

Former Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Their Alternative Education Experiences:

A Narrative Inquiry

by

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## Abstract

Large numbers of North American youth are disengaging from and dropping out of school. These youth are increasingly either being placed in, or electing to attend a growing number of alternative education programs (AEPs). Unfortunately, attendance at AEPs often results in the further marginalization of struggling students because (a) relatively little research has identified effective practices within AEPs and (b) negative conceptions of AEPs and of the students who attend them abound. To contribute to the growing body of research identifying effective alternative education practices and to provide an authentic view of these contexts and youth, I examined former students' perceptions of (a) their experiences in AEPs and (b) the impact their experiences in AEPs had on their lives both during and after attendance. Two semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with six participants who attended four different AEPs. All participants were female—no males volunteered to participate. The first research interview captured participants' perspectives on their experiences at the AEPs generally. The second focussed on their perceptions of whether and how characteristics of the AEPs addressed their needs and were linked to outcomes both during and after they attended the programs. Holistic-content analyses identified themes within interviews and a thematic analysis identified themes across narratives. Interviews with former teachers and document analyses provided additional contextual information. The former AEP student participants described characteristics of the AEPs they attended that they perceived addressed their unique and varied social, emotional, and academic needs and facilitated their success, not only while they were attending, but beyond their time at the AEPs. Analyses revealed seven predominant themes across their narratives: relationships with a key teacher and with other students; counselling services; the identification, use, and development of personal strengths; flexibility and structure in the organization of

academic learning; life skills learning; exercising control over the goings-on and culture at the AEP; and a homelike physical set-up. My study contributes to the promising new field of research investigating the impact of AEP practices from the perspective of students. This approach contrasts the majority of previous research that has ignored the voices of these key stakeholders.

## **Preface**

This study was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board [certificate #H12-02703].

I was the lead investigator for this study and was responsible for all major areas of concept formation, data collection, transcription, analysis, and manuscript composition. Dr. Nancy Perry was the supervisory author, involved throughout the study in concept formation and manuscript edits.

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**Dedication**

*To my participants, for their generosity*

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Alarming numbers of North American youth are disengaging from, and dropping out of, school (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2012). More and more, these youth are being placed in, or electing to attend a growing number of alternative education programs (AEPs; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008). In order to effectively serve their students with complex needs, AEPs must work to incorporate practices that address not only the academic, but also the social and emotional needs of this population (e.g., Goodman, 1999; Kim, 2011; Miller, 2002). My study contributed to the growing body of literature attending to characteristics needed for AEPs to meet the diverse and acute needs of their students. It also provided an authentic view of AEPs and the students who attend them, countering prevailing negative stereotypes, stereotypes that further marginalize AEP students (e.g., Kim & Taylor, 2008; Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

Using a qualitative interview method, I spoke to former students of AEPs to examine their perceptions of whether and how their experiences at the programs affected their lives. Because the vulnerabilities of youth-at-risk persist into adulthood (e.g., Danielson et al., 2009), it is essential that we identify characteristics of AEPs that promote positive outcomes while students are attending and that lead to sustained positive outcomes over their lifetimes. Consequently, I specifically investigated whether and how former students of AEPs perceived that characteristics of the programs they attended impacted them *both* during and *since* their time there.

## **Key Constructs**

### **Alternative Education Programs**

Although most research on AEPs comes from the United States, American and Canadian AEPs are similar in function and structure (Lind, 2013). Alternative education (AE) settings are typically designed for students who either are, or are at risk for, experiencing failure in the mainstream school system (Aron, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). The US Department of Education operationally defines an AEP as a "... school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides non-traditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, and falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (Tang & Sable, 2009, p. A-23). What often links AEPs is a combination of the following characteristics: small class size, remedial and self-paced instruction, the opportunity to earn a high school diploma, academic and career counselling, and behavioural and crisis intervention (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

In general, AEPs enrol youth between the ages of 15 and 19, although some districts have AEPs for younger children. Though students can elect to attend an AEP, they are usually placed there (with the implicit or explicit goal of retention until graduation (Catterall & Stern, 1986; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). In Canada, school boards are responsible for deciding whether or not to provide AEPs as well as how they operate. AEPs were first introduced in the province of British Columbia in the 1960's and have maintained their original mandate to help youth attain an education in a supportive and non-threatening environment (Smith et al., 2008).

### **Youth-at-Risk**

Because they disproportionately experience individual, family, and/or community risk factors or vulnerabilities, youth who attend AEPs are often termed "youth-at-risk." These risk

factors increase their likelihood of experiencing challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and school failure and engaging in “problem” behaviours, like aggressive, antisocial, and delinquent behaviour; and school disengagement and drop-out (Ingersoll & Orr, 1989; Lamis, Malone, Langsford, & Lochman, 2012). Specific risk factors commonly experienced by youth attending AEPs, and their associated “negative” outcomes, are discussed in detail in the following chapter, *Chapter Two*, in the section *Introduction to Youth Who are Typically Served in AEPs*.

However, the negative outcomes associated with risk factors youth attending AEPs often experience are not certain. Many youth-at-risk display great resiliency in achieving positive adaptation despite experiencing heightened vulnerabilities. Protective factors, including supportive educational contexts can promote this resiliency (e.g., Edward, 2005). As a consequence, researchers argue for a relocation of risk from the individual to the context (e.g., Kim, 2011; Rogers & Schofield, 2005). For example, Kim (2011) writes that when schools do not provide protection in the form of responsiveness to their students’ unique needs, it is these contexts, not their students, who are at-risk.

## **Relevant Literature**

### **Alternative Education Programs**

Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette’s (2011) meta-analysis of the research on AEPs revealed an extremely sparse body of literature in which individual studies were typically of low quality. Other reviews, however, have distilled from relevant literature potentially effective AEP practices for addressing student behavioural issues (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). For example, Tobin and Sprague’s review of literature on effective school-based practices for students who have behaviour disorders and/or show antisocial behaviour revealed eight potentially effective AE practices, including low ratio of students to teachers, adult mentors



at school, and high quality academic instruction. However, in spite of Tobin and Sprague's and others' similar reviews, the direct, empirically supported effects of the identified practices on students in AEPs are largely undetermined (Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradway, & Ennis, 2012).

A promising way that the impact of AEP characteristics is being explored is through the perceptions of students. Understanding students' experiences is important because the effects of program features are determined by the way students interpret and interact with them (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). Robert K. Greenleaf, founder of the modern servant leadership movement, underscores the importance of understanding student perceptions, and the perceptions of others we are intending to serve. He urges those in leadership positions to "... abandon their present notions of how they can best serve [youth] ... and wait and listen [for youth to] define their needs in their own way and, finally, state clearly how they want to be served" (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 36). And "... in this process" he continues, "[those in positions of leadership can] get a fresh perspective on the priority of [youths'] needs and thus they may again be able to serve by leading" (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 36).

Studies investigating the perceptions of students attending AEPs indicate what program characteristics youth perceive promote positive outcomes for them. For example, Morrissette's (2011) interviews with former AEP students revealed the importance participants placed on such things as their former teachers' pedagogical skills, evidenced, for example, in their ability to "push" students without overwhelming them. And Jones' (2011) interviews with students currently attending an AEP revealed that they perceived that their connection to a supportive community and to caring teachers within their program facilitated adaptive behavioural changes for them.

My study addressed several limitations in the literature on AEP characteristics. First, it contributed to the presently small body of literature on potentially effective AEP characteristics, and more specifically, to the subset of studies employing qualitative research methods (Flower et al., 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Second, it examined students' interpretations of how those characteristics were associated with outcomes for them. Third, it was the first to investigate student perceptions of how their AEP experience has impacted their lives post school. Finally, it is one of only a handful of studies that examined Canadian AEPs (Morrissette, 2011; Smith et al., 2008).

### **Self-Determination Theory and Positive Psychology**

In order to ground my study, I drew on studies that have identified potentially effective AEP characteristics, and especially those that investigated the perceptions of individuals who are, or have been, students in those programs. Also, I drew on research and theory from self-determination (SD) and positive psychology (PP) perspectives. Researchers argue that "... school officials must address [AEP students'] differences by thinking outside the box and creating alternative education settings that acknowledge the fact that not everyone can learn in the traditional classroom setting" (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 211). Relevant practices include helping students to regain lost hope and increase self-esteem and faith in themselves, the program, and society, while also helping them improve their academic knowledge, skills, and talents (Conrath, 2001). Self-determination theory (SDT) and PP strengths-based approaches to education advocate just such an approach. They identify features of classrooms that attend, not just to students' academic learning, but also to their motivation, wellbeing, and strengths. It is not surprising, therefore, that the educational approaches highlighted in the SDT and PP strengths-based literature are consistent with those in the literature on AEPs and that they have

been shown to lead to gains in areas in which youth who attend AEPs commonly experience deficits.

**Self-determination theory.** SDT is a social-cognitive theory of motivation concerned with the degree to which individuals' behaviours are freely chosen versus coerced, or intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1985). A central construct in SDT is that people have basic psychological needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence. Research indicates that when these basic psychological needs are met, not only are actions experienced as intrinsic, but also positive personal wellbeing and social development and optimal functioning are encouraged (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002).

The dialectical framework within SDT proposes that classroom conditions, specifically teaching practices, fall on a continuum of highly autonomy-supportive to highly controlling; thus supporting or frustrating students' inner motivational resources (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Students' inner motivational resources are their psychological needs as well as their interests, values, and strivings (Reeve, 2006). Teachers who are autonomy-supportive give students opportunities to let their preferences, interests, and needs inform their classroom activities. Specifically, they do such things as: listen carefully; provide opportunities for students to work in their own way; encourage effort and persistence; and praise signs of improvement and mastery.

Many of the benefits associated with practices highlighted in the SDT literature parallel the needs of students attending AEPs, and as a consequence, hold particular relevance to them. Autonomy-supportive classrooms are associated with the satisfaction of students' needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence as well as decreased student misbehaviour and increased positive emotionality, wellbeing, school engagement, and school persistence versus drop-out in

students (Black & Deci, 2000; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993; Reeve, 2006; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Barch, & Jeon, 2004; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). However, a high proportion of students attending AEPs report low levels of autonomy, belonging, and academic competence and experience delinquency, affective disorders, school disengagement, and school drop-out (Bender & Wall, 1994; B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996; Farrington, 2005; Margalit & Shulman, 1986; McGough et al., 2005; Moffit, 1993; Vallerand, et al., 1997). Therefore, practices associated with support for SD might prove helpful in AEPs, and I used the categories that SDT provides to support my examination of what former students' of AEPs perceived to be useful about the AEPs.

My study asked participants, who were former students of AEPs, to report their perceptions of whether and how their AEP supported their needs and then looked for consistencies and inconsistencies between their descriptions and facets of SDT—that is, whether and how they described characteristics SDT identifies for meeting students' needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence. It also looked for evidence in their reports of whether and how their SD has been sustained in their post school lives. In these ways, my study addressed several of the limitations within the SDT literature. First, research in the field of SDT has largely used survey methods (i.e., forced choice questionnaires), with few studies employing interview methods (Urduan & Turner, 2005). Second, of the three needs, autonomy has received the lion's share of attention in SDT research (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). Studying how to meet—and the effects of meeting—all three needs is important because research indicates that these three needs hold different importance to different groups of students. For example, Deci, Hodges, Pierson, and Tomassone (1992) looked at predictors of school adjustment and achievement in students with a learning disability (LD) and emotional handicaps and found that for students with LD,

competence was the greatest predictor of these outcomes, while for students with emotional handicaps, autonomy was the greatest predictor. Third, because most SDT research in the field of education has focused on elementary and high school students in general education contexts, and because these students usually have little control over their classroom activities, most SDT studies have focussed on negative effects of controlling versus positive effects of autonomy-supportive teacher behaviours (Urda & Turner, 2005). My study applied SDT to a novel group (youth who are seriously at-risk) and context (AEPs) and looked at the positive impact of autonomy-supportive teacher behaviours.

**Positive psychology.** Positive psychology (PP) is a relatively recent branch of psychology that concerns increasing fulfilment in everyday life and identifying and nurturing strengths and talents (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Meaning in life, according to PP theory, results from knowing what your foremost strengths are and using them as a way to engage in and work to improve something you believe in (Seligman, 2002). Applied to education, PP's focus is on educators helping students to identify and use or foster their strengths and talents each day (Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, & Wood, 2009). Specific practices include educators' measuring students' strengths; considering and acting upon students' unique interests and strengths; and having students deliberately apply their strengths to situations in and out of the classroom (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

An emphasis on strengths is important for youth attending AEPs because, in their previous schools, their shortcomings have often taken centre-stage and their strengths and talents have been overlooked (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). In addition, my study's focus on strengths (versus weaknesses) in youth-at-risk is somewhat unique in an area of research that spends a lot of time admiring their problems.

Research has shown benefits associated with highlighting and fostering personal strengths that are particularly relevant to youth attending AEPs. For example, it leads to increased classroom engagement, wellbeing, and positive affect (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Proctor et al., 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Youth attending AEPs experience deficits in just these areas. They experience heightened rates of school disengagement, self-critical cognitive schemas, and affective disorders (Foley & Pang, 2006; Ford, Chapman, Connor, & Cruise, 2012).

My study addressed two of the limitations within the PP literature. First, of the three pillars of PP Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) outlined, *positive subjective experience* and *positive personal traits* have received the majority of research attention (Hart & Sasso, 2011). There are few studies looking at *positive institutions*, especially in the area of school/educational psychology. Second, most studies in the field of PP have focused on WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) subjects (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) who don't represent all groups in North American society. Other populations that may benefit from strengths-based approaches have not been researched, including marginalized populations, such as youth with low socio-economic and/or ethnic minority status (who are disproportionately represented in AEPs).

### **SDT, PP, and AEP (Potentially Effective Practices) Theoretical Convergences**

In addition to their social-emotional focus—and relatedly, the way the benefits associated with their respective interventions map onto the deficits youth-at-risk experience—other similarities between SDT and PP made them appropriate as a combined theoretical framework for my study. Having both evolved from humanism, SDT and PP have positive views of human nature (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). While SDT holds that humans are innately inclined to learn and

to communicate with and help each other, PP researchers have aimed to explore the often overlooked positives in human nature (Keltner, 2009; Motl, 2007). Second, in its conceptualization of optimal motivation, SDT can explain many of the areas of focus in PP, such as wellbeing and performance (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). For example, SDT accounts for deficits in wellbeing and performance as resulting from past and current needs frustration. Third, both SDT and PP, with their strong focus on mental events, have deviated from the behaviourist view that actions result directly from past experience and anticipated patterns of reward and punishment (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Orzech, Shapiro, Brown, & McKay, 2009; Seligman, 1998).

Not only do key principles outlined in SDT and PP strengths-based literature align with each other, they align with those in the AEP literature. All three bodies of literature, in their approach to teaching and learning, are student-centred—they advocate anchoring instruction in the unique needs, interests, and skills of students (Kim, 2011; Lopez & Louis, 2009; McGregora, Mills, te Riele, & Hayes, 2015; Reeve, 2006). Additionally, all three have a focus on the psychological wellbeing of students, with PP researchers, for example, arguing that tackling issues of psychological wellbeing in schools is becoming more and more important because of the increasing rates of depression among school-age children and youth (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Finally, all three bodies of literature emphasize student autonomy, or students' sense of control over feelings and behaviours. The construct of autonomy is at the forefront in the SDT literature and is defined as "... an inner endorsement of one's actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one's own" (Deci & Ryan, 1987, p. 1025).

In combination, these similarities (a student-centred approach to education and focus on psychological wellbeing and autonomy) represent a framework for fostering student

empowerment. They are a set of supports that not only contribute to students' current success, but also their ability to successfully navigate future challenges. To counteract the disenfranchisement that has likely resulted from the societal, familial, and/or psychological challenges/adversity youth-at-risk have encountered, the empowerment of students attending AEPs is very important.

### **Overview of My Study**

My research methodology was narrative inquiry and my research method was narrative interviews. My use of narrative interviews fits my interest in obtaining accounts of AEP students' experiences in their own words and contrasts the preponderance of the research on AEPs that has relied on researcher-derived categories (Flower et al., 2011). Narrative interviews involve "... the generation of detailed 'stories' of experience, not generalized descriptions" (Riessman, 2004, p. 710); and as a result, they allowed me to document the specifics of participants' unique experiences. In addition, because narratives recreate "... experience through the eyes of the experienced, and [bring] with [them] the richness of personal and social history" (Kirsh, 1996, p. 56), they revealed the complexity of the social worlds to which my participants have belonged, and currently belong.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) contend that the most important decision when designing a study, or choosing a research question and approach is "... the concordance between the research goals and its methods" (p. 165). Correspondingly, the information I sought (e.g., perceptions of links between past experiences and current life circumstances) is consistent with that shared in narrative interviews. Narrative interviews often reveal information about the way in which events are meaningfully linked, or "... reflective elements that are concerned with the teller's present feelings, needs, goals, and values in relation to the past experience"



(Sanderson & McKeough, 2005, p. 134). Narrative interviews are also an appropriate means of gathering information from former students of AEPs. First, by allowing participants to speak for themselves, narrative interviews can give a voice to marginalized individuals, thus "... giv[ing] a voice to the voiceless" (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994, p. 164). In addition, by asking participants to share their experiences in narrative form, that is, in a natural, everyday conversational way, historical feelings of "test anxiety" that could resurface if they were asked to complete a survey or self-report questionnaire are avoided.

