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Youths' Perceptions of How their Self-Determination was Supported in Alternative Programs

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ABSTRACT

We examine youths' perceptions of their experiences in one of two senior alternative education programs. We used self-determination theory (SDT) as a sensitizing lens to specifically understand students' perceptions of whether and how their basic psychological needs—needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence—were fostered in the context of these alternative education programs. We used a photo-elicitation activity to position youth as both experts and collaborators in research and knowledge-production processes. In general, youth revealed: (a) that their needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence were being met in the context of alternative program activities; (b) how this was true; and (c) how fulfillment of these needs impacted their relationships, wellbeing, and learning. Implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Introduction

Too often high schools focus almost exclusively on preparing students for college/university (McGregor, Mills, te Riele, & Hayes, 2015; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Their corresponding emphasis on abstract reasoning, rationality, and academic ability—over all other abilities—marginalizes significant numbers of students (Noddings, 2005). Students with other skill sets and interests, who struggle with the academic track, become discouraged, disengage, and may even drop out of school. Some of these students are choosing to attend, or being placed in, a growing number of alternative programs (e.g., Kim, 2011; Panina-Beard, 2018).

In addition to having experienced a disconnect between their skills and interests in mainstream programs, students attending alternative programs often disproportionately experience challenges that likely impeded their success in mainstream programs. These challenges include, but are not limited to, a history of learning difficulties or disabilities, emotional behavioral disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; and mental health issues like anxiety, familial stress and instability; and poverty (Foley & Pang, 2006; Ingersoll & Orr, 1989; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012). Alternative programs typically

offer supports that can address such challenges; for example, they offer small class size, remedial and self-paced instruction, academic and career counseling, and behavioral and crisis intervention (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Relative to studies on mainstream schools, little research has been conducted on alternative programs and what research exists is predominantly quantitative (e.g., Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011). Although this quantitative research, using researcher-derived categories and interventions, has provided information on potentially effective alternative program characteristics, qualitative research has the unique ability to "… [bring] us in close contact with details and particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even the measurable" (Greene, 2000, p. 10). A promising new body of research uses qualitative methods to investigate alternative education programs. This includes case studies of alternative programs (i.e., Kim & Taylor, 2008; McGregor et al., 2015; Vadeboncoeur, 2005) and studies that use interview methods to investigate students' experiences at alternative programs in-depth (i.e., Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette, 2011). These qualitative studies reveal important characteristics of effective alternative programs. Especially, they reveal the way in which alternative program students interpret, and interact with, organizational and instruction supports, which are key to understanding whether and how these supports "work" (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). Our study adds to this body of work.

Students attending alternative programs associate particular qualities with their success in these programs (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). For example, they describe how the affordance of flexibility around attendance and assignments, allows them to take responsibility for their own schooling, which in turn, enhances their sense of control over outcomes and leads to increases in effort to meet expectations. They also say that being a part of a caring community at the alternative programs is essential to their success at the programs. In light of these and other findings, we thought self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), with its emphasis on meeting people's inherent needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence, could be a useful lens through which to view youth's perceptions of alternative education programs. In particular, we wondered if youth would perceive practices supportive of their basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017), and find them helpful. The theory served as a sensitizing lens to help us map aspects of alternative programs students identified as beneficial. Aspects of the theory are described in greater detail below.

This study was part of a larger program of research using case study methodologies to examine how features of classroom contexts and teaching practices support the social, emotional, motivational, and academic needs of youth attending alternative programs. Here we present the cases of two alternative programs for youth aged 15-19. Our overall research protocol included classroom observations, auto-photography, and teacher and student interviews. This article focuses on our findings from the photo-elicitation (PE) protocol—auto-photography in combination with photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs; Noland, 2006)—to indicate whether and how youth in these two alternative programs perceived their basic psychological needs were enhanced through program activities.

Key constructs and research perspectives

Alternative programs

Alternative programs are one option for youth who either choose to take an education route different from the mainstream, or more often, have not found success in the mainstream school system (Raywid, 1994). Although individual alternative programs differ considerably in terms of their missions (e.g., to separate students with emotional behavioral problems or to provide them with a more compassionate and effective education) and focus (e.g., "the student's misbehavior, the student's psyche, the school's environment," Raywid, 1990, p. 31), they typically offer a low student to teacher ratio; self-paced instruction; a pathway to the attainment of a high school diploma; personal, academic, and career counseling; and crisis intervention (Bascia & Maton, 2017; Bascia et al., 2017; Lehr & Lange, 2003). While there exist private alternative programs, this research focuses on two that are publicly funded. In the province in Canada where this study was undertaken, alternative programs are located in a wide range of settings, from schools to youth centers, and provide uneven access to services and nonacademic activities (Smith et al., 2007). Although some school districts have alternative programs for younger children, most of these programs serve youth between the ages of 15 and 19.

Research indicates that youth who attend alternative programs disproportionately encounter individual, family, and/or community risk factors or vulnerabilities (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradway, & Ennis, 2012). These vulnerabilities increase the probability they will experience difficulties like anxiety, depression, and school failure and engage in "problem" behaviors, such as aggression and delinquency and school disengagement and drop-out (Ingersoll & Orr, 1989; Lamis, Malone, Langsford, & Lochman, 2012).

However, the negative outcomes associated with the vulnerabilities some alternative program students experience are not guaranteed to manifest. Many youth display great resilience in attaining positive outcomes despite their vulnerabilities. Protective factors, including supportive educational contexts can promote resiliency in youth (e.g., Edward, 2005) and alternative programs were originated to provide such a context. Ideally, they should serve as a source of protection against negative life outcomes, and promote positive life outcomes for students whose previous school experiences have often been negative and alienating (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006). We sought to understand whether and how this was the case in two alternative programs.

Self-determination theory and basic psychological needs theory

SDT is a social-cognitive theory of motivation concerned with the extent to which behaviors are freely chosen versus coerced, or intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Lynch & Salikhova, 2016). SDT holds that humans are inherently growth oriented, seeking to fulfill their capabilities through such processes as intrinsic motivation (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Social environments can either support or thwart such efforts, and those that are supportive help individuals to meet their basic psychological needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017;

Trenshaw, Revelo, Earl, & Herman, 2016)). Autonomy is the need to feel one's behavior is freely-chosen; belonging is the need to feel important and respected by significant others; and competence refers to the need to feel effective and successful in key activities in one's life.

The theory holds these needs are crucial not only for intrinsic motivation, but also for general well-being (Ryan, Deci, & Vansteenkiste, 2016; Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang, & Rosen, 2016). Moreover, the theory offers some support for understanding the link between contextual factors and an individual's well-being versus ill-being (Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Efforts to promote self-determination in groups of students who are represented in alternative programs (e.g., students with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders), has been shown to have benefits both during school (e.g., enhancing involvement in education planning) and after school attendance (e.g., improving employment outcomes) (Wehmeyer, 2015). In general, when teachers foster students' basic psychological needs, they facilitate academic, social, and emotional gains that are highly relevant to youth attending alternative programs.

Teachers foster students' basic psychological needs by becoming involved in students' lives, expressing warmth, and providing resources (e.g., help, time, and energy) to them (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Autonomy refers to the belief that actions arise from within and belong to oneself (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Satisfying this psychological need is particularly important for youth attending alternative programs, because, for example, youth who are delinquent tend to have a generalized external orientation and report low levels of control over their circumstances (Gottfredson, 2005; Parrot & Strongman, 1984). Similarly, students with learning difficulties tend to make more external than internal attributions and often perceive that academic outcomes are controlled by powerful others (Lewis & Lawrence-Patterson, 1989; Tarnowski & Nay, 1989).

Teachers who support student autonomy attend to students' interests, goals, values and motivational needs when designing classroom activities (Reeve, 2006). For instance, they praise signs of improvement and mastery and create opportunities for students to work in their own way. On the other hand, teachers with a more controlling style are less likely to acknowledge students' motivational resources and use directives, commands and controlling questions to direct students' work. Research indicates that students with autonomy-supportive compared to controlling teachers not only show increases in autonomy, but increases in many domains of positive functioning such as classroom engagement, school persistence, creativity, psychological well-being, deep learning, and self-regulated learning (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCinto, & Turner, 2004; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007; Trenshaw et al., 2016).

Belonging or relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to valued others (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Youth attending alternative programs report that a sense of belonging is fundamental to their success in school (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996). Students are facilitated in meeting their need for belonging when they are able to be part of a close, caring group with shared goals and have a voice in classroom norm-setting and

decision-making (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). To achieve this, teachers can, for example, encourage students to: collaborate with one another to achieve mutual goals; provide and receive meaningful assistance; and reflect on and talk about one another's experiences. Belonging need satisfaction is associated with many positive outcomes, many of which are particularly important for youth-at-risk. For example, it is related to increases in self-esteem, empathy, social competence, conflict resolution skills, achievement, and decreases in depression in boys and anxiety in girls (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Battistich et al., 1997; Osterman, 2000).

Competence refers to an individual's perception that s/he can affect outcomes and achieve desired goals (Ryan & Deci, 2002). When individuals feel competent, they are more likely to feel self-determined because they have experienced the link between their behavior and desired outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Classrooms that promote competence tend to be autonomy-supporting versus controlling; they allow students' opportunities for their preferences, interests, and needs to guide their classroom activities as opposed to being characterized by inflexibility, intimidation and a controlling use of praise and extrinsic rewards (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010; Reeve, 2006). Autonomy-supporting classrooms are especially important for students-at-risk because these students typically report lower levels of academic competence than do other students (Bender & Wall, 1994; Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001). Students' sense of competence is enhanced when teachers' expectations are tailored to students' abilities and students are provided with clear information about classroom expectations, consequences, and how to be successful in activities (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007).

Autonomy and autonomy support have received the most attention in the research literature (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011; Trench & Salikhova, 2016). This is unfortunate in light of research indicating that the three needs hold different levels of importance for various groups of students, including groups who are represented in alternative programs (Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992; Trenshaw et al., 2016). Therefore, our goal was to pay equal attention to all three needs. Additionally, just as basic psychological needs theory provided a helpful lens for our interpretation of students' experiences in alternative programs, our descriptive self-reports (in the PEIs) provided rich contextualized examples that can be mapped to the theory. Few studies in the field of SDT have privileged participants' experiences in the way our study does. The majority of the studies in this field have relied on surveys (i.e., forced choice questionnaires) rather than semi- and un-structured interviews, (see for e.g., Sheldon & Ryan, 2011) and no study that we know of has used a participatory approach, such as PEIs.

Overview of our study

We used a case study design and observations and photo-elicited (PE) interviews to understand student experiences in two alternative programs. Specifically, we used a PE protocol, or auto-photography, in combination with PEIs to ask youth in two alternative programs whether and how they perceived their self-determination was enhanced through alternative program activities. Although we were sensitized to the conceptual categories of SDT, and shared these categories with youth participants to create a shared

focus, we took steps to support participants to capture and discuss experiences that were important to them, and to describe these experiences in "their own words." For example, we invited participants to create their own definitions of the autonomy, belonging, and competence constructs and designed our interview questions to allow for additional categories that may not be covered in these constructs to emerge.

Our study focuses on students' perceptions of the supports provided at the alternative programs and is guided by a single overarching question: How did youth perceive their needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence were met in the alternative programs?

Methods

The alternative program cases

Two alternative programs in a western province of Canada were the cases for this study. Students in both programs were 15 to 19 years old and most had experienced learning disabilities, substance use/abuse problems, and/or mental health disorders (Perry, Brenner, Collie, & Hofer, 2015; teacher personal communication, 2011, 2013). These youth were often lacking positive role models outside of school, they had been unsuccessful in the mainstream school system, and their history of academic difficulties made them vulnerable to numerous negative outcomes, including school disengagement and dropout.

Both alternative programs were located in non-school settings and offered nontraditional learning environments. For example, they had dimmer lighting than is typically found in classrooms; a variety of comfortable seating options, including couches and communal tables for working; and kitchens. Our observations in the two alternative programs also revealed commonalities among their approaches to student learning; specifically, course selection and delivery were individualized to meet the unique needs of students. Students were encouraged to work in their own way and at their own pace and the teachers designed activities to address students' need for functional skills. For example, both programs taught students budgeting skills and applied these lessons as credit toward academic areas, such as math.

One of the alternative programs (hereafter referred to as AP1) had male and female students and the other (hereafter referred to as AP2) had only female students. However, we did not ask the students to report gender, we presumed their gender from the pronouns their teachers used and from their presentation. Since collecting these data (circa 2014), we have developed a more inclusive demographic and consent form that allows youth to identify on a continuum.

AP1 was located in a large urban school district. To be eligible for this program, students had either a social worker or a probation officer and many of the students lived either in foster care or a group home. AP1 had one full-time teacher, one full-time teaching aide, and several counselors specializing in mental health and addiction who made weekly visits. An interview with the teacher (Perry, et al., 2015) revealed ways in which he attended to students' needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence. He individualized curriculum and his teaching style to meet each student's unique needs (autonomy); he developed and maintained caring (e.g., accepting and nonjudgmental) relationships with students (belonging); and he set realistic expectations for students

while also acknowledging many forms of success (competence). On average, the program enrolled 20 students, predominantly male, but just 6 to 12 students attended the program on any given day.

AP2 was located in a small city. It was an integrated education and counseling program that focused on empowering students to advocate for their needs in and out of the alternative program. AP2 had one full-time principal, teacher, and teaching assistant and two full-time counselors. The program's curriculum included practices paralleling those shown to support students' basic psychological needs (Social and Personal Responsibility Curriculum, 2011). For instance, there was an emphasis on helping students to: identify personal factors influencing their learning (autonomy); form healthy relationships and contribute to the school community (belonging); and set future goals and create plans to achieve them (competence). An interview with the teacher at AP2 (Hofer, 2016) also revealed these parallels; particularly, it revealed that the alternative program staff engaged in practices known to contribute to the satisfaction of students' need for belonging. For instance, the alternative program dedicated the second week of each school year to activities designed to create community, and once a week, the staff and students went on an outing together. On average, the program enrolled 25 girls at one time and most of them attended daily.

The researchers had significant experience working with youth in alternative programs including working in similar contexts in other capacities (e.g., as counselors or learning support teachers). In addition, the researchers had an interest in motivation research, particularly research related to SDT (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012; Perry, Mazabel, Dantzer, & Winne, 2018). We shared the view, which is well supported in the research literature, that the promotion of SD is critical for learners who experience school disengagement and who are disenfranchised in various ways.

Students and teachers in both programs seemed motivated and engaged in their work/learning at the programs. The teacher from AP1 was part of an advisory network to a Faculty of Education initiative to support youth who struggle in school and their teachers. He heard about our research and perceived SD was a good fit for what he was trying to achieve with students, so he volunteered to be part of our research. He was involved in the design as well as the implementation of the research activities. He was interested in learning more about SDT and integrating components of this theory into his work with students. At the same time, he was a tremendous resource for our research, helping us to connect with students and informing us when he felt an idea we had would not work.

An interview with this teacher (Perry et al., 2015), uncovered personal qualities that motivated and sustained him in what many perceive to be a challenging teaching role, including (not surprisingly) a sense of efficacy and engagement in teaching. He reported a sense of competence in connecting with students and making a difference in their lives and a strong commitment to his work. His future goals included helping other teachers develop skills to better serve students' with significant barriers to success.

We chose to include AP2 based on previous research about this program, which characterized it as "successful" in meeting students' emotional, social, and academic needs (e.g., Artz & Nicholson, 2010; Rehnby, 1996). For example, in Artz and Nicholson's study, students reported feeling highly supported by their teachers; feeling

free to ask for help; believing they could influence decisions that affected them at the program; feeling that they belonged and that they shared a common vision and purpose with fellow students; liking to attend and being proud of their school, Furthermore, interviews with students at AP1, revealed they credited the program for much of their success in school and in life (Hofer, 2016).

Staff at AP1 expressed to us a commitment to meeting students' needs and helping them find success. When asked to describe her students, the teacher's focus was on their strengths, as well as their need to belong; she is quoted as saying, "They all [have] a sense of humor and they [are] kind and caring. They [want] a place where they feel they belong" (Hofer, 2016, p. 120).

Photo-elicitation

We invited students enrolled in these alternative programs to be partners in our research—to generate data with us by participating in a photo-elicitation (PE) activity. Our PE protocol involved auto-photography (i.e., participants took pictures they perceived to be relevant to the research focus) in combination with photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs). Three PEIs were conducted in AP1 (two with one student and one with another) and six were conducted in AP2 (two with one student and one with four others).

Photo-elicitation is a stimulated recall technique that uses photographs to prompt research participants' interview responses (Collier, 1957; Collier & Collier, 1986). Collier's (1957) research revealed that PEIs prompted longer and more in-depth responses that were less influenced by participants' mood or fatigue in comparison to more traditional approaches to interviewing. Auto-photography accompanied by stimulated recall interview techniques has proven effective in research with vulnerable populations, including street entrenched youth and homeless populations (Noland, 2006; Clark, 1999). PEIs attend to the vulnerable position of participants and acknowledge their contributions to the research process. Collier and Collier (1986) describe the role of participants in PEIs as "expert guides leading the fieldworker through the content of the pictures" (p. 106). Also, because PEIs gather and draw upon visual as well as verbal data, they can support participants who struggle with communication tasks (Steger et al., 2013). This was important in our study because students attending AP1 and AP2 had learning and other disabilities and many had experienced trauma and/or prolonged gaps in their education, which may have impacted their willingness and/or ability to share their experiences in a more traditional approach.

PEIs are an innovative way to study individuals' SD. SDT research has primarily involved survey self-report methods—questionnaires (Urdan & Turner, 2005). Rather than privileging what participants' say, these methods privilege researcher-derived, deductive categories. Moreover, they do not fully capture the complexity of individuals' experiences in particular settings and situations and are often biased in favor of dominant communities/cultures (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Given that students in alternative programs have disproportionate rates of ethnic and/or socioeconomic minority status (Jolivette et al., 2012), developing approaches that attend to issues of diversity within alternative program settings is warranted. We wanted to acknowledge and support the

youth's autonomy, belonging, and competence by making them partners and key informants in the research.

PE protocol

Our recruitment procedure for the PE activity was different for the two alternative programs. Because students in AP1 did not attend on a regular basis, it was difficult for us to arrange a time to explain our research to them. Consequently, we worked with the teacher to recruit student participants. We explained our PE activity to the teacher, gave him several consent forms, and he approached students individually to invite them to participate. Those who wanted to participate signed a consent form and the teacher contacted us to arrange a time to meet with these students to begin the activity. In AP2, we met with the staff and students to explain our research goals and describe the PE activity. Then they met together to decide whether to participate. Finally, we met with a smaller group of students (i.e., those willing participate in the PE activity) to go over the study's details and consent forms and enrolled them in the study.

We carried out the PE activity in two phases. In Phase 1, researchers met with participating students individually to explain the PE activity. First, we focused on what the content of photographs could be and co-constructed language/labels for describing perceptions of *autonomy, belonging,* and *competence*. Researchers introduced each construct to the participants and then asked them to describe each construct in their own words—in a way that made sense to them in the context of their lives. For example, participants connected autonomy with feelings of independence and freedom; belonging with acceptance from others; and competence with skill and success. From these conversations, we created infographics for the agreed-upon definitions, which we posted throughout the alternative programs. We stressed the importance of protecting "others'" privacy when taking pictures (e.g., we emphasized that they needed to get permission from [third parties] to use photos of them in the research). We explained how we planned to use the photos and the extent of their control over their data (e.g., they would choose the photos to be used in research and they had the power to withhold photos and not to talk about photos they preferred not be included in the research). These choices were also explained in the consent form.

Next, students were given disposable cameras for a period of two weeks and asked to take pictures that represented their experience of autonomy, belonging, and/or competence in activities/during events in the alternative programs during that time period. Our choice to provide disposable cameras, as opposed to having students take digital pictures, was based on several factors. Few students in the alternative programs owned cell phones and teachers described how those who did have phones often misplaced or lost them. Correspondingly, we did not want make participants responsible for a costly device they could not replace if it was misplaced (which happened to several of the disposable cameras). Finally, we wanted to give participants a device with the singular purpose of supporting the research, so they would use it with the intention of gathering information relevant to our research purpose. Students returned their cameras to us at the end of the 2-week data collection period.

Phase 2 involved developing the photos (the researchers did this) and meeting with students individually to conduct the PEIs. We returned the developed photos to participants, reviewed the central constructs (i.e., autonomy, belonging, and competence) in the study, and asked participants to decide which pictures they wanted to use in the research. We asked them to identify photos associated with feelings of autonomy, belonging, and competence. Participants were told that individual photos could reflect more than one of these categories and they could place photos between category piles. We then asked the participants to discuss each picture with us; specifically, we asked how it represented their experience of autonomy, belonging, and/or competence in their alternative program.

Our interview protocol was semi-structured; participants were encouraged to lead the conversation and questions from the protocol were only asked when participants did not speak to the content of their photos without prompting. Questions revolved around two main topics for discussion: (a) What were you feeling when you were doing the activity? and (b) What made you feel [autonomy, belonging, or competence]? Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analyses.

Data analyses

Two of the researchers thematically coded the interview transcripts, looking for content related to autonomy, belonging, and competence as well as emergent categories that related to the broader research agenda, such as: How did youth experience the alternative programs? How did they perceive efforts to keep them engaged in school? Once the interviews were coded, these researchers met to discuss differences in coding both analytic and emergent categories. Final coding decisions were reached through a process of returning to and discussing transcripts and then coming to consensus concerning the most relevant categories. Table 1 contains the coding categories along with definitions derived from the SDT literature, synonyms our participants generated for each of these categories, and excerpts from one participant's (Julie's[1]) PEI indicative of how participants described their experience in relation to particular categories.

Results

Results are organized according to the framing constructs in our study. For each of these constructs, we present content from students PEIs, first from students in AP1 and then from students in AP2. We also present students photos with captions to explain how aspects of the activity captured in the photo related to her/his feelings of autonomy, belonging, or competence. For each construct we have tried to address our overarching research questions with data from students' auto-photography and PEIs.

Autonomy

AP1. Miguel and Jason were the two participating students from AP1. They placed photos from several different program activities (academic work, workplace learning—

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[1]Students' names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Coding categories, definitions, and examples from the PEIs.

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	SYNONYMS	EXAMPLE FROM JULIE'S INTERVIEW
Autonomy	The student perceives a sense of internal causation—choice and control over actions (Trenshaw, et al., 2016).	Independence, choice, and/ or freedom.	"There's a lot of different ways that we could have done this … You could make it look however you want, choose whatever facts. It didn't matter, as long as it's presentable" (p. 8).
Belonging	The student feels connected to classmates or teachers; feels part of a group; perceives a sense of community (Battistich et al., 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2002).	Inclusion, closeness, and/or acceptance from others.	"This is my friend [Kendra]. We were stoked …. We were talking about how it's gorgeous at Goldstream … We love it there [and we were] having fun and laughing and walking (pp. 54-55)
Competence	The student feels s/he is doing a good job or achieving desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Trenshaw et al., 2016).	Skill, capability, and/ or success.	"[I felt] proud. Proud of my work" (p. 6).

landscaping, and decorating a skateboard) in the category of autonomy. Miguel and Jason said they experienced a sense of autonomy (or a sense of having "choice") when they were given choices about when and how to complete activities and whether and when to take breaks during activities. Jason associated autonomy in activities to a reduction in stress and to a sense of comfort. Miguel indicated his sense of autonomy led to feelings of leadership and empowerment. Jason also identified empowerment as an outcome of autonomy. He described how having a say in how to install a ramp during landscaping " … [made] me feel like I have more of a say in stuff like this. Like I should speak up more. If I was actually doing a job like this, instead of just keeping my mouth shut, voicing my thoughts" (p. 33).

Miguel shared pictures of a decal he designed, produced, and attached to the bottom of his skateboard (see Figure 1, photo A). This was the product of an art project in which several students with skateboards at AP1 took part. He described how choosing the design and creating the decal enabled him to express his identity. He said, "That's my initials for my name, so it's technically representing me … It expresses me, for who I am" (p. 9).

AP2. Under the category of autonomy, the five participants from AP2 included pictures that captured their experiences in a wide range of activities, including: art-making, "Check-in," cooking class, academic work, a science fair at a local college, and an outing to a nature park. They perceived that their autonomy was supported through choices about: whether, when, and how to complete activities; how to engage in activities; and the type of activities offered at the alternative program. Julie and Cathryn shared pictures of art they created at the alternative program. Julie shared a poster (see Figure 1, photo B) and Cathryn shared a painting (see Figure 1, photo C). Both participants linked having a choice about what to include and how to complete the activity to their

Figure 1. PE Photos A, B, C, D, and E.

sense of autonomy. Julie said, "There's lots of different ways that we could have done this, right? I think that we have a lot of opportunities to do things a little differently, a little more fun than we would in regular school. Because you probably would just write a short essay about this guy, you know? It's more fun. It's more creative. You can make it look however you want. Choose whatever facts. It doesn't matter, as long as it's presentable" (p. 8). Cathryn said, "That's what I felt good about, knowing that this was 100% mine; nobody told me how to draw it, what to draw, [how to] color it, or anything" (pp. 3-4).

Choice about type of engagement during activities is exemplified in Cathryn's PEI. Cathryn identified a picture of three students sitting together during an academic block as representing autonomy. She said, "I don't feel pressured to be perfectly sitting … I can look down and I can draw something and still pay attention … There's three of them sitting there, so, again, it's totally up to you … how you want to behave during class … Just being able to be you and still learn at the same time" (p. 8).

Students at AP2 linked their sense of autonomy during activities to such things as their motivation to attend school, sense of respect, fun, creativity, self-expression, competence, and control. Julie said, "I feel there's a level of respect in having a choice … I

feel like in a setting where you don't have a choice, you don't feel respected, and you don't feel like you're being listened to" (p. 3). Cathryn also linked the autonomy she experienced during academic activities at the alternative program to her competence, as did Jessica. In her previous school, when she didn't have a say in what she worked on, Jessica said she dreaded school. Now with choice, she said, "I went from being a C, C + average, and I'm getting straight A's right now … So it really has made a huge difference for me" (pp. 12-13).

"Check-in" was a group activity at AP2, where all members of the staff and all of the students sat in a circle and took turns sharing "what was going on for them." It was done at the beginning of the week, on Monday morning, and involved the staff describing the agenda for the coming week and the students sharing highlights from their weekend as well as thoughts and feelings about the plan for the week. Cathryn did not take a picture during check-in, but she discussed the activity. She said she felt a sense of autonomy during check-in because students can choose whether or not to take part in the discussions. She said, "You can say 'pass' and no one's going to be like, 'Oh, you weirdo'" (p. 58).

Belonging

AP1. Miguel and Jason referred in their PEIs to pictures that captured their experiences during the following activities: decorating a skateboard, renovating the alternative program, repairing bikes, landscaping, cooking, and playing hockey. All of these activities involved the participation of both students and staff. Participants said their sense of belonging was fostered when activities were done in a group, either as a team or with members working on individual projects. In the groups, they appreciated that others appreciated them; that staff and students helped one another; and that everyone was working on the same or similar task.

These participants described how staff members nurtured their sense of belonging by showing them respect, which they said was evidenced when staff treated students equally (not showing preferential treatment). Jason said this respect was apparent during activities, when the staff, " … make it so … nobody's getting the harder job or the easier job." Both participants said their sense of belonging improved their confidence in their ability to work as team, and Miguel said this confidence was specifically related to the ability to solve problems as a group.

The staff at the mixed-gender alternative program gave students opportunities to gain vocational skills in many different areas, including landscaping and bike repair. The alternative program had a landscaping business and students received payment for their landscaping work. Jason said that simply working with staff members while landscaping gave him a sense of belonging. During the installation of a wheelchair ramp, he said appreciated that his opinion was valued. He said, "He asked for my opinion for how we should put the ramp in so it'll fit … That's what I like about [the staff]; they're really respectful." Jason associated his sense of belonging during this activity with: (a) improved confidence in his ability to be an effective team member; (b) improved ability to communicate skillfully; (c) and a sense of pride for communally completed work.

AP2. Student participants from AP2 placed pictures in the category of belonging that captured their experiences during: poster-making; science, drama, and cooking classes; a budgeting workshop; an outing to a local nature park; and an open house event at a local college. Also, one of the students, Cathryn, shared a picture of several students and a staff member sitting together during their "life skills" class and several participants referred to the "Check-in" activity as a place where they felt connected to others at the alternative program. However, they did not take pictures during this activity out of respect for the privacy of their peers.

In PEIs, participants described how their sense of belonging at the alternative program was supported when students listened well to one another and helped each other. They described how staff treated students as equals, making themselves available if and when students were in need of help; and helping students work toward their life goals. For example, Cathryn said that when she told a staff member what academic program she was looking to take after graduating high school, the staff member researched the courses she needed to take to be eligible for the program. Cathryn said, "… they go out of their way to do that. They actually care" (pp. 35-36). Also, students said their sense of belonging was fostered when learning activities were inclusive and when they weren't academic, for example, when they focused on life skills, such as budgeting.

Students said their sense of belonging positively affected their relationships through enhanced fun or enjoyment during activities and increased compassion amongst everyone at the alternative program. This compassion manifested in students' desire to help staff when appropriate. A sense of belonging also reduced students' stress and promoted their ability to express themselves. Finally, by feeling connected to others at the alternative program, several participants said their learning was enhanced.

Cathryn described how the physical set-up in the life skills room at AP2 fostered her sense of belonging with other students. Describing the significance of the picture, she said, "I think there's three or four couches and then there's also different sections, if you just want to sit by yourself. So when I come into here, because I don't really know very many girls in the school, … the way the couches are placed … kind of in a circle, it makes you feel a little more connected to the girls because I can see everybody" (p. 46). She said, "This [picture] totally represents [AP2]. It's all about just being comfortable and who you are and being here. And you can see these girls look so comfy" (p. 41, see Figure 1, photo D).

Competence

AP1. In the category of competence, Miguel and Jason included pictures of: decorating a skateboard, repairing bikes, participating in "CrossFit" and hockey, landscaping, cooking, and writing. In their PEIs, they described how their need for competence was attended to, for example, by: engaging in difficult tasks that were completed either individually or as a group; pushing themselves; completing a task; being praised by the staff for their work and/or skills; learning new skills; and/or producing a good quality product. They linked their sense of competence to other outcomes, such as belief in their ability to complete similar tasks, a sense of pride in their work, and/or learning that completing challenging tasks is rewarding (i.e., leads to a sense of accomplishment).

Figure 1 (photo E) shows Miguel engaging in a wall-ball exercise during "CrossFit"—a strength and conditioning fitness program that incorporates functional movements (mimicking real-world actions) at a high intensity and constant variety ("CrossFit Vancouver," n.d.). The teacher at AP1 adapted this program to align with the fitness level of his students. Miguel engaged in CrossFit several times each week. He said that pushing himself during CrossFit gave him a sense of competence. He shared, "During the workout, I'm like, 'Oh, I don't want to do this.' But I'm pushing myself through. I'm learning how to do that because a while ago, I used to give up quickly, almost instantly. I'm definitely pushing myself and it's helping" (p. 27). He said his sense of competence was also enhanced when he saw the physical results. He said, "It gives me more [strength]" (p. 27). Finally, Miguel described how engaging in CrossFit gave him confidence in his ability to complete similar tasks, "I've been misjudging what I can really do" (p. 28).

AP2. During their PEIs, students from AP2 referred to pictures of: poster-making; painting; a budgeting and a leatherwork workshop; science and cooking classes; an open house event at a local college; and students and staff eating ice-cream at a restaurant. The ice-cream was a reward for students who completed a ten kilometer run. Julie described another reward commonly given to students by staff at the alternative program: coffee at a nearby coffee shop. Finally, Cathryn discussed her experiences at AP2 generally, and of nearing graduation specifically, but did not capture these experiences pictorially.

AP2 participants said their sense of competence was fostered by: engaging in interesting and/or fun activities; setting goals that they follow-through with; being rewarded for their work; and/or getting good grades. They perceived their sense of competence increased their confidence in skills related to a specific subject or skill area (the one in which they felt a sense of competence) and their motivation to engage in similar activities in the future. For example, Julie described how she felt less stress about her ability to manage finances as a consequence of developing competence related to budgeting.

Cathryn brought pictures of several paintings she created for an art course at AP2 to her PEI. She said her sense of competence increased when she was permitted to use her creativity in assignments. She stated, "That's what I felt good about: knowing that this was 100% mine; nobody told me how to draw it, what to draw, [how to] color it, or anything" (pp. 3-4). Getting a good grade also contributed to her sense of competence. She said, "I've never had my own art that I've made on a canvas graded before. So it was really cool to see what my grade was. I think I got an A" (p. 26). Cathryn was aware of her progress as an artist, which increased her sense of confidence in this domain. She said, "My drawings looked like stick figures two years ago. And this is the first year I actually felt like I could show another artist this and be confident about it" (p. 68).

Convergences and divergences between student experiences at AP1 versus AP2

Table 2 summarizes common themes across alternative programs in students' PEIs, looking for a shared sense of how autonomy, belonging, and competence were fostered during activities at the alternative programs, as well as common views of how the

Table 2. Themes across PEIs: autonomy, belonging, and competence.

HOW WAS AUTONOMY SUPPORTED DURING ACTIVITIES AT THE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM?		DEFINITION
Through Choice in:	• Whether, when, and/or how to complete activities • Whether and/or when to take a break • Type of engagement in activities • Types of activities offered	• Students chose whether they participated in activities; when they completed activities; and/or the way in which they completed activities (e.g., what they will write about during a writing task) • Students chose if and/or when they took breaks during activities • Students chose how to engage in activities (e.g., whether they talked or just listened during group discussions) • Students had a say in what activities were offered at the alternative program
The Impact of a Sense of Autonomy		**Definition**
Relationships	• Leadership • Respect	• Confidence in the ability to play a leadership role • A sense of respect between students and between staff and students
Wellbeing	• Reduced stress • Comfort • Empowerment • Self-expression • Enjoyment/fun • Creativity • Competence • Control	• A reduction in and/or ability to manage stress • A sense of comfort/ease at the program • A sense of personal power (e.g., having a voice) • The ability to express personal feelings, thoughts, and/or ideas • Having fun during activities • The ability to use imagination and express original ideas • A sense that s/he completes tasks successfully • The power to influence events
Learning	• Engagement in/motivation for school • Focus • Performance/grades	• Feeling emotionally involved, and/or motivated to attend, school • The ability to maintain concentration during activities • Enhanced academic performance
HOW WAS BELONGING SUPPORTED DURING ACTIVITIES AT THE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM?		DEFINITION
Through Qualities of:	• Relationships with other students • Relationships with staff • Learning activities • The physical environment	• Students: listen intently and well to each other; help each other; engage in conflict resolution when experiencing conflict; and/or have close friends at the alternative program • Staff members: treat students with respect (i.e., as equal to them and to one another); use humor with students in an affiliative manner; make themselves available to help students when/if students are in need of assistance; accommodate students' unique needs/preferences (e.g., by providing vegetarian and vegan lunch options); help students work toward their life goals (including post-alternative program academic goals); and/or show enthusiasm about students' work • Activities are inclusive (i.e., anyone can participate); activities are done in groups made up of only students and staff (where members either work as a team, or individually); group members help one another; group members ask each other questions; group members sometimes have defined roles and/or take turns doing tasks; and/or materials are shared. Also, there are opportunities for nonacademic activities, including outings • There are comfortable seating options (e.g., sofas, assembled in a circle)

(*continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

The Impact of a Sense of Belonging		Definition
Relationships	• Teamwork • Communication • Fun • Support • Compassion • Relationships with staff	Enhanced: • Ability to work in a team • Ability to communicate skillfully with others • Feelings of shared enjoyment and fun with others in the alternative program • Sense of support from others in the alternative program. Also, ability to support others, generally • Compassion between students and between students and staff • Motivation to maintain positive relationships with staff members, by, for example, helping them with tasks such as clean-up
Wellbeing	• Pride • Stress • Self-expression	• A sense of pride in communally completed work • A reduction in feelings of being overwhelmed or stressed by tasks • Enhanced ability to express personal feelings, thoughts, and/or ideas
Learning	• Group problem-solving • Learning • Focus • Attendance	Improved: • Ability to work with others to solve problems • Learning during activities • Ability to focus on work • Attendance at the alternative program
HOW WAS COMPETENCE SUPPORTED DURING ACTIVITIES AT THE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM?		**DEFINITION**
Through Qualities of:	• Activities • Students' own behavior • Staff's behavior • Learning • Other outcomes	• The task is difficult, time consuming, completed individually or as a group, interesting, and /or fun. Also, the student can take advantage of strengths and interests. • The student: embraces a challenge; pushes him/herself; follows through (i.e., doesn't give up); completes the task and/or a substantive amount of work; and/or takes on a leadership role • The staff: praise students' skills, work, and/or performance and/or reward students for their work • The student learns: new skills or information and/or how to successfully complete a difficult task • After completing the task, the student: has a good quality product; shares learning with other students; influences or inspires other students; experiences tangible effects such as increased strength and/or improvements in his/her personal life; and/or gets a good grade
The Impact of a Sense of Competence		Definition
Wellbeing	• Confidence • Pride • Motivation • Stress	• Enhanced confidence that s/he can: complete similar tasks; solve challenging problems in the future; and/or take on a leadership role in the future. Also, enhanced confidence in skills related to a subject area • A sense of satisfaction/accomplishment • Enhanced motivation to engage in similar activities • A reduction in stress vis-à-vis knowing important skills
Learning	• Perseverance	• Learning that: completing challenging tasks is rewarding; and/or if you stick with something that is important to you, you can be successful

satisfaction of these needs impacted their relationships, wellbeing, and learning at the alternative programs.

Across alternative programs, students' PEIs indicated students perceived their needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence were met in the context of the alternative programs. Their PEIs also revealed how they perceived these needs were met and how they perceived the fulfillment of these needs was implicated in their relationships, wellbeing, and learning at the alternative programs. Specifically, all students identified "having choices" as central to perceptions of autonomy and described how experiencing autonomy led to other benefits, such as reductions in stress and feelings of empowerment. They pointed to relationships among students and between staff and students as key contributors to their sense of belonging at the alternative programs. They also described how learning activities and the physical environments supported belonging. Sense of belonging was associated with feeling respected and having confidence to work as a team. Finally, students perceived that their need for competence was satisfied through aspects of: alternative program activities, their own behavior, the staff's behavior, and their learning. Their increased sense of competence led to enhanced motivation and/or confidence to complete similar tasks in the future.

We observed two key differences in the PEIs from AP1 and AP2. First, students at AP1 spoke most about their need for competence and student participants at AP2 spoke most about their need for belonging. This difference could reflect teachers' differential emphasis on belonging and competence at each alternative program. We observed that the teacher in AP1 designed activities that were mostly completed individually and promoted a sense of personal success, or competence (e.g., *Crossfit*, painting skateboards), while at AP2, staff designed the majority of activities to foster a sense of community among students (e.g., Check-in, communal lunches, academic projects requiring collaboration). Also, at AP1 students were more autonomous in their coming and going, whereas at AP2, students were expected to attend for the entire school day. As a result, compared to AP2, at AP1, opportunities for students to build relationships was relatively limited. In addition, there were fewer group activities at AP1, Perhaps attendance would have improved at AP1 if there had been more group activities, but creating a sense of connection between students was not a primary goal of the teacher at AP1. In fact, in some instances, the teacher discouraged "bonding" amongst students out of concern these relationships might trigger or reinforce problem behavior.

Finally, students from AP2 seemed to take a more reflective stance in their PEIs than students from AP1. Although all the student participants were open and forthright in sharing their experiences at their respective alternative programs with us, the students from AP2 elaborated on the value of having their needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence met, and the importance and value of other aspects of their learning at the alternative program, more than the students from AP1. Moreover, the participants from AP2 seemed to more thoroughly understand and "buy into" the approach of their alternative program than did the participants from AP1. The degree of detail/elaboration in the PEIs of students from AP2 could be linked to the approach taken at that alternative program. Staff at AP2 were invested in empowering students to understand their needs and to make sure these needs are met both in and out of the alternative program. Therefore, activities were designed with self-advocacy goals in mind. Examinations of

differences in autonomy, belonging, and competence support across alternative programs and the relative importance of those supports for different groups of students would be a fruitful area for future research.

Discussion

During our conversations with youth attending two alternative programs, they shared the ways in which they interpreted organizational and instructional supports there and how those supports enhanced their self-determination. Specifically, they identified ways staff at the programs met their basic psychological needs and what benefits accrued when this was accomplished. Students perceived their autonomy was supported through choices presented to them during activities. They reported that this led to such benefits as enhanced respect among students and between teachers and students; a reduction in stress; and increased motivation for school. Participants described how their sense of belonging was supported through aspects of their relationships with other students (e.g., they helped one another) and teachers (e.g., teachers treated students with respect); inclusive activities; and a comfortable learning environment. They described how their sense of belonging enhanced their sense that they were part of a team and their pride in learning. Finally, students indicated their need for competence was satisfied through: activities that enabled them to work from their strengths and interests (e.g., activities that allowed for creativity); aspects of their own behavior (e.g., they took on a leadership role); and their learning (e.g., they learned new skills). They reported that their sense of competence led to increased persistence during challenging activities as well as increased confidence.

These findings are consistent with research indicating what alternative programs ideally do. For example, they offered flexible deadlines and course completion options (Vedeboncoeur, 2005), set high, but achievable standards (McGregor et al., 2015), and provide caring teachers and supportive communities (Jones, 2011). Our findings are also consistent with the SDT research, which, for example, links autonomy satisfaction to improved academic persistence with a reduced probability of dropping out of school (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997) and belonging need satisfaction to increased self-esteem and achievement (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Osterman, 2000).

Our study contributes to SDT in two important ways. First, the majority of SDT studies have focused on students' psychological need for autonomy, with fewer studies attending to their needs for belonging and competence (Osterman, 2000; Sheldon & Ryan, 2011; Trenshaw et al., 2016). We gave equal weight to all three psychological needs and participant interviews underscore the importance of supporting not only students' sense of autonomy, but also their belonging and competence in alternative programs. Second, although researchers have argued that fostering student autonomy, belonging, and competence may have the greatest benefit in schools with groups of marginalized or disadvantaged learners (Battistich et al., 1997), and youth who generally struggle in school (Abery & Stancliffe, 2003; Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001), until now, researchers have not examined ways in which basic psychological needs can be met through participation in alternative programs. Our study begins to establish a rich and contextualized portrait of this.

Our study also contributes to the research on alternative programs in several significant ways. First, it joins a growing body of research that privileges youth perspectives on features of alternative programs that promote their SD, and whether and how these supports appeal to them. This understanding can inform the development of effective practices in alternative programs (i.e., practices that meet students' social, emotional, motivational, and academic needs). Our study also suggests categories highlighted within the SDT literature are relevant to students in alternative programs; in particular— students had no difficulty identifying experiences related to autonomy, belonging, and competence, and seemed to appreciate features of the alternate education environment that provided those experiences. Finally, our study contributes to a promising new body of research that uses qualitative and participatory methods to foreground students' perspectives of what works for them within alternative programs (e.g., McGregor et al., 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Our PE activity positioned student participants as both experts and collaborators in the research and knowledge-production processes and allowed participants to speak for themselves, rather than respond to a set of forced choice items. It created opportunities for researchers to support participants' communication skills and collect/construct data in a relatively unobtrusive and non-threatening way (Norman, 1991; Steger et al., 2013).

Practical considerations arising from our research include giving students voice and choice in their learning and participation: youth in our study seemed to appreciate being part of the decision making around whether, when, and how to complete activities; whether/when to take a break; and what type of activities are offered. To foster a sense belonging in students, staff in alternative programs could consider: whether and how they treat students with respect and make themselves available to help students; promote respectful and helpful interactions between students; have students engage in group work; and create a safe and comfortable learning environment (e.g., supply comfortable seating options). Finally, to meet students' need for competence, staff at alternative programs might consider designing activities that are optimally challenging, interesting, and/or fun and that allow students to use their strengths and to take on a leadership role. They could also give students opportunities to learn new skills and/or information and celebrate students' progress and learning.

Characteristics of alternative programs, including a small teacher-to-student ratio may make them especially well-suited to fostering students' basic psychological needs. In our study, students reported their need for belonging was fostered, for example, by their teachers individualizing instruction to their unique needs and developing a relationship them. These outcomes are more difficult to achieve in the mainstream of high schools where teachers are relating to large numbers of students and typically see each student for short periods of time. A small class size can help prevent students from feeling like "just another number," and instead like part of a community. However, researchers and practitioners should look for ways to implement some of the features our participants observed in their alternative programs in mainstream classrooms and schools, saving many students from needing alternative programs.

In addition to the contributions we have outlined, our research is bound by several limitations. The PE protocol used in this work is complex—it involves several steps and requires self-motivation on the part of participants. Some students, who typically

struggled to complete their school-work and remain focused on activities, had difficulty remembering to take photos. As a result, two students from AP1 and one from AP2 who signed up to participate did not produce any pictures and could therefore not be interviewed. Researchers and teachers conducting similar studies in the future should consider ways of reminding participating students to take pictures without becoming overly prescriptive (e.g., teachers might embed prompts in instruction).

Additionally, although in interviews and analyses we used a very general set of categories to frame our inquiry with participants, we acknowledge that these categories likely focused participants' attention on some experiences (and perhaps positive experiences) over others. Our goal was to provide participants with some structure, so they could be intentional about taking photos, but to keep the structure fairly open (big categories), allowing for a good deal of choice and self-expression. This is consistent with evidence-based teaching practices indicating that providing students with instrumental structure (i.e., clear directions and guidance) and autonomy-support for optimal engagement (e.g., Jang et al., 2010) are best practice.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we used SDT and PEIs to frame an investigation of what students perceive is helpful in their alternative education programs. Building from previous research that privileged students' reports on what they need to succeed, we developed a protocol with youth participants that was particularly sensitive to their needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence. Participants in our study corroborated previous research, echoing the importance of basic psychological needs met at alternative programs, but also revealed how those needs were met, and benefits that accrued to them subsequently.

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