeling supported by their teachers in giving them extra time to complete homework. The fact that these students all experienced significant personal barriers to learning in mainstream school is consistent with the research on alternative education reviewed in Chapter Two, including in particular the profiles of alternative education students provided in the provincial *Alternative Education Policy* (BC Ministry of Education, 2009) and in the *Making the Grade Report* (McCreary Centre Society, 2008). However, students’ specific barriers to learning are not as important in this discussion as their perceptions (or recollections) of a lack of support for their challenges in their previous schools. Like the respondents in Fraser, Davis, and Singh’s (1997) identity work with alternative students, the participants in this study felt “marginalized, isolated, and devalued” (p. 221) in their previous
mainstream schools, and their residual anger, even for those who had been in alternative settings for several years, was communicated clearly in almost every interview.

**Feelings of Alienation**

During the interviews many of the students also talked about their sense of alienation or lack of connectedness in their previous school. In some cases these feelings stemmed from negative relationships with teachers that resulted from the students’ inability to conform to classroom rules or deadlines. In other cases students simply believed that teachers in their previous schools just didn’t care about them. Other students struggled to fit in socially and felt alienated by their peers. Mainstream high schools had made them feel lost and disconnected. Those attending large high schools like Megan felt overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of students in the building, and even Brennan, who had come from a relatively small school, spoke about feeling invisible to teachers and peers.

This finding is consistent with alternative education research studies (Aron, 2003 and 2006; Aronowitz, 2005; Benard, 1997) that emphasize the importance of creating a sense of safety (physical and psychological), belonging, and community in alternative settings. Students’ negative prior experiences in mainstream schools often leave them feeling alienated and vulnerable by the time they arrive in alternative schools (Saunders & Saunders, 2002). This theme is also emphasized in the literature on engagement theory. *What Did You Do in School Today? (WDYDIST)* (Willms et al, 2009) provides evidence that student engagement is closely linked to the learning climate of the school, including in particular positive student-teacher relationships and a sense of belonging. In summarizing the most salient findings of the *WDYDIST* report, Levin (2010) states,
“over half of the variation among schools in sense of belonging, regular attendance, and intellectual engagement is attributable to classroom and school learning climate” (p. 89).

**School Bureaucracies**

Many of the students also talked about the rigid timetables, strict school rules, and traditional teaching methods used in their former schools. The students’ comments are consistent with the research; the reason why students seek out alternative education in the first place is often because the rigid timetables, bell schedules, and other rules and regimens of traditional schools did not meet their needs (Fraser et al, 1997; Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Some students also talked about the transmission style approaches to teaching and the lack of relevance in the assignments for their courses in mainstream school. This finding is also reflected in the *WDYDIST* report, which emphasizes that student work needs to be “relevant, meaningful and authentic – in other words, it needs to be worthy of their time and attention” (p. 34).

The students’ distancing narratives reflect what Tilleczek, Ferguson, Roth Edney, Rummens, Bovdell & Mueller (2011) refer to as “risk factors” that contribute to early school leaving among Canadian youth. These factors raise some interesting questions about public schooling and our ability to meet the needs of our most vulnerable students. The *BC Ed Plan* (Ministry of Education, n.d.) states that our education system needs “more responsive and effective interventions for students who are struggling” (p. 3) and promises parents and educators that provincial changes to education will ensure that “every student’s needs are met” (p. 5). Many educators believe that students are best served by remaining in their home schools with appropriate supports to meet their challenges. They argue that all schools should find the means to accommodate all students. Unfortunately, despite the promises of policy makers and the predictions of
educational change theorists, many mainstream high schools still operate on an industrial model based on large class sizes, fixed timetables, and traditional instructional methods that include strict deadlines for completing course assignments. As Levin (2010) comments, “Despite all the calls for transformation of high schools, it is hard to be optimistic given the past 30 years” (p. 90). Clearly the current model of most secondary schools does not work well for students like those in this study whose personal challenges prevented them from attending school regularly and meeting deadlines for assignments. Alternative programs with smaller class sizes, flexible timetabling, and an enhanced sense of belonging, either situated within the home school or on other campuses, may provide vulnerable students with learning environments that better meet their needs. Wherever the best placement for students is determined to be, it is critical that decisions concerning supports and/or transfers to alternative settings be made in a thoughtful, timely manner. Adolescence is a time when students develop personal identities in relation to their social and educational environments. When students remain in settings that do not meet their needs they may risk developing feelings of alienation, resentment, and vulnerability in relation to school, or, worse, what Fraser et al (1997) refer to as “stained student identities” (p. 221) – negative views of themselves that may be irreversible unless new school settings, “designed to give students new ways of looking at themselves” (p. 222) are provided.

7.3.2. **Embracing Narratives**

Inviting students to reflect on the challenges and problems they had experienced in the past allowed them to distance themselves from their former identities and embrace new self-images in their current school landscape. Embracing narratives, which illustrated the many factors that re-engaged students in learning in the context of an
alternative education program, and within the project-based learning environment, included a caring environment, flexible learning, a co-constructed curriculum, personal relevancy and authenticity in learning designs, and empowerment.

**Caring Environment**

Even though there were no specific questions asked during the interviews with respect to the environment of their new school, all of the students spoke about the personalized, welcoming environment that had been established in previous alternative education programs in the school district and in the newly consolidated school. They described the staff as caring, open-minded, positive and familial. Their stories often emphasized the contrast they noticed between the teachers in their previous school and those in the alternative setting, whom some students described as being “like parents” to them. The sense of belonging and community that students encountered in the alternative school gave many of them renewed self-confidence, and helped them re-engage in learning. Most students also talked about the high level of personalized support they received from all staff in helping them overcome mental health or cognitive challenges. They worked closely on their projects with the teachers in the ISP program, but also received extra support for their academic and social emotional needs from other staff on site.

This finding is not surprising given all of the current research on best practices for alternative education. A nurturing school environment is particularly important for low achieving students or those who have disengaged from school. Supportive, caring adults in alternative schools and programs, who effectively build trusting relationships with students, play a critical role in developing the protective factors these students need to re-engage in school (Aron, 2006; Aronowitz, 2005; Bonnell and Zizys, 2005; De La
Rosa, 1998; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletton, 2002; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Morrissette, 2011). The narratives shared with me by the students in this study also reflect the responses of over 300 students in the McCreary study (2008), who reported high levels of school connectedness and positive relationships with staff as important aspects of effective alternative programs.

School connectedness, a sense of caring, and positive relationships with teachers, are also prominent themes in the current literature on secondary student engagement in general. For example, Christenson, Reschly & Wylie (2012); Parson & Taylor, 2011; Stout & Christenson, 2009; and Willms et al (2009) all emphasize the importance of affective connections within the socio-cultural context of learning, and in particular positive student-teacher relationships, for making a difference in students’ academic, social, and intellectual engagement. It seems reasonable, given the emphasis the students placed on the caring environment of the school and their positive relationships with teachers throughout the interviews, that these aspects of the alternative school climate, and of the Integrated Studies Program, created an important foundation from which students could begin to engage in the project-based learning model.