My data included narrative interviews with former students of AEPs and their former teachers as well as documents describing the AEP. Each interview was semi-structured. I led with open-ended questions and followed up with specific probes when I thought something the participant said needed clarification or elaboration (McCracken, 1988). Once the narrative interviews were transcribed, I conducted a holistic-content analysis on each interview (Lieblich et al., 1998), identifying themes to reflect both my conceptual categories and more analytic categories. I used the themes from the former AEP student interviews to write the narratives for each of these participants (Polkinghorne, 1995), insuring important information (identified as themes) from each interview was reflected in the narrative. Next I conducted a cross-narrative thematic analysis (Patsiopolous & Buchanan, 2011) on each of these narratives and my document analysis. The holistic-content analyses identified themes within the individual interview and the cross-case analysis identified patterns across the narratives that pointed to general experiences for further study (Patsiopolous & Buchanan, 2011).

My interviews with the students' former teachers were designed to gather information about, for example, goals and characteristics of the AEP. In combination with my analysis of available documents describing the AEPs, these interviews functioned as a way for me to learn

as much as I could about the AEPs and to provide "... a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation" (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008, p. 147).

Based on my review of the literature examining: (a) potentially effective AE characteristics, (b) SDT, and (c) strengths-based approaches from PP, in combination with my personal/professional experiences with youth-at-risk (particularly, those attending AEPs), I focussed on three research questions.

(a) How do former students of AEPs perceive/describe their experiences in AEPs?

(b) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs affected them at the time of attendance?

(c) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs have contributed to their current life circumstances?

The following chapter, *Chapter Two*, details the theoretical framework of my study. It provides a thorough review of the research on AEPs and on SDT and PP strengths-based approaches to education and ends with a list of conceptual categories, generated from my review, which I used to both guide and ground my data collection and analysis. *Chapter Three* outlines the methodological procedures I used, and how I achieved rigour in my study. My results are reported in two chapters. *Chapter Four* describes each of the four AEPs and presents the narrative for each of the six former AEP student participants in my study. *Chapter Five* presents my cross-narrative analyses, or the seven themes that were suggested in the participants' narratives. Finally, *Chapter Six* summarizes my main results and conclusions and discusses the contributions my study made to theory, research, and practice as well as limitations and future directions.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

I begin this chapter with an introduction to the youth who are typically served in AEPs: Who are they? What challenges are they experiencing? How has mainstream education failed them? Then I review research that identifies characteristics of AEPs that are believed to meet the needs of youth-at-risk. Especially, I examine the limited research that has asked students who have attended/are attending AEPs to speak about their experiences. I then describe self-determination theory (SDT), educational approaches from an SDT perspective, and benefits associated with the effective delivery of these approaches. Next I present a description of positive psychology (PP), of PP strengths-based approaches, and benefits associated with highlighting and using/fostering strengths. Lastly, I discuss the theoretical convergences between SDT, PP, and program characteristics highlighted in the AEP literature. I end this chapter with a discussion of what these three bodies of literature, taken together, tell us about specific program qualities and practices that could support youth in AE settings.

#### **Introduction to Youth Who Are Typically Served in AEPs**

When it comes to students attending AEPs, theory, research, and practice typically focus on their challenges. And unfortunately, these students are both blamed for their challenges and not acknowledged for their strengths. In this section, I outline key vulnerabilities faced by youth attending AEPs and present a view of their challenges that incorporates causes beyond their own personal “failings.” I then consider a distinctive strength in this population.

Research indicates that students attending AEPs usually have encountered, and are encountering individual, family, and/or community risk factors. Risk factors, or vulnerabilities are defined as contexts or experiences, including exposure to adversity or threat, which heighten

the probability of negative outcomes (Repucci, Fried, & Schmidt, 2002; Richman & Fraser, 2001). Foley and Pang (2006) surveyed AEP administrators in Illinois and found that, on average, 50% of their students had an emotional disorder (ED), 12% had a learning disability (LD), 13% had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 12% had attention deficit disorder (ADD), 6% had a developmental disability, 5% had communication disorders, and 2% had sensory impairments. Some estimates, moreover, suggest that the number of students in AEPs with emotional-behavioural disorder is as high as 75% (Duncan, Forness, & Hartsough, 1995; NCES, 2001). Additionally, a disproportionate number of students at AEPs are male, have ethnic minority status, and reside in households and neighbourhoods that have low socioeconomic status (SES) (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Jolivet, et al., 2012; Nelson, Sprague, Jolivet, Smith, & Tobin, 2009).

There is a complex association between these risk factors and the other challenges that youth attending AEPs experience, such as delinquency, mental health disorders, and school-disengagement. Students with a disability, such as learning disabilities (LDs) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are at-risk for delinquency and school drop-out (Bryan, Pearl, & Herzog, 1989; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Jensen, Martin, & Cantwell, 1997). Other risk factors for adolescent delinquency include living in a single-parent home, lack of parental involvement, and the presence of delinquent peers (Entner-Wright & Younts, 2009; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli, & Huesmann, 1996; Kazdin, 1994; O'Donnell, Richards, Pearce, & Romero, 2012). Significant comorbidity also exists among affective disorders—such as depression—and substance use, conduct disorder, and school dropout (Fergusson & Horwood, 1997; Riggs, Baker, Mikulich, Young, & Crowley, 1995; Robins & McEvoy, 1990; Shaffer et al., 1996), with data indicating that a staggering 20% of students who drop out of high school discontinue their

education because of early onset psychiatric disorders (Kessler, Foster, Saunders, & Stang, 1995). Finally, additional risk factors for school dropout include substance use, deviant affiliation and behaviour, poor academic achievement, and school disengagement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012).

Some researchers argue that the development of challenges and/or challenging behaviours in AEP students can be explained by inappropriate or ineffectual interventions both in and out of school (e.g., McGregora et al., 2015; Morrissette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). For example, they link these students' challenges to inconsistencies between their backgrounds, interests, and approaches to learning and the one-size-fits-all approach of mainstream schools. Noddings (2005) contends that especially problematic in the approach of most mainstream schools is the overemphasis on abstract reasoning and rationality and unwritten belief that academic ability is superior to all other abilities. Because of these and other shortcomings, some researchers propose that schools, not students, are "at risk." For example, Kim (2011) writes: "... a school is at-risk when it marginalizes minority students, ... is unresponsive to students' needs, and does not adequately prepare students for the future" (p. 92). Youth attending AEPs readily report at-risk environments at their previous schools, environments in which they "... did not fit in very well ... [leading to them going]... down hill, down hill, and down hill" (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996, pp. 7-8).

In addition to a unique set of challenges, students attending AEPs also possess distinctive strengths, such as psychological resilience. Considering the heightened vulnerabilities that students attending AEPs have experienced and/or are experiencing, it is incredible that so many thrive in various ways, such as by persisting in school. Psychological resilience is defined as a

process, rather than a trait, that facilitates individuals in achieving positive adaptation despite significant adversity, threat, trauma, and sources of stress (Luthar, Cicchetti, Becker, 2000).

Protective factors that foster resilience in children and youth include not only personal attributes (e.g., positive self-concepts), but family dynamics (e.g., a close bond with at least one family member) and community factors (e.g., support from peers or teachers) (Cauce et al., 2003; Edward, 2005; Grossman, D'augelli, & Frank, 2011; O'Grady & Metz, 1987).

### **Research on AEPs**

As well as a mandate to provide students with an education in a supportive and non-threatening environment, AEPs have a responsibility to be a source of protection against negative life outcomes, and to promote positive life outcomes for their students whose previous school experiences have typically been alienating and discouraging (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). In order for this to occur, researchers and educators need to understand and apply effective AEP qualities and practices (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Although this is changing, compared to research on mainstream schools, relatively little research has been done on effective characteristics of AEPs. Jolivette et al. (2012) argue that this has resulted in AEPs providing "... a range of curricula, interventions, and strategies that form an eclectic approach to addressing student needs [which in turn has resulted in] practices that are misaligned, contraindicated, and improperly implemented and lead to poor outcomes" (p. 2).

Moreover, the majority of research conducted on AEPs has focussed on researcher-derived categories and interventions (e.g., Flower et al., 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). This approach ignores student experiences, which seem key to understanding what organizational and instructional supports are needed (e.g., Smyth & Fasoli, 2007). Fortunately, there is growing

body of research that hears from students at AEPs as key stakeholders in interventions and outcomes.

Below I present findings from systematic reviews that aimed to identify effective AEP characteristics using researcher-derived categories and interventions. Then I review relatively recent qualitative investigations of AEPs. I first review three case studies of AEPs that include student voices, then three studies that use interviews to examine AEP student experiences in-depth. I present these systematic reviews and qualitative investigations and their findings, and I follow each with a discussion of their respective limitations.

### **Systematic Reviews of AEP Practices**

My search for relevant research turned up three systematic reviews of AEP practices. Two extrapolate effective AEP practices from research in other contexts (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). The third (Flower et al., 2011) is a meta-analysis of empirical studies about AEPs.

**Extrapolation studies.** de Jong and Griffiths (2006) report practices outlined in a large-scale Australian survey, undertaken by the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). The MCEETYA survey was conducted in two stages. First, through a literature review, it identified what appeared to be effective administrative and teaching practices for student behaviour management, and one of these practices was AEPs. Second, “Based upon a set of guidelines, State, Catholic, and Independent Schools jurisdictions across Australia were requested to survey between 6 and 10 programs” (de Jong, 2005, p. 355) about whether and how they used these practices. Unfortunately, neither de Jong and Griffiths’ (2006) nor de Jong’s (2005) article about the MCEETYA survey outlined (a) what the “set of

guidelines” were for choosing the programs to survey and (b) who completed the survey questionnaires.

The request yielded 52 completed survey questionnaires. The MCEETYA survey assumed that repeated reference to “... certain behaviour management strategies associated with successful outcomes” (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 35) in the literature review and observed use of the practice in the program survey was evidence the strategy was a good practice. A limitation of the MCEETYA survey was a lack of direct evidence to relate student outcomes to particular practices.

de Jong and Griffiths (2006) clustered the good practices identified in the MCEETYA survey into three categories: *organization and partnerships*; *pastoral care and ethos*; and *curriculum and pedagogy*. *Organization and partnerships* include a shared vision among stakeholders, interagency collaboration in the development and implementation of the AEP, and parent and community participation. Such practices point to what de Jong and Griffiths term a “wraparound framework” or an “integrative collaborative plan.” This framework serves individual students in a “... holistic way so that a broad range of services are contributing to [their] education and wellbeing” (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 36).

*Pastoral care and ethos* focuses on adults relationship-building with students, which, de Jong and Griffiths (2006) argue is an essential for improving learning and behaviour outcomes for students who display challenging behaviour. *Pastoral care...* includes teachers taking a personal interest in students, ensuring a supportive, non-threatening learning environment, and being proactive rather than reactive; and adults serving as mentors and role models for students. These mentors support students in changing negative behaviour by helping them to develop reflective thinking and life skills and to engage in prosocial behaviours. Lastly, *curriculum and*



*pedagogy* involves teachers being responsive to student learning needs by providing them with maximum flexibility in their learning process, and by encouraging them to take ownership of their learning program, to develop resiliency, and to improve self-understanding and life skills. de Jong and Griffiths identify students taking ownership of their learning as fundamental to their success at AEPs. They argue it encourages responsibility and motivation and empowers students to make decisions about their own learning.

Like de Jong and Griffiths (2006), Tobin and Sprague (2000) provide a summary of teaching practices "... expected to be effective in alternative education programs" (p. 177). Because of the lack of research in AEPs per se, Tobin and Sprague decided to search the literature "... for school-based interventions that have been effective with students who have behavior disorders and/or antisocial behavior" (2000, p. 178). Tobin and Sprague used three criteria for including interventions in their review. They chose interventions they judged were: (a) applicable to students at risk for antisocial behaviour or academic failure in traditional classes; (b) practical enough to be implemented in public high school settings; and (c) shown to produce "... convincing evidence of positive outcomes" (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 178). These authors attributed the effectiveness of interventions to eight characteristics/practices: low ratio of students to teachers; highly structured classrooms with behavioural classroom management; positive rather than punitive emphasis in behaviour management; adult mentors at school; individualized behavioural interventions based on functional behaviour assessment; social skills instruction; high quality academic instruction; and the involvement of parents.

To understand what "convincing evidence of positive outcomes" means to Tobin and Sprague (2000), I looked to the articles they included in their review. Though many are themselves reviews (e.g., Mayer, 1995; Swanson & Hoskyn, 1998), a few used experimental

designs. For example, Kamps et al. (1999) examined a prevention program for elementary students with, or at risk for developing emotional and behaviour disorders (EBD). To identify students at risk for EBD, they asked teachers to complete a measure that included adaptive and maladaptive behaviour rating scales. Kamps et al. included those students who teachers indicated displayed behaviours such as "... persistent difficulty in class participation and learning" (Kamps et al., 1999, p. 179) and they also included students who had already been identified by school districts as having EDB.

Twenty-six students received "... a prevention program designed to provide "universal" intervention (i.e., classroom management, social skills [instruction], peer tutoring in reading)" (Kamps et al., 1999, p. 178) and 24 students received no intervention. After receiving the intervention or no-intervention for half a school year, participants were directly observed by the researchers, and rated by their teachers for behaviours such as staying on task and aggression. The researchers' observations revealed that the experimental group engaged in significantly less off-task behaviour, negative recess interactions, aggression, and out-of-seat behaviours. In addition, the teachers scored the experimental group higher on such things as following directions and reduced disruptive behaviours. Kamps et al. conclude that early intervention for students at risk for, or with EBD are important, especially positive behaviour support systems.

**Meta-analysis.** Flower et al. (2011) argue the importance of identifying and using effective practices for addressing the needs of students with EBD, students who are often served in AEPs. They reviewed research conducted between 1970 and 2010 on behavioural interventions implemented in AE settings. They looked for the inclusion of nine practices recommended for use in AEPs. Specifically, they looked for the inclusion of the practices Tobin and Sprague (2000) outlined and for Positive Behaviour Intervention and Supports (PBIS).

Flower et al.'s (2011) stated goal was "... to examine the use of these effective practices and PBIS within interventions for students in AE settings including those with E/BD" (p. 503).

Schools using PBIS make use of functional behavioural assessments (FBAs) to understand environmental factors that reinforce students' challenging behaviours. They also employ techniques such as goal identification, information gathering, support plan design and implementation, and monitoring to decrease students' undesirable behaviours (Sugai et al., 2000). PBISs are widely used in schools—and AEPs—in the United States with promising behavioural outcomes in students, such as reduced office discipline referral rates (Nelson et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Flower et al. (2011) included the practices Tobin and Sprague outlined because, they argue, these practices may serve to buffer against the negative outcomes students with EBD often experience, and when implemented effectively, may have the greatest impact on these students' academic achievement and social performance. Also they included PBIS because of Nelson et al.'s (2009) assertion that the systems change approach to improving student academic and social behaviour in the PBIS framework is important in AEPs. Once Flower et al. identified studies that included one or more of the nine practices, they evaluated them for their quality.

The practices Flower et al. (2011) looked for in their literature review included a low student to teacher ratio and teachers providing high quality instruction, such as the use of small group exercises and encouraging methods, such as praise. Each of the studies that contained at least one of the practices was subsequently evaluated for quality using a set of quality indicators. Flower et al. used quality indicators for experimental/quasi-experimental, single-subject, and qualitative designs outlined in a series of articles in *Exceptional Children* in 2005. Quality indicators common between these design types included "... sufficient information regarding

participants, adequate information concerning the treatment condition, and measures and analysis appropriate for answering the research questions” (Flower et al., 2011, pp. 494-495).

A total of 39 articles met Flower et al.’s (2011) inclusion criteria. Twenty-one of these studies used experimental/quasi-experimental design, seventeen used single-subject designs, and only one used a qualitative research design. Flower et al.’s analysis of the articles revealed that studies on AEPs were typically of low quality, with 50% scoring 70% or below on quality indicators; that 29 studies included between one and four of the effective practices they identified; and that small class size was the most frequently cited of these effective practice. In general, very few of the effective practices they identified were present in the studies. From their findings, Flower et al. concluded that research on AE settings is overwhelmingly sparse and generally of poor quality, and that effective practices are used far too infrequently in AEPs.

### **Limitations of These Reviews**

There are four key limitations with Tobin and Sprague (2000), de Jong and Griffiths (2006), and Flower et al.’s (2011) reviews. First, the effectiveness of the identified practices within AEPs is yet to be determined. Jolivette et al. (2012, p. 16) underscore this limitation, stating that although “... researchers have identified numerous universal characteristics of positive programming within AE settings,” these characteristics have not been studied in AEPs or, often, in relation to student outcomes beyond behaviour. Therefore, “... to date, the direct, empirically supported effects of [these] characteristics on [a broad set of] student outcomes [in AEPs] are unknown” (p. 16). They recommend “... further research on the connection between these universal characteristics and [AE] student outcomes related to improvements in school behaviours, graduation rates, and post-school success” (p. 16).

The second limitation of these three reviews, particularly, of Tobin and Sprague's (2000) and Flower et al.'s (2011), is that they selected practices on the basis of relevance to students with EBD, which is a subset of all the students who attend AEPs. As a consequence, the applicability of the identified practices to all AE students is questionable. In fact, the very structured approach of some of the practices Tobin and Sprague identify, and of PBIS generally, may not serve all students in AEPs well. Some research indicates that a flexible approach to pedagogy and curriculum is important to students in AE settings (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Jones, 2011; Morrissette, 2011).

Another limitation in these three reviews is that practices they “[expect] to be effective in alternative education programs” (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 177) are mainly didactic, teacher-directed versus student-centred. Although de Jong and Griffiths (2006) underscore the importance in AEPs of students taking ownership of their learning, only a small number of the practices highlighted in the three reviews attend to this. Rather, they primarily focus on enabling teachers to manage students' behaviours, thus empowering teachers and not students. This focus further marginalizes AEP students by blaming them for their difficulties in mainstream schools, and propagating the notion that AEPs are a way to separate delinquent youth from the larger population (Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

The fourth limitation of the three reviews is that they predominantly draw from quantitative studies using methodologies that don't reveal the complexities of how and why practices are effective. This empirical view assumes that the practices work, in large part, simply because students are compliant and represents the researchers' point of view and not the students'. Even questionnaires represent researcher-derived categories that the participant responds to, rather than gathering information from participants, in their own words. Because the

effects of organizational and instructional supports are determined by the way students interpret and interact with them (Christenson et al., 2001), investigating students experiences is integral to our understanding of the precursors of student outcomes.

### **Qualitative Investigations of AEPs**

Qualitative investigations, unlike their quantitative counterparts, can "... [bring] us in close contact with details and particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even the measurable" (Greene, 2000, p. 10). Because AEP students represent a marginalized population, it is paramount that researchers employ methods that give them voice, honouring their unique perspectives (Hutchinson et al., 1994). Below I review qualitative case studies of AEPs and then I review in-depth investigations of AEP students' experiences using interview methods.

**Qualitative case studies.** McGregora et al. (2015), Kim and Taylor (2008), and Vadeboncoeur (2005) each conducted a qualitative case study of one or two AEPs. As a means of understanding what constitutes good education in AEPs, Kim and Taylor asserted that, of the perspectives of key AE stakeholders, students' perspectives are the most important. In their articles, evidenced by the emphasis they placed on data sources revealing them, both Kim and Taylor and Vadeboncoeur privileged students' perspectives.

McGregora et al. (2015) did not privilege, but did include student perspectives in their research. They conducted case studies of two AEPs in Australia, comprised of: classroom observations; document/artefact analysis; and interviews with workers, teachers, and students. The two AEPs were chosen through recommendations from colleagues, and in particular, because they operated within a social justice framework, viewing education for all students as a right. The authors' purpose was to examine the approaches of the AEPs, including their goals, strategies, and how they provided "meaningful" education. McGregora et al. defined meaningful

education as education that aligns with the needs and goals of students who are outside of the mainstream school system.

One of the AEPs served junior and senior high school students and other served high school students only. Students at both AEPs were experiencing significant challenges such as homelessness, mental health issues, and/or substance abuse and had either been expelled from, or had left mainstream school. McGregora et al.'s (2015) data revealed that staff at the two AEPs fostered social justice by: attending to students' out of school needs; highly consulting students about various aspects of the programs; and providing "meaningful" education. They found that teachers at the AEPs: developed caring and intimate relationships with students, by, for example, attending to their unique material needs such as housing; facilitated students in developing their own learning goals; and identified and integrated into the curriculum knowledge and skills that were important to students' out of school lives. Some of these knowledge and skills were project-based and others were integrated into existing units and work. Finally, at the AEPs, McGregora et al. found that teachers strove to: (a) make the curriculum challenging for students; and (b) to set high, but achievable standards. Student interviews revealed that the approach at the two AEPs fostered in students a sense that their teachers genuinely cared about them as well as an excitement for learning.

The AEP under investigation in Kim and Talyor's case study (2008) served approximately 40 youth from grades nine to eleven, the majority of whom were minority and came from low-income families. Kim and Taylor grounded their study in critical theory, "... a school of thought and a process of critique regarding notions of money, consumption, distribution, and production" (p. 209). Critical theory maintains that such notions are encouraged and maintained through inequitable relationships (i.e., relationships of subordination and

domination). A central concern to critical theory is the question of who receives the benefits of education. Accordingly, Kim and Taylor's research question was, "In what ways is the school beneficial or not beneficial to the students in terms of equity?" (p. 208).

In order to answer their research question, the Kim and Taylor (2008) conducted classroom observations; an analysis of documents such as curriculum materials for core subjects like math; and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at the AEP. Interviews with various stakeholders gave the authors "... multiple perspectives about the school program" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 210). Nine students and four teachers participated in interviews.

Analyses had researchers compare data sources and identify themes within and across them. Results revealed two key findings. First, the AEP offered a caring environment that was comfortable for students. Students spoke of feeling welcome in a way they had not felt in regular school. Students repeatedly referenced respectful, caring, honest, and genuine staff, who they said, were able to gain their trust. Due to the small school environment with classes comprised of six to ten students, students and teachers felt they belonged to a community, even a family. Students' initial feeling of disdain for the AEP changed to a sense that the program was a good place from which they wished to graduate. Also, all participant interviews revealed a change of perception of the AEP from a dumping ground to a safety net.

However, Kim and Taylor's (2008) second key finding was that the district support of the school was authoritarian; that the AEP lacked "... systematic support that would break the cycle of educational inequality" (p. 216). The AEP's curriculum was behaviouristic and reductive and Kim and Taylor wrote that it needed to be more rigorous, by emphasizing critical and higher order thinking. Moreover, Kim and Taylor asserted that the teachers and students needed to have



a greater say in the planning and implementing of school change and the district needed to provide more systematic opportunities for teacher professional growth. Based on their findings, Kim and Taylor concluded that the AEP "... functioned to benefit the population of the regular high school with an assumption that it might work better without the problem students" (p. 217).

Finally, Vadeboncoeur (2005) conducted a case study of an AEP in Montana. The AEP served approximately 70 youth who predominantly came from working class families (and many of whom worked themselves). Many of the students reported not fitting in, and 27 percent were failing in regular high school. The students said that with 2,000 students, the regular high school in the town was too big to understand and address their students unique and shifting needs, preferences, and identities.

Vadeboncoeur's (2005) case study included observations, field notes, interviews and analyses of documents such as student journal and poems and newspaper articles written about the AEP by journalists. She used these data sources as a means, ultimately, of highlighting the benefits and limitations of this AEP in particular, and AEPs in general. Vadeboncoeur outlined key differences between the AEP under investigation in her study and mainstream high school contexts. She divided these differences into two categories: time and space. In terms of time, and compared to regular high schools, the AEP offered: frequent late passes so students could finish their work; optional Saturday school so students could finish their work; and course completion in an alternative sequence (e.g., English II and English III concurrently). Space-wise, the AEP provided: rooms for students to use to meet or study; a student centre that included a stove, microwave, tables, and chairs; and a library/community with couches for the purpose of intimate conversations, tutoring, and individual work. In short, these manifestations of time and space

were flexible and fluid and "... shifted to meet the needs of the students" (Vadeboncoeur, p. 135).

Flexibility and fluidity were also afforded to students in terms of course content and structure. For example, in writing class, "Students were both engaged in regular curriculum and encouraged to choose additional poets authors and song lyrics whose work they read, studied, and analysed. ... [In addition], on a regular basis, they shared their work with each other and their teachers" (Vadeboncoeur, p. 137).

Student reflections on the AEP revealed that they understood and appreciated the rationale behind the AEP's flexible approach and that it encouraged them to take responsibility for their education. In particular, they appreciated that the AEP gave them the time and space they needed to complete assignments, which in turn, enhanced their effort to meet expectations for project and study completion. Unfortunately, other data (e.g., newspaper articles about the AEP, student reports about how they were treated by business operators in the neighborhood) suggested students who attended the AEP were stereotyped as being involved in drugs, having failed in the main stream high school, and/or having been pregnant. Vadeboncoeur (2005) concluded that, "Participation in alternative programs ... offers students a beneficial environment with sometimes troublesome consequences. Indeed, the *alternative high school program* has become a metonym for difference, marginality, and delinquent youth. ... It is a space that isolates young people and their differences from the larger society" (p. 148).

**Qualitative studies using in-depth student interviews.** In-depth, qualitative examinations of the perceptions of students hold great promise for understanding the relative merit of AEP qualities and practices. In particular, they can help build knowledge about "... motivation processes from the students' perspectives" (Jones, 2011, p. 222). Below is a review of

three investigations that employed in-depth qualitative interviews with AEP students (i.e., Jones; 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette; 2011).

Using narrative interviews, informal conversations, and observations, Kim (2011) investigated how one student, Kevin Gonzales, experienced his alternative education. The goals of Kim's study were to reimagine the role of AE and to question what the best educational experience within public AEPs would look like for disenfranchised students like Kevin. Kim's article begins with an exploration of public perceptions of AEPs, such as dumping grounds or warehouses for "bad kids," or as synonymous with juvenile detention centres. Such perceptions, Kim contends, have further marginalized AEP students, with the public not wanting such a program in their neighbourhood and students hesitating to list an AEP on their resumes because they know if they do they will be less likely to find employment.

In his interviews, Kevin talked about being subjected to backpack searches, getting into trouble, and not being able to voice his opinion at the AEP. He said, "Today, our school security guard did a backpack search on me and two of my friends. That's the third backpack search I've got this fall. That bastard must be having fun doing that. He likes to stop us and tell us to open our backpacks. ... I didn't want to be at school today. Well, I feel that way every day anyway. But today, I was very upset because Mr Schindler sent me to the office again for no reason. Even though the whole class was talking, he gotta send me to the office whenever I opened my mouth. ... It's because I stand up for myself. ... In fact, many teachers are lost souls. ... They are only interested in keeping their job, so they just regurgitate the stuff they are supposed to teach and show no compassion. ... Teachers expect us to believe whatever they say and they never let us go against it" (Kim, 2011, pp. 85-89).

Kim (2011) writes that Kevin's narrative, his "... complex, personal story reminds us again that not all students will succeed in the traditional school setting, which explains why we need public alternative schools that can better serve increasingly marginalized students like Kevin" (p. 90). By retaining the contextualized and vernacular language of Kevin's narrative in her study, Kim sought to encourage the reader to understand the complexity and meaning in Kevin's life and to use Kevin's story as a "metaphorical loft" to imagine what good education could look like for others like Kevin who are underserved in the mainstream school system. Unfortunately, Kevin's AEP did not serve him well and from his narrative, we learn what didn't work in his AEP, rather than what did. For example, with its warehouse-like appearance, frequent backpack searches, and zero-tolerance disciplinary policy, Kevin perceived his AEP functioning as a dumping ground for bad kids, and sometimes, as an interface between school and prison, or a juvenile detention centre.

Kim outlines practices that could far better serve students like Kevin. For example, she cites Miller's (Kim, 2011, p. 91) article urging AEPs to adopt a philosophy of education appropriate for their unique students, incorporating practices that support their emotional wellbeing. Kim underscores the need for teachers in AE settings to develop compassionate perspectives about students and to foster trustworthy teacher/student relationships. She writes that in order to gain students' trust, teachers should avoid the controlling approach of the teachers at Kevin's school (and represented in many of the practices outlined in the three systematic reviews discussed in the previous section). Specifically, Kim (2011) writes, they "... might want to question their authoritarian, disciplining role that might take place in the name of 'caring'" (2011, p. 91). According to Kim, the development of caring, trustworthy relationships calls for teachers to have skill in *relational pedagogy*, which adopts the fundamental premise that

meaningful education is only feasible when relationships are well understood and carefully developed. Noddings (as cited in Kim, 2011, p. 92) contends that relational pedagogy requires teachers to have a broad competence in many school subjects. Kim quotes Noddings (2004, p. viii), who stated: “Knowing that they will meet students with widely varying interests, teachers must continue to learn and to share their learning in response to the expressed needs of students” (p. 92).

Jones (2011) used a combination of classroom observations and narrative interviews with students to explore the experiences of 24 students in an AEP with impressive student test scores and graduation rates. From the perspective of the students at the AEP, he studied how and why organization and instructional strategies worked. The AEP had been operating for twenty years and was created as a drop-out prevention program. It provided small class size, remedial and self-paced instruction, and behavioural and crisis supports. Choice theory informed the pedagogical approach at the AEP. Jones (2011) writes: “Choice theory holds that individuals are constantly seeking to meet their basic needs (e.g., survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun), and that there are behavioral choices in how to fulfill these needs” (p. 223).

In their interviews, students spoke of feeling connected to caring teachers within a close and supportive community and emphasized the importance of this sense of emotional engagement in making behavioural changes. Students also shared that changes in their approach to school occurred as a result of working through pivotal conflicts or personal issues with the help of a teacher. In general, Jones’ study revealed the efficacy of the AEP’s student-centred approach to instruction for addressing students’ unique social, emotional, and academic needs, and thus, in promoting academic engagement. However, Jones (2011) contends that his study is just a beginning. Because of the great diversity in the needs of AE students and in the structure

of AEPs, more research is needed "... to build a body of evidence-based literature in this area" (Jones, 2011, p. 233).

Finally, Morrissette (2011) conducted a phenomenological study comprised of interviews with 20 graduates of a single Canadian AEP. The goals of his study were threefold: to allow the learners to share their experiences; to provide preliminary information about the way this unique approach to education operates; and to spark an interest in research about AEPs. Participants were randomly recruited through a call from the program counsellor and requirements for participation were that students had graduated from the AEP and were willing to discuss their experiences in the program.

Morrissette's (2011) interviews opened with the researcher asking the participant to: "Please describe for me as completely as possible your experience as a student in the alternative high school program" (p. 173). Participants were subsequently invited to speak freely with specific questions only asked by the researcher when prompting seemed necessary to elicit further information. Once Morrissette's (2011) interviews were transcribed, they were analysed for content related to the research question: "What was your experience within the alternative high school program?" (p. 177).

Morrissette (2011) found five predominant themes between interviews, all related to characteristics of the AEP that participants viewed as particularly valuable. First was the non-intimidating and supportive *ambiance* of the AEP, which was achieved by the quiet, distraction free space and by the warm, outgoing attitude of teachers. Second was the feeling of *belonging* participants experienced in the program, or the sense of being accepted and embraced by teachers and of being a part of a community of students. The third theme was the teachers' *pedagogical skill*, their ability to support and guide students without becoming judgmental or

overbearing. Fourth was the *program flexibility*, which had two components: (a) the clear structure the AEP provided in relation to expectations and actions necessary in order to graduate; and (b) the flexibility teachers showed in their willingness, when necessary, to transition from formal instruction to conversations about students' personal issues or challenges. Morrisette's final theme was *self awareness*. Participants spoke of entering the AEP with feelings of guilt about disappointing their parents and others when they dropped out of school and of the empowerment and wellbeing they gained through returning to school and persisting in the AEP.

Based on his interview results, Morrisette (2011) advises that AEP administrators and teachers gain an understanding of their students' unique social, emotional, and academic needs. To this end, Morrisette encourages them to engage students both when they first arrive and throughout their time at the AEP. Unfortunately, Morrisette does not explain what he means by engaging students, but from other information he provides in his article (e.g., that students appreciated the daily greeting and warm welcome from the AEP staff), it can be assumed that engaging students means talking with them in an attempt to discover what they want and need from the program. Morrisette further contends that the way learners can best be engaged depends on their particular disposition and learning style. For example, he hypothesizes that while some learners may need a close and supportive relationship with the teacher, others may best benefit from the opportunity to work independently without much contact with the teacher.

### **Limitations of These Qualitative Studies**

There are three key limitations with the qualitative studies presented above, limitations that I addressed in my study. First, although all six either discussed, or presented excerpts from, interviews with current or former AEP students, they did not provide in-depth narratives of students' experiences at AEPs. A comprehensive understanding of students' experiences at AEPs

is important because misconceptions in the form of negative stereotypes of AE students and contexts further marginalize AE students (e.g., Kim & Taylor, 2008; Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

In my study, I provided extensive, in-depth narratives of students' experiences at AEPs, including what led to their attendance there and what their lives were like post-attendance. The majority of the content in these narratives came directly from my interviews with the former AEP students. By maintaining their contextualized and vernacular language, the narratives should allow readers to see the world through the participants' eyes (Kim, 2011). This, in turn should prompt readers to re-examine taken-for-granted notions (Weiland, 2003) and (re)imagine "... ways in which alternative education can provide the best possible educational experiences for disenfranchised students who are increasingly underserved by the public education system" (Kim, 2011, p. 77).

Second, none of the qualitative studies investigated students' perceptions of the impact their experiences at the AEPs had on their lives after their time there. The difficulties facing youth-at-risk often follow them into adulthood (e.g., Quinn & Poirer, 2004; Zigmond, 2006); consequently, it is important to hear from former AEP students about whether and how their experiences at AEPs sustained them over time. In my study, I investigated the former students' perceptions of the effects their experiences at AEPs had on their lives after they left the AEPs.

Third, none of the qualitative studies were grounded in bodies of research and theory that highlight educational characteristics that align with the diverse needs of AEP students.

Researchers urge AEP administrators and educators to design AEPs to address not only the academic, but the social and emotional needs of attending students (e.g., Goodman, 1999; Kim, 2011; Miller, 2002). In my study, I drew on SDT and strengths-based approaches from PP, bodies of research and theory point to a vision of what successful AEPs might look like,



attending to students social, emotional, and academic needs, including their motivation and strengths. Not only do the interventions described in these bodies of literature align with the unique needs of AEP students, they align with many of the practices described in the AEP research presented above (these interventions, including their alignment with (a) the unique needs of AE students; and (b) the AEP literature, are discussed in detail in the remainder of this chapter).

To inform my interview protocols and to understand when something in the former AEP students' narratives was relevant to my study, I referenced the SDT and PP strengths-based literature and I also referenced AE characteristics highlighted in the qualitative investigations discussed above (e.g., Morrissette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2005) and some of the practices highlighted in the three reviews (i.e., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Flower et al., 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). The practices I used from the systematic reviews were those that were consistent with my understanding of the needs of AEP students as well as the theoretical lenses I used in my study (i.e., SDT and strengths-based approaches from PP). Because de Jong and Griffiths' review identified practices that attend to the many needs of AEP students (e.g., motivation, resiliency, and empowerment), I predominantly referenced their review.

### **Synthesis of Key Findings From Research on AEPs**

To learn from previous research on AEPs, I first examined three systematic reviews of research identifying potentially effective AEP characteristics (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Flower et al., 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Because relatively little of the research cited in these reviews was actually carried out in AEPs, de Jong and Griffiths (2006) and Tobin and Sprague (2000) extrapolated from research in other contexts what might be effective practices in AEPs. Flower et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis examined outcomes from research conducted about

practices used in AEPs between 1970 and 2010. These authors concluded that: research on AEPs is overwhelmingly sparse and typically of low quality; effective practices are infrequently used in AEPs; and qualitative studies on AEPs are few in number.

A promising new body of research uses qualitative methods to investigate AEPs. This includes case studies of AEPs (i.e., Kim & Taylor, 2008; McGregora et al., 2015; Vadeboncoeur, 2005) and studies that employ interview methods to examine students' experiences at AEPs in-depth (i.e., Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette, 2011). These qualitative studies revealed important characteristics of effective AEPs. Especially, they revealed the way in which AEP students interpreted, and interacted with, organizational and instruction supports, which is key to understanding whether and how they "work" (Christenson, et al., 2001). However, several of these qualitative studies also revealed that misconceptions about AE students and programs abound, and that these stereotypes function to further marginalize AE students. They negatively impact (a) the quality of education students receive at AEPs; and (b) how AE students are treated by members of the general public (Kim, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

**Important AEP characteristics.** Similar to de Jong and Griffiths' (2006) and Tobin and Sprague's (2000) reviews, the qualitative investigations revealed the importance, in AEPs, of teachers providing of high quality academic instruction by, for example, offering challenging curriculum while also being responsive to students' unique learning needs. Consistent with de Jong and Griffiths' review, these qualitative studies also revealed the importance of teachers' developing warm and caring and relationships with students and of students having opportunities to improve their psychological/emotional wellbeing through such things as life skills learning and working through pivotal life issues. As with Flower et al.'s meta-analysis, these qualitative

investigations also related the importance of small class size to teachers' ability to (a) attend to students' unique learning needs; and (b) develop genuine and caring relationships with them.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

SDT is a social-cognitive theory of motivation, proposing a continuum of motivation, from extrinsic to intrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Gagne et al., 2010). Motivation is defined as "... the hypothetical construct used to describe the internal and/or external forces that produce the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behaviour" (Vallerand & Thrill, 1993, p. 18). While intrinsically motivated behaviours are performed to experience the pleasure or satisfaction inherent in the activity, extrinsically motivated behaviours are performed to achieve an external goal, such as receiving an award or avoiding punishment (Vallerand, 2012).

Internalization occurs when a regulation that was previously regulated by external factors is taken in and becomes internally regulated (Gagne et al., 2010). In other words, behaviours that were initially engaged in to achieve an external goal can become integrated with other aspects of the self and engaged in by choice, becoming self-determined (Vallerand, 2012). For example, by such practices as providing positive feedback, teachers can create conditions that foster autonomous, or intrinsic motivation in students (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Youth who struggle in school and in life, including many of those who attend AEPs, have often experienced a lack of control over their life circumstances. This contributes to a sense of helplessness and behaviours such as not assuming personal responsibility that reflect an external locus of control (e.g., Gottfredson, 2005; Parrot & Strongman, 1984). As a result, and although challenging (Deci et al., 1999), instilling a sense of agency, or self-determination in this population is very important.

Central to SDT is the notion that individuals have inherent growth tendencies to exert effort, agency, and commitment in their lives. These tendencies help them to meet their three basic psychological needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence (Vallerand, 2012).

*Autonomy* refers to an inner sanctioning of one's actions, the perception that behaviour emerges from within (internal locus of causality) and that one has a large degree of psychological freedom, or volition during an activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1987; Reeve & Jang, 2006). SDT researchers (e.g., Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986) borrow deCharms' (1968) metaphor of being an Origin to describe autonomy. According to deCharms, "An Origin is a person who perceived his behavior as determined by his own choosing; a Pawn is a person who perceived his behavior as determined by external forces beyond his control" (p. 274). *Belonging*, or relatedness, refers to a feeling of connection to valued others (Ryan & Deci, 2002), and *competence* refers to an individual's perceived ability to affect outcomes and achieve desired goals (Ryan & Deci, 2002). When these three psychological needs are met, not only is one's intrinsic motivation enhanced, but so are other forms of positive functioning (Deci, Eghari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Van Petegem, Beyers, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2012).

### **Educational Approaches From an SDT Perspective**

According to the dialectical framework in SDT, students' inner motivational resources, (their psychological needs as well as their interests, values, and strivings) can be supported or frustrated by classroom conditions (Reeve, 2006). To the degree that classroom expectations and activities support their motivation resources, synthesis will occur and encourage positive functioning in students. The SDT literature outlines three categories of instructional practices believed to support students' inner motivation resources: *autonomy support*, *involvement*, and *structure* (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In the

following sections, I describe *autonomy-support*, *involvement*, and *structure* and what they look like in the classroom. Then I highlight the benefits associated the effective delivery of these three categories of instructional practices.

**Autonomy support.** Generally speaking, autonomy-supportive teaching practices involve teachers providing students with opportunities for their internal states or internal motivations to direct their behaviour (Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999). They do this by recognizing and fostering students' needs, interests, and preferences. *Autonomy support* is important in promoting students' needs of autonomy and competence (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Rather than a prescribed set of strategies and practices, *autonomy support* subsumes a set of assumptions and beliefs about student motivation (e.g., that students function best in classroom environments that nurture their inner motivational resources; Reeve, 2006). Nonetheless, from the research on an autonomy-supportive motivating style, Reeve outlines what autonomy-supportive teachers tend to say and do during instruction. In summarizing these practices, as well as research showing that veteran teachers can alter their motivating style by incorporating more of them (e.g., Reeve et al., 2004), Reeve argues that an autonomy-supportive motivating style is not necessarily stable, but can be learned. That teachers can learn an autonomous motivational style, and that students can move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999), are promising for youth attending AEPs, youth who often feel a lack of control, or self-determination in their lives (e.g., Gottfredson, 2005; Lewis & Lawrence-Patterson, 1989).

Reeve (2006) describes four categories of behaviours, as well as nine specific teacher behaviours (or autonomy supports) that SDT research indicates are present in the motivating style of autonomy-supportive teachers. The first category is *nurturing inner motivational resources*, or finding ways to match instructional practices to students' preferences, interests, and

competencies. The second is *relying on informational, uncontrolling language*, or communicating requirements or opportunities in an informal, flexible, and positive manner. *Communicating value and providing rationales* involves identifying and explaining the value and importance of an activity. And the fourth category is *acknowledging and accepting students' expressions of negative affect*, or recognizing that sometimes negative affect is an appropriate response to the imposition of assignments, limits, and demands. The nine autonomy supports Reeve outlines are: listening carefully; allowing students to work in their own way; allowing students to talk; arranging learning materials and seating patterns so that students can engage with objects and in conversations; encouraging effort and persistence; praising indications of improvement and skill; offering progress-enabling advice if/when students appear stuck; acknowledging and responding to student questions and comments; and clearly acknowledging student perspectives.

For his four categories of autonomy-supportive teacher behaviours, Reeve (2006) references Assor, Kaplan, & Roth's (2002) study that assessed the effects of directly controlling teacher behaviours (such as giving frequent directives) on students' anxiety and anger, their need of autonomy, and their motivation. Assor et al. administered a series of surveys to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders measuring their perceptions of their teachers' directly controlling behaviours and their own anxiety, anger, amotivation (lack of any will or intention to exert effort or to engage in an activity), and extrinsic motivation. Results of Assor et al.'s path analysis revealed that student perceptions of their teachers as directly controlling led to amotivation that was intertwined with anxiety and anger.

For his nine autonomy supports, Reeve (2006) cites Reeve et al. (1999), who conducted three studies, all indicating that teachers with a disposition to support student autonomy show a

motivating style distinct from those with a disposition to control students. For example, in study 2, the behaviours of pre-service teachers who were identified as autonomy-supportive (based on their responses to the Problems in Schools questionnaire) were documented through observations of their one-on-one instruction with a student. The behaviours unique to these teachers were that they listened, allowed the student to work in his/her own way, and didn't give solutions. Reeve (2006) concludes his article by underscoring the importance of an autonomy-supportive teaching style. He states that when teachers nurture, involve, and expand on students' inner motivation, they adopt an autonomy-supportive motivating style, and in turn, facilitate a host of positive outcomes for students (outcomes which will be discussed in the section *Benefits Associated With Providing Autonomy Support, Structure, and Involvement*).

**Involvement.** Teachers demonstrate *involvement* and contribute to student autonomy and competence when they acknowledge student perspectives and experiences, encourage effort, and praise signs of improvement and mastery (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Also, teacher *involvement* contributes to student belonging when teachers take time for, express warmth toward, are attuned to, and provide resources (help, time, and energy) for students.

Skinner and Belmont (1993) examined the effects of teacher behaviours on elementary students' need satisfaction across the school year. Both teachers and students completed measures of teacher *autonomy support*, *structure*, and *involvement*, as well as student behavioural engagement (effort, attention, and persistence) and emotional engagement (interest, happiness, anxiety, and anger). Results indicated that the teachers' *involvement* with students had the most powerful effect on the students' perception of the teacher (i.e., students who perceived their teachers as more involved, also perceived them as more autonomy-supportive and

structured) and dictated the degree to which students felt their needs for competence and belonging were met. Results also indicated that students' perceptions of the amount of *structure* teachers provided uniquely predicted their behavioural engagement in school, as measured by their "... effort, attention, and persistence during the initiation and execution of a learning activity" (p. 575). Structure is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

As compared to *autonomy support* and *structure*, teachers' *involvement* with students has the greatest impact on students' belonging need satisfaction (Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2010). Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps' (1997) research on schools as caring communities offers further insight into the ways in which students' need for belonging can be met in schools. Although this need is central to their research, Battistich et al. (1997) argue that all three psychological needs—autonomy, belonging, and competence—are fully met only when students are given the opportunity to participate in a "... cohesive, caring group with a shared purpose; that is, a community" (p. 138). These researchers implemented a program in several schools designed to enhance pro-social development in students. The program involved students: collaborating with others in pursuit of common goals; providing and receiving meaningful help; discussing and reflecting upon others' experiences; and developing and practicing important social competencies.

The practices Battistich et al. (1997) identify are consistent with those research indicates are important for AEP students (e.g., Morrissette, 2011). However, some research indicates that the deleterious behaviours that youth-at-risk commonly display can elicit negative behaviours in their peers (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Litt, Kadden, Kabelá-Cormier, & Petry, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2012). The spread of deleterious behaviours among students is referred to in the literature, somewhat unfortunately, as the "contamination effect" (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 32). de



Jong and Griffiths write that in AEPs, "... there is the potential for 'contamination,' where instead of being exposed to pro-social behaviour, students are 'contaminated' by the anti-social behaviour of other students in the programs and therefore embrace values and attitudes that can predictably lead to unlawful and further risk activities" (p. 32).

Teachers in AEPs might be concerned about students' personal challenges impacting their peers and discourage close contact between them. However, it is not known whether "contamination" occurs when teachers effectively support students' development of autonomy, belonging, and competence. Because students in AEPs stress the value of their sense of belonging within the programs (e.g., Jones, 2011), this is an area in need of further research. Ideally, this would involve in-depth, qualitative investigations to understand the range of factors at play.

**Structure.** Teachers provide *structure* when they give students information about how to achieve desired outcomes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Specifically, when they clearly communicate their expectations, respond consistently and contingently, offer instrumental help and support, and adjust teaching strategies to address the particular needs of students. The provision of *structure* is important in meeting students' need of competence. Taylor and Ntoumanis (2007) write: "Adjusting the goals set for students depending on the students' ability is an example of the provision of structure. It is important that structure is provided in an autonomy supportive and not a controlling way" (p. 748). The participants in Morrisette's (2011) study also stressed the importance of structure and of flexibility. In their interviews, former students of an AEP spoke of the importance of teachers providing a clear structure in relation to expectations, while also showing flexibility in their readiness, when necessary, to move from academics to conversations about students' personal lives.

**Benefits associated with providing *autonomy support, structure, and involvement*.**

In brief, SDT researchers have linked teachers' provision of *autonomy support, structure, and involvement* by and large to the satisfaction of students' needs of autonomy, competence, and belonging, respectively (Tessier et al., 2010). The following sections outline the socio-emotional, behavioural, and educational gains associated with SD need satisfaction, many of which are particularly relevant to youth-at-risk.

***Autonomy.*** Providing *structure* in combination with gentle discipline (both shown to promote student autonomy; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve, 2006) is important for youth attending AEPs. One student, discussing her experience at an AEP in British Columbia, Canada says she came to the program because she wanted "... somewhere where [she] felt comfortable and [she] had control over [her] school life" (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996, p. 6). Research indicates that students who struggle in school (e.g., students with LD or emotional problems) report low levels of autonomy (Margalit & Shulman, 1986; Morrissette, 2011; Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001) and that schools with fair, clear, and consistently enforced rules have the lowest rates of student misbehaviour (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Gottfredson, 2001). Other benefits of autonomy-supportive classrooms include enhanced positive emotionality (Patrick et al., 1993) and wellbeing in students (Black & Deci, 2000), better academic performance (Boggiano, Flink, Shields, Seelbach, & Barrett, 1993), and increased academic persistence with a decreased likelihood of dropping out of school (Vallerand et al., 1997).

Vallerand et al. (1997) examined a motivational model of high school dropout. It postulated that non-autonomy-supportive climates (as indicated by parents', teachers', and school administrators' behaviour) are associated with low levels of self-determined motivation in students and that this, in turn, is associated with students developing intentions to drop out, and

then actually dropping out of high school. Vallerand et al. tested this model on high school students prospectively through the use of a questionnaire about the autonomy-supportive behaviours of their teachers and school administrators and their own intrinsic motivation and intentions to drop out of school. Roughly four thousand five hundred students from seven high schools were given the questionnaire in October of ninth grade. A year later, the researchers determined who among the participating students had dropped out and who had persisted in high school. Vallerand et al.'s analyses of their data supported their motivational model of high school dropout for all students and each gender separately. They revealed, for example, that students who dropped out of school, versus those who persisted, had lower levels of intrinsic motivation, higher levels of amotivation toward school activities, and perceived themselves as being less autonomous and less competent.

***Belonging.*** SDT researchers argue belonging is a key motivating force for students (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) and that meeting the psychological need of belonging is most important for youth-at-risk, such as those with a history of academic difficulties or in schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Battistich et al., 2007; Deci, et al., 1992). Consistent with this, students attending AEPs report that belonging need satisfaction is fundamental to their success in the programs (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996) and de Jong and Griffiths (2006) argue that relationship-building at AEPs, or attending to students' need for belonging "... is fundamental to improving behavioural and learning outcomes for [those of them] with challenging behaviours" (p. 37).

Research indicates that belonging need satisfaction is associated with many positive outcomes, outcomes 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). Osterman (2000) reviewed the literature on students' sense of acceptance within the school community, or their "belongingness." Two bodies of literature were included, one that examined the significance of a sense of belonging as an individual psychological need, and another that examined how, and the extent to which, schools foster a sense of belonging in students.

Osterman's (2000) results indicated that students' sense of belonging positively influenced multiple aspects of their behaviour, including their motivation and engagement in learning, commitment to school, and the supportiveness of their interactions with peers. Osterman also found that the "... least developed area [in the research on belongingness] deals with those organizational practices and policies that affect the development of students' sense of community in schools" (p. 360). In general, she found that interpersonal, instructional, and organizational strategies that support positive interactions between students and other members of the school community *should* result in belonging need satisfaction in students. The importance of research in this area is underscored by Osterman's additional finding that, for the most part, students and researchers describe schools as alienating institutions. This sense of alienation in mainstream school is widely reported by students attending AEPs and they also report a link between their sense of alienation and a lack of school success (e.g., B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996; Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2009).

**Competence.** Perceived autonomy and belonging, together, promote perceived competence (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007). Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis (1996) argue that research from a variety of perspectives indicates that "... psychological health depends on ongoing

feelings of effectance or competence.” Paraphrasing White (1963), they state: “The need to feel competence is a basic organismic propensity that underlies self-esteem and self confidence” (p. 1271). Sheldon et al. had students report their levels of autonomy, competence, and wellbeing at the start of the study and then completed daily diaries that focused on experiences of autonomy and competence as well as levels of wellbeing, positive affect, and vitality. Results indicated that individuals who reported higher initial levels of autonomy and competence tended to have better days, in general, and that good days for individuals were those in which they felt more competent and more autonomous as compared to their trait levels of these variables. A limitation in Sheldon et al.’s study is their conceptualization of autonomy and competence as trait attributes. It is inconsistent with SDT research that has shown these constructs to be dynamic and malleable in nature (e.g., Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Classroom variables that promote competence are especially important for students with LD and/or who are attending AEPs because these students report lower levels of academic competence than do other students (Bender & Wall, 1994; Wiest et al., 2001). These youth and others considered at-risk have typically experienced heightened levels of school failure, and consequently, are in need of experiences of success, or of competence need satisfaction.

***Intrinsic motivation.*** SDT postulates that when students’ psychological needs are met, their SD increases, which promotes the internalization of extrinsic motivations such that students become more intrinsically motivated (Deci, et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research has indicated that such things as the provision of tasks that are personally meaningful, interesting, and/or novel is associated with enhanced intrinsic motivation, (c.f., Bergin, 1999) and that among school-aged children, perceived competence is associated with intrinsic motivation (Boggiano, Main, & Katz, 1988). Intrinsically motivated students show lower levels of stress,

feel better about themselves, remain intrinsically motivated over the long-term, stay in school longer, and are more likely to continue their education after high school (Ames & Ames, 1984, 1985; Auerbach et al., 2011; Naccarato, 1988; Pintrich, 2004).

Auerbach et al. (2011) examined how having extrinsic versus intrinsic goals related to stress generation in a group of 255 adolescent students. Participants completed self-report measures of extrinsic and intrinsic goals, interpersonal and non-interpersonal stress, and depressive and anxious symptoms. Follow up assessments were given once a month for six months. Results indicated that students who showed greater endorsement of extrinsic versus intrinsic goals showed higher levels of interpersonal stress and that this interpersonal stress predicted greater depressive symptoms. Auerbach et al. concluded that having extrinsic, versus intrinsic goals increases adolescents' vulnerability to stress, and that this stress, in turn, increases their susceptibility to depressive symptoms. Their study holds particular relevance to youth attending AEPs because, for example, students with LD and ADHD are more susceptible to depression than are other students (Bender & Wall, 1994; McGough et al., 2005). Furthermore, Auerbach et al.'s study suggests that intrinsic motivation may foster resilience in students, helping to protect them against stress and depression. Promoting resilience is especially important for students attending AEPs who have experienced and/or are experiencing heightened levels of adversity.

In addition to those already mentioned, there are several other ways in which techniques that enhance intrinsic motivation are particularly important to students attending AEPs. For example, research indicates that youth who engage in delinquent behaviour and/or have LDs (challenges that are overrepresented in students attending AEPs), also tend to perceive low levels of control over their circumstances, assume less personal responsibility in academic settings, and

are more likely to perceive that academic outcomes are controlled by powerful others (Gottfredson, 2005; Lewis & Lawrence-Patterson, 1989; Parrot & Strongman, 1984; Tarnowski & Nay, 1989).

In general, in the transition from elementary to high school, students also transition from intrinsic to extrinsic academic motivations (Jang, 2008). They increasingly find learning activities both irrelevant to their lives and uninteresting. This leads to a devaluing of these activities and such things as decreased motivation to engage in the activity, decreased effort, and withdrawal from the activity. This is especially the case for students attending AEPs because they are often experiencing difficulties in their personal lives that overshadow academics (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996). Paradoxically, however, this means that in order to best serve their students, staff at AEPs should, rather than focussing on such things as intrinsic motivation, also dialogue with students about their personal issues and challenges (Morrissette, 2011). One student, discussing the positives about her AEP, remarks: "If you can't concentrate because something horrible is happening in your life, you get support" (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996, p. 7).

### **Limitations of This SDT Research**

There are four key limitations in the SDT research I reviewed, which are addressed in my study. First, although SDT interventions have clear implications for youth-at-risk and in AEPs, there is a lack of SDT research on these youth in these contexts. Second, most of this SDT research relies on survey self-report questionnaires (e.g., Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Reeve et al., 1999), such as the Problems in Schools questionnaire, which asks teachers to report on their practices. Very few SDT studies have employed observations or interviews (Urduan & Turner, 2005). The use of interviews in my study allowed me to gather information

about participants' lives that may not have been revealed through a researcher-derived measure (Greene, 2000).

The third limitation in the research I discussed from an SDT perspective is that it has predominantly focussed on students' psychological need of autonomy, versus their needs of belonging and/or competence (Osterman, 2000; Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). Focussing on this one need might not serve all students well. Research indicates that these three needs hold different importance to different groups of students considered "at-risk" (Deci et al., 1992). Deci et al.'s study looked at predictors of math and reading standardized test scores for students with emotional handicaps and LD. They gave students questionnaires assessing their self-perceptions of home and classroom variables that reflect autonomy or competence aspects of internal motivation. Results indicated that while perceived autonomy was the greatest predictor of achievement for students with emotional handicaps, perceived competence was the greatest predictor of achievement for students with LD.

Studies investigating students' perceptions of their AEPs' characteristics indicate that they experience a strong need to belong in their program, perhaps amplified because of historical feelings of not fitting in well in school (e.g., B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996; Jones, 2011). SDT researchers echo this, claiming that belonging need satisfaction may be at the forefront for marginalized students, such as those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Battistich et al., 1997). My study further contributed to the field of SDT by investigating former students' perceptions of whether and how their needs for autonomy, belonging, *and* competence were met in their AEPs (as well as their perceptions of the effect of these practices both during- and post-school).



The fourth limitation in the SDT research I reviewed is that, because typical elementary/secondary classrooms do not provide students with much control over activities, it predominantly examined the negative effects of controlling, versus the positive effects of autonomy-supportive instructional practices (e.g., Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982; Flink, Boggiano, & Barrett, 1990). As a result, autonomy-supportive teaching practices have largely been identified in an indirect manner—they are the inferred counterparts of the controlling behaviours revealed in research (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985). Consequently, a final way in which my study contributed to the field of SDT is by examining practices students perceive are autonomy-supporting and the positive effects of these practices.

## **Synthesis of Key Findings From This SDT Research**

SDT researchers have identified classroom characteristics that help students meet their basic psychological needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence (Deci et al., 1991). Such characteristics include teachers: (a) matching instructional practices to students' unique preferences, interests, and competencies (*autonomy support*, Reeve, 2006); (b) expressing warmth toward students (*involvement*, Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007); and providing a clear yet flexible structure for classroom activities (*structure*, Skinner & Belmont, 1993). When students' basic psychological needs are met, they experience other gains, many of which are particularly important for youth attending AEPs, such as enhanced social competence, self-esteem, school commitment, and a decreased likelihood of dropping out of school (Osterman, 2000; Patrick et al., 1993; Vallerand et al., 1997).

### **Positive Psychology**

Psychological theories have historically focused on people's difficulties—what's not going well. This focus began with Freud and moved to other schools of psychology including psychodynamic, behavioural, evolutionary, and clinical. These approaches also hold a negative view of human nature; for example, they hold that people are inherently more selfish than selfless, more susceptible to mistakes than accuracies, and more prone to cowardice and deceit than to bravery and honesty (Sheldon & King, 2001). Since PP's creation in the late 1990's, its researchers have sought to bring balance to the field of psychology by focusing on what works well for people as a way of: (a) providing a full account of human nature and behaviour; and (b) increasing fulfilment and improving quality of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & Ryan, 2011).

However, over the years, PP researchers have focussed primarily on the latter—they've provided less of a conceptual framework of human nature and psychology than a set of resources that contribute to the optimal fulfilment and quality of life of individuals and groups (Fernandez-Rios & Novo, 2012). The reason for this focus is, perhaps, linked to PP's stated goals, which have remained the same since its creation. These goals, which focus not on theory, but on intervention, are: (a) to identify and assess positive traits that transcend cultures and political systems; (b) to encourage positive experiences and emotions; and (c) to create intervention strategies promoting strengths and experiences that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals, institutions, and communities (Seligman, 1998). The following section briefly summarizes PP's two intervention models and then introduces PP's strengths-based approach to education.

### **PP Strengths Interventions**

Interventions outlined in the PP literature fit into one of two models. The first is the resilience or competence model, which aims to develop resources that can be drawn upon to resist and overcome difficulties (Benard, 2004). The second is the “positive psychotherapy” model, which aims to build character strengths and positive emotions and to encourage engagement in personally meaningful life projects (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). PP strengths-based educational practices fit primarily into the positive psychotherapy model; however, individual or character strengths play an important role in both models. In fact, meaning in life, according to PP theory, results from knowing what your foremost strengths are and using them to connect with—and work for the betterment of—something you believe in and value (Seligman, 2002).

Although this is changing, Seligman and colleagues have criticized schools in the United States for focusing solely on achievement and not addressing issues of wellbeing (Seligman et

al., 2009). PP researchers urge educators to deliver positive education as a means of addressing students' psychological wellbeing. They argue that because children and adolescents spend most of their weekdays at school, it is the ideal environment in which to develop positive emotions. This is particularly the case with youth attending AEPs because they oftentimes experience disorganized family and social lives and they report low levels of parental involvement in their lives, thus making positive interventions at school all the more important (Kurlychek, Krohn, Dong, Hall, & Lizotte, 2012; Wiest et al, 2001).

In education, PP has focussed on teachers identifying and giving students opportunities to use/foster their strengths and talents (Linley et al., 2009). Rather than penalizing them for their deficits or mistakes, PP researchers urge teachers to provide students with opportunities to use their strengths and talents in and out of the classroom. Such an approach is very important for youth attending AEPs because their deficits or “failings” have received the majority of attention in their previous schools, with their strengths, talents, and accomplishments often overlooked (Vadeboncoeur, 2009).

Within the PP literature, strengths usually refer to character strengths, which are assessed using measures such as the Big Five, the California Personality Inventory (CPI), and the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF; Harter & Hodges, 2003; Schreiner, 2006). In an attempt to identify and classify the positive psychological traits of humans, Peterson and Seligman (2004) created the *Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) Handbook*. The CSV outlines six virtues, or general states of moral character, and 24 strengths, or manifestations of these virtues in daily life. So, for example, the virtue of “humanity” has the associated character strengths of “kindness,” “love,” and “social intelligence.” A few of the best-known instruments for identifying character strengths are the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)*;

Seligman, Park, & Peterson, 2004), the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* (The Gallup Organization, 1999), and the *Realise2* (Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, 2010).

**Highlighting and fostering student strengths.** In the following section, I outline key principles of PP's strengths-based approach to education. I then discuss the benefits associated with highlighting and fostering strengths. And finally, I discuss limitations with PP's trait view of strengths and argue that, especially in AEPs, a less trait-based and structured approach to strengths-identification is better.

***Approaches to highlighting and fostering student strengths.*** Strengths-based education, which is derived from PP research and employs formal measures of student strengths, is being delivered in hundreds of post-secondary institutions in the US and Canada (Lopez & Louis, 2009), secondary schools in the US (Anderson, 2005), and primary schools in the UK (Fox Eades, 2008). However, approaches to implementation of strengths-based education are diverse (Lopez & Louis, 2009). To promote consistency, Lopez and Louis have outlined five educational principles integral to the effective delivery of strengths-based education, principles they gleaned from the PP literature (e.g., Bowers, 2008; Gallup, 2003; Lopez, 2004; Rath, 2007; Seligman et al., 2005).

The first principle advocates the use of *measures* that assess students' strengths (e.g., *Clifton StrengthsFinder*). The second prompts educators to personalize students' learning processes through *individualization*, or think about and act upon the unique strengths, interests, and needs of students. In order for individualization to be successful, educators must help students to talk about their goals within the context of their personal strengths. The third principal encourages students to *network* with others, including friends, family, and professionals, who can affirm their strengths. As students become more mindful of their own

strengths, they can share that knowledge with fellow students and begin to think of others in terms of their strengths, a process that Lopez and Louis (2009) argue will help strengthen connections among students. The fourth principle emphasizes the need for students to *deliberately apply their* personal strengths to situations both in and out of the classroom. Relatedly, the fifth and final principle has students *intentionally developing* their strengths through new experiences or focused practice over a set period of time. Ideally, students generate new strategies or access previously underutilized resources to develop their strengths.

One of the articles Lopez and Louis (2009) reference is Bowers (2008). They reference this article in their third principle of *networking*. Bowers first summarizes literature in the field of PP strengths-based interventions. He focusses on how strengths are conceptualized and identified, and the benefits associated with strengths-identification. Compared with these areas of study, Bowers suggests that little is known about how strengths can best be used, or capitalized upon. To uncover the mechanisms by which strengths-capitalization may be facilitated, he provides an extensive summary of an unpublished dissertation (Janowski-Bowers, 2006).

Janowski-Bowers (2006) interviewed eight college students who had recently taken strengths-development programs. Participants were recommended by instructors in these programs on the basis of being the “best of the best” (Bowers, 2008, p. 31) with regards to the utilization of their strengths. Participants were asked about the strengths-development programs, their signature strengths, and about the application of their strengths. Interviews were thematically coded and results indicated that three conditions were associated with participants using, or capitalizing upon their strengths: (a) social support; (b) success experiences; and (c) the feeling that their strengths were working for them. Under the theme of social support, all eight participants indicated that they had social support, in the form of family and friends, and that this

was associated with their ability to capitalize upon their strengths. It is unclear from Bowers' summary, however, whether the participants *networked* with their supports to affirm their personal strengths.

***Benefits associated with highlighting and fostering student strengths.*** PP research has shown beneficial outcomes associated with the identification and use/fostering of personal strengths (e.g., Austin, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) It has also shown positive outcomes associated with increased positive affect (which is associated with strengths-identification and use) (e.g., Isen, 2001; Seear & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). Though this research has predominantly been done with college students or professional groups, benefits associated with highlighting and using strengths are aligned with the needs of youth-at-risk.

For example, the simple act of identifying strengths has been shown to result in higher classroom engagement and academic expectations and efficacy (Austin, 2005; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009) as well as higher levels happiness (Gentry, 2009; Seligman et al., 2005). These benefits are important to youth-at-risk because they experience disproportionate rates of school disengagement, dropout, self-critical cognitive schemas, and affective disorders (i.e., Foley & Pang, 2006; Ford et al., 2012).

Using personal strengths, moreover, has been shown to lead to decreased depressive symptoms (Seligman et al., 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) and enhanced wellbeing (sense of fulfilment, choice, and authenticity; Proctor et al., 2011) and productivity (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006). Furthermore, students who are skilled at drawing on their strengths are more adept at using past successes to facilitate current undertakings and are better at garnering social support (Bowers & Lopez, 2010). Many youth-at-risk, including those attending AEPs, could especially benefit from an enhanced ability to garner social support. Social support could help

offset some of the challenges they commonly encounter, like bullying, social withdrawal, and low levels of parental involvement (e.g., Ford et al., 2012; Wiest et al., 2001).

Seligman et al. (2005) conducted a six-group, placebo-controlled study, testing five interventions designed to increase individual happiness. Baseline data and periodic data over a six-month period were collected from 577 adult participants. The Internet was used to recruit participants, deliver the interventions, and collect data. Measures included the *Beck Depression Inventory* (BDI), which assesses happiness and depression, and a novel measure called the *Steen Happiness Index* (SHI). The authors created the SHI because available measures of happiness captured neither the three aspects of happiness revealed in previous PP research (i.e., positive emotion, engagement, and meaning), or upward changes in happiness levels.

Within one week of giving consent, participants completed one of the five interventions: writing and delivering a letter of gratitude to someone who had been especially kind to them; writing down three things that went well each day for a week; writing about a time when they were at their best, reflecting on the personal strength involved in the experience, and reviewing the story every day for a week; taking an inventory of personal strengths and using one of the identified signature strengths in a new and different way each day for a week; and taking a survey identifying their top five signature strengths. The control group kept a journal for one week with entries focussing on early life experiences.

Results indicated that all of the interventions, including the placebo, had a positive effect on happiness and depression. Two of the interventions, writing down three good things each day and using signature strengths in a new and different way, resulted in increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months. The letter of gratitude created large positive changes in the BDI and SHI, but only for one month. The other two interventions, reflecting on a



time when one was at his/her best and identifying signature strengths, created positive, but transient changes in happiness and depression in participants. The placebo group were also happier and less depressed at the immediate posttest. Seligman et al.'s (2005) results reveal that while identifying personal strengths leads to increases in happiness and decreases in depressive symptoms, in order for these positive changes to persist, signature strengths should be exploited in new and different ways. A key limitation of Seligman et al.'s study is that their sample was of individuals who elected to visit their PP website. Initial tests revealed that participants were mildly depressed at the study's onset, and as a consequence, the effectiveness of the interventions for individuals without depression is undetermined.

Research indicates that increases in positive affect (associated with strengths identification and use) lead to gains in wellbeing (i.e., Seear & Vella-Brodrick, 2013) and creativity (i.e., Isen, 1999; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). Positive affect, moreover has been shown to promote approach (versus avoidance) behaviour (Davidson, 1993; Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Teilegen, 1999) and to encourage careful, systematic, cognitive processing, which makes decision-making more efficient and thorough, and more flexible and innovative (Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1997; Isen, 2001; Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991).

In Isen et al.'s (1991) study, medical clinicians were either assigned to a condition in which positive affect was induced (via receiving feedback of success on an anagram test) or assigned to a no intervention control condition. Clinicians from both groups were asked to decide, based on nine clinical conditions, who among a group of six patients were most likely to have lung cancer. Clinicians in whom positive affect had been induced were more likely to go beyond the assigned task, doing more than what was required; they were significantly less confused in their decision-making process; and they showed more integration of information in

their decision-making. These findings hold relevance for youth attending AEPs because, for example, difficulties with decision-making are associated with many of the deleterious outcomes they experience, such as risky behaviour (Knight, Dansereau, Becan, Rowan, & Flynn, 2015).

### **Limitations of This PP Research**

The primary limitation with this PP research is that despite the applicability of PP strengths-based education to youth-at-risk, including those attending AEPs, there remains a lack of research examining how to deliver this type of education to these youth and in these contexts (Henrich et al., 2010). Most studies in the field of PP have involved a limited sample, and not marginalized populations. In fact, particularly for youth-at-risk and in AEPs, PP's trait view of strengths and highly structured approach to strengths-identification may not be optimal.

Even within PP, researchers have acknowledged the limitations with a trait view of character strengths, specifically, that it ignores the role of environmental factors and of effort in the development of strengths and talents (e.g., Proctor et al., 2011). The interplay between strengths and experience is critical in education because when educators simply highlight students' innate abilities without also emphasizing experience and effort, students' motivation to engage can be undermined (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). It can lead to the devaluing of effort in achieving desired outcomes.

Clifton et al. (2006) argue that though talents naturally exist within the individual, in order for them to be of maximum value, they must be honed with increasing knowledge and skill. These researchers thus define talents as genetic predispositions toward particular aptitudes, and strengths as abilities that are developed through a combination of such aptitudes and experience. However, it is also argued that we need not be "born" with specific talents. Talents can "... emerge in distinctive patterns alongside particular goals, interests, values, and situational

factors” (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011, p. 106). Especially when working with marginalized individuals, such as youth-at-risk, an experiential view of strengths is important because they may not have had the opportunity to develop strengths in the past.

Even within the PP literature, strengths are sometimes defined quite broadly. For example, Buckingham and Clifton (2001) define a strength as “... consistent, near perfect performance in an activity” (p. 25). This is important for youth-at-risk, especially those attending AEPs because their goals, interests, values, and personal contexts often differ from the mainstream. As a consequence, their strengths may not represent those seen in the general population, or in measures, such as the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* (The Gallup Organization, 1999). However, because of interruptions to school attendance, challenges such as LD, and/or academic failure, AEP students’ strengths may not involve “near perfect performance” in an activity. Rather they may represent an advantage relative to the challenges these students have experienced and/or are experiencing.

Research also shows that strengths are strongly tied to our likes—we tend to like what we do well and dislike what we do poorly (Sutton, Phillips, Lehnert, Bartle, & Yokomizo, 2011). Park and Peterson (2009) argue that children naturally possess signature strengths and should, therefore, be able to self-identify them. Because a flexible approach to pedagogy and curriculum is important to youth in AEPs (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Jones, 2011; Morrissette, 2011), for this group, strengths-identification might best involve an informal approach; for example, teachers discussing with them activities that they are good at and/or find pleasurable. Another caution, however, is that because youth attending AEPs have typically experienced heightened levels of academic failure and have received feedback that overwhelmingly focuses on their weaknesses, they may have a more difficult time, and therefore need a good deal of scaffolding

to identify and/or acknowledge their strengths. To begin to uncover what effective strengths-based practices look like for youth-at-risk in AEPs, in my study, I examined former AEP students' perspectives of whether and how their strengths were identified and fostered in the AEPs they attended (as well as what, if any, value they perceived in this).

### **Synthesis of Key Findings From This PP Research**

In order to provide a clear framework for PP strengths-based education, Lopez and Louis (2009) identified five fundamental principles: educators need to measure students' strengths; then they need to incorporate into activities students' individual strengths, interests, and needs; students should be encouraged to network with others who can avow their strengths; students need to deliberately apply their strengths to situations in and out of the classroom; and students should intentionally develop their strengths through focused practice. A focus on personal strengths is especially important for students attending AEPs because their strengths have oftentimes been overlooked in the mainstream school system. It is not surprising, therefore, that benefits associated with the identification and use of personal strengths, such as increased happiness, wellbeing, and ability to garner social support, correspond to areas in which youth-at-risk typically experience difficulties.

#### **SDT, PP, and AEP (Potentially Effective Practices) Theoretical Convergences**

Sheldon and Ryan (2011) suggest that in its conceptualization of optimal motivation, SDT can explain several of PP's areas of focus, such as performance, wellbeing, and personal growth. Because of these and other similarities, they argue that SDT "... is a prototypical example of a theory within the broader field of PP" (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011, p. 33). Having both evolved from the humanistic branch of psychology, SDT and PP maintain positive views of human nature. Although humanistic psychology and PP differ in significant ways (Waterman,

2013) Seligman contends that “Humanistic Psychology stressed many of the same premises as PP does: free will, responsibility, hope, and positive emotion” (2002, p. 275). In line with humanism’s positive view of human nature, PP researchers have sought to explore the often ignored positive qualities of humankind (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). SDT, correspondingly, in its organismic-dialectic theory of human motivation, assumes that people are naturally inclined to learn, integrate important cultural values, and interact with and help others (Moti, 2007).

Both SDT and PP, with their interest in the influence of cognition on behaviour, have challenged the view—central to behaviourism—that actions are a direct result of experiences and anticipated patterns of reward and punishment. As is evident in their approaches to education, rather than focussing wholly on observable behaviour, SDT and PP researchers place great importance on such things as understandings and beliefs. This focus on cognition is epitomized by SDT and PP’s growing interest in the construct of mindfulness (e.g., Brown et al., 2007; Orzech et al., 2009), or a non-judgemental and non-reactive awareness of presently occurring external (e.g., sights and sounds) as well as internal (e.g., emotions and cognitions) phenomena (Baer, Lykins, & Peters, 2012). While both SDT and PP researchers have largely focused on the way in which mindfulness training impacts wellbeing (c.f., Brown et al., 2007; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011), SDT researchers have also explored the role of this type of awareness in healthy self-regulation (e.g., Ryan, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Self-regulation refers to a process of taking control of, including evaluating, one’s own learning and behaviour. Students who self-regulate set a specific learning objective, choose strategies to accomplish this goal, and monitor their progress toward this objective (making modifications to their strategies when they encounter difficulties) (Winne, 1995). In fact, self-

regulation is an important outcome of self-determination. It is facilitated when individuals' needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence are nurtured (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012).

Three significant criticisms of PP can be addressed by integrating SDT principles. First, PP has been criticized for assuming that certain psychological traits are inherently beneficial, while ignoring evidence that the benefit of so-called positive traits is highly dependent on the context in which they are expressed (c.f., McNulty & Fincham, 2012). McNulty and Fincham, in their review of four longitudinal studies of marriage, discovered that four seemingly positive processes—optimistic expectations, positive thoughts, kindness, and forgiveness—could be either beneficial *or* harmful for relationship wellbeing. They were beneficial in the context of healthy marriages, but deleterious in unhealthy ones. The cautious application of “positive traits” such as optimistic expectations and forgiveness in relationships is especially important for youth attending AEPs because they often struggle with unhealthy romantic, peer, and family relationships (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Wiest et al., 2001).

In contrast to PP, SDT has a profound focus on both non-interpersonal and interpersonal context. SDT suggests, for example, that it is our tendency to approach, partake in, and master social practices and challenges within the environment that allows for the satisfaction of our psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009). In other words, in order to fulfil our needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence, certain environmental structures must be in place, including, according to Battistich et al. (1997), close, caring relationships.

Second, in its focus on positive emotions and experiences, PP has been criticized both for failing to acknowledge the way in which difficulties and challenges may contribute to personal growth, purpose, and meaning (Fernandez-Rios & Novo, 2012; Ryff, 2003) and for failing to

explore the ways in which negative factors can get in the way of optimal functioning (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). By integrating SDT's dialectical account of the way "negative" factors influence people's optimal functioning, the latter deficit could be addressed. SDT, recognizing that people can act in negative ways (selfishly, meanly) as easily as they can positive (prosocially, openly), accounts for negative behaviours as being a consequence of SD need frustration during development and in current contexts (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011).

Third, of the three pillars of PP Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) outline—the study of positive subjective experience, positive personal traits, and positive institutions—the first two have received the vast majority of attention (Hart & Sasso, 2011). Through their content analysis of the literature in the field of PP, Hart and Sasso found that although efforts to integrate PP into health and counselling psychology have escalated over the years, such efforts have not been seen in the area of school/educational psychology. SDT, with its growing focus on educational contexts, has the potential to offer insight into *positive institutions*. Specifically, SDT researchers have identified classroom characteristics that support students' SD needs (discussed in detail in the previous section *Educational Approaches From an SDT Perspective*). However, SDT researchers have not yet examined whether and how entire schools can be structured to support students' SD and this is an important direction for future study.

Not only do SD and PP theory have much in common, they contain many of the overarching constructs in the literature on effective AEP characteristics (especially the qualitative studies). These include a student-centred approach to teaching and learning and a focus on student psychological wellbeing and student autonomy. Each of the studies presented in the section *Qualitative Investigations of AEPs* advocates a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, with Kim (2011), for example, claiming a school is at-risk when it doesn't respond

to its students' unique academic, as well as social and psychological needs. The educational approaches outlined in both the SDT and PP strengths-based literature are student-centred with their focus on individualizing instruction to align with the unique needs, interests, and strengths of students (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Reeve, 2006).

Another shared focus among SDT, PP theory, and research on AEP characteristics is the enhancement of student psychological wellbeing. The improvement of student psychological wellbeing grounds all of the qualitative investigations of AEP students' experiences. For example, the former students of AEPs in Morrissette's (2011) study focussed on the way their AEP met their emotional versus just their academic needs. Similarly, while SDT researchers have sought to identify classroom conditions that support students' inner motivational resources, including their psychological needs (Reeve et al., 2004), PP strengths-based approaches to education have emerged from the positive psychotherapy model, which aims to not only build character strengths, but also positive emotions (Seligman et al., 2006).

Finally, a focus on enhancing students' autonomy, or their sense of control over feelings and behaviours, is consistent across the SDT, PP strengths-based, and AEP literatures. de Jong and Griffiths (2006), under the category of *curriculum and pedagogy*, advocate educators encouraging students to take ownership of their learning program. Correspondingly, educational approaches from an SDT perspective are designed to meet students' three basic psychological needs, including their need for autonomy. In SDT, autonomy refers to the need to be a causal agent in one's life and to perceive a large degree of psychological freedom during an activity (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Csikszentmihalyi (1991), a key researcher in PP, writes: "People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy" (p. 2). Correspondingly, Lopez and Louis (2009)



outline five modern-day PP strengths-based educational principles that involve students engaging in a process of self-regulation by gaining an understanding of their own unique strengths and talents and using them to negotiate new situations in and out of the classroom.

As a final note, by drawing on SD research and theory, the approach or attitude that therapists or educators (including those in AE settings) take with their clients/students can be informed. While all three bodies of literature emphasize the importance of autonomy, only SDT outlines the way in which it can be supported. SDT researchers propose that *autonomy support* is a mode that can be taken to improve the effectiveness of any therapy or treatment program (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). Because SD research has shown that individuals are most likely to perform well and to thrive in autonomy-supportive conditions, the delivery of AEP practices may be aided by an approach that supports choice and encourages self-regulation.

### **Specific AEP Qualities and Practices Derived From Literature Review**

I close this chapter by outlining categories of program characteristics that emerged from my literature review. These categories and their associated qualities and practices are summarized in Table 1 (below). McCracken (1988) writes that the first step in a qualitative interview is an exhaustive review of relevant literature, which allows the researcher to construct the interview questionnaire and to assess his/her data. The information in Table 1 informed the development of my interview protocols (*Chapter Three*) and analysis of interview transcripts (*Chapter Four* and *Chapter Five*), particularly with articulating themes within and between interviews that converged with and diverged from the literature.

In addition to their overarching constructs, many of the specific program characteristics outlined in the literature on AEPs and on educational approaches from an SDT and PP strengths-based perspective are also in alignment. These characteristics, which are believed to be effective

in AEPs and/or to lead to benefits of particular relevance to youth attending AEPs, are presented in Table 1 under one of three categories: (1) *relationships*; (2) *student wellbeing*; or (3) *student learning*. The chosen order of the categories (i.e., *relationships* and *student wellbeing* preceding *student learning*) and the relatively large amount of information contained in the combined categories of *relationships* and *student wellbeing* coincide with the research on AEPs. This research indicates that the social and emotional needs of students attending AEPs are at the forefront (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Foley and Pang, 2006; Kim, 2011). By establishing a cohesive, caring community within the AEP, through practices that foster positive relationships, students should "... become effectively bonded with and committed to the school" (Battistich et al., 1997, p. 138). This school bond and commitment should, in turn, facilitate student engagement in practices designed to enhance their emotional wellbeing (Jones, 2011). And finally, with their social and emotional needs addressed, students should be better able to engage in academic learning (Morrissette, 2011; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).

Table 1

*Program Qualities and Practices From the AEP, SDT, and PP Literature*

| Category                | Description   | Specific Characteristics   | Benefits   | References  |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| <b>I. Relationships</b> |   |  |  |   |
| a) Teacher/<br>Student  | Teacher/student relationships in which students are cared for and feel they can trust the teachers.               | Teachers develop compassionate perspectives toward students; and take an interest in and show support for them by listening carefully and acknowledging and responding to their questions and comments.  | Students experience increased autonomy, belonging, competence, and trust; and may be better able to make behavioural changes.                            | de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Ki & Taylor, 2008; Morrissette, 2011; McGregora, et al., 2015; Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006 |
| b) Mentor/<br>Student   | An adult staff member or community volunteer having a positive, advisory relationship with an individual student. | The mentor keeps track of the student's behaviour, attitudes, and performance; guides the student's progress; supports the student in changing negative behaviours; and role-models positive behaviours. | 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; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Flower et al., 2011; Osterman, 2000; Tobin & Sprague, 2000          |

| Category                             | Description   | Specific Characteristics  | Benefits  | References  |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| c) Student/Student                   | Students being part of a cohesive, caring group within the AEP that has a shared purpose.                                 | Students collaborate with each other in pursuit of common goals; provide and receive meaningful help; discuss and reflect upon each other's experiences; and network with each other to avow their strengths.   | Students are facilitated in reconnecting to school and engaging in their learning process. They also experience increases in autonomy, belonging, and competence.   | Battistich et al., 2007; Jones, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lopez & Louis, 2009   |
| <b>2. Student Wellbeing</b>          |   |   |   |   |
| a) Psychological Wellbeing           | The AEP incorporating practices to improve student emotional wellbeing.   | Adults help students to change their negative behaviours through role-modeling/teaching reflective thinking, life skills, and prosocial behaviours; attend to students material needs, by, for example, helping them find housing; have students reflect on each other's experiences and practice important social competencies; and provide students with help in identifying and fostering talents and strengths.   | Psychological gains such as increased classroom engagement, fulfilment, authenticity, and positive affect.  | Battistich et al., 1997; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; McGregora et al., 2015; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Proctor et al., 2011; Seligman, et al., 2005  |
| b) The Learning Environment          | The AEP providing a supportive, non-judgemental, and non-threatening learning environment.                                | The AEP incorporates practices that encourage student and adult/teacher "... dispositions of patience of listening, of attentiveness to contrasting views, of sensitivity to human detail and nuance" (Hansen as cited in Morrissette, 2011, p. 177); adults/educators arrange learning materials and seating patterns so that students can engage with objects and in conversations; and room configurations and seating options are comfortable and inviting. | Alleviates students' anxieties about returning to school and facilitates their sharing of personal issues that impacted their learning; increases their willingness to engage, try, and learn in school.                              | de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Jones, 2011; Morrissette, 2011; Reeve, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Vadeboncoeur, 2005  |
| c) Positive Versus Punitive Measures | Adults/educators using uncontrolling/positive language/techniques.  | Adults/educators use informal, uncontrolling language, or communicate requirements or opportunities in a natural, flexible, and positive manner; praise signs of improvement and mastery; encourage student effort and persistence; and offer progress-enabling hints when students appear stuck.   | Enhances students' interest in an activity and maintains or enhances their intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation elicits many positive behaviours such as taking on challenges, utilizing skills, and following one's interests. | Cameron et al., 2001; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Deci et al., 1999, 2001; Flower et al., 2011; McGregora et al., 2015; Reeve, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 2000 |
| <b>3. Student Learning</b>           |   |   |   |   |
| a) Structure and Flexibility         | Teachers providing students with clear parameters for classroom activities/expectations and also flexibility depending on | Students are given a sufficient amount and quality of information in relation to expectations, steps necessary for completing a task, and consequences of behaviour. Also, adults/teachers are flexible with expectations, depending on students' needs, interests, and strengths. To understand students' unique interests, etc., staff members  | Satisfies students' needs of autonomy and competence; may contribute to decreased rates of student misbehaviour; and promotes students' academic  | Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Jones, 2011; McGregora et al., 2015; Gottfredson, 2001; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Skinner &  |

| Category                     | Description  | Specific Characteristics   | Benefits  | References   |
|------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| a) Structure and Flexibility | their unique needs/abilities.  | talk with them both at the point of initial contact and throughout their time at the AEP to find out what they want and need from the program.   | engagement in the AEP.  | Belmont, 1993; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007; Tobin & Sprague, 2000; Vadeboncoeur, 2005   |
| b) Student Autonomy          | Students having opportunities to take ownership of their learning program. | Activities are made personally meaningful to students in some way. This is facilitated when educators provide a rationale; allow students to work in their own way; and encourage students to talk and clearly acknowledging their perspectives. Also educators are willing to transition from formal instruction to conversations about students' personal issues or challenges when necessary.   | Enhances positive emotionality and wellbeing in students: and contributes to better academic performance, and increased academic persistence with a decreased likelihood of dropping out of school. | Black & Deci, 2000; Boggiano, et al., 1993; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Jang, 2008; McGregora et al., 2015; Morrissette, 2011; Patrick et al., 1993; Reeve, 2006; Vadeboncoeur, 2005; Vallerand, et al., 1997 |
| c) Teacher Pedagogical Skill | Teachers providing high quality academic instruction.                      | Teachers have skill in <i>relational pedagogy</i> (a broad competence in many school subjects). They provide students with challenging lessons in content areas such as arithmetic, reading, language arts, social studies, and science (lessons which are considered effective when students make progress toward grade-level standards); individualized remediation, ample practice opportunities, and small group exercises; opportunities to create new or to access previously underutilized resources in order to develop and deliberately apply their strengths to situations in and out of the classroom and the opportunity to use their strengths and talents each day | Contributes to students feeling engaged, valued, validated, and understood; and to their belonging need satisfaction.   | Dance, 2002; Flower et al., 2011; Kim, 2011; Linley et al., 2009; Lopez & Louis, 2009; McGregora et al., 2015; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Tobin & Sprague, 2000                      |

## **Chapter Three**

### **Method**

The goal of my study was to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about characteristics of AEPs students of AEPs perceive are effective. To this end, my objective was to use a qualitative interview method to examine whether and how former students of AEPs perceived that characteristics of their programs impacted their lives then and now. I engaged in narrative inquiry using semi-structured narrative interviews to answer my three research questions:

- (a) How do former students of AEPs perceive/describe their experiences in AEPs?
- (b) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs affected them at the time of attendance?
- (c) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs have contributed to their current life circumstances?

In this chapter, I present my methods. I begin with a general description of narrative inquiry and why narrative interviews are appropriate for my study. Then, after warranting my methodological approach, I describe my methodological procedures, how I achieved trustworthiness/rigour in my study, and ethical considerations.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a category of qualitative research that describes human actions through stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). There are two key types of narrative inquiry: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. I employed both in my study. Narrative analysis, or narrative configuration refers to the "... procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). This process

involves extracting emerging themes from data and configuring these into stories (Kim, 2006). Analysis of narratives, on the other hand, has narratives as data and analyses that produce themes or categories (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The rise of qualitative approaches, such as narrative inquiry, has been attributed to the crisis of representation and legitimation in traditional research methods, such as survey questionnaires (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Specifically, qualitative approaches address growing concerns over the degree to which traditional methods capture, and thus represent, the real, lived experiences of individuals (particularly of those who are not part of the mainstream society) and concerns about how research studies are evaluated, using constructs such as *validity*, *generalizability*, and *reliability* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In contrast to conventional methods, which are often theory-driven, narrative interviews allow researchers to access the internal world of participants' experiences, independent of theories (Crossley, 2000). They provide a means to "... the essentially personal, coherent and 'real' nature of individual subjectivity" (Crossley, 2003, p. 289).

Nonetheless, Kim (2008) asserts that storytelling without theory is insufficient in narrative research. Correspondingly, although participants' lived experiences were at the forefront in my study, theory also played a role. I used theory to situate the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., to define my research questions and methods and to inform my interview protocols) and to help me understand the participants' narratives from the perspective of relevant literature and the historical and social worlds in which the narratives were embedded (Bold, 2012; Goodman, 1999; McCracken, 1988).

## **Why Narrative?**

Mishler (1986) writes that people often remember and retell events in storied form and that if interviewers do not limit answers to those that are relevant to narrowly specified questions, storied answers will be given. There are three main reasons why I chose narrative interviews for my study. First, personal narratives reveal information in line with the purpose of my study—investigating perceptions of the way in which (a) a specific context (b) affected life events. “Narrative captures the contextual influences in a way that other research methods may not,” (Riessman, 1993, p. 21) including the social and historical milieu in which individual events take place (Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives also include information about the way experiences are meaningfully linked. They contain “... reflective elements that are concerned with the teller’s present feelings, needs, goals, and values in relation to the past experience” (Sanderson & McKeough, 2005, p. 134) and insights into the way events are organized (i.e., in a tragic or positive plot line).

The second reason that narrative interviews were a good fit for my study is that they are appropriate for collecting information from the population I investigated (i.e., marginalized individuals) because they capture and reflect participants’ unique perspectives. Narrative interviews “... respect [participants] as subjects with both histories and intentions,” (Mishler, 1996, p. 80). By encouraging them to speak for themselves, narrative interviews can give a voice to disenfranchised individuals, thereby, “giv[ing] a voice to the voiceless” (Hutchinson et al., 1994, p. 164).

The third reason narrative interviews were appropriate for my study is that they allowed me to meet the consideration of beneficence by benefiting the participants and (future) readers (Christians, 2005). “Telling one’s story and really feeling heard can be empowering for

participants [and] [e]mpowering involves movement and change” (Hutchinson et al., 1994, p. 163). Polkinghorne (1995) defines a narrative as a type of organizational scheme onto which stories are placed and asserts that by identifying the whole that they contribute to, narratives make individual events comprehensible. Sharing narratives also allows individuals to reimagine their lives in a more useful manner (Riessman, 2005) and further their cause (Bold, 2012). Reading biographical narratives, moreover, can prompt readers to re-examine taken-for-granted ideas (Weiland, 2003) and because they have an inherent morality, they can elicit ethical considerations (Chase, 2005). Reading narratives of individuals who were formerly students in AEPs should enhance understandings about the complexities of their lives and inspire imaginings about what good education could be like for others like them (Kim, 2011). By focusing not simply on the negatives about AEPs and their students, but also on the positives, my study may help transform the general view that AEPs are “dumping grounds” or synonymous with “juvenile detention centres” (Kim, 2006; Kim, 2011) and for “bad kids” (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

### **Methodological Procedures**

Before beginning my study, I sought permission from the University of British Columbia Behaviour Research Ethics Board (BREB). My data collection involved narrative inquiry and narrative interview methods (Riessman, 2005). My procedures for conducting and analysing individual interviews followed guidelines Lieblich et al. (1998) provide. I conducted two semi-structured narrative interviews with each of six former students of AEPs, one with each of their former teachers, and a document analysis on documentation about the AEPs. To avoid preconceived notions about the AEPs during the interviews and while conducting holistic-content analyses of them, I conducted my document analysis after these procedures.



## Participants

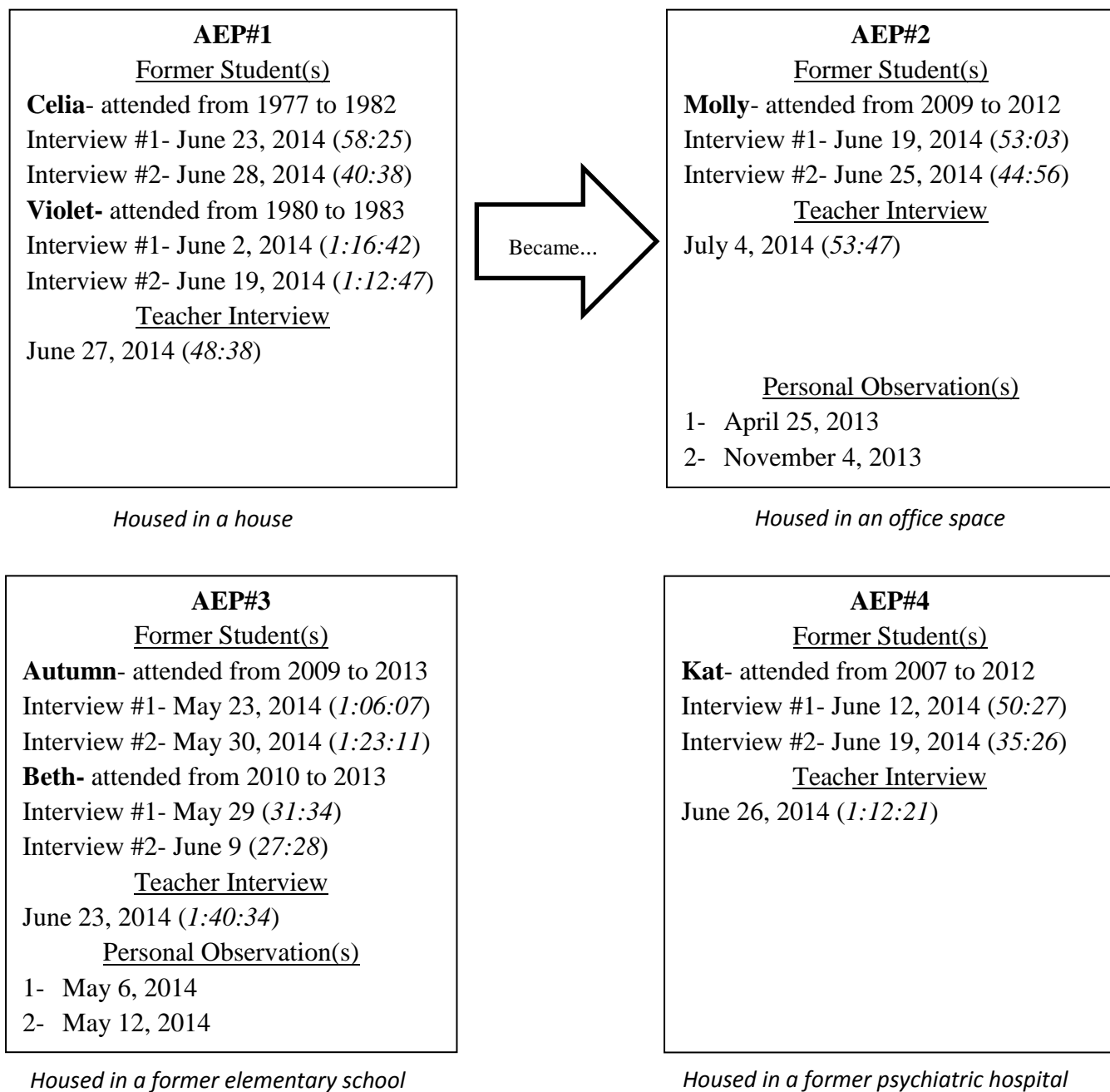
**Recruitment.** Participants were former students of AEPs and the teachers they had while attending the AEPs. Former students had attended an AEP for at least one year and had been out of that AEP for at least one year. Teachers were recruited in two ways. First, teachers who were already participating in Dr. Nancy Perry's study, *Promoting Positive Life Outcomes for Children and Youth Who Struggle in School*, were invited to participate. Second, the principal of one of the AEPs in Dr. Perry's study (AEP#2), who was a former student of AEP#1, provided me with the contact information of her teacher at AEP#1. I contacted this teacher by email and invited her to participate.

The former AEP student participants were recruited in three ways. First, the three teachers in Dr. Perry's study who agreed to participate were asked to contact one or more of their former students. They provided these students with information about my study (information letter supplied by me), and invited them to participate. I recruited the two former students of AEP#1 in a different manner. I personally invited the principal of AEP#2 (who was a former of student of AEP#1) to participate. She gave me the contact information of another former student of AEP#3, whom I contacted by email and invited to participate in my study. My recruitment yielded six former AEP student participants and four AEP teachers (the students came from four AEPs and I included the teachers from each).

Figure 1 (below) shows when the former AEP student participants attended the AEPs and the dates I collected data. Within each rectangle (representing the four AEPs) is listed the former student participant(s) who attended that AEP (names are pseudonyms) and the dates they attended; the date and length (in brackets next to the date) of each research interview; and the dates I conducted observations of AEP#2 and AEP#3 (running records included in my document

analysis). Although AEP#1 is the original version of AEP#2, I examined them as two separate programs because AEP#1 has changed significantly over the years such that its current incarnation (as AEP#2) is notably different than its original. The two generations of the program are 30 years apart and housed at different locations. Also, at AEP#1, staff roles were shared and courses were taught to small groups. At AEP#2, staff roles were well-defined and students completed courses individually and in a self-paced manner (see *Chapter Four* for detailed descriptions of each program).

Figure 1

*Timeline of Former Student Participants' Attendance in the AEPs Relative to Data Collection*

All participants (former students and teachers) in my study were female—no males volunteered to participate. This sample of former AEP students is not representative because more male than female students attend AEPs (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). Each former AEP student participant, ranging in age from approximately 19 to 50, had attended one of the four AEPs during their teen years. As can be seen in Figure 1 (above), four of the former AEP students (Molly, Autumn, Beth, and Kat) last attended their respective AEPs between one and two years prior to my interviews with them. In contrast two former AEP students (Celia and Violet) last attended their respective AEP three decades prior to my interviews with them. By including participants with more and less “distance” from their AEP experience (i.e., those who had been out of an AEP for a relatively short period of time and those who had been out for three decades), I was able to hone in on two very different perspectives. I was able to capture perspectives of individuals with “fresh” experiences in AEPs. And I was able to capture perspectives of two individuals who had a wealth of post-AEP experiences to reflect upon. Moreover, as described in their narratives in *Chapter Four*, these two individuals, Celia and Violet, continued to play major roles at the AEP they attended after graduating high school. As a consequence: (a) their experiences as students there, and the impact of those experiences, had remained at the front of their minds; and (b) relative to the other former student participants, they had a good deal of insight into the intention behind the various practices engaged in by the staff at AEP#1.

The socioeconomic backgrounds of the AEP student participants in my study varied, though most came from families/neighbourhoods with low socioeconomic status. Although they all had experienced social isolation and academic difficulties at their previous high schools, each had a unique experience, or set of experiences that led to her referral to the AEP, including

school bullying, homelessness, pregnancy, substance abuse, and anxiety/depression. Since their time at the AEPs, all had attended, or were about to begin college/university, and had worked in fields ranging from hospitality, to counselling, to administration.

One of the former AEP teachers was in her late-30s and the other three were in their late-50s to early-60s. They had worked at their respective AEPs for between four to twenty-five years. Two were still teaching and two were retired from teaching. Prior to working at the AEPs, three had worked as teachers in other alternative education contexts.

### **Former Student Interviews**

**Preparing for interviews.** The former AEP students were asked to dedicate approximately three to four hours to my study. We had an initial conversation in person or by phone so that I could explain my study and go over key aspects of the consent form. This conversation began the process of rapport-building between us. McCracken (1998) underscores the importance of building rapport, writing that prior to a qualitative interview, "... the investigator must be careful to establish a relationship of substance, and some kind of 'connection' with the respondent" (p. 26). Once participants indicated a desire to take part in my study, we scheduled the first interview and I provided a prompt, or provocation, for them to recall and consider their experiences in preparation for this interview. The prompt was: Think back to your time in the alternative education program. What did a typical day there look like? What kinds of activities were going on there? What was the teacher like? What were the other students like? What are some high points from your time there? What were some challenges you experienced during your time there? I also encouraged these participants to bring artefacts to the first interview—items both from and related to their time at the AEP. Four of the six former AEP students brought such artefacts and they were used as an impetus for them to share information

beyond abstracted understandings to more depth of experience; for example, where the artefacts were from and what they meant to them.

After both the participants and I had time to think about and digest their first interview, we met for the second interview (after one to three weeks had elapsed). A week before their second interview, I contacted participants by phone or email and provided them with another prompt for reflection. The prompt was: Think about your experiences since your time in the alternative program. What have your relationships been like? How have you been generally? What has your school/work been like? Do you see any links between your experiences in the alternative program and events in your life after you stopped attending?

**Location and length of interviews.** The former AEP student interviews were in-person, audio-recorded, and were conducted at a place of the participant's choosing—at my home, at her home, or at one of the AEPs. The twelve interviews (two with each of the six former AEP students) spanned approximately thirty minutes to one and a half hours in length.

**Protocols.** The two former AEP student interview protocols (*Appendix A* and *Appendix B*) targeted several broad categories of information—categories central to my inquiry—and contained a series of general and then more specific open-ended questions. Each interview was semi-structured, and as such, participants were encouraged to lead our conversation, using their own words to describe their emotions, thoughts, and experiences. I was not committed to asking every question in my protocol, so long as the broad categories were addressed. Because I had the flexibility to omit questions, not ask questions in the order they appeared, and ask other clarifying questions, some of my analysis/interpretation was going on during the interview, as I made "... decisions about the content and nature of the interview as it progresse[d]" (Bold, 2012, p. 95).

The first research interview with the former students focussed on their experiences at the AEP (e.g., what led them there and what it was like for them from the beginning to the end of their time there; see *Appendix A*). It also included a few questions about experiences prior to and since their time at the AEP. The information I collected from the first interview provided a narrative base (or a broad developmental account of the participants' experiences; Polkinghorne, 1995) that informed my focus for the second interview. For example, if the participants did not touch on a specific aspect of her experiences at the AEP, such as their relationships with other students there, I paid extra attention to this topic in the second interview.

The second interview with the former students of the AEPs focused on how experiences in the AEPs affected them while they were in their programs and after they left their programs (*Appendix B*). The interview protocol contained questions that emerged from my review of the literature on AEPs and on SDT and PP (strengths-based) interventions. In particular, it attended to program characteristics I have identified as potentially powerful in the lives of the AEP graduates (see Table 1, p. 69). The second interview protocol was divided into two parts: experiences before and experiences after the AEP and each of these sections attended to conceptual categories that emerged from my literature review (e.g., relationships, wellbeing, and learning) as well as novel information or categories that emerged during our conversation.

To create an atmosphere of comfort and safety, I opened each interview with an informal conversation (e.g., introductions, perhaps ease of finding the meeting location, offering something to drink/water). I generated general open-ended questions that were straightforward to answer and informal (e.g., "Tell me about your high school experiences") (McCracken, 1988). These "grand-tour" questions were designed "... to 'spring' respondents, to move them to talk without over-specifying the substance or perspective of this talk" (McCracken, 1988, p. 34) and

to invite their narratives. McCracken (1998) writes that in the qualitative interview, “Once respondents have been brought in sight of the topic, they must be able to “go” wherever they wish” (p. 40). However, if/when a participant appeared to be stuck or detached from the topic, I gently redirected her with the more specific open-ended questions (e.g., “What were some of the things you most liked about high school?”) or with probing questions (e.g., “[Can] you share more about what that was like for you?”; Jones, 2011, p. 173). Once it appeared that the participant had fully shared her experience (i.e., all she remembered or all she was willing to recount), I asked the closing question: “Is there anything else that you would like to add that has not yet been addressed?” (Jones, 2011, p. 173).

#### **Procedures for data analysis.**

*Holistic-content analysis.* Once I had transcribed verbatim the twelve former AEP student interviews, I read and interpreted each one using Lieblich et al.’s (1998) holistic-content analysis. The second interviews with the former AEP students seemed to naturally flow from the first, and as such, it made sense to examine them together. Consequently, I treated the two former student interviews as one document in my analyses.

I followed Lieblich et al.’s (1998) advice that because narrative interviews are influenced by the participant, the researcher, and contextual factors (like the time and location of the interview), the researcher should read the transcript multiple times, to pick up on these various dimensions of the data and to gain insights about the research questions. In the holistic-content analysis, I was looking to gain a general view of the participants’ stories, including elements of their life stories, with a focus on content. When looking for the meaning in specific parts of the text, I took the entire narrative (or the entire context) into account. Lieblich et al. (1998) underscore the importance of the surrounding context. They write: “Content analysis of sections



from a life story that completely ignores the context of the whole loses much of its power and meaning” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 122).

There were five steps in the holistic-content analyses. First, I read the entire interview several times, until a pattern emerged, in the form of the focus of the story, including such things as plot, characters, and setting (Sandelowski, 1991). Lieblich et al. underscore the importance of keeping an open mind during the readings and letting the story speak for itself. Secondly, I wrote down my first and general impressions of the story, which also included exceptions to my general impression as well as instances when the participant appeared emotional or did not finish a thought.

The third step involved deciding on themes to follow throughout the story, often indicated by the amount of time or the number of times that the participant discussed a topic. I looked for themes related to my three research questions. These themes were both emergent and aligned with the program qualities and practices I distilled from my review of the literature on AEPs, SDT, and strengths-based approaches to education (see Table 1, p. 69). Fourth, I highlighted the various themes in the text, using a different coloured marker for each theme. Each theme was attended to in a separate reading of the transcript. Fifth and lastly, I documented my impressions by noting my thoughts about each theme after it had been colour highlighted in the text, such as where the theme first arose in the text and its surrounding context.

I then conducted a narrative analysis by writing a narrative for each of the former AEP students from key information in their interviews. In writing the narratives, I fit the themes and corresponding story elements from the interviews into a coherent narrative of their experiences during and after their time in an AEP. In writing the narratives, I aimed to make the disconnected themes coherent, so that they would, “... appeal to the reader’s understanding and imagination”

(Kim, 2006, p. 5). I sent the narratives to the former AEP students. They were given two weeks to look over their narrative and provide me with feedback about anything I should change, add, or omit. Their feedback is described below in the *Rigour of Study* section.

***Cross-case analysis.*** Also after completing the holistic-content analyses on the former AEP student interviews and writing a narrative for each of these participants, I conducted an analysis of narratives in the form of a cross-narrative thematic analysis (Patsiopolous & Buchanan, 2011). This entailed reading each narrative several times with attention to patterns present across the narratives. For both the holistic-content and the cross-case analyses, my focus was on the content, or what was said, versus how, when, or for what purpose (Riessman, 2008). Next, I created a chart highlighting themes both within (when they appeared especially significant to the participant) and between narratives. Finally, I compared the seven themes I identified to key information in my *Chapter Two: Literature Review*, and especially, to the conceptual categories I identified as part of this literature (see Table 1, p. 69). With this information, I wrote *Chapter Five: Cross-Narrative Analyses*. As with their narratives, I sent this to each of the former AEP student participants with a request for feedback within a two-week time period. Again, this feedback is detailed below in the *Rigour of Study* section.

### **Teacher Interviews**

**Preparing for interviews.** The teachers were asked to dedicate approximately two hours to my study. I had an initial in-person or telephone meeting with them, individually, to describe my study and explain key aspects of the consent form. In addition to being informational, this conversation allowed us to begin establishing rapport (McCracken, 1998). Once they decided to take part in my study, I had them sign the consent form and we set up a time for an interview.

**Location and length of interviews.** The teacher interviews were in-person, audio-recording, and conducted at a location of the participant's choosing—at my home, at the participant's home, or at one of the AEPs. The teacher interviews each took between one and one and a half hours.

**Protocol.** The teacher interview protocol (*Appendix C*) focussed on broad categories of information containing general and then more specific but still open-ended questions. These interviews were carried out in the same semi-structured manner as the former AEP student interviews (i.e., participants were encouraged to lead the conversations and specific questions were only asked when the content was not touched upon without provocation).

The goal of the interview with the AEP teachers was to understand their perception of the structure and function of the AEP (during the time the former student(s) in my study attended). The first questions focused on the participant's teaching history and the student body and goals of the AEP. The remaining targeted characteristics of the AEP that my review of the AEP, SDT, and PP (strengths-based) literature revealed as being potentially powerful in the lives of AEP students (see Table 1, p. 69). As with the former AEP student interviews, these questions were designed to be sufficiently open to allow for new information to emerge (e.g., How does [name of program] address the personal challenges faced by students? Can you give some examples?). When it seemed the teachers had fully shared their experiences, I asked the closing question: "Is there anything else that you would like to add that has not yet been addressed?" (Jones, 2011, p. 173).

**Procedures for data analysis.**

***Holistic-content analysis.*** As with the former AEP student interviews, once I had transcribed the four teacher interviews verbatim, I read and interpreted each using Lieblich et

al.'s (1998) holistic-content analysis. The five steps of the holistic-content analysis were: (a) reading the entire text several times until a pattern emerged, (b) writing down my first and general impressions, (c) deciding on themes to follow throughout the story (I looked for themes related to the purpose of this interview, that is, understanding the structure and function of the AEP), (d) highlighting the various themes in the text using a different coloured marker for each, and (e) documenting my thoughts about each theme. I referenced the information I gathered through the holistic-content analysis of the teacher interviews to write the descriptions of the AEPs.

### **Document Analysis**

**Document collection.** I looked for research articles about the four AEPs in my study using PsycInfo and Google Scholar and for other documentation about the programs through recommendations from teachers and administrators and district and program websites. Because I exclusively included documents that were written/created when the former students were attending the AEP, I was only able to find a few that were relevant to my study (*Appendix D*). However, I also included running records of my observations of AEP#2 and AEP#3 that I conducted for Dr. Nancy Perry's project, *Promoting Positive Life Outcomes for Children and Youth Who Struggle in School*. These observations were conducted from one year to three years after the former students in my study attended the programs, so I reference them only in my description of the layout of the programs and the *check-in* and *check-out* activities. I confirmed with the teachers at these two programs (the ones participating in my study) that the physical layout of the two AEPs and the *check-in* and *check-out* activities were largely the same when the former students in my study attended the programs.

**Document analysis.** In determining the quality, and thus, usefulness of documents, I used the quality criteria Scott (1990) described for handling documentary sources. These criteria were: *authenticity*, that is, whether the evidence was from sound sources; *credibility*, or whether the evidence was free of distortion; *representativeness*, referring to whether information in particular documents was consistent with the totality of like documents; and *meaning*, or whether the evidence was clear and understandable.

Once I decided which documents to include in my analysis, I read through them, identifying, highlighting, and noting my thoughts pertaining to information about the general characteristics of the students attending and intended characteristics of the AEPs. I used this information, alongside that which I obtained through the holistic-content analysis of the teacher interviews, to write the AEP descriptions (see *Chapter Four*). The purpose of these descriptions was to supplement the information the former students provided. They provided a different perspective on the AEPs (from what is revealed in the former student narratives), and thus a richer picture of the structure and function of the programs.

### **Rigour of Study**

To achieve rigour and trustworthiness in my study, I employed multiple strategies. These strategies all attended to one of Riessman's (1993) four criteria for evaluating narrative inquiries: *persuasiveness*, *correspondence*, *pragmatic use*, and *coherence*.

#### **Persuasiveness**

*Persuasiveness* refers to the extent to which the researcher's interpretations of the data are reasonable or convincing. To determine the *persuasiveness* of narrative data and analyses of these data, Lieblich et al. (1998) urge narrative researchers to engage in *consensual validation*, or to share their research with a community of researchers. After I analyzed my interviews and

wrote up my results, I had two other researchers act as reviewers. I asked them to: (a) read the six former AEP student participant narratives and my *Cross-Narrative Analyses* chapter; and (b) provide me with their view of whether the seven themes I identified were corroborated by the narratives. They both told me that the data, or narratives, corroborated the themes. They also offered other feedback, such as further links to research. I integrated all of their feedback into my dissertation. Riessman (1993) writes: “Persuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants’ accounts” (p. 65). In my study, these links were present, and outlined in my *Cross-Narrative Analyses* chapter.

### **Correspondence**

*Correspondence* is the extent to which the researcher’s reconstructions of the data adequately represent the participants’ experiences. In order to achieve *correspondence*, Riessman (1993) said, “... an investigator can take results back to those studied” (p. 66). To corroborate the adequacy of my narrative reconstruction of their interviews, I member checked the narrative of each former AEP student and my *Cross-Narrative Analyses* chapter.

After her narrative was drafted, I e-mailed it to the former AEP student participant with a request to identify any changes to the document. Specifically, I asked if there was any information she would like changed, omitted, and/or added, with an eye to anonymity. I also asked whether the participant had suggestions for a pseudonym that I could use in place of her real name and I welcomed modifications to the text (if possible, using *Track Changes*). The extent of revisions and type of feedback the former AEP students provided varied. One participant accepted her narrative as I wrote it (e.g., “It sounds good to me”); one clarified a single detail (e.g., “The only thing I would change is that I attended [the AEP] on and off for five years, not three”); one clarified a detail and asked that I omit something; and three participants

clarified one or more points and did copyediting using *Track Changes*. Five of the six participants responded positively to their narrative (e.g., “It looks great!”) and one sounded disappointed in herself (e.g., “Man, I talked a lot, and I certainly don’t sound humble. . . . Please feel free to take out more ‘ands’ and in other ways, make me sound more articulate!”). I integrated all their feedback in subsequent drafts of the narratives.

Once my *Cross-Narrative Analyses* chapter was drafted, I sent it to each of the former AEP student participants. I offered them the opportunity to provide feedback about their sense of the accuracy of my interpretations; specifically, in regards to their own narrative. As with their narratives, I welcomed modifications to the text itself. The amount and content of their feedback varied. All six said that my interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (e.g., “I believe your interview interpretations are very accurate on all seven themes”); two participants provided minor editorial suggestions using *Track Changes*; and five also made comments about their experience as a participant in my study. This feedback was all positive. For example, one participant said, “You created a space for positive experiences to be shared. It is important for these stories to be told. It was a pleasure to be a part of this!” Another participant shared, “It’s been an incredible experience to see and read how I formed myself from my early interventions. [Your dissertation speaks] to the importance of early interventions.”

### **Pragmatic Use**

*Pragmatic use* refers to whether a study becomes the basis of others’ work. *Pragmatic use* is “future oriented,” and as such, it cannot be determined, only facilitated. So that other researchers can build on my study, I carefully outlined my data collection and analysis procedures in this chapter and I included my interview protocols and consent forms (*Appendix E* and *Appendix F*) as appendices to my dissertation.

## Coherence

Riessman (1993) states that in order to indicate that interpretations are more than ad hoc, they must be as rich as possible. To attend to *coherence* in my study, I engaged in reflexivity, reflecting upon my views and interpretations throughout my research process. I situated myself with regards to my philosophy of science and from the beginning of my data collection to the writing up of my results, I kept and referenced a reflexive journal.

**My philosophy of science.** My personal philosophy of science, congruent with aspects of post-positivism and post-modernism, has influenced the way I developed, and impacted the way I implemented my research method. In line with post-positivism, I believe that context influences behaviour and that all interpretations are, to a greater or lesser extent, subjective in nature. I believe there are meanings in stories, which cannot be empirically validated, but that are important because they are important to the participants in the contexts of their lives. The epistemological criteria that I used to guide my pursuit of “truth” in science are that statements were true if they were true for the participant. I also examined whether the statements were consistent with others the participant made and what her motivation appeared to be in making a given statement. However, because I subscribe to the constructivist notion that there are multiple selves and that change is possible, and to the narrative concept that telling narratives can help individuals reconstruct their lives, consistency between statements was not necessarily a requirement for truth claims.

In line with postmodernism, I believe that reason is not the only way of knowing; rather, there are other important means of gathering information, such as intuition. My definition of intuition is similar to Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) *theoretical sensitivity*. This is a quality that varies among researchers such that “One can come to the research situation with varying degrees



of sensitivity depending on one's previous ... experience with or relative to the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 41). It is sensitivity to the subtle meaning of data that impacts the researcher's ability to give meaning to it. McCracken (1988) echoes this idea. He writes that the process of detecting meaning in qualitative is hard to mechanize. It requires that the researcher "... listen not only with the tidiest and most precise of [his/her] cognitive abilities, but also with the whole of [his/her] experience and imagination" (McCracken, 1998, p. 19).

Because of my review of relevant literature and my previous work experiences, I brought to my study not only a high level of theoretical sensitivity, but also practical sensitivity about participants' experiences. I have worked as a counsellor and as a researcher with youth-at-risk. I was a counsellor at a drop-in centre for youth-at-risk and at a non-profit organization that served children and youth whose parents were low-income and going through separation or divorce. In addition, I was a research coordinator for Dr. Nancy Perry's study, *Promoting Positive Life Outcomes for Children and Youth Who Struggle in School*, which employed various methods to observe and identify features of AEPs, including teaching practices, that attend to students' needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In these various roles, I worked with and researched youth who both struggled in regular high school and who had positive things to say about their experiences as students in AEPs.

**Reflexive journal.** Agar (1986) suggests that in qualitative research, the investigator's background determines the framework from which s/he will organize the study, investigate the phenomenon, and represent the research findings. My previous experiences working with and researching youth-at-risk made me susceptible to preconceived notions about participants' lives and about what the interviews would reveal (McCracken, 1988). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that in narrative inquiry, "When researchers enter the field, they experience shifts and

changes... [and should therefore be] constantly negotiating, constantly re-evaluating, and maintaining flexibility and openness to an ever-changing landscape” (p. 71). During my data collection and analysis, I kept a reflexive journal, which allowed me to “... assess [how my] own background, perceptions, and interests [affected my] qualitative research process” (Krefting, 1991, p. 218).

My journal entries contained descriptions and explanations of my choices related to my research; reflections on my thoughts and feelings that came up both during and after the interviews; and links between my participants’ narratives and the research literature (Bold, 2012). The journal helped me achieve a greater (a) understanding of how my beliefs, expectations, personality, and demeanour impacted the outcome of the research and (b) self-awareness and objectivity in the interpretation process (Yow, 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because participants are subjecting aspects of their lives to potential scrutiny by others, Bold (2012) underscores the importance of considering ethical issues when engaging in narrative inquiry. Such ethical considerations involve weighing the potential benefits of participation against the potential risks; working toward anonymity; and accurately portraying participants’ voices.

### **Benefits and Risks**

Benefits of taking part in my research included the psychological gains associated with sharing personal narratives, such as insights into the ways in which experiences are meaningfully linked and feelings of empowerment resulting from being heard (Arvay, 2002; Hutchinson et al., 1994). Five of my former AEP student participants spoke of such benefits (e.g., “Going through this process was surprisingly therapeutic. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to

share my experiences”). An important risk of participation was that sharing life histories can both feel intrusive and can cause emotional upsets to come to the surface (Bold, 2012). Risk was minimized in my study by making participants aware of both the potential benefits and potential risks of participation before they gave consent. I also provided the former students of the AEPs, who were at greater risk of upset than their former teachers, with a list of resources, such as crisis lines, that they could access if they experienced negative affect or trauma as a result of participating in my study.

### **Anonymity**

I worked toward confidentiality in my study by disguising participant details, including their names and identifying characteristics of the AEPs. