Student and Teacher Perceptions of a School Involvement Intervention Program

by

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ABSTRACT

A secondary school student enrolled in an intervention program for lower-achieving students reported positive affective, motivational, and cognitive experiences indicative of involvement and flow. Interview data revealed greater support for positive experiences related to extrinsic factors of improved grades and volume of work completed than to challenging activities that matched skills. Autonomy-supportive classroom practices appear to promote involvement through allowing students flexibility to determine learning pace and daily classroom schedules. A predictable, organized environment and individualized instruction created a stable context where the student felt relaxed and supported. Feelings of competence and well-being arising from positive learning experiences enhanced involvement as the student gained recognition for successful learning. Student and teacher interview data suggest increasing school involvement and competency is transformative, culminating in a rejuvenated student identity and excitement for learning.

Keywords: school involvement; secondary students; motivation; flow theory; self-determination theory; autonomy support; emotional support; competency
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1: INTRODUCTION

Despite a plethora of research on motivation and engagement, educators remain unsure of how to reduce the high percentage of students who disengage from school and fail to graduate, a problematic outcome for youth in an increasingly knowledge-based society. In British Columbia, approximately twenty per cent of the general student population does not complete secondary school, and for students from specific ethnic backgrounds, the percentage is thought to be even higher (BC Ministry of Education). Describing the psychological variables and behaviours of students who disengage from school is only the beginning. Understanding the mechanisms behind development of these variables, including how classroom contexts may contribute to or mitigate their development, can give educators a clearer picture of how to create environments that are responsive to students at risk of school disengagement. Instructional practices that help students find learning personally rewarding in contexts that support their emotional well-being may be critical to keeping students engaged in school. Another factor explored in the present study is the impact of allowing students more autonomy over their learning. Although educators may instinctively do the opposite when dealing with lower-achieving students, increasing student autonomy may empower them to improve their chances of being successful and thereby help them develop positive identities as students.

Expanded views of academic engagement (or disengagement) consider its multidimensional nature in order to integrate more widely studied cognitive and behavioural aspects with less understood emotional components. Such views have
prompted a renewed interest in the role of emotions in motivation and learning (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pintrich, 2000; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007; Schweinle, Meyer & Turner, 2006; Schweinle, Turner & Meyer, 2008; Wentzel, 1999). Theories have emerged that consider emotions as more than just outcomes of learning. In fact, theories and research findings point to a reciprocal relationship between affect and cognition that drives learning (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Schallert, Reed, & Turner, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Recognizing its clearly emotional component, Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, and Barch (2004b) define engagement as “the behavioural intensity and emotional quality of a person’s active involvement during a task” (p. 147). Piecing together why students fail to engage or become actively involved in their learning requires an understanding of their motivational and affective experiences and of how features of school and classroom environments contribute to such experiences.

Julianne Turner and Debra Meyer have been prominent researchers in the field of motivation and academic engagement for over a decade. In one study, they found a strong link between affective responses to errors and a number of important learning variables (Turner, Thorpe, & Meyer, 1998b). Recognizing that such motivational-affective patterns develop within learning environments, Turner and Meyer explored the social construction of motivation in classrooms. In an observational study, they sought to identify what instructional practices contribute to or detract from student involvement in upper elementary mathematics classrooms (Turner, Meyer, Cox, Logan, DiCintio, & Thomas, 1998a).
Drawing on these findings, I will expand on Turner et al.’s (1998a) research using a different population of students and a different learning context. The participants in the present study are a Grade 10 student enrolled in an intervention program designed to improve involvement and a teacher in the same program. Along with her classmates, the student in this study has a history of poor academic performance and low involvement in school, indicating a pronounced need for motivational intervention. The goal of the intervention program is to re-engage students in learning and to provide them with opportunities for academic success. The students do most of their academic coursework within a self-contained classroom.

Extending Turner et al.’s (1998a) research is important in order to explore the involvement—including affective, cognitive, and motivational experiences—of a secondary school student enrolled in an intervention program to improve involvement. Secondly, this study examines a student’s and a teacher’s perceptions of instructional practices that enhance involvement of a student at risk of dropping out of school and to compare effective practices with those Turner et al. (1998a) found in high-involvement elementary mathematics classrooms.

In their study, Turner et al. (1998a) explored involvement in mathematics classrooms to uncover what features of mathematics instruction might explain the predominance of negative affect and poor cognitive outcomes associated with this subject area. Conversely, Turner et al. (1998a) also wanted to understand how teachers create positive motivational climates that keep their students involved in learning mathematics. To highlight contextual features, Turner et al. (1998a) make a distinction between cognitive engagement or “volition and activity, such as use of learning strategies” and the
more encompassing state of involvement, defined as “a momentary or situationally dependent quality of experience that participants seek to repeat” which normally includes but is not caused by cognitive engagement (p. 731). Knowing what contextual features and instructional practices separate high involvement from low involvement learning environments is important, particularly for educators of students who show low involvement and signs of school alienation.

Turner et al. (1998a) found that in high involvement classrooms, students report significantly more positive affect and a balance between the difficulty level of activities and their skill level. However, for students who have struggled with learning, finding a balance between difficulty level and skill level often does not occur in a regular classroom, where their skills can lag behind those of their peers. Along with difficulties keeping pace with their peers, struggling learners often associate school with negative feelings or demonstrate apathy towards performance. In order to help address these problems, the student in the present study is enrolled in a self-paced program in which weekly goals are based on the student’s current skill level, an instructional design teachers hope will provide students with opportunities to experience success and thereby improve involvement. Giving students greater autonomy to adjust the pace of their learning may help them experience a balance between difficulty level of tasks and their ability to meet the demands of tasks. This balancing of difficulty and skill is a central feature of what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) refers to as flow experience, an optimal form of intrinsic motivation linked to deep involvement in learning. Thus, the present study expands Turner et al.’s (1998a) research by investigating whether the student reports higher perceived autonomy while in a classroom designed to increase involvement.
compared to her experiences in a regular classroom. Findings reveal the extent to which allowing greater control over learning pace and schedules impacts involvement of this struggling student.

Past research on student involvement has relied primarily on student survey data. Another objective in interviewing a student and a teacher from the intervention program is to assess whether gathering interview data provides a more nuanced, phenomenological understanding of students’ and teachers’ experiences that can expand on insights about involvement gathered through surveys. Further, my research will explore whether this student’s experience in an intervention program designed to improve school involvement and the teacher’s perceptions of the student’s experiences converge.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

In their study, Turner et al. (1998a) focus on the social construction of involvement, a state during which “attention is wholly concentrated, time passes quickly, and there is deep comprehension, focused emotional investment, and a motivational drive to continue” (p. 731). They draw primarily from Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993) and from research by Reed and Schallert (1993) on involvement in academic discourse among college students. I will briefly review the literature pertaining to the construct of involvement as it relates to Turner et al.’s (1998a) findings. I also will review relevant literature on self-determination theory and discuss how perceived autonomy may affect involvement of secondary school students.
1.1.1 Involved as a psychological experience

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) research focuses on defining the underpinnings of intrinsic motivation, and seeks to explain an individual’s often intense pursuit of goals or commitment to challenging tasks in the absence of discernable external rewards (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008; Turner et al., 1998a). Turner et al. (1998a) describe such an optimal and rare flow experience as “a state of mind that results from being involved in an activity that is chosen for its own sake and that promotes personal growth through challenges of existing abilities” (p. 731). Similarly, in their work with college students, Reed and Schallert (1993) found that involvement is associated with intense focus, clear understanding of the task and its importance, defined goals based on feedback about progress, and a reported balance between task demands and individual skill level. This balance between high challenge and skill level, requiring students to function at their optimal capacity, is the most frequently identified factor associated with flow and involvement (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007; Schweinle et al., 2006; Schweinle et al., 2008; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003; Turner et al., 1998a).

The flow experience theorized by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) is an ideal learning state, though perhaps not a realistic one to expect on a regular basis, particularly among struggling students. Students who show low involvement may not respond to challenge in the same manner as higher-achieving students. Discovering what instructional methods encourage disengaged students to tackle challenging tasks has important implications for designing appropriate educational programs to involve them more deeply in their learning, while at the same time helping them feel successful.
In addition to a match between challenge and skill, students in high-involvement contexts also are more likely to report positive emotional experiences. When students in such classrooms experience learning difficulties, they are able to get the emotional and motivational support they need to meet learning challenges (Turner et al., 1998a). However, Meyer and Turner (2006) found that students engaged in activities where skills exceeded challenge, generally a low-involvement situation, reported high levels of happiness but not pride, suggesting that emotions in learning contexts are nuanced and complex. Such a finding may indicate that avoiding the uncertainty that can accompany challenging activities and errors may provide positive short-term emotional experiences but may detract from involvement over the long term if students do not sense that they are increasing their competence. An issue requiring further exploration is how students with histories of poor academic performance experience high- versus low-challenge activities and contexts. Examining the emotional well-being of these students as it relates to challenge is important when seeking to re-engage them and encourage their long-term involvement.

1.1.2 Linking involvement to learning contexts

Involvement is a complex interaction of cognition, motivation, and affect. Studies have primarily focused on involvement as an individual psychological experience (Turner et al., 1998a). However, Turner’ and Meyer’s ongoing research on motivation, particularly the critical role of emotions (Meyer & Turner, 2002), evolved into an examination of how teachers and students “co-create positive climates for learning” and a view of emotions as “shared and generative factors in learning and motivation, bound to context” (Turner & Meyer, 2006, p. 378). Thus flow theory, which focuses on the
interplay of cognition, motivation, and emotion in order to describe the quality of learning experiences, fit well with Turner’ and Meyer’s research purpose of discovering the contextual features of positive learning environments associated with involvement.

In their study of how teachers create involvement in whole-class settings, Turner et al. (1998a) found that students’ self-reports of affective states and the ratio of challenge versus skill during mathematics instruction correlated with certain instructional strategies observed in classrooms. Teachers of students who reported high involvement and positive experiences scaffolded instruction using strategies designed (a) to negotiate understanding by helping students build meaning (b) to support intrinsic motivation by modeling enjoyment and personal interest in mathematics and (c) to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. Conversely, teachers in low-involvement classrooms relied on extrinsic motivation practices, used initiation-response-evaluation methods, and focused on procedures more often than did teachers in high-involvement classrooms. Thus certain instructional practices appear critical for upper elementary students’ involvement and quality of experience while learning mathematics. Whether these instructional practices are factors in involvement of secondary students who have struggled with school achievement requires verification. Intuitively, teachers of struggling students may tend to start with low-skill remedial activities rather than with high-skill activities requiring scaffolding. For example, researchers claim the predominant teaching practices employed, particularly with lower achieving students, consist of teacher-dominated recitation or activities involving decontextualized tasks, which provide little opportunity for meaning-making (Mueller, 2001; Panofsky, 2003;
Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). The assumption appears to be that these students are inherently passive learners who have difficulty engaging in active, self-directed learning.

1.1.3 **Self-determination Theory**

Turner *et al.*’s (1998a) findings support their theorizing that certain instructional practices are associated with higher student involvement, particularly practices that support challenge seeking and create positive emotional experiences to enhance intrinsic motivation. However, another important factor that may contribute to involvement that Turner *et al.* did not analyze in detail is students’ perceptions of autonomy. Research suggests this construct may be an important variable to consider (Marchand & Skinner, 2007; Oliver, Markland, Hardy & Petherick, 2008; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004a; Schweinle *et al.*, 2008; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004; Tsai, Kunter, Lutzke, Trautwein & Ryan, 2008). As Turner *et al.* (1998a) recognize, “student control is a central tenet of intrinsic motivation to learn, whereas controlling environments tend to decrease motivation” (p. 743).

The notion of perceived control over learning outcomes or processes is an important facet of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reeve *et al.*, 2004a; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schweinle *et al.*, 2008). Research drawing on this theory focuses on the contextual features that enhance or thwart self-motivation and well-being. Self-determination theory identifies control or ‘autonomy’ as one of three innate psychological needs that must be satisfied in order to achieve optimal personal growth, constructive self-motivation, and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan (1987; cited in Harper, 2007) describe the term autonomy as meaning more than having choices:
Autonomy connotes an inner endorsement of one’s actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one’s own. Autonomous action is thus chosen, but we use the term choice not as a cognitive concept, referring to decisions among behavioural options, but rather as an organismic concept anchored in the sense of a fuller, more integrated functioning.

Self-determination theory suggests that features of learning environments such as rewards, deadlines, threats, directives, high-stakes evaluations, and imposed goals undermine intrinsic motivation because such features encourage perceptions that success (or failure) is the result of external forces not within the learner’s control. Conversely, development of intrinsic motivation (or engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction) is promoted when learners can exercise more autonomy by making choices to self-direct their learning, which in turn encourages increased curiosity, challenge-seeking, and more effective learning (Reeve et al., 2004a; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stefanou et al., 2004).

In addition to the contextual features that promote intrinsic motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) also examine how behaviours and values that at first are not intrinsically motivating become internalized and integrated as self-determined behaviours. These theorists note that as we mature and need to comply with social expectations to engage in activities we may not find interesting, intrinsic motivation alone does not drive much of our behaviour. This is certainly the circumstance for many children who with age report decreased interest in school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens & Matos, 2005). However, unlike other perspectives that treat increasing reliance on external motivation as detrimental to perceived autonomy, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that extrinsically motivated behaviour can be accompanied by varying degrees of autonomy and self-
determination. They suggest that motivation should be conceived as a continuum between perceived external and internal regulation, a view they claim is supported by research indicating that “the more students were externally regulated the less they showed interest, value, and effort toward achievement” (p. 73).

The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is ‘integrated regulation’ which results when learners identify with and come to value an action as personally meaningful and then integrate that meaning as part of the self, resulting in perceptions of greater autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the process of internalization of extrinsically motivated behaviours has important implications for learning, a process they claim occurs when learners have “a sense of choice, volition, and freedom from excessive external pressure toward behaving or thinking a certain way” (p. 74).

How might Ryan and Deci’s (2000) construct of autonomy (or lack thereof) play a role in student involvement explored in Turner et al.’s (1998a) research? Based on the perspectives of self-determination theory, research conducted in authentic learning contexts indicates that students whose teachers use more autonomy-supportive rather than controlling instructional approaches show higher levels of engagement, even when the task was deemed by students to be uninteresting (Reeve et al., 2004a). Thus, when teachers must rely on extrinsic motivational strategies to promote activities, engagement improves if teachers use instructional approaches that are sensitive to a self-determined, autonomy supporting versus a controlling form of extrinsic motivation. Examples of autonomy-supportive practices include using informational rather than controlling language, conveying to students the value in uninteresting tasks, and supporting students to develop intrinsic motivational resources (Reeve et al., 2004b). Conversely, controlling
motivational strategies include extrinsic rewards such as money for grades, threats, deadlines, directives from others, evaluations involving high stakes, and other-imposed goals that reduce intrinsic motivation by promoting an external locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers may instinctively rely on such controlling methods as threats and directives to attempt to motivate students displaying disengagement and little or no apparent inner motivational resources (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Finding autonomy-supportive alternatives to controlling motivational methods and giving low-involvement students autonomy in some areas of their learning may be key to rebuilding involvement. For example, allowing these students flexibility in their learning schedules and daily routines may give them a greater sense of control and perhaps the confidence to tackle challenging tasks.

Another autonomy-supportive instructional strategy found to improve student engagement is teachers’ acknowledgement and acceptance of students’ expressions of negative affect during learning activities (Reeve et al., 2004b). If, as Turner et al. (1998b) theorize, negative affect is linked to the development of maladaptive learning goals, beliefs, and behaviours, it would be important for educators to know what autonomy-supportive teaching strategies can reduce the harm negative affect can have on engagement and learning. Accordingly, exploring a student’s perceptions of perceived autonomy provides educators with a more nuanced understanding of how to shape learning environments that reduce the impact of negative emotional responses to learning challenges. Such an understanding is particularly relevant for educators working with vulnerable students who, because of their histories of poor school performance, are likely to display negative emotions or apathy about learning. At the same time, students who are
at risk of disengaging from school tend to respond poorly to learning contexts they perceive as coercive (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Turner et al. (1998a) demonstrate that involvement develops in contexts where students experience a balance of challenge and skill, findings that highlight the importance of designing learning contexts in which learners feel secure enough to engage in challenge-seeking without worrying about their well-being. The secondary school student who is the subject of this study has a history of poor academic performance. She may show a pronounced reluctance to approach challenging tasks due to her experiences of failure and alienation from school. Gathering a student’s perceptions of experiences in an intervention program may be helpful to educators. Uncovering whether and to what degree a student and her teacher associate challenge and perceived autonomy with involvement and emotional well-being will help educators understand the processes associated with development of these experiential aspects of learning. Accordingly, research questions are:

1. What is the quality of experience for a secondary school student enrolled in an intervention program designed to improve school involvement? How does it compare to the student’s experiences in a regular classroom?
   a. Does a student enrolled in the intervention program report involvement based on a match of high challenge and skill?
   b. Does a student enrolled in the intervention program report experiencing important affective, cognitive, and motivational factors associated with involvement?
2. What instructional practices does the student report as helpful to maintain involvement? Does a teacher perceive the same practices as helpful to students?

3. Does a student enrolled in the intervention program report perceived autonomy as an important aspect of school involvement? Does a teacher in the program also perceive student autonomy as important to improve involvement?
Motivation is a multifaceted topic within educational psychology, complicated by an explosion in research over the past decade, along with a multitude of theories and shifting perspectives (Ormrod, 2004). Despite the complexity of the motivation construct, the cognitive, motivational, and emotional variables that energize the desire to learn continue to fascinate researchers and educators alike. Researchers have tried to explain motivation by identifying a growing list of mediating variables including: goals, interest, attributions, self-efficacy, attitudes, beliefs, values, needs, and emotions, to name a few. For educators, methods of motivating students, particularly those who have difficulty and show low involvement in learning, is a challenging educational issue that many rank as the most significant problem they will face in their careers (Winne & Marx, 1989).

Though much research has focused on pinpointing the variables at play in motivation, a number of theorists suggest this is not enough, citing the need to understand what variables interact to form motivational patterns that describe individual learners (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Turner et al., 1998a; Turner et al., 1998b). However, as Turner and Patrick (2008) argue, knowing what influencing variables interact does not tell us much about how motivation develops and why it changes. These researchers argue that, rather than identifying students as motivated or unmotivated, future research needs to be reframed to examine motivation as more situated and dependent on context (see also Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). To illustrate this shift, I will review research on motivation from the perspective of three theories that
explore the interaction between cognitive, emotional, and motivational variables, namely: involvement theory; flow theory; and self-determination theory. I conclude with a discussion of how these theories point to a situated understanding of motivation to address issues arising from the interaction of learner and context explored in this study.

2.1 Theories of motivation that describe interactions between variables

2.1.1 Involvement Theory

In order to explore the integration of emotions, motivation, and cognition, Turner et al. (1998a) examine involvement, which they describe as an experience-based understanding of learning. The psychological state of involvement focuses more on cognitive rather than behavioural activity and includes deep concentration and comprehension, positive emotions, and strong motivation to continue an activity (Turner et al., 1998a). Such involvement experiences include pleasurable absorption in a task and typically arise from the learner’s intrinsic pursuit of material that provides a reasonable level of challenge. Although Turner et al. (1998a) assume that students in a state of involvement also are engaged, they claim engagement alone is not enough to cause involvement, implying that involvement is a more complex, emotionally and motivationally rewarding state than engagement. However, few researchers appear to make the same distinction between engagement and involvement, often using the two terms interchangeably but more often favouring the term engagement (e.g., Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Turner et al., 1998a). Accordingly, a discussion of differences between the two constructs is in order.
The construct of school engagement, like motivation, has been the subject of considerable research attention over the past decade. Definitions of engagement have similarities to those of involvement. In their extensive review of the school engagement literature, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) describe engagement as a multidimensional “meta construct” that fuses behaviour, emotion, and cognition. Thus, the construct of engagement differs only slightly from that of involvement, which combines motivation, emotion, and cognition (but notably, not behaviour). Fredricks et al. (2004) also indicate that engagement is a result of interaction between individual students and the learning context, another overlap with involvement. These researchers claim that most studies have examined engagement as an outcome rather than a possible mediator between context and academic achievement. Fredricks et al. (2004) contend that the research on engagement falls short of its potential to provide a nuanced understanding of the construct. They claim this shortcoming is because the majority of studies examine only one or two types (e.g., behavioural and emotional) rather than all three types simultaneously (cognitive engagement is the least studied); thus there is little understanding of the interaction between the three types that could be revealed by more pattern-based analysis. Further, many of the underlying variables that come into play in engagement such as values and feelings are more precisely defined and measured in the literature on motivation. Since involvement considers motivation in combination with emotion and cognition, it is the more fitting construct for the present discussion.

Schallert, Reed, and Turner (2004) use the term involvement to describe an enjoyable learning experience they define as “feeling totally captivated by an academic task” (p. 1717). Similar to other motivational theorists, Schallert et al.’s (2004) research
on involvement arose out of an interest in how emotions contribute to and integrate with students’ motivational and cognitive processes throughout a semester. These researchers argue that volitional strategies (i.e., work habits) that keep students focused on accomplishing learning goals too often come at the expense of enjoyment or deep involvement in a task. Similarly, Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff (2003) contend that both academic intensity (concentration, interest, attention) and positive emotional response (positive mood, enjoyment, esteem, intrinsic motivation) need to be present for activities to be engaging, yet many classroom activities create one or the other but not both simultaneously.

Like Turner et al. (1998a), Schallert et al. (2004) distinguish between engagement and involvement, claiming that “intrinsic involvement has consequences for learning and motivation over and above what can be expected from engaging in a task without deep involvement, even if the student elects to engage in the task” (p. 1720). They argue that volitional strategies can be useful to help students get started on assignments until involvement sets in and makes working on the assignment pleasurable rather than effortful. Schallert et al. suggest that involvement can be a reward for volitional strategies but the joy of pursuing knowledge is thwarted when we place too much emphasis on reaching goals and completing tasks. Turner et al. (1998b) describe an example of engagement without involvement, where they found that the least engaged students showed low commitment to both learning and performance goals yet this group reported average deep strategy use and action after failure. Turner et al. (1998b) interpreted this finding as an indication of conformity to teacher expectations of using appropriate learning strategies and providing correct answers. However, such surface-level
involvement is not likely to encourage pleasurable absorption in a task that results in deeper learning.

In a study by Reed, Hagen, Wicker, and Schallert (1996), involvement of undergraduate students correlated to good comprehension of the material students were studying in preparation for an exam. These researchers also found that involvement is a dynamic process that changes in intensity throughout a task. Changes in measures of involvement appear tied to changes in affective, cognitive, and motivational variables. For example, as involvement increases, reported measures of both positive and negative affect decrease, which Reed et al. (1996) interpret as a possible indication that high involvement is so absorbing that it leaves little remaining cognitive resources for considering affective influences. However, in an earlier study, Reed and Schallert (1993) found that among university students during a writing task, involvement levels and accompanying moods varied across stages of the task but on the whole, highly involved students reported less anxiety and fatigue than did those reporting low involvement. These researchers claim their (1993) study demonstrates that “positive affect occurs with and as a result of involvement” and that, “this affective/motivational response accompanies and may even trigger cognitive processes such as attention focusing and attempts at comprehension” (p. 265).

In their 1998a study, Tuner et al. go a step beyond Reed and Schallert (1993) by combining student self-reports of involvement with observations of high- and low-involvement upper-elementary mathematics classrooms. These researchers found that measures of involvement reflect features of instructional practices and environments, supporting their claim that educators and researchers need to examine more closely the
situated nature of motivation and social construction of involvement when teachers provide motivational, affective and cognitive support. Turner et al. (1998a) observed that students reported high involvement (challenges and skill level above average and matched; positive affect) in classrooms where teachers scaffolded instruction in three key areas: (1) negotiated difficulty levels of tasks; (2) transferred responsibility by expecting students to explore and demonstrate new strategies; and (3) supported intrinsic learning goals by encouraging risk taking. In classrooms in which students reported low involvement, teachers were more inclined towards initiation-response-evaluation sequences, used more procedural discourse, and relied on more extrinsic motivational strategies than teachers in high involvement classrooms, thus reducing opportunities for students to become autonomous, intrinsically motivated learners.

2.1.2 Flow Theory

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) developed his theory of flow over three decades ago, yet it continues to have influence in educational psychology research. The theory appealed to Turner et al. (1998a) for its utility in integrating emotion, motivation, and cognition in support of their research goals (Meyer & Turner, 2006; Schweinle et al., 2008). Claiming a close link between Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) research on flow and their study of involvement, Turner et al. (1998a) describe flow as “a state of mind that results from being involved in an activity that is chosen for its own sake and that promotes personal growth through challenges of existing abilities” (p. 731). Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) point out that although flow experiences are associated with enjoyment and a number of other positive emotions, the operational definition of flow addresses only the
interplay of challenge and skill. The relationship between challenge and skill level required to meet the challenge influences the quality of experience, a relationship that has been divided into four major quadrants of experience: flow (high challenge and high skill); relaxation (low challenge and high skill); apathy (low challenge and low skill); and anxiety (high challenge and low skill) (Schweinle et al., 2008).

Based on the contention that adolescents are motivated by activities they find enjoyable, Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) explored how changes in adolescents’ experiences of flow over a two year period while doing school work corresponds to changes in behaviour and affect. They found that adolescents engaged in school work are as likely to show significant increases as decreases in the amount and intensity of flow experiences within a two-year period. Those who showed increases in flow also reported increases in their perceptions of the importance of school work for their future goals and thus appeared to develop a greater sense of intrinsic motivation and self-direction towards school. However, Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) conclude that educators need to provide all adolescents with learning opportunities that balance challenge with skill in order to ensure more optimal experiences at school. Otherwise, learners who find school unrewarding can “slip into the unstructured and unchallenging mode of passivity” so that school activities “become a chore leading to boredom and anxiety and not to self-fulfilment and enjoyment” (p. 18).

In their study of the role of affect in flow experiences among students in elementary mathematics classrooms, Schweinle et al. (2008) found only partial support for flow theory. For example, personal affect was relatively unchanged by level of challenge among students reporting flow experiences. Further, students did not
necessarily report low challenge activities as less positive experiences. These findings contrast with central tenets of flow theory, which holds that learning occurs when individuals repeatedly seek activities that enhance competence, requiring progressive increases in challenge to match improving skills, accompanied by positive emotions and intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen 1993). As Schweinle et al. (2008) also point out, not all students are comfortable with the risks involved in engaging in challenging tasks, and may report more positive affect when skills exceed challenge, thus opting for more emotionally rewarding experiences rather than opportunities to improve their skills. However, Schweinle et al. (2008) suggest the inconsistencies between flow theory and some of their findings may relate to flow theory’s greater application to activities that are freely chosen, which elementary mathematics activities are not, implying that level of autonomy may mediate the link between challenge level and personal affect.

Flow theory is based largely on Csikszentmihalyi’s research of talented adolescents while engaged in activities at which they excel (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993), and therefore may apply differently to younger students, particularly if autonomy plays a role. For example, Schweinle et al. (2008) suggest that an increase in flow experiences reported by adolescents may arise from greater autonomy they have to choose elective courses that match their interests and abilities. This opportunity for choice gives them more control over the balance of challenge versus skill and increases the likelihood that they will find schoolwork enjoyable and relevant to their goals.

Drawing on flow theory’s central premise that the combination of challenging activities that support skill development is one of the best means of engaging students,
Shernoff et al. (2003) studied engagement of high school students across a variety of subject areas. Shernoff et al.’s conception of engagement is “the culmination of concentration, interest, and enjoyment” and they suggest that these “subcomponents” of engagement must arise simultaneously for flow to occur (p. 158, 167). Thus, their conception of engagement differs from Fredricks et al.’s (2004) described above in that it does not consider behaviour and seemingly suggests engagement is part of flow experience. Composite engagement measures (based on an average of the three subcomponents of concentration, interest, and enjoyment) as well as separate measures of each subcomponent were highest when students reported participating in activities that were highly challenging and required higher skill levels, thus supporting flow theory. Students also reported significantly higher engagement, increased esteem and more positive mood when reporting high versus low control over activities. In general, students reported higher engagement and intrinsic motivation in relation to non-academic versus academic subjects. Although listening to lectures was reported as one of the most frequently used instructional methods (one third of school time), students found it the least engaging and found group work and individual work most engaging. Shernoff et al. (2003) note that perceived control over school work is a key influence on engagement yet their findings of the prevalence of teacher-controlled lecturing indicates that “student disengagement may stem from a lack of challenge or meaning, which was reported to typically occur in the lecture format” (p. 171).

In addition to perceived control, other factors may act as possible moderators of flow experience. Engeser and Rheinberg (2008) contend that, based on their findings, the operational definition of flow as largely defined by the balance of difficulty and skill is
questionable. They found that among university students, the importance of activities had a significant influence on whether the balance of difficulty and skill resulted in flow experience. As the importance of the activity increased, so did the requirement for skills to exceed difficulty in order for flow to occur. Conversely, for activities perceived as low importance, a balance of difficulty and skill led to flow. Engeser and Rheinberg (2008) also found that individuals high in achievement motivation experienced more intense flow experiences when difficulty and skill were balanced than did students with higher fear of failure, who can find the balance of difficulty and skill threatening. Findings that the importance of an activity (e.g., high-stakes test) and individual achievement motives may dictate how the difficulty-skill balance affects flow imply that students comfortable with risk-taking are likely to achieve flow during important tasks, and therefore to perform better on these tasks. Engeser and Rheinberg (2008) conclude that flow is a more multidimensional construct than previously conceived and the experience sampling method used to measure flow needs to incorporate additional components such as importance of the learning activity. They also point out that their findings are consistent with previous research indicating that ego-threatening learning conditions tend to undermine intrinsic motivation and that external performance standards have the most effect on easy tasks.

2.1.3 Self-determination theory

Like flow theory, self-determination theory focuses on intrinsic motivation, proposing factors that contribute to this optimal form of motivation and conditions under which learners report greater pleasure and satisfaction in an activity. Generally, when students feel their actions are self-determined, they tend to achieve at higher levels, to
experience positive emotions, to persist at a task for longer periods, to find the task more meaningful, and to think creatively (Ormrod, 2004). Alternatively, in environments where people feel they have little ability to determine a course of action, they may passively do as they are asked but with little intrinsic investment or persistence in the face of challenges. Thus, self-determination theory is concerned with the interplay between self and context and the resulting tension between our “inherent tendencies toward integrated, vital functioning and our vulnerabilities to being controlled” (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Ryan and Deci’s (2000) research guided by self-determination theory emphasizes the role of social contexts in development of self-motivation and well-being. This line of research identifies the positive developmental factors and psychological needs that underlie self-motivation and optimal functioning, as well as the social environments that foster (or hinder) such development. Self-determination theory (SDT) is an organismic approach to motivation that “highlights the importance of humans’ evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioural self-regulation” and thus is grounded in an optimistic view of our tendencies towards adaptive growth, while acknowledging that social contexts can support or limit this growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68).

SDT identifies three innate psychological needs essential for healthy psychological development and self-regulation: the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT research suggests that certain social-contextual features, such as positive feedback and rewards, instil feelings of competence when performing an action. Competence increases intrinsic motivation for that action provided
people also feel the action was performed autonomously (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006). In classroom settings, studies have found that students whose teachers support greater autonomy by offering more choices, allowing for more self-directed activities, and recognizing students’ feelings are more intrinsically motivated than students whose teachers rely on extrinsic motivational directives such as imposed goals, deadlines, threats, and high-pressure evaluations (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006).

Educators seek to instil intrinsic motivation as an ideal state for growth and development. However, rarely are situations entirely intrinsically motivating. More commonly individuals are influenced by both forms of motivation and particularly as children get older, they are increasingly participants in social environments where they are expected to engage in activities they may not find interesting, such as school work. Recognizing this circumstance, SDT proposes that motivation be viewed as a continuum with amotivation on the left and, moving towards the right, a series of increasingly autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation until reaching intrinsic motivation on the far right. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that a critical concern addressed in SDT is how well and under what circumstances extrinsically regulated behaviours become internalized or adopted (through a process known as identification) and subsequently integrated or incorporated into a person’s sense of self. According to SDT, the more a person integrates performance of an externally regulated activity, the more autonomous he or she feels about participating in the activity, which tends to have positive outcomes such as increased performance, higher level learning, and less likelihood of dropping out of school (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2006) later point out that autonomy does
not imply an absence of external influences. Rather a person’s endorsement of and compliance with such influences defines autonomy, therefore it is not equivalent to independence.

Self-determination theory claims relatedness also is critical for internalization, as when students willingly participate in activities that are valued by and modelled by teachers with whom they feel secure and connected. Further, engaging in activities that are within students’ perceived competence levels facilitates internalization (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These findings suggest that classroom climates in which teachers build supportive relationships with students and design learning activities to accommodate a range of skill levels may help students find more value and meaning in their schoolwork. In addition, students who have a sense of relatedness or feel cared for by their teachers are more likely to regulate their behaviour in accordance with teacher expectations (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, Seifert and O’Keefe (2001) found that students who feel competent and in control of their learning are likely to develop learning (rather than performance) goals, indicating that when teachers create nurturing, respectful environments, students tend to be intrinsically motivated.

Classroom climates are shaped by how teachers communicate the importance of tasks. Reeve, Jang, Hardre, and Omura (2002) studied identification, defined as a process through which an individual accepts an external behavioural goal as personally valuable and therefore internally relevant. Reeve et al. (2002) found that when research participants were given a rationale for endorsing an uninteresting task and for exerting effort, and the rationale was delivered using autonomy-supportive language (including an acknowledgement that the task might elicit negative feelings), participants’ showed
enhanced identification with the task in comparison to those who received no such rationale. Further, participants’ effort increased in line with improvements in identification. Oliver et al., (2008) found that, in comparison to controlling instructions, autonomy-supportive instructions that included a clear rationale for a task, an acknowledgment of emotions, and communicated a sense of choice positively influenced the emotion-related content of participants’ self-talk, which these researchers argue plays a vital self-regulatory role, supporting the evaluation and internalization of social messages.

Despite research indicating the benefits of autonomy-supportive practices on learning outcomes, Reeve et al. (2004) claim teachers are most familiar with and tend to rely on controlling motivational practices. Although Reeve et al. found this to be the case among teachers who participated in their intervention study, following the intervention these teachers were able to implement four key autonomy-supportive instructional practices: nurturing inner motivational resources; using non-controlling, informative language; promoting value in uninteresting tasks; and recognizing and accepting students’ negative emotions. Further, Reeve et al. found that students showed increases in engagement to the extent that their teachers used these autonomy-supportive strategies. Deci, Hodges, Pierson, and Tomassone (1992) found that autonomy-supportive instructional strategies also can have positive effects on the motivation, adjustment, and achievement of special education students identified as learning disabled and emotionally handicapped. This finding contrasts with the prevailing practices among educators, who favour greater behavioural control, perhaps based on beliefs that students who experience learning difficulties are unable to handle autonomy effectively. Nor does reliance on
controlling instructional practices appear to subside as students mature. Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, and Roth (2005) claim that studies in the United States and Israel indicate a general increase in teachers’ use of directly controlling behaviours (defined as frequent directives, interference in pace of learning, and discouraging independent opinions) in middle and secondary schools. Not surprisingly, Assor et al. found such practices by elementary school teachers correlate with a number of negative learning outcomes, notably amotivation and emotions of anxiety and anger.

Although much of the research on SDT supports the benefits of autonomy-supportive learning environments, some researchers offer words of caution, particularly when these findings have led to superficial implementations. For example, teachers may believe they are supporting autonomy by providing choices that are actually “teacher-determined options” (Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003) that result in no discernable improvement in students’ experiences of self-determination. Similarly, Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004) argue that superficial organizational and procedural forms of autonomy (e.g., choosing group members; choosing how learning is demonstrated) may detract from cognitive autonomy support, which they describe as “ownership and justification of ideas, the construction of meaning, and the intentional self-reliance used in critical thinking” (p. 109) that underlie truly autonomous learning. Stefanou et al. also warn that teachers need to monitor whether students have developed the skills to handle choices about their learning if these choices are to have intended motivational benefits. Even notable self-determination theorists Ryan and Deci (2006) conclude, “having many options is not a basic need, nor is it even always edifying” (p. 1580).
2.2 Linking Involvement, Flow, and Self-determination Theories

2.2.1 Positive learning environments and experiences

Turner et al. (1998a) expand Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) notion of flow as an individual psychological experience by linking it to instructional practices, particularly dialogue in classrooms, in order to discover how involvement is created or situated in these contexts. This important step reflects a movement by these researchers towards a more sociocultural approach to learning, a recognition that desire to learn is largely created and sustained through social interactions in classrooms. (See for example Turner & Patrick, 2008, advocating a situated approach to motivation research based on Barbara Rogoff’s heuristic of three planes of analysis.) Like involvement and flow theories, self-determination theory concerns the endorsement or rejection of socially promoted academic effort and how features of learning environments can enhance or hinder this process. All three theories highlight well-being as an integral part of motivation to learn, assigning emotions a central role in learning. When taking a situated approach to learning and motivation, sociocultural theorists Packer and Goicoechea (2000) make the following observation:

When one pays attention to “what is done” and “what is said” in the school classroom, an economics of emotion becomes apparent in the pragmatics of discursive movement, and the dialectic of meaning and desire in the transformation of the human person is evident (p. 135).

The quality of one’s school experiences follows from successfully navigating this transformation into the role of student. Success at school requires an ontological transformation into a new role, the social construction of a new identity as student, yet as Packer and Goicoechea (2000) argue, “it is in occasions of apparent failure to learn that
the ontological aspects of schooling are highlighted” (p. 237-8). Packer and Greco-Brooks (1999) observe “the ontological distinction made over and over again in practice is that between “good student” and “bad student” ” (p. 147). Thus the degree to which children appropriately occupy the role of student determines their place in the social order of the classroom and often their relationship to the teacher, who “gratifies the children’s desire for connection and recognition” (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p. 236). Those who have positive learning experiences of involvement, flow, and self-determination view themselves as good students and their endorsement of academic pursuits secures them a valued place in the classroom community. Even though their sense of well-being may ebb and flow when they take on the risks of learning, they are secure in their identities as good students who have the ability to find the support they need to return to states of well-being when they encounter challenges.

Packer and Goicoechea (2000) suggest that a sociocultural approach to learning improves on a constructivist view by revealing that epistemological change--what we call learning--is only part of the ontological change involved in becoming a student, thus “knowing is not an end in itself, but a means to the ends of recognition and identity” (p. 235). But what becomes of those who are not able to negotiate this ontological change quite so successfully? If accepting the role of student is cultivated through the social practices of the classroom, being a successful student appears to centre on the quality of a student’s experiences in that cultural setting. Meyer and Turner (2006) claim, “engaging students in learning requires consistently positive emotional experiences, which contribute to a classroom climate that forms the foundation for teacher-student relationships and interactions necessary for motivation to learn” (p. 377). Learning is a
risky undertaking for those who find it difficult, making them vulnerable to feelings of alienation, particularly when they believe their teachers and peers perceive them as unsuccessful students. Out of a desire for recognition, these students may attempt simple tasks and avoid challenging ones, thus foregoing rewarding learning opportunities in order to protect their emotional well-being (Boekaerts, 1993; 1995; 2007). In the end, their identities as students suffer in classrooms that offer few opportunities for them to participate successfully (Turner & Patrick, 2008). Looking for this pattern in those who find the costs of being a student too high should alert educators to respond to the needs of these students, to incorporate diverse opportunities for them to participate, to create and to recreate positive identities as students.
3: METHODS

3.1 Participants

One participant is a Grade 10 student enrolled in a relatively new program for youth who have a recorded history of poor school performance. A teacher in the same program, who was involved in planning and implementing the program, is the second participant. The teacher has extensive experience working with troubled youth who struggle with school involvement. Teachers and administrators recommend students for the program who are in need of a supportive environment to mitigate their negative or apathetic stance towards school achievement. Consent was obtained from the student and a parent and from the teacher prior to conducting interviews.

The intervention program is located in a single classroom in a secondary school located in a suburban school district in British Columbia. The goal of the program is to give selected low-performing students the extra motivational and social support they need to complete Grade 10, thereby providing them with more options to earn enough credits during their Grade 11 and 12 years to meet the requirement for high school graduation. Students in the program do not have a Ministry of Education identification and are deemed by teachers to have academic potential but have stopped producing. When entering the program, most students have experienced two to three years of failure in the public education system. Students in the program attend class every day and meet with a teacher once a week to establish learning goals for the following week. Teachers do not emphasize strict timelines for completing work. Rather, students must hand in completed
work that is of a high standard in order to receive marks for assignments and can continue to revise and make corrections until the work meets the standards for earning a grade. Teachers believe this individualized, self-paced approach relieves some of the pressures students in the program face in regular classroom placements while at the same time, supporting students to expand their skill levels by engaging in authentic, challenging academic work. In addition, having only two teachers for the duration of the school year, one for English and Social Studies and one for Mathematics and Sciences, and an additional support staff member to provide individualized assistance, contributes stability and allows the staff and students to build trusting, supportive relationships. The small class size and ratio of one teacher for approximately every 20 students is conducive to considerably more student-teacher contact than in a typical secondary program, allowing teachers to gauge closely each student’s progress and to provide targeted feedback and encouragement in a timely manner.

3.1.1 Student interview

Although research based on self-reported survey data has contributed important information about motivation, involvement, and self-determination constructs, this method does not produce in-depth, anecdotal accounts of how individual students construct perceptions of their experiences. Nor do self-report measures adequately capture the complex interplay between learner and context (De Groot, 2002). Interviews can be useful to gain a more holistic understanding of a students’ reality, of his or her perceptions of school experiences and how these experiences shape beliefs and behaviour related to learning (De Groot, 2002; Krapp, 2005; Maxwell, 2005). Individual face-to-
face verbal interactions with participants also can be effective to encourage them to
discuss sensitive topics such as learning difficulties (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

To probe whether interview data can provide important elaborations of findings
from student self-report measures, I conducted a one hour interview with a student
enrolled in the intervention program. Using a semi-structured interview approach,
questions were designed to draw out the student’s perceived level of school involvement,
views about instructional practices that support involvement, and perceived autonomy in
the intervention program. Further, the present study examines the student’s descriptions
of affect, motivation, and cognition that Turner et al. (1998a) associate with involvement.
Turner et al. (1998a) gathered data relating to students’ self-reports of affect, motivation,
and cognition by using student response logs (an adaptation of the Experience Sampling
Form from Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1987; cited in Turner et al., 1998). The response
logs consist of 13 semantic differential scales that require students to choose between
opposing emotions such as happy-sad, bored-excited. Response logs are designed to
capture affective experiences of happiness, cooperativeness, feeling part of the group, and
pride. Motivational experiences that the response logs attempt to capture are involvement
and wanting to learn. Cognitive experiences measured in response logs are alertness,
clarity of thoughts, excitement, mental strength, and relaxation. Researchers have found
these 13 semantic items are important indicators of intrinsic motivation
(Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whelan, 1993; Turner et al., 1998a).

Rather than responding to prompts provided in the student response logs,
interviews are a means of gathering spontaneous reports of affective, motivational, and
cognitive experiences at school. The interview was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

### 3.1.2 Teacher interview

Turner et al. (1998) did not gather information directly from teachers in their research, relying instead on student survey data and the research team’s views of what instructional practices observed in classrooms are associated with student involvement. The present research expands on Turner et al.’s (1998a) methods by seeking input directly from a teacher regarding what contextual features and instructional approaches support involvement of a specific population of students who have disengaged from school. The teacher’s semi-structured interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions about unique features of the program, instructional approaches, and motivational or emotional support the teacher believes and has observed are important to re-involve disaffected students.

### 3.2 Interview coding procedures

While transcribing interviews, I made memos about the themes and issues raised by interviewees. From these memos, I developed broad theoretical and substantive categories into which to sort the data according to the present research study’s conceptual framework. Some categories reflect components of involvement identified by Turner et al.’s (1998a) research and by self-determination research, while some unexpected categories (such as the importance of extrinsic motivational factors) emerged during the process of transcription analysis.
Once I identified organizational categories, I reviewed each interview transcription in more depth to investigate possible connections the student and teacher made between contextual or instructional features in the intervention program and components of involvement. Connections helped to generate broader concepts by which to link segments of data, to generate possible interpretations, and to explore ideas about involvement in this special context.
4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

In the following excerpts, R = researcher. Pseudonyms are used for the student (Paula) and the teacher (Mr. Grant).

4.1.1 Involvement

The student, Paula, reported experiences indicating a high level of involvement, particularly when working on two larger projects. These were extended written assignments requiring research. The topics were determined by the teachers and are consistent with the regular Social Studies 10 and Science 10 curriculum:

R: Can you think of a day when you came to school and you were working on something and you went home and thought, I really liked what I did at school today? Can you describe that to me.

Paula: Ya, I did…on my last module for Socials I did this project and it was on discrimination and race, the history of it, and I don’t know…I just got so attached to it and I just wrote so much about it and I loved it…and then there was another one for Science I had to do a project on…and after I did it I just felt so smart. I loved it. I gave it to my friend so she could give it to her mom. [smiling, animated expression, relaxed look on face]

Paula’s description indicates some of the factors Turner et al. (1998a) identify as indicative of a high-involvement or flow experience including positive emotional investment, a desire to continue working on the task, and concentrated attention.
When asked for examples of activities students became the most involved in, the teacher, Mr. Grant, described essay contests that two students from the program entered. The teacher suggested the reason students become deeply involved in writing essays for submission to contests is “because it challenges them.” He went on to say:

It affects their self-esteem and they get confident and they’re willing to try something new. So this particular person who wrote this, she was regarded as a kid who stopped working; she did nothing. When she came to us she said she liked writing and then we just kept on encouraging that. She has a particular style of writing that is very thoughtful. She gets credit as an assignment and she gets to submit it to the Royal Commonwealth Essay Contest...so that becomes a huge motivator.

When asked about the most interesting assignment she has done this school year, Paula describes how she became absorbed in writing a report for a Science project:

I love writing. I used to write stories all the time, I used to write letters and keep them and never send them. I used to have writing contests with my friends, who could write more words. I used to sit on my computer and type up stories. I don’t know, and I just started that again and once I saw this project I thought, I know exactly what to write and I just started typing and it was three pages long and it was a good 3000 words that I typed up for this project.

Paula’s description of her experience of working on this assignment suggests she was inspired by the topic, which helped her get started and then to become more absorbed in her writing. She indicated she “researched stuff” as well rather than drawing only on her own ideas. The level of involvement is in stark contrast to her description of her involvement and performance at her previous school:
I used to get really low marks. If there was something out of 60, I’d get 2, I’d probably get 2 out of 60. That’s how bad it was. I’d never do my work, didn’t want to and I’d guess on every single answer because I didn’t want to work. And now I’m actually focusing on it and 86 is unbelievable. It just shows me that I’m actually working hard and I can succeed in the stuff that I work in my head to do.

When articulating what is different about the intervention program and her previous school, Paula notes the relaxed atmosphere that induces her to want to attend and her sense of enjoyment in being at school. Again, she describes the change in her level of involvement from her previous learning environment:

Because before in [name of previous school] I always missed class, like half way through class I didn’t want to go to class, I didn’t want to do anything in class. I’d just sit in class talking and stuff but with [name of current program], you go in there, you can sit at tables with your friends, it’s just nice to be there. You can talk to your friends and stuff so long as you get your work done and...I don’t know, like I go there on time, I get along with my teachers, I don’t skip classes and if I do leave class, I call my mom and I tell my mom exactly what’s going on.

4.1.2 Involvement based on a match of high challenge and skill

Csikszentmihalyi’s selection of a balance between challenge and skill as the best indicator of involvement and intrinsic motivation arose largely from his studies of adults and teenagers engaging in activities at which they were highly talented (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1993). In the present study, Paula describes her involvement at school, an environment that, until her entry into the intervention program five months ago, she has associated with failure and self-doubt. Her contrasting position from those who were the subject of Csikszentmihalyi’s research
may explain why she does not identify high challenge as a significant factor in her renewed involvement in school. When asked if she likes working on a task that she believes she will get a good mark on, she responds affirmatively:

    R: Do you like working on a module or an assignment that you’ll get a good mark on because it’s kind of easy for you?

    Paula: Uh ha. It helps you far more.

    R: You don’t get bored if it’s too easy?

    Paula: No because then I can just zip through things and start the next one.

Paula expresses a need to feel productive and to complete assignments, which perhaps outweighs her need to feel challenged, given her history of poor school performance and low productivity. When asked to discuss a difficult assignment, she describes a learning situation she was not willing to attempt, even with the assistance of the teacher:

    It was the hardest one I’ve ever done. I can’t remember what it was on. I think it was on the government or something like that. It’s so hard for me with the government and I was just reading and I was like...I don’t even understand what these words mean. How can I do the work when I don’t even understand what they mean? I can’t go to the dictionary and look up every single word.

Paula’s experience with an assignment where challenge exceeds skill, coupled with a subject area in which she has little interest, contrasts with her descriptions of more positive learning experiences in the intervention program. She also conveys a sense of relief when the teacher apparently recognizes the potential for frustration and adapts the assignment:
I read the questions and I’m like, No. I didn’t look for Mr. Grant and he’s like, “Oh, when you get a module, come to me and I’ll mark off what ones you have to do and the ones you don’t” and the things I didn’t have to do I really didn’t understand. So, I’m like, I’m not doing this. Then he marked off the ones that I didn’t understand so I’m like, oh, so I got like six modules done in one week.

Paula’s response indicates her reluctance to tackle the challenging parts of the assignment or even to take the time to ask for assistance from the teacher. She appears to prefer the prospect of completing a number of modules to attempting a difficult one that will take her longer and may require more effort. The teacher, on the other hand, is very clear about the need to challenge students in order to keep them involved:

You always put a challenge in front of kids...Challenging the learner in terms of difficulty level and finding their comfort level with you – very important...when we identify those people who do good work, we push them beyond.

However, he explains the need to offer both high-risk and low-risk activities when working with this population of students who have experienced several years of failure at school:

R: If most of the kids in the class were presented with a task that was not too taxing, that was within their skill level, or they were given the choice of doing something more challenging, how do you think most of them would respond?

Mr. Grant: Well first of all, you never present it in that particular way. You would present the challenge always because...there’s ways of doing it. You have to build in the high risk with low risk. So some activities
must be low risk but...too many low-risk activities, that’s when you get the acting out but we don’t have that because we mix high-risk activities with low-risk activities.

The discrepancy between Paula’s and Mr. Grant’s views about the need for challenging tasks may be explained by the instructional practice of alternating high-challenge and low-challenge tasks. Paula may have accumulated enough positive experiences to overshadow the tasks on which she needed support. The requirement that she make successive corrections before handing in work also may support her to reframe challenging assignments as learning opportunities and thus recall them in a more positive light.

4.1.3 Affective, motivational, and cognitive factors associated with involvement

Affective factors

Before starting to tape the interview, Paula began our conversation by stating emphatically how much she loves school, a remarkable statement given that she enrolled in the intervention program only five months prior to our interview, after several years of failure and school suspensions. Throughout the interview, she displayed a number of the affective concomitants of intrinsic motivation measured by Turner et al. (1998a) (happy, cooperative, part of group, pride) that are considered important factors associated with involvement.

When asked to describe what she likes about the intervention program and how it differs from the regular classroom environment she was in before, Paula indicates feelings of cooperation with others and being part of a unique community of learners:
You don’t have to try and get someone’s attention. You can sit at the table with somebody and like...I mean, the people in there, they’re doing the exact same thing as you, they just get in there and they get their work done and you just talk to them and have a little chat or whatever but they still get their work done.

She also expressed pride in her accomplishments since enrolling in the program, particularly the improvement in her marks:

R: If you think you might not get 96 or 100, you might get a little bit lower, do you find you can still work hard?

Paula: Uh hu. Even if I get 86 I’m still really proud of myself and I still call my mom and tell her exactly what I got. I don’t know, it’s just because...I used to get Fs and everything, I used to get really low marks.

When asked to recall how she felt when she got an assignment back on which she had received a grade of 100 per cent she explains:

Paula: Whenever I get 100 per cent I’m speechless, I’m like I thought I should have got good.

R: What are some other feelings you have?

Paula: Surprised [smiles, laughter], anxious for the next one, see how good I’m going to do on the next one.

Her expression of pride in the improvements she made since enrolling in the program is apparent when she describes her school year:

Amazing, great improvement. I’m so looking forward to next year, actually. I can’t wait to come back. It’s going to be a good year next year.
Progress is good...I’m the most improved student in the program, and it’s just a really good feeling, like going from nothing to everything [animated vocal and facial expression].

When asked if she shows others in her class when she gets a mark she is proud of, she responds:

Ya [laughing, smiling], then I run outside to me friends and I’m like “I got 100%!” and when I get my report card I’m like “I got an A in Social Studies!” and they’re like “Ha, ha, ha, ya right” and I’m like “I did, it’s 100%” and ...they’re like “No, you didn’t, you’re not that smart.” And I say “Look at my report card!” and they’re like “What the heck, you are smart.”

This was Paula’s most animated point in the interview, when she seemingly expresses both pride and happiness. In a typical secondary program, a student receiving 100 per cent might indicate that student is not being challenging. Meyer and Turner (2006) found that in boring learning situations where skill exceeds challenge, students reported high levels of happiness but not pride. Meyer and Turner (2006) interpreted this finding as an indication that “high levels of challenge and student involvement were not necessarily indicative of positive learning experiences for students, and also that academic emotions are quite nuanced (e.g. happy, but not proud)” (p. 382). For a student accustomed to good grades and other indicators of success, the emotional response to such a high mark (e.g., lack of pride) may differ from the response of a student like Paula, who had a perception that such marks were beyond her reach. Another difference between a regular program and the intervention program is that students in the intervention program are required to make corrections and complete an assignment before it is graded. Thus, although they
have more than ‘one shot’ at a grade as is typically the case in a regular program, they have to do the work in order to get a good grade. This circumstance contrasts with the teacher’s description of how previous teachers in regular programs have treated low-performing students like many now in the intervention program, allowing them to get away with incomplete work in order to push them through:

Mr. Grant: What we emphasize is the working relationship with the assignment and completing it because remember, all their school life has been based on incomplete assignments or to get rid of them by turning in assignments incomplete and the teacher gives them a grade just to get rid of them.

R: And they pick up on that?

Mr. Grant: They know it. Their history has been the incomplete assignment, their report card has always been the incomplete assignment.

The emotionally demoralizing effects of such negative messaging from teachers may account for the alienation and self-doubt vulnerable students develop about school. The requirement in the intervention program that they persist at an assignment until they complete it correctly may permit them to relish the good marks and take pride in their accomplishments.

In addition to her pride in her good grades, Paula also notes her improvement in her reaction to frustration. Describing an interaction with a substitute teacher, she expresses her desire to be viewed as cooperative rather than confrontational:

I don’t know, it’s just, substitutes...they just aren’t really good for me and stuff. It’s just hard to not be rude to them when they’re rude to me but I’m trying and I’m doing so much better. Now I just walk out when I know
I’m getting frustrated and my teachers know. I don’t want to have to keep arguing with teachers and stuff, especially substitutes, because it just makes me look bad and stuff.

**Motivational factors**

Paula indicates commitment to her schoolwork and wanting to learn, motivational factors Turner *et al.* (1998a) measured in student response logs that are considered important for intrinsic motivation and involvement. For example, Paula describes a situation during the previous term when she was removed from the intervention program and how much she wanted to be back in the classroom:

I hate being in trouble and so last semester, when I got kicked out of class for coming late again, um...I had to work in the office for a few weeks and stuff and I hated it. I always felt like I was in so much trouble and I hate working in the office and stuff and like, I don’t know, it’s hard and stuff too. I just realized I don’t like being in here and that I have to show them I don’t want to be in there, I want to be in class working.

When asked if there were things she had learned about in the intervention program that she was not previously interest in she responded:

Ya, like Socials and Science. I hated them, didn’t want to be part of them, didn’t see the point of it and now, I’m just like, oh, I can use this in the future.

Asked if she gets the sense from her teachers that she is expected to do well she responds, “Uh hu. They don’t expect it, they know that you could.” Paula does not seem to give herself any other option but to do well because her teachers have the same expectation. When she describes her feelings after receiving a high mark on an assignment, Paula
indicates she is “anxious for the next one, see how good I’m going to do on the next one.” Although the prospect of getting good marks is motivating, her responses suggest a high level of commitment to doing her schoolwork, a commitment that was absent before she enrolled in the intervention program. Whether the external rewards of good marks and the resulting recognition will sustain her through to graduation is another question worth exploring in future research.

**Cognitive factors**

Turner *et al.* (1998a) used student response logs to gather data about how alert, clear, excited, mentally strong, and relaxed students feel during a lesson, cognitive factors researchers associate with intrinsic motivation. Although the student did not provide as many cognitive as affective indicators of involvement and intrinsic motivation, there were some glimpses of clarity, alertness, and excitement about assignments. Describing the assistance provided by teachers in the program, Paula explains:

They put themselves out there to help you learn. In your head after they talk to you, it’s like you know that ‘I can go far, I know I can do this now, I understand it, and stuff.’ I don’t know, it’s just like the way they explain things to you – you completely understand it and you know you can get it right.

Paula describes cognitive indications that she has learned well this year and expresses excitement about the next school year, based on her improvements this year:

When I work on things it gets clear to me and I understand and I can remember what I just did...I’m so looking forward to next year, actually. I can’t wait to come back.
When asked what kinds of strategies she uses in class to stay focused, she indicates that it is not so much strategies but a more generalized mental strength, along with positive emotions, that keeps her involved:

R: What kinds of things do you do in class to stay focused, what kinds of tricks or strategies have you found help you?

Paula: It’s not really strategies and it’s not something someone can tell you how to do. It’s something that you need to think about and, I don’t know, I felt good and I’m like, okay, today I’m going to stay here, I’m going to finish my work. It needs to be in your head, you need to think it through. It’s just like quitting something. It’s like when...my friend is trying to quit smoking and stuff. You need to quit for you or else it’s not going to work.

R: So the strength has to be...

Paula:[jumps in] Inside of you

4.1.4 Instructional practices that maintain involvement

Turner et al. (1998a) identified three categories of teacher practices evident in whole-class instructional discourse that correspond to high student involvement: (1) negotiating meaningful learning (2) transferring responsibility for learning and (3) supporting intrinsic purposes and tasks. Although the present study did not include classroom observations, the student and teacher described experiences and situations in the intervention program that suggest similar outcomes. For example, Paula gave the following description of how the teacher adjusts instruction to a moderate level so that she can still meet the challenges of a task, with the assistance of the teacher:
The teachers help you more. They set all their attention on you when you need it. They give you their time and you know that they’ll be there and they’ll be helping you and there’s two other teachers in class and they’re there to help other people too and it’s just so much better when you know there’s a teacher there that can sit down with you, anything that you ask, and they just talk you through until you understand.

Paula’s description of the intervention program reflects her perception that being responsible for the pace of her schoolwork has helped her take more ownership for her learning:

R: If someone asked you what the program was all about, how would you describe it?

Paula: I would tell them that it’s a learn-at-your-own-pace, it helps you realize that you don’t want to skip. When you go into that classroom, there are teachers that will always be helping you.

Paula describes the approach she has found helps her to complete modules, another example of taking ownership by developing her own strategies:

R: When you do your modules, do you have some choice around what you can pick to work on?

Paula: No. They give you a module and then you work...this is what I do. I get my module from Ms. H for science, I do all the pages I understand, that I know, and then...this one that I’m working on right now, I have three more pages and I don’t know how to do those ones and I save the ones I don’t know how to do for last so that Ms. H can work on them with me.
Some of the instructional practices Turner et al. (1998a) noted in whole-class discourse that support intrinsic motivation are: providing encouragement, mediating frustration, promoting the value of errors to enhance learning, supporting goals, and advocating risk-taking and challenge-seeking. Although the program does not involve whole-class discourse, Paula’s responses offer insights about her perceptions of what instructional practices support her involvement, and include some of the intrinsic supports identified by Turner et al. (1998a). When asked what she thinks is the best feature of the program, her response reflects the degree of support she experiences in the program:

R: What is the best thing about the program?

Paula: I haven’t really thought of that but I’d have to say, probably Mr. Grant being there. Because, I don’t know, it’s just like, he’s awesome, like he’ll help you out as much as he can and like if you’re sitting in class and you’re upset or something, he realizes it and he’ll try and help you out and he’ll ask you if you need to go talk to somebody or...I don’t know, he’s just always there for you and stuff and like that’s the kind of teachers that you need. He’s always trying to be supportive towards you and always trying to help you out...that’s just something you need to keep you going.

Paula’s explanation of the support she gets when facing a difficult task indicates the scaffolding available to encourage challenge seeking:

R: Can you think of an assignment you were asked to do this year and you didn’t understand it?

Paula: Ya, and I asked Mr. Grant and I’m like, ‘Can you help me with this? I really just don’t understand it.’ Then he talked me through it and I’m like, oh, I get that.
R: Can you ask for an easier module if you find that it’s just too hard?

Paula: No, you can’t. Mr. Grant will work it through with you. No one has complained and everyone has gotten good marks.

R: What are some things the teacher does to help you get through it?

Paula: It’s just the way he explains it. He shows you and it’s just like, wow, I could have done this myself. He just makes it so clear for you.

Mr. Grant’s responses indicate recognition of the need to provide motivational support and to encourage challenge seeking:

But we knew we would face kids who had not worked for two or three years and how do we motivate them, how do we stay patient with them but at the end of it how do we also motivate them to write a provincial exam, which is really very difficult to do because—why should they—because they have failed many, many times before.

Mr. Grant explains his understanding of the link between challenging tasks and students’ development of intrinsic purpose and meaningful learning, which helps to mediate frustration and anxiety:

Well, any individual, once they experience success, needs to know that the success is real and that they are accomplishing things and are moving forward and there’s no difference here. If the student knows that they’re being successful and they’re challenging themselves, their anxiety level goes down...the other thing is, when you complete your coursework, your assignments, and it goes into your binder, it goes in as completed work. So your binder gets bigger and bigger and bigger, which is more work than what you’ve done in the last three years. So the common refrain that we hear is “This is more work than I’ve ever done before...you’ve challenged
me to do more work than I’ve done in the last three years and it didn’t seem like it.”

Requiring students to complete assignments and make corrections to improve the quality of their work before it is graded means that teachers can use errors as learning opportunities, a practice that supports involvement by reducing fear of failure. When teachers promote errors as important to improve rather than to reduce marks, errors no longer carry the same threat. Further, this practice, along with individualized instruction, eliminates the social comparison between good students and poor students that is common in regular secondary programs and undermines involvement of less capable students.

4.1.5 Involvement based on perceived autonomy

In response to the third research question, Paula indicates control over learning pace is an important feature of the program that appears to empower her. She explains the self-paced format used in the program:

Paula: Well, we do these modules and you have to work during class and when you’re finished them you get another module. There are these booklets of work and it’s like different units, like Chemistry, and then you get the units done and stuff and like you hand one module in and you get another one back.

R: Do you have much choice around your modules? Do they give you a choice of different assignments that you can pick from?

Paula: Well, I just ask the teacher if I can have a couple modules at a time and then I work through them at different times and get them done and
then we just stack them all together and can work on more modules to get the rest done.

Her pride in describing how “I got six modules done in one week” suggests she enjoys the sense of control the program allows her to have over the amount of work she completes and reflects her desire to experience the sense of competency attached to completing work. The program also allows students the autonomy to put aside subjects and concentrate on others. As the teacher explains:

You start with the person’s comfort level. So they may do Math for the first week or more, even though they’re in the class to do Math, Socials, and English. They may do Math right through and not worry about the English. So we just simply put ‘No mark, no mark’ next to the English and the Socials and then they might get to a point where they’re ready to do Social Studies. So it never goes in a nice even line. That’s why we work on the completed assignment routine because some kids will have a real thing, they can do their entire Math in two months and never touch their other things. That’s how they derive their comfort.

Paula describes her experience of arriving at this comfort level in her own time, which appeared to motivate her to increase her pace in order to complete the coursework on time:

R: Has there been a module that you’ve done that at first you didn’t think you were interested in and then, once you started

Paula: [jumps in] Socials. When I first started it, I didn’t think...I started in second semester, in February. I didn’t start on that probably until April and I finished. I finished Social Studies this year. I don’t have to take...I
passed the provincial exam for Socials 10 and I already finished my Math 10 and have taken the exam.

Contrary to expectations, the lack of autonomy related to assignment topics and format did not appear to impact negatively on involvement. When asked what assignment she found most interesting all year, Paula talked about a Science project on a topic that she did not choose but “was already there” in the module. When asked if she thought it would make a difference if the teachers gave her a choice of assignment topics, she responded: “No. I think that the way they’re doing it now, it’s better than giving us choices and it’s more organized.” Mr. Grant also recognizes this apparent preference for structure and routines:

She needed the structure. All the kids need it. They have to have the structure to calm them down. So you came in here the other day and they were pretty calm. You would not know that any one of those kids could take apart a classroom, and they can, they can. But they’re calm because the structure is needed. It’s orderly, it stays the same, it doesn’t switch, it’s familiar and they need that. They need that structure because their lives are unpredictable.

However, Mr. Grant describes instructional practices that move away from expectations that students demonstrate compliance with teacher and classroom rules and schedules:

R: So that insistence on compliance that you tend to see elsewhere just will not fly here?

Mr. Grant: No. Well, because that’s what they’ve experienced and yet people will insist upon ‘we have to have compliance’ so compliance...you know, people will invent bizarre rules. Now...those rules have a place in that they work for 90 per cent of the students. But they won’t work for
these guys. They’ll look at their rules and say ‘I won’t buy into it.’ That’s their style.

R: Where do you think that comes from?

Mr. Grant: Well, that’s their passive-aggressive side coming out. That’s the part that’s given them enormous control. That’s the part that says, ‘This is how I will take control over my learning or my not learning.’ Now, we effectively disarm that.

Teachers in the program disarm this passive-aggressive form of control by giving students a sense of autonomy over what activities they work on at any given time rather than insisting on compliance and coercing students into teacher-determined routines. Mr. Grant explains how allowing students to exercise control over their daily routines helps when dealing with students’ expressions of frustration:

Mr. Grant: I say to them, ‘Slow down. What’s your issue?’ Redirect. ‘Try something different. Go and work on your Math. You can’t work on your English, go work on your Math. If you can’t work on your Socials, try something else. Read for a while or try again the next day. Go home and try again the next day. Start fresh.’ So you’re always... the power struggle is if you insist you must do Math. We take away the power struggle by redirecting to other things.

R: So when they’re showing resistance, you don’t insist that they figure out some way to do it?

Mr. Grant: Well, every other teacher who has tried confrontation with them has failed.

R: And they know that?
Mr. Grant: They know that. They’ve won the battle. They don’t even have
to try, they know they’ve won the battle. Redirecting is a different thing
because redirecting gives them an option out.

Redirection may be an effective autonomy-supportive practice to alleviate frustration by
giving students the option to switch to a different subject or take a break from an activity,
a choice not routinely available in typical classrooms.

An important but unexpected theme to emerge from the interview data, and one
not considered in the research questions, is Paula’s need for a sense of competence and
recognition for accomplishments. According to self-determination theory, competence--
along with autonomy and relatedness--is essential for healthy psychological development
and self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Paula’s clearest expressions of positive
emotions and experiences in relation to her schoolwork were those associated with a
growing sense of competence. Many of these expressions correspond to external
indicators such as the volume of work she was able to complete and the grades she
received. She also responded to threats of removal from the program if she did not arrive
on time and ready to work. This finding of the effectiveness of extrinsic motivation,
along with signs of involvement, is contrary to the notion that involvement is associated
with intrinsic motivation (Turner et al., 1998a). For a student who has experienced
several years of failure and a resulting perception that she is not competent, the tangible
signs of competency may be a necessary step towards rebuilding involvement and
emotional well-being. The elation Paula expressed about getting one hundred per cent on
an assignment and getting an A on her report card were the most animated sections of the
interview. She also appeared pleased with being able to “zip through things” and the
visible signs of accomplishments such as taking “a couple modules at a time and then I
work through them at different times and get them done and then we just stack them all
together and can work on more modules to get the rest done.” Mr. Grant also describes a
visible indicator of success when students’ binders of completed work get bigger and the
regular refrain from students that “this is more work than I’ve ever done before.”

Along with competency, another theme revealed in the interview data is the
relatedness and the sense of security Paula perceives in her interactions with teachers in
the intervention program. Self-determination theory posits, “a secure relational base does
seem to be important for the expression of intrinsic motivation to be in evidence” (Ryan
& Deci, 2000). When asked what she believed was the best thing about the intervention
program, Paula responded that it was the teacher, Mr. Grant. She describes his sensitivity
to her needs, explaining “he’s just always there for you and stuff and that’s the kind of
teachers that you need...he’s always trying to be supportive towards you and always
trying to help you out.” This sense of support contrasts sharply with Paula’s description
of the lack of support from a teacher at her former school:

I never got that, that’s what I needed and...I was always put out there to be
stupid...to this one teacher at [former school] and so...she wouldn’t even
talk to me, she wouldn’t even look at me.

Perhaps the most compelling theme Paula’s interview data reveals is how the
intervention program gave her an opportunity to create a new identity, an identity as a
‘good student’ worthy of recognition by her teachers, family, and friends. She explains
that the intervention program is “a really rewarding program and it changes people, it
really does. It changed me in...like really well.” Mr. Grant claims students’ development of positive identities and well-being is fundamental to the effectiveness of the program:

R: You mentioned the word identity. What do you think happens to a kid’s identity in this program?

Mr. Grant: Well, we see it. It changes. Their sense of who they are changes.

R: You see that quite clearly?

Mr. Grant: You see that girl [refers to student working at a computer] who’s worked here for almost an hour? That’s a change in identity. We said goodbye to her last March. She came back in September.

R: What’s happened there?

Mr. Grant: What’s happened is that she needed the continuity and the consistence...she’s experienced success and she wants to experience success by writing the provincial exam. That’s the difference.

Like the classmate Mr. Grant describes above, a new identity may be a large part of Paula’s increased involvement in her schoolwork. Further, it appears to have helped her socially, motivating her to be less confrontational with others at school. She describes how the program “changes the way you reflect on where you want to go and stuff, what you want to do.” Her responses indicate she is concerned with how others view her and is learning how to adjust her environment to help her interact in ways that are in keeping with her new identity, such as removing herself from potentially confrontational situations: “I’m trying and I’m doing so much better. Now I just walk out when I know
I’m getting frustrated and my teachers know...I don’t want to have to keep arguing with teachers...it just makes me look bad.”

4.2 Discussion

An objective of this study was to explore whether interview data would add important insights to our understanding of school involvement that survey and observation data do not capture. Turner et al. (1998a) note that a disadvantage of survey data is uncertainty about how respondents interpret the questions and terms used in surveys. Interview data can compensate for this disadvantage by allowing the researcher to explore in more detail participants’ perceptions and interpretations of learning environments. Further, educators often find that survey data are not always useful and can be difficult to analyse to produce meaningful results, whereas anecdotal information can be informative. The present study indicates interviews can contribute anecdotal information that enriches insights concerning school involvement of learners who have had negative school experiences. Future studies of involvement would benefit from incorporating interview data along with survey and classroom observation data in order to better assess the contributions of qualitative, phenomenological approaches to studying school involvement. Such multi-method approaches may point to areas in which to expand upon current theories of involvement.

Turner et al. (1998a) define involvement as “the perception that the challenges afforded by the instruction and students’ skills were both high and fairly balanced” (p. 742). Turner et al. measured involvement by asking respondents the following two simple questions: “How challenging was math class today?” and “How were your skills in math today?” and had respondents choose a number for each question on a Likert scale.
(p. 734). However, Turner et al. acknowledge that, “some students’ rating of challenge and skill for the lessons might have been confounded with other teacher characteristics such as warmth, knowledge, or experience” (p. 744). The present study suggests involvement of students who have experienced school failure may be more complex than Turner et al.’s definition implies. Scaffolding of instruction to encourage students to seek challenges and build intrinsic motivation may be important for most students. However, for students who have experienced failure, such as the student in this study, the match between high challenge and high skill may not enhance involvement and may be perceived as threatening (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008).

Interview data reveal that while in the intervention program, Paula had learning experiences associated with high involvement classrooms. She perceives the environment in the intervention program as much more involving than the environment she was in prior to enrolling in the program. Rather than a match between challenge and skill, she seemingly prefers the external indicators of competency such as high grades and volume of work completed to enhance her involvement and quality of experience. While recognizing the importance of challenge to enhance involvement, the teacher suggests the need to intersperse high-challenge with lower-challenge activities. This instructional practice may be particularly important for vulnerable learners who need experiences of success to establish a sense of well-being and confidence before introducing too much challenge. As the teacher explains:

The primary goal is to keep the kid at school, to recapture the kid and redirect them to complete Grade 12...As part of the recapture, you’re also focusing on self-esteem building, so they feel comfortable and they rejuvenate themselves as confident learners.
One-on-one instruction appears to be a beneficial instructional practice to support involvement. Part of the advantage to this method may be the warm, trusting relationships between students and teachers. As Mr. Grant points out, it requires students to engage with teachers and with the material: “We took the existing curriculum and then designed it so that it causes the student to talk with the teacher, all four of us.” Paula describes several instances of positive affective and motivational experiences arising from the significant amount of support and encouragement from teachers and teachers’ sensitivity to her needs, likes, and dislikes. The timeliness of help with learning difficulties featured prominently in Paula’s explanations of how she has benefited from the program, an important factor to counter disengagement that may not be available in typical classrooms where individualized instruction is less frequent.

Interview data suggest perceived autonomy is an important factor to support involvement of vulnerable students. However, autonomy in the form of choices about topics for assignments did not appear to be important to the student. The finding that predictability and organization rather than choice of learning topics, provided a sense of security without detracting from involvement and quality of experience deserves further exploration. However, Paula indicated control over the pace of learning was an important feature of the intervention program that appeared to stimulate involvement and perceived competency. The teacher identifies redirection--allowing students who are showing signs of frustration with a task to take a break and do something different-- as an important autonomy-supportive instructional practice that disrupts students’ previous methods of gaining control over their learning through confrontation and power struggles with teachers. Paula indicates she has not experienced pressure to comply with teacher-driven
learning schedules or expectations, describing instead the relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and the flexibility teachers allow her to complete her work according to her schedule. These autonomy-supportive factors may be critical to reducing the alienation vulnerable students experience when they cannot keep pace with learning schedules in regular classrooms.

A lingering question arising from this study is whether students who have experienced failure are so desperate for recognition and feelings of competency that they seek opportunities for earning high marks instead of tackling challenging activities. The teacher recognizes how fear of failure and competency needs can hinder learning:

These are vulnerable learners who fear failure. They fear failure for a number of reasons. They haven’t experienced much success in the system and the system doesn’t work for them. In many cases their fear of failure has allowed them to limit themselves.

The tangible rewards signifying success figure prominently in Paula’s expressions of positive school experiences. However, research indicates sustaining involvement requires a perception of growing skill level, thus Paula eventually may need to use her newfound confidence as a springboard to pursue higher challenges. Skinner and Belmont (1993) raise this same issue that school success is more than creating contexts for positive feelings about self:

Educators have plausibly wondered whether it is likely that students who feel good about being in school may nevertheless fail to learn anything. According to our model, children who are engaged in ongoing learning activities should not only feel pride and satisfaction in their accomplishments but should also increase their actual competencies (p. 572).
Although flow theory and Turner et al.’s (1998a) theory of involvement advance benefits of intrinsic motivation to support involvement, vulnerable learners may need extrinsic motivators such as good grades, to acquire the recognition they have watched their more successful peers enjoy. Perhaps, as Packer and Goicoechea (2000) claim, learning is not a means in itself but a means to an end, that is, a means to receive recognition for good performance. If so, vulnerable students may initially need opportunities to achieve this recognition in order to set them on a path towards emotional well-being. If so, a delicate balance between low- and high-challenge assignments may be the most effective instructional approach, a point the teacher articulates well:

R: You mentioned the word well-being. How important is that to these kids?

Mr. Grant: Huge, huge. If I’m safe, if things are predictable, if things are orderly, if I’m appreciated, if the work that I do is valued, I’m okay. That’s vital. If none of those elements are present, they won’t learn and they will repeat the same behaviours that have led them into difficulties. If the system is changed in any way, it changes who they are.

The rewards of feeling productive, of earning those coveted good grades and the positive identity attached to them, appears critical to recapturing vulnerable learners. An instructional approach that allows a student to make multiple corrections in order to earn higher grades does not appear to detract from her perceived competency. It may be the insistence from teachers that students revise their work until it meets a high standard that communicates to students that they are capable of producing quality work, work they can be proud of handing in. When asked about the student’s expression of pride in the good marks she has received in the program, Mr. Grant explains,
It comes from...we don’t accept junk and when we give you credit for 86, 90, 95 or 100 it’s because you’ve had to redo your assignment three or four times or you’ve completed it the way we wanted you to complete it.

Mr. Grant emphasizes the importance of accepting only completed work rather than resorting to other external motivators such as imposing deadlines or adjusting grades down, methods he believes are not effective:

We don’t change deadlines. It’s all on work completion. That’s exactly what they want you to do. They want you to change their grades and they want you to impose a deadline. Then you have incomplete work and you have, ‘I’ll take 50 per cent’ and that’s a killer for these guys because that’s what they’ve been doing for the last four years.

Allowing students to make corrections may be effective by giving them the satisfaction of having to work for the good grades. Mr. Grant articulates the importance of legitimizing success: “Well, any individual, once they experience success, needs to know the success is real and that they’re accomplishing things and are moving forward and there’s no difference here.”

The findings in this study are a small ‘snapshot’ of a student’s global experiences in the intervention program and her teacher’s assessment of the program’s effectiveness in re-involving alienated students. Both participants likely had an interest in portraying the program as successful. Gathering observation data during daily classroom activities would be helpful to verify interview data and would contribute ecologically valid events against which to compare interview data. Recording instructional discourse between teachers and students during individualized instruction also would allow comparisons
with Turner et al. ’s (1998a) findings of links between scaffolded instruction and student involvement.

Data gathered from one student and one teacher does not permit generalization to a larger population. Interviewing more students enrolled in the program to incorporate a range of perspectives would expand our understanding of student experiences given findings from this study that interviewing is an effective method for exploring experiential aspects and social construction of involvement.

4.2.1 Conclusion

Intervention program staff worked with Paula to create a classroom culture within which she has experienced the positive emotions and feelings of competence that follow from school success. The socially rewarding outcomes associated with the recognition she receives become part of her new identity as a successful student who describes herself as “the most improved student in the program, and it’s just a really good feeling.” As Vygotsky (1978) stated, “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (p. 57).

Findings extend Turner et al. ’s (1998a) evidence for the social construction of involvement through whole class discussion, indicating it also may be constructed--or in this case, reconstructed--through individualized teaching. The student describes changes in her level of involvement since enrolling in the intervention program, thus involvement, like motivation, does not appear to be an individual, stable trait. The right interaction between learner and context is required to elicit student involvement, an encouraging
conceptualization for educators who have felt discouraged by their students’ apparent internal deficits concerning involvement and motivation.

Choice related to assignment topics did not appear to be important to Paula. However, her appreciation for the relaxed atmosphere in the intervention program classroom, where she did not feel pressured to comply with the teacher-driven routines and timelines typical in most secondary school classrooms, may have played a part in re-involving her by requiring her to take charge of her learning. The essentially voluntary attendance and flexibility to decide what subjects to work on each day means students are free to choose whether to take advantage of the supportive, organized, predictable learning atmosphere in the classroom. The student explains, “it’s just nice to be there” and anticipates the same positive experiences next year when she “can’t wait to come back”, indicating her decision to continue the commitment she benefited from this school year.

Meyer and Turner (2006) claim, “engaging students in learning requires consistently positive emotional experiences” which may be particularly important for students who have not experienced success (p. 377). Discovering ways to help students find school involving and meaningful is well worth the efforts of educators and researchers, so that more students like Paula discover that involvement and success are indeed “like going from nothing to everything.”
REFERENCES