**Flexible Learning**

The alternative school had intentionally established an open and flexible learning environment for the students. Many of the students in the study mentioned their appreciation for the freedom they experienced in the school setting and in the project-based learning model of the ISP program. They commented often on the self-paced aspects of the projects and the flexible deadlines, which relieved the pressures the students had felt in mainstream schools. In fact, when asked what they liked most about
the project-based learning model several students referred back to the themes of freedom (to work on projects of their choice) and flexibility (to work at their own pace and to pursue other projects and courses outside school).

Once again, this finding is not surprising and correlates closely to the research on alternative education. Most alternative schools today are structured to offer flexible programming that is self-paced to meet the needs of students with intellectual, behavioural, social, or emotional challenges whose attendance is inconsistent or who have difficulty meeting deadlines for assignments (Lange & Sletton, 2002; Morrissette, 2011). But what was interesting in this study was that many of the students, who had experienced so many challenges with the rigidity of mainstream high school schedules and deadlines, actually found themselves becoming more engaged, self-disciplined and self-directed in their learning than they had been in their previous schools. This finding does not suggest any direct correlation or causal relationship between flexible learning environments and student engagement, but does suggest that for the students in this study the flexible learning environment (and along with it the intentional reduction of the typical external pressures of schedules and deadlines) was perhaps a factor in enhancing their autonomy and ability to successfully engage in the project-based learning model.

**A Co-Constructed Curriculum**

One of the most important and interesting aspects of the project-based learning model adopted by the Integrated Studies Program (ISP) teachers was the emphasis on a co-constructed curriculum philosophy. Students engaged in a process of co-designing projects with their teachers. Rather than using learning outcomes as the starting point, the ISP teachers initially met one-on-one with students to help them imagine projects
that would reflect their interests and passions. The teachers then worked in collaboration with students to determine which required learning outcomes could be applied to each project and to help them develop vision statements (a rationale for their project) to anchor their work. Once students got started on their projects they had frequent touchback sessions with the teachers to check on their progress, adjust learning outcomes, seek help from other teachers as needed, and make revisions to their project designs. In addition, students had frequent opportunities to share their progress on the projects with their peers. Many of the students interviewed in the study expressed their appreciation for having what came to be known by the group as “voice and choice” in their learning. For students like Tammy the co-constructed curriculum philosophy represented respect for and acknowledgement of her ability to direct her own learning. Other students, who needed a bit more direction, appreciated that the teachers helped them find inspiration for their projects without directing or deciding what they chose for their topics. During the interviews students frequently acknowledged the ownership they felt over their projects as a result of the process of co-construction. This finding has implications for the on-going conceptualization of project-based learning models and approaches to planning. In many other PBL models in the United States and Canada students complete projects that are designed by teachers and driven by state core standards or provincial learning outcomes (see for example Edutopia, PBL Online, Buck Institute for Education, and other websites dedicated to project-based learning models). It is promising to note that in their most recent book, Krauss and Boss (2013) describe two distinct planning approaches for project-based learning:

There are several ways to start designing projects. One is to select among learning objectives described in the curriculum and textbooks that guide your teaching and to plan learning experiences based on these.
Another is to “back in” to the standards, starting with a compelling idea and then mapping it to the objectives to ensure there is a fit with what students are expected to learn. (Krauss and Boss, 2013, p. 54)

The first approach represents what many teachers use, including the Junior Cohort teachers in this study (Brianne, Susan, and Terri) who collaborated on the development of PBL multi-disciplinary units for their academic courses. The second more closely resembles the project-based learning planning approach used by the ISP teachers.

This dual approach to PBL planning offered by Krauss and Boss provides greater flexibility for teachers to plan projects based on topics of current interest rather than topics driven by learning outcomes. However, it does not explicitly encourage or promote the active involvement of students in the design process. Despite the emphasis on student-driven learning, student choice and decision-making, and self-direction of learning apparent in the descriptions of project-based learning (see for example Blumenfeld et al, 1991; Grant, 2002 & 2011; Railsback, 2002; Thomas, 2000), there are very few examples of project-based learning models available that promote the co-construction of projects by teachers and students.

The unique approach to PBL planning that was adopted by the ISP teachers probably does not adhere to currently accepted frameworks for project-based learning in which the driving questions, developed in alignment with learning outcomes, anchor the unit of study to the learning outcomes and ensure academic rigour. As John often mentioned during the interviews, the ISP was not “textbook PBL.” Nonetheless, within the context of the educational setting of this study, this collaborative and creative approach to PBL planning, which focused on a philosophy of co-construction based on students’ interests and passions, was a key factor in engaging students in learning.
While provincial learning outcomes for courses and the requirements for graduation (see BC Ministry of Education, 2004) were certainly addressed in the design of each project, the real outcomes for these students were perhaps enhanced levels of confidence and sense of personal efficacy.

**Personal Relevancy and Authenticity in Learning Designs**

The students in this study all expressed their appreciation for being able to explore their own individual topics for their projects based on personal interests. Many of the students, who had been frustrated by having to learn things they perceived as uninteresting or irrelevant in their former high schools, commented many times in the interviews that it was easier and more personally fulfilling to engage in learning that was relevant to their interests or ambitions. For some students the relevancy in learning came from pursuing their passions and talents (artwork, storytelling, photo journaling, film making) or a project connected to family or social issues (researching the Downtown Eastside); for others it came from the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of their personal challenges (anxiety, depression, etc.) or explore career options (aesthetics, jewellery-making).

Authenticity of learning was another important theme in the student interviews and in the other ISP student projects. Connecting to real audiences, through sharing sessions with peers and teachers at the school, public presentations, exhibitions and art shows, and online social media networks (student blogs and websites) were aspects of the projects that engaged the students I interviewed in their learning – socially, cognitively, and academically. Designing, creating, and selling their jewellery to teachers during the student presentations in February was a motivating factor for Brennan and his partner who then actively pursued other opportunities for selling their
artisanal products at community night markets. Teachers provided on-going assessment to students on various aspects of the projects, but for many of the students in the ISP, the feedback they received from real audiences was a far greater motivator for completing their projects. Publication of the students’ projects became a driving force for many of the youth who wanted their work to be seen or read by “real audiences.” Maya arranged, through an online publishing source, for many of the students’ projects to be professionally bound in beautiful hard cover books. Megan mentioned this in her interview when she talked about having her project on Anxiety published as a “legit book.” The published books arrived in June and the students were thrilled with the professional look of their writing and artwork.

Other students, who were not interviewed for the study, but whose progress I followed through discussions with the staff, had significantly increased their engagement in school and their self-confidence through learning opportunities that took them off-site to explore projects with real-world connections. The two students who had initially worked with Cindy on school-based gardening projects, eventually decided to start a landscaping business. They designed a business plan, created a graphic logo, and developed a client base for providing landscaping services to homeowners in the community. By the end of the spring they were invoicing clients and had made over $1000 from their new business. They also shared their design for the school’s sustainable garden project at the School District’s Green Fair in April 2013. According to staff at the school, attendance for both students, who suffered from significant birth defects, learning disabilities, and mental health issues, had increased considerably. Another student, whose passion for reptiles was well known among teachers and her peers, had found a captive audience for sharing her project by developing an interactive
presentation on reptile awareness (with her live pets!) to share with elementary schools in the community. Her first presentation was such a success that other elementary school principals began contacting her to book presentations at their schools. In total she presented her reptile awareness workshop to over 500 elementary students in the School District.

The themes of relevancy and authenticity are mentioned somewhat tangentially in the literature on alternative education. Raywid (1994) talks about student choice and authentic assessment as hallmarks of effective alternative education practices. Bonnell and Zizys (2005) and the McCreary report (2008) emphasize the importance of strength-based approaches that help alternative education students develop confidence and self-efficacy through learning and leadership opportunities that highlight their unique interests and talents. Yet research on alternative education offers very little in terms of concrete suggestions for curriculum models or instructional approaches.

On the other hand, relevance, authenticity, and real-world connections are featured predominantly in the current conceptualizations of the project-based learning model. Well-designed projects have relevance, authenticity, and transferability beyond the classroom (Blumenfeld et al, 1991; Newmann, 2006; Thomas, 2000). More specifically, Larmer & Mergendoller (2010a) see relevancy for the learner as a key criterion for a meaningful project: “students must perceive it as personally meaningful, as a task that matters and that they want to do well” (p.53). Barron and Darling-Hammond (2008) have said that authentic projects provide unique opportunities for learning. This thought is further developed in a quote from Boss & Krauss (2007) that reflects in many ways the project-based learning experience in this study: “When students learn by engaging in real-world projects, nearly every aspect of their experience changes” (p. 11).
The findings from this study suggest that projects that are personally meaningful, relevant, and connected to authentic purposes and audiences, can significantly increase alternative education students’ engagement in learning. These findings may also have implications for the design of project-based learning models in mainstream schools.

**Empowerment**

The final, and perhaps most important, resonating theme from the students’ embracing narratives was empowerment through self-expression, self-determination, and self-actualization. Students’ projects had allowed them to find their voices, understand their own learning processes and challenges, develop greater autonomy in their learning, and begin to recognize their own strengths and talents. The students in the ISP program shared many narratives during our interviews that reflected their growing self-determination, motivation, and sense of ownership of their learning. Students who chose to design their projects on topics related to personal and mental health issues challenges were developing greater self-awareness, self-efficacy, and resiliency. For these students, who had not experienced success in previous learning environments, the process was transformative.

The ISP program provided students with opportunities to express themselves artistically and to discover inner strengths they didn’t know they had. Many, like Claire who communicated in the interviews how shy and fearful of change she had been for most of her life, recognized her own transformation during the development of her “artistic exposure” project. She commented often during the interview on her growing confidence and leadership and her ability to direct her own learning, which seemed to surprise her. Claire’s self-empowerment lead to many personal successes during the year including a Youth Recognition Award early in the fall of 2013 and the presentation
of a significant body of artistic work at the exhibition of student learning in June. Kim’s comments also reflect a deep appreciation for the learning environment of the ISP that provided the freedom for her to express who she really was in her artistic pursuits without fear of being labeled or judged. She felt accepted in the alternative school and was beginning to develop greater determination and resiliency as a result. Her ability to persevere with projects (finishing what she started) was, as she said, the most enjoyable aspect of project-based learning. Lisa, who had struggled with written assignments, also discovered her hidden talents and developed the self-determination to improve her writing through an engaging multi-media project on homelessness in the Downtown Eastside. Many of the students, like Tammy and Elizabeth who previously had difficulty completing assignments in their mainstream schools, were surprised to find themselves putting in extra hours outside of school researching and enhancing their ISP projects. No one at the school was asking these students to do homework. I believe it was their passion for their projects, which provided opportunities for authentic self-expression and self-actualization that drove their efforts.

The project work in which the students in this study were engaged was intrinsically motivating and contributed significantly to their social emotional and cognitive development throughout the year. More importantly, the projects significantly helped the students develop a more positive sense of self for many students. These findings confirm earlier research on alternative education that reinforces the need for effective programming for vulnerable youth to engage in self-expression, self-exploration and self-definition (Bonnell and Zizys, 2005, p. 7). This study suggests that providing students with opportunities to express themselves authentically, to explore their passions and interests, and to engage in learning that is personally relevant can help
them develop self-determination and greater autonomy over their learning. These kinds of opportunities may significantly enhance processes of healing and self-actualization.

### 7.4. Lingering Questions and Recommendations for Further Research

Most teachers and students in this study spoke passionately about their experience with the project-based learning model. Many of them recognized that they were involved in a pilot project that was unique to the school district and perhaps even unique in the field of alternative education. As a result, they wanted to share how successful the program had been for them. The ISP teachers and other teachers in the school, who developed PBL units for their students, shared their successes with me during the interviews, with colleagues from across the School District at the *Designs 2013* series, and with the Board of Education Trustees in a presentation in May 2013. Students were also noticeably enthusiastic about the PBL approach during their interviews. They willingly shared their stories and projects with me and with others in presentations and public exhibitions of learning.

I too was impressed by the narratives I heard and by the amazing artefacts of student learning. The study has filled me with hope about how powerful and effective learning can be for students in alternative settings. And yet I am left with some lingering questions. First, with respect to the staff I wonder about the factors that contributed to their professional growth and development during the implementation of the PBL model. The many foundational factors that emerged from the data, including an emphasis on positive relationships with students, a commitment to student-centered learning, flexible scheduling, staff collaboration, and administrative support, are, without a doubt, key
elements in effective curriculum development and school change theories. What I wonder is whether or not these particular elements can be created and sustained in every school culture. In other words, are these features of school culture that can be developed (through team building exercises, pot luck lunches, and in-service), or are they intrinsically linked to the personalities, educational philosophies, and worldviews of the educators at the school? Palmer (2007) suggests that relational trust is “built on movements of the human heart such as empathy, commitment, compassion, patience, and the capacity to forgive” (p. xvii). The teachers and administrators in this study had all chosen to work with vulnerable youth; many in fact had been in alternative education for their entire career. They were accustomed to working collaboratively with one another to create caring learning environments for students. Their compassion and commitment to an ethic of care in the building seemed to extend as well to their relationships with colleagues; and this culture of care permeated every meeting I attended during the study. Even when challenges and differences of opinion arose in the process of implementation, the staff resolved them in a collegial manner and with a noticeable level of respect and social trust. Did they develop these attributes or is there a natural self-selection process inherent in staffing for alternative education that simply results in high proportions of caring individuals coming together as colleagues? Could this same ethos of care and social trust be reproduced in other secondary school settings? If so, what are the requirements and supports that need to be put into place to make it happen? Further research, focusing specifically on the development of these foundational factors would be interesting and timely given the current emphasis on teacher inquiry and professional learning communities.
Other questions I have related to staff development concern the possible relationship between teachers’ views about project-based learning and their epistemological assumptions. As previously noted in Chapter Four, two of the teachers from the study who also participated in the Designs 2013 leadership team, informally completed Babin’s (1978) *Curriculum Orientation Profile* with me, which indicated their predisposition for what Eisner (1985) referred to as “self-actualization” and “development of cognitive processes” curriculum orientations. I wonder how many other teachers at the alternative school shared these worldviews with respect to education? I also wonder if there is a correlation between teachers’ curriculum orientations and the various approaches to project-based learning planning proposed by PBL experts like Krauss and Boss (2013). In other words, do teachers with more of an “academic rationalist orientation” (Eisner, 1985) lean more towards a teacher-centered approach to PBL design that begins with learning outcomes first, while those with a predisposition for the “self-actualization” or “development of cognitive processes” orientations prefer to start with student’ interests and work backward to fit in the required learning outcomes? This study did not specifically address these questions, but does present multiple opportunities for further research that might help us develop approaches to project-based learning (and to corresponding professional development to support the implementation of PBL) that align more closely with teachers’ educational philosophies and better reflect specific learning contexts such as alternative education settings.

With respect to the student data, I am left with one important lingering question. During the interview with Tammy I asked her if it were the teachers or the project-based learning curriculum that was making her re-engage and re-invest in school. She replied that it was “both”, explaining her answer without hesitation. The PBL would not have
been possible for her without the support of the teachers, but that without the option to meet learning objectives through project-based learning she would not have been successful towards completing the courses she needed for graduation. I consider Tammy’s answer to be both insightful and wise. In hindsight, I wish I had incorporated this same question into all of the student interviews. Given the number who spoke so enthusiastically and so frequently about the welcoming environment of the school and about their positive relationships with teachers, I still wonder if the students’ success with project-based learning was more an outcome of the affective and relational aspects of the caring learning environment at the school and less an outcome of the project-based learning model itself. Or do they both need to be in place in equal portions to successfully engage vulnerable youth? This study could be extended through qualitative research to explore these questions further. These kinds of studies would contribute in meaningful ways to the implementation of project-based learning in other contexts, including other alternative education settings.

Extensive research has already been conducted with respect to student engagement (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012; Willms et al, 2009) and the field of education is beginning to realize how important student engagement really is as a factor for student success. As Levin (2010) reminds us:

Everything we say we want for students — from the desire to be lifelong learners to effective citizenship to academic skill development to completion of high school and participation in postsecondary education— is tied to high levels of student engagement (p. 90).

In their article on the cultural geography of schools and its impact on vulnerable students, Smyth and Hattam (2002) urged educators and policy makers to “provide space for the enunciation of young people’s voices” (p. 376) in discussions about school
change. At that time they believed that students, particularly those at risk of leaving school, were being largely ignored. In current research on student engagement greater attention is being paid to student voice (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Willms et al, 2009). Students wish to be heard and we now recognize that they have valuable and authentic contributions to make to our discussions about school improvement. This was evident even in this small study. Although it was initially challenging to get students’ Informed Consent forms and schedule interviews with them, once the interviews began I was amazed by how much these youth had to say and the enthusiasm with which they expressed their views. Even more surprising to me were the students, like Elizabeth and Lisa, who thanked me at the end of the interview for the opportunity to share their views and contribute to research that might provide the impetus for positive, systemic change in education. This study contributes to the growing field of research that is attempting to define student engagement more clearly by bringing students’ voices into the dialogue.

7.5. Recommendations for Practice

Doctoral research in education should not only connect the situational or phenomenological aspects of a small-scale study to theoretical hypotheses, but also to broader discourses related to teaching and system-wide educational practices. Based on the findings of this study, I offer the following recommendations for practice:

1. I recommend that practitioners in all educational contexts pay close attention to the social, emotional, and relational elements of school culture that affect learning and growth for both educators and students. Implementation of school-wide curriculum design requires a high level of collaboration, positive interactions, and social trust among colleagues for genuine communities of
practice to develop. Likewise, positive student-teacher relationships and a sense of belonging are prerequisites for authentic and sustained student engagement in learning.

2. Given the concerns and research relating to student engagement, I recommend that alternative education programs and schools explore approaches to curriculum (including project-based learning) that allow students and teachers to co-construct learning opportunities that are closely linked to students’ passions, interests, or career aspirations. Student voice in decision-making should be prioritized in order to ensure that learning is relevant and connected to students’ lives.

3. I recommend that practitioners consider a broader range of conceptual frameworks and design tools for project-based learning that align with the goals, settings, and student clientele of specific educational contexts (e.g. elementary vs. secondary schools, mainstream vs. alternative, secondary, technology-rich classrooms or schools, arts-based programs, etc.)

7.6. Personal Reflections on Self as Instrument of Inquiry

As I reflect on the research study I have conducted, and on my own learning and growth, I am once again reminded of Plantanida and Garman’s (2009) concept of developing oneself as “an instrument of inquiry” (p. 59). I began this study from the perspective of a district administrator with expertise in curriculum design and implementation. I wanted to study the development and implementation of a project-based learning model. However, as I lived through the study, the focus on the PBL curriculum became less compelling than other phenomena. In explaining the criterion of
vérité in qualitative research, Plantanida and Garman (2009, p. 194) remind us that qualitative researchers must cultivate and maintain a mind-set that is conducive to authentic inquiry. While there may be a temptation to promote one’s beliefs or preferred educational theories, authentic researchers maintain a sincere desire to learn from the inquiry and a willingness to shift to a posture of “deliberative curiosity” (p. 194). Arrogance and certainty must give way to “a more tenuous relationship with life’s ambiguities” (p. 229).

By allowing the data in this study to emerge and resonate with me, I soon realized that this study was becoming more of an examination of the relational aspects of learning than a pure exploration of curriculum design and implementation. In the end, I think it was both. I am left with this final thought – new curriculum design, no matter how innovative, creative, or compelling it might be in theory, is intrinsically dependent on the social emotional quality of the learning environment, both for the educator and the students. I believe it was the project-based learning approach to curriculum design, the strong ethic of care within the learning environment of the alternative school, and the many factors that contributed to both, that ultimately re-engaged these students in learning and helped them to self-actualize.

7.7. Summary and Conclusions: Re-imaging Alternative Education

Much of the literature on alternative education, including research studies (see for example Bonnell & Zizys, 2005; Aron 2003; Aronowitz, 2005; Calabrese et al, 2006 & 2007; De La Rosa, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006) and government policy documents, uses the term “at-risk youth” to describe the students who attend alternative secondary
programs or schools. I have purposefully avoided that terminology in this study because that is not my perception of the students who participated in this research. Furthermore, it is not how the students see themselves. Those with learning challenges, who might be considered low achievers in traditional disciplines of the curriculum, developed strategies for learning and the confidence to pursue their vocational dreams in the future. Those considered vulnerable because of mental health and other personal issues, had found ways to understand their challenges and recognize their strengths and talents through self-expression within a caring community of educators and peers. Their confidence, resiliency, and sense of empowerment came not from focusing on their deficits, but rather from a growth mindset and strengths-based approach to learning and self-actualization. Not one of these students ever once used the term “at risk” (or “dropout”) in speaking about themselves during the interviews. However, their narratives did reveal evidence that the mainstream education system is in fact “at risk of failing” some of the students it serves.

There is a great deal of emphasis on accountability in the public education system in British Columbia. Students’ academic outcomes are regularly monitored through standardized assessments in literacy and numeracy in elementary school, and through required provincial examinations in the senior secondary grades. In addition, schools and school districts must complete annual plans to monitor and report on student achievement and completion and graduation rates. There is no question that the accountability agenda is a prominent consideration in this province. But in posing the question “for what should schools be held accountable?”, Noddings (2005, p. xiv) urges us to consider the obligation of schools, beyond test scores, to be responsive to the needs of students within a climate of caring relationships. “To listen attentively and to
respond as positively as possible are the very hallmarks of caring” (p. xiv). Noddings advocates for changes to the current system of education that would expand the concept of accountability.

We look for the development of democratic character, critical thinking, and caring. We will hold our schools responsible not just for outcomes, but for the opportunities and choices they offer (Noddings, 2005, p. xx).

One teacher in the current study defined alternative education youth quite simply as “students whose reality does not match up with mainstream high school” (John, personal communication, June 7, 2013). Well-designed alternative education programs, with smaller teacher-student ratios, flexible learning environments, and on-site wrap-around services, offer these students an educational environment that is more responsive to their needs than traditional high school settings. Yet, misconceptions of alternative schools and the students who attend them continue to contribute to negative stereotypes and marginalization of these educational options. “Despite the growth, value, and popularity throughout the world, a negative connotation continues to loom over alternative education” (Morrissette, 2011, 170). This is unfortunate, since alternative education programs built on the foundation of Noddings “ethic of care” have the potential to reverse the effects of the negative labels, stigmas, and “stained student identities” (Fraser et al, 1997, p. 222) that are often experienced by alternative students in their previous mainstream school settings.

In Canada, researchers and educational scholars are focusing more attention than ever before on the relationship between the quality of educational environments and student achievement. Concerns regarding secondary students’ social, academic, and intellectual disengagement at school (Levin, 2010; Willms et al, 2009) and the
number of youth who drop out of school have heightened the need to find educational options that are substantially different from mainstream school practices. We need schools, programs, and approaches to teaching and learning that re-engage our most vulnerable youth in challenging, meaningful pursuits that allow them to express who they are, think critically, and direct their own learning towards personal interests and future goals.

Noddings reminds us that the field of education is prone to a “desire to reduce all teaching and learning to one well-defined method” (2005, p. 7). Project-based learning is currently considered to be a promising new model for teaching and learning that successfully engages students in complex, multidisciplinary tasks and promotes inquiry, critical thinking and authentic problem solving. PBL has been well defined by various scholars and conceptual frameworks and appears to be taking the educational world by storm. However, a single-minded emphasis on the PBL methodology, without consideration for the relational foundation on which it is built, will not necessarily ensure its successful implementation. A school climate in which caring relationships are in place is a critical element for curriculum implementation if we wish all students (and not just the high achievers) to succeed. The findings of this research suggest that if positive inter-relational conditions are established in the learning environment among teachers and students (sense of belonging, trusting relationships, collaborative practices, ethic of care) project-based learning can be an effective curriculum model for re-engaging vulnerable youth in school. Furthermore, the study suggests that a PBL curriculum model, grounded in students’ interests and passions, can provide personally relevant, authentic learning opportunities that empower alternative education students and help them develop resiliency, self-efficacy, and more positive self-images.
7.8. Epilogue

This story began in a school gymnasium filled with angry residents from a local neighbourhood chosen as the location for a newly consolidated alternative program. Fears, negative stereotypes, and misconceptions of alternative youth filled the space that night until one brave girl spoke passionately to the crowd of local citizens about their moral commitment to provide quality education to vulnerable youth. To illustrate the transformation of this school community in just one year, I end this story with another student voice – a young man who proudly gave the valedictorian speech to a record number of graduates and their families from the alternative school:

This year was different; we merged two programs and out of it came a new academic experience and a new school culture. The transition has been difficult, all the students and teachers deserve a lot of credit for enduring the seemingly endless renovations.

Another mountain we had to climb was that the neighbourhood was apprehensive about having alternative kids and our new program replacing the old school, but we’ve blended quite nicely into the community, where a student from this school isn’t any different than a student from another secondary school.

Some people may think this was the easy way out, but after the years we have put into our education it would be hard to say it was easy. We have grown and matured with many of you here tonight and every last one of us should be proud that we have set the bar high for future graduates.

This school is for the persistent person,

For the compassionate, the compulsive, the frightened,

For the strong, the shy or distracted,

For the worrying or proud person,
For the analytical or quiet, angry and determined, the academic or athletic,

For the artistic and complicated person,

For the philosophical and emotional, cultured and innovated, nurturing or technical, hands on and constructive, creative and thoughtful person.

This school is for all of us.³

³ Excerpt from graduation valedictorian speech June 24, 2013. The names of schools and the student author have been omitted to protect the identity of the participants in this study.
References


National Alternative Education Association (2009). Exemplary practices in alternative education: Indicators of quality programming. NAEA.


Appendix A. Staff Informed Consent Form

RE: Informed Consent for Staff Participants in a Research Study at the North Vancouver School District Community Learning Program (October 2012-June 2013)

October 1, 2012

Dear Program Staff Member,

As a graduate student in Simon Fraser University's Ed D (Doctor of Education) program, I am seeking your agreement to participate in a qualitative research study. The research will focus on the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning model in North Vancouver School District's new Community Learning Program. The study will involve the participation of staff, students and community partners. The data collected during this study will contribute to the development of my doctoral dissertation.

The research study will take place at the Program’s site during the 2012-2013 school year. Please find attached an Informed Consent form that provides more detailed information regarding the research study. The signed consent form is required for your participation in this research.

Approval for this study has been obtained from the North Vancouver School District and the Department of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University.

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this study, please do not hesitate to call or email me.

Sincerely,

Joanne Robertson
Simon Fraser University Ed D

Email: 
Phone: 
INFORMED CONSENT

Program Staff

Simon Fraser University and Joanne Robertson, the researcher conducting this research study, subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under the permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological wellbeing of participants. Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, the responsibilities of researchers, or have questions or concerns, please contact my Research Supervisor Dr. Milton McClaren by email at mcclaren@sfu.ca, or by phone at 250-764-8781. A secondary contact for questions or concerns is the Director, Office of Research Ethics, who may be reached by email at hweinberg@sfu.ca or phone at 778-782-6593.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received this document which describes the procedures for this study, that you have reviewed all pages of this document, considered whether there are possible risks and benefits associated with this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

TITLE: Designing for Learning in the 21st Century: The Development and Implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in a Suburban Public School Alternate Education Setting

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Joanne Robertson

SFU GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISOR: Dr. Milt McClaren

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study will investigate the factors that influence the design, development and implementation of a project-based curriculum model within a new community-based alternative education program in a suburban public school district.

PROCEDURE: Your participation in this study is being sought in your capacity as a staff member involved in the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning model in School District's Community Learning Program. The research component of the study will take place in the School District from October 2012 to June 2013. It will include 1:1 semi-structured interviews, focus group sessions, observation, and informal dialogue with staff during meetings, in-service sessions and other events throughout the year. The organizing theme for the research as it relates to staff is:

What professional development requirements are necessary to enable the successful design and implementation of a project-based curriculum design for a community-based alternative education program?

Topics to be discussed with staff participants during interviews, focus group sessions, and informal conversations will include the following:

As you consider the implementation of project-based learning so far this year in the new Program, in your view:

1. What have been the successes of the PBL model for you so far?
2. Have there been any challenges for you?

3. What professional development and other opportunities have been most effective to date in supporting the implementation of the PBL model in your teaching practice?

4. What other kinds of professional support do you need at this time?

Your answers to these questions will be digitally recorded during the interview, transcribed, and stored electronically in a secure place. You will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews and make edits, corrections to ensure accuracy of the written transcriptions.

RISKS TO THE PARTICIPANT: This research study is considered to involve minimal risk. The probability and magnitude of possible harms incurred by your participation in this research will be no greater than those encountered by you in your everyday life at work and school. Participation by teachers or staff who are in the employ of the [redacted] School District is totally voluntary. Refusal to participate, or withdrawal from the study after agreeing to participate, will have no effect on any aspect of your terms of employment or career development with the school district. The study will be designed and conducted with the utmost concern for the welfare of all participants and in a manner that protects them from any avoidable risks.

BENEFITS OF STUDY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW KNOWLEDGE: Through the analysis of data collected during this study, the research will attempt to isolate and identify both the specific design factors that contribute to the successful implementation of a new PBL model in an alternative education setting, as well as the challenges and obstacles that arise throughout the process. The conclusions and recommendations resulting from this research may provide other school districts and their communities with valuable information relating to the design and implementation of new educational learning models for alternate education students.

STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Interviews and focus group sessions will be audiotaped and may also be videotaped only with the express permission of participants. Research notes and interview transcriptions will be kept on the hard drive of my password-protected computer for the purposes of analysis. The computer will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only by me. A back-up copy of all research data will be kept on an external hard drive in a locked cabinet in my office. After analysis is complete in 2013, the data will be transferred from my computer to an external hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet in my office until June 2015.

The confidentiality of all participants’ identities will be assured and maintained throughout this study through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage. A document containing the list of pseudonyms and participants’ real names and other important information will be kept securely in print form and on an external hard drive in a locked cabinet in my office. The identities of study participants, schools and the school district, and other locations will not be revealed in any published research results.

By consenting to participate in the staff focus group for this study, you confirm that any information you encounter will be kept confidential and not revealed by parties out the focus group. Although the objective is to maintain confidentiality, it cannot be guaranteed.
INFORMED CONSENT for STAFF PARTICIPANTS

SFU Research Study at the [Blank] Program

2012-2013

Having been asked to participate in the research study described above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in this document (pages 1-4) describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation from this research study at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with Dr. Milton McClaren by email at [Blank] or by phone at [Blank]. A secondary contact for questions or concerns is the Director, Office of Research Ethics, who may be reached by email at [Blank].

I may obtain copies of the results of this study upon its completion by contacting Joanne Robertson by telephone at [Blank] or through email at [Blank].

Participant’s First and Last Name:
__________________________________________________________

Title/Role: _______________________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Participant Contact Information:

Telephone: ___________________________ Email: ___________________________
Appendix B. Student/Parent Informed Consent Forms

Simon Fraser University

October 1, 2012

Dear [Parent/Guardian],

I am writing to you as a parent/guardian of a student enrolled in a new educational program being offered in the [School District] School District. As a graduate student in Simon Fraser University’s Ed D (Doctor of Education) program, I am seeking your agreement for your child to participate in a qualitative research study. The research will focus on the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning model in the new [Program] Program. The study will involve the participation of staff, students and community partners at the [Program]. The data collected during this study will contribute to the development of my doctoral dissertation focusing on the implementation of project-based learning models.

Approval for this study has been obtained from the [School District] School District and the Department of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University.

The research study will take place at the [Program] Program’s school site during the 2012-2013 school year. Please find attached an Informed Consent form that provides more detailed information regarding the research study. The signed consent form is required for your child’s participation in this research.

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this study, please do not hesitate to call or email me.

Sincerely,

Joanne Robertson

Email: jar17@sfu.ca

Phone: 778-773-9092
INFORMED CONSENT
Community Learning Program Students

Simon Fraser University and Joanne Robertson, the researcher conducting this research study, subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under the permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological wellbeing of participants. Should you wish to obtain information about the rights of participants in research, the responsibilities of researchers, or have questions or concerns, please contact my Research Supervisor Dr. Milton McClaren by email at mcclaren@sfu.ca or by phone at 250-764-8781. A secondary contact for questions or concerns is the Director, Office of Research Ethics, who may be reached by email or phone at hweinberg@sfu.ca.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received this document which describes the procedures for this study, that you have reviewed all pages of this document, considered whether there are possible risks and benefits associated with this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to have your child participate in the study.

TITLE: Designing for Learning in the 21st Century: The Development and Implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in a Suburban Public School Alternate Education Setting

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Joanne Robertson

SFU GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISOR:
Dr. Milt McClaren

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study will investigate the factors that influence the design, development and implementation of a project-based curriculum model within a new community-based alternative education program in a suburban public school district.

PROCEDURE: Your child’s participation in this study is being sought in your capacity as a student engaged in the design, development and implementation of a project-based learning model in School District’s Program. The research component of this study will take place in School District from September 2012 to June 2013. It will include 1:1 semi-structured interviews, focus
group sessions, observation, and informal dialogue with your child throughout the year. The organizing theme for the research as it relates to students is:

What design factors effectively engage adolescent, alternative education students in a project-based curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students in designing (with adult educators) projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

Topics to be discussed with student participants during interviews, focus group sessions, and informal conversations will include the following:

When you think about your own experience so far as a student in the new Program:

1. Which aspects of this alternative program do you really like?
2. What projects or activities have engaged you the most so far this year?
3. Are learning activities at the school personally relevant/meaningful for you?
4. Do you have a voice in decisions made at the school regarding your learning?
5. Have you actively contributed to the design of learning experiences in the school?
6. Are projects and assignments open-ended enough to allow for you to pursue areas of personal interest?
7. What opportunities have you had to work collaboratively with other students?
8. Have you had opportunities in your assignments and projects to interact with and learn more about the local community?
9. Is there anything you don’t like or would like to change in this program?
10. What improvements would you like to see at the school?

Your child’s answers to these questions will be digitally recorded during the interview, transcribed, and stored electronically in a secure place. They will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews and make edits, corrections to ensure accuracy of the written transcriptions.
RISKS TO THE PARTICIPANT: This research study is considered to involve minimal risk. The probability and magnitude of possible harms incurred by participating in this research will be no greater than those encountered by students in their everyday lives at school. Participation by students enrolled at the [Community Learning Program] School District is totally voluntary. Refusal to participate, or withdrawal from the study after agreeing to participate, will have no effect on any aspect of students’ academic performance or evaluation. The study will be designed and conducted with the upmost concern for the welfare of all participants and in a manner that protects them from any avoidable risks.

BENEFITS OF STUDY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW KNOWLEDGE: By analyzing the responses to the questions listed above, my research will attempt to identify ways in which secondary students can engage in and contribute to the successful design and implementation of a project-based learning model. The conclusions and recommendations of the research will provide other school districts and their communities with valuable information relating to the design and implementation of new educational learning models for alternate education students.

STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Interviews and focus group sessions will be audiotaped and may also be videotaped only with the express permission of participants. Research notes and interview transcriptions will be kept on the hard drive of my password-protected computer for the purposes of analysis. The computer will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only by me. A back-up copy of all research data will be kept on an external hard drive in a locked cabinet in my office. After analysis is complete in 2013, the data will be transferred from my computer to an external hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet in my office until June 2015.

The confidentiality of all participants’ identities will be assured and maintained throughout this study through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage. A document containing the list of pseudonyms and participants’ real names and other important information will be kept securely in print form and on an external hard drive in a locked cabinet in my office. The identities of study participants, schools and the school district, and other locations will not be revealed in any published research results.

By consenting to having your child participate in the student focus group for this study, you confirm that any information they encounter will be kept confidential and not revealed by parties out the focus group. Although the objective is to maintain confidentiality, it cannot be guaranteed.
INFORMED CONSENT for STUDENT PARTICIPANTS
SFU Research Study at the Community Learning Program
2012-2013

Having been asked to have my child participate in the research study described above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in this document (pages 1-4) describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to my child in taking part in the study.

I understand that my child may withdraw his/her participation from this research study at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with Dr. Milton McClaren by email, or by phone at . A secondary contact for questions or concerns is the Director, Office of Research Ethics, who may be reached by email at or phone at .

I may obtain copies of the results of this study upon its completion by contacting Joanne Robertson by telephone at or through email .

Student’s First and Last Name:

Parent/Guardian First and Last Name:

Signature: __________________ Date: __________________

Parent/Guardian Contact Information:

Telephone: ______________ Email: ______________
Appendix C. Student Data Coding and Analysis

Organizing Theme: What design factors effectively engage adolescent learners in a project-based curriculum design? Which factors contribute to successfully engaging students in designing (with adult educators) projects that are personally relevant and meaningful?

Topics discussed with student participants during interviews:

My Initial Open and Axial Coding of Student Data

In my coding of the student data from the student interviews I created the following table to align the questions I asked to the answers provided by the students. From their responses I began to recognize salient themes emerging from the data that corresponded to my core research question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>SALIENT THEMES from RESPONSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me what school was like for you before you came to this school/</td>
<td>RISK FACTORS:⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>project-based learning program?</td>
<td>Barriers to learning - undiagnosed or little support for learning disabilities, anxiety, shyness, lack of self-advocacy skills, mental and physical illnesses, too many school changes, lack of interest in school, truancy, expulsion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No sense of Belonging – big schools (felt ‘lost’, unnoticed), ‘fell through the cracks’, too many students, difficulty fitting in, making friends, peer pressure (ridiculed, bullied)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rigid Structure – bell schedule, , deadlines for assignments, falling behind with work, too much homework, didn’t get help needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative Relationship with Teachers – lack of understanding of special needs or situations of students, no sense of connection, critical of students, verbally abusive (“dumb’, ‘a failure’), staff helped but didn’t care, mean, didn’t explain things,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative Self-Concept – anxious, shy, embarrassed, uncomfortable feeling stupid, worthless, incapable, overwhelmed, afraid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴ Risk Factors and Protective Factors are terms used by Tilleczek et al 2011 in their Study of Early School Leavers (Toronto, Ontario). They have been used here to demonstrate the risk factors students experienced in mainstream schools vs. the protective factors they identified experiencing in alternate school settings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What was different in the alternate school?\textsuperscript{5}</th>
<th>PROTECTIVE FACTORS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethic of care – welcoming, safe environment, supportive staff, acceptance of differences, easier to make friends, staff care about the kids, their well-being, their career plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specialized/Personalized Attention – help from teachers, diagnosis and support for LDs, therapeutic day program to address emotional issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers – caring, helpful, present, personal, more like friends, family, parent, first names, trusting, ‘they don’t judge you’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility – no bells, less structure, more freedom, work at your own pace, choice, open schedule, fewer routines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which aspects of project-based learning do you really like?</th>
<th><strong>Choosing Topics of Personal Interest</strong> – related to family, personal stories and challenges, career aspirations, opportunity to pursue personal skills and talents, passions, ‘something you care about and enjoy’, not everybody doing the same project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Flexibility</em> – less structured, personalized, ability to learn in different ways, self-paced, flexible deadlines, freedom to do what you want, when you want/can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivating – wanting to complete projects, come to school (improved attendance), thinking about projects at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Real Audience for Work – sharing with peers, online, student presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Expression/Actualization – being able to show who they are, completing/creating something personally meaningful, making your own decisions, being responsible – taking charge of learning (‘taking school into your own hands’), doing work for yourself (‘being your own boss’), having teachers trust you and value your time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{5} This question was never asked during the interviews; however, almost every student answered it anyway by comparing their experience in mainstream and alternate school settings. Therefore I have included the salient themes for this implied question in the data analysis since they constitute ‘design factors’ that contributed to increasing student engagement in learning.
and your life goals, being comfortable with yourself, growing as a person, increased confidence (e.g. public speaking), “The project is not just about learning new things, it’s about you learning about yourself”

| What projects or activities have engaged you the most so far this year? | **Artwork** – painting, photography, filming, vision boards – helps with focus, motivation  
**Writing** – blogs, journals, stories, books, poetry |
|---|---|
| Do you have a voice in decisions made regarding your learning? Have you actively contributed to the design of learning experiences at your school? | **Support from Teachers** – suggestions for projects, redirection as needed, support for skill development to complement projects (English, Math), teachers make sure things work for students, ‘back and forth’ negotiation, teachers ‘ask and listen’ they don’t ‘tell you and ignore’  
**Student Ownership** – responsibility for making own decisions, owning the process, responsibility for completion – ‘putting your mind to it’, getting to do ‘my own thing’, |
| Are learning activities at school personally relevant/meaningful for you? Are projects and assignments open-ended enough to allow for you to pursue areas of personal interest? | **Changing Direction** – evolution of projects based on students’ needs, interests (from film to photography);  
**Relevancy** - application of PBL learning to future career options (e.g. photography), making course work (Math, English) more relevant and valuable  
**PBL as Protective Factor** – without projects attendance would be lower, drop out potential  
Increased Self-Awareness – learning/working styles, barriers to learning |
| What opportunities have you had to work collaboratively with other students? | **Student Presentation** – opportunity to share projects, find common topics,  
**Peer support** – motivation, feedback, online sharing  
**Sharing Sensitivities** – fear of disagreement of opinion, fear of exposing artwork to others |

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6 Since these two questions were not as open-ended as the others, and were somewhat repetitive of questions asked earlier in the interview, the students tended to answer with simple yes/no answers. Themes related to the two questions have therefore been identified or inferred from responses or comments provided in response to these two questions and at other moments throughout the interview.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Opportunities – ability to help out in the community (e.g. Social Justice Squad), ability to welcome new students, to help with other students’ projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you had opportunities in your assignments and projects to interact with and learn more about the local community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire But No Experience to pursue opportunities to interact with local community – raise awareness of project topic, change mindsets, connect with businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career/Work Experience – Blanche MacDonald, Aboriginal Friendship Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions – bring in outside experts from the community to support student’s projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you don’t like or would like to change or improve in this program at your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Responses to ISP – amazing, cool, enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check-in – some students uncomfortable sharing in front of others (individually might be better?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newness of ISP Program – expectation of changes needed after first year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Structure – outlines, hand-outs to help keep students on track with projects, to help with process, to discourage slacking off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for More Therapy – miss TDP, art therapy, music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears – of graduating (leaving safety net of Mountainside), presenting or speaking in front of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit of PBL – not for everyone, need for motivation to get work completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Voice – appreciation for opportunity to contribute to research on topic of importance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Coding Systems Developed by the Critical Review Committee**

When I met with the Critical Review Committee in June 2013 I asked them to think about these questions in reviewing the open and axial coding I had developed:

*Do you agree with the themes/categories I have selected? Are there any missing?*

*Are there overlaps?*

*Have I overgeneralized or overlooked anything?*

*Do you see any obvious biases?*
I then asked them to develop their own coding system in their groups (one student working with one teacher) after reading through the student interviews.

**Group 1: Student Data Analysis**

The student in this group said reading through the student interviews was hard work and took a long time. She began with her own hypotheses about what engaged the students based on her own experiences in the ISP. When she read through the data she saw repeating patterns and overlaps in the themes, many of which corresponded to her initial hypotheses. She and the teacher used coloured highlighters to identify themes. Initially they found ten themes, but then eliminated one and combined two others to assemble this list of eight factors that had engaged students in the project-based learning model.

1. Teacher Support and Relationship – caring
2. Collaboration
3. Voice and Choice
4. Ownership
5. Not for Everyone – ISP not for everyone – design theme?
6. Flexible and Lack of structure
7. Real world/Future plans
8. Previous school – not enough caring and too much structure

**Group 2: Student Data Analysis**

The student in this group followed a similar process, using her own predictions as a starting point before she began reading, but used a numbering system to count the times salient themes emerged from the student interviews. Based on this system, she and her teacher partner identified ten salient themes from the student data.

*4/7 interviews covered these themes:*

1. Process
2. Personal Responsibility
3. Relationship and Support
4. Welcoming and Acceptance – caring staff, peers, environment
5. Freedom of Choice
6. Empowerment
7. Personalization
8. Reduced Pressure

*5/7 interviews covered these themes:*

9. Relationships and Support
10. Empowerment
Appendix D. Samples of Student Projects

Lisa’s Project on the Downtown Eastside: Exploring Social Justice Issues

Excerpt from Lisa’s online blog:

I became interested in the Downtown Eastside when I was a really little girl. As my family would drive through the area I would look out the window and feel a connection to the people who were living there. I was always intrigued by their stories. Why did they end up there? What circumstances took place in their lives? How can I be involved in changing that story? Perhaps my sensitive curiosity came from the fact that my mother’s brother lives in the Downtown Eastside. As I was growing up my uncle’s struggle with drug use was often a topic of conversation. I wanted to see the positive things about his life, and not focus on his struggles. I have continued to visit my uncle once a week for the past four years and our relationship has been impactful for both of us.

I want my photography project to be a reflection of this relationship. I want people who see my book to try and see this struggling area, and the people who live there, through my eyes and to see the beauty in that struggle. To look past the rough exterior and know the community of kindness that exists in the Downtown Eastside.

“No one even saw him.”
Tammy’s Teenage Survival Guide: Experiences as a Survivor

ISP Teacher’s Description of Tammy’s Project (June 2013):

Tammy wanted to help others survive the challenges of teenage years armed with her strategies. Her Outcast Survival Guide includes artwork, quotes, and inspirational sayings that will uplift any reader.

Tammy’s project is a great example of how her interests, hobbies, and passions helped her to find her own voice and overcome life’s challenges. Now, by sharing that voice with others, she has found a way to give back.

This week Tammy has met with a publisher to discuss her vision for publishing her book!
Elizabeth’s Cultured Art Nail Bar: Finding Her Career Path

Elizabeth’s Student Presentation, February 2013:

*My project is “Cultured Art Nail Bar.” My project helped me a lot because it really taught me how to take matters into my own hands and make my own decisions. Also, to put pen to paper because I’ve always had a hard time with that – just starting something. I have a Facebook page.*

*Project-based learning was probably a really good decision for me to make because you’re doing something you love and you’re getting school credit for it. So, for all those kids who don’t like to learn, or don’t like to go to school, I think it’s perfect.*
Megan’s Anxiety Workbook

Megan’s Vision Statement for the ISP Project:

*I am writing this anxiety book because I don’t want anyone else to go through what I had to go through. As I am writing this book I, myself, am going through anxiety, and I am using real things that happened to me as examples in the workbook. I felt the need to write this book because some people don’t like listening to professionals who think they know everything…. My book is coming from the perspective of someone who has actually gone through it. I want people to know what things I have done to relieve my anxiety, and share some strategies, that work for me. I hope my book helps lots of people. I want this book to change people’s lives, and that’s my vision.*
Claire’s Project on Artistic Exposure

Claire’s video presentation to the Board of Education, May 2013

My project is called “Artistic Exposure.” It’s explaining how I came to be the person I am today and how art has helped me heal. I started a blog and took pictures of my artwork and started documenting everything I do and I opened up an online shop at Etsy. I try to give people a better understanding of how I create.

This project has helped me to find what I love and helps me think about my future – what I really want to do. My project mostly helped me to find me and it’s helped me to become a better person knowing that art has helped me get through a lot of stuff. It’s taught me to be patient with myself. The one thing that’s challenged me the most was having the freedom to do whatever I want. It was challenging to do it by myself. It gives you more freedom and makes you feel like you are in charge, which you are…. It’s a cool way of learning. It’s helped me grow as a person and finding out my personality that’s been hiding the whole time. Doing this project has given me a closer bond with my teachers and peers. With my Etsy webpage I am finally showing people my artwork. I usually don’t do that. I never thought that I’d be showcasing it, but it’s really cool because it makes me feel awesome.
Brennan’s Jewellery-Making Business

ISP Teacher’s Description of Brennan and his partner’s Project (June 2013):

The dynamic duo of Ross and Brennan created the Cantankerous Smiths business.

“Dastardly designs, and modern metal interpretations: Combining leatherwork, chainmail, and metal plate work.”

Ross and Brennan create jewellery, which reflects medieval armour and modern fashion. They also created a report, restored a suit of armour, taught chainmail classes and created a business plan. You can find them on Facebook.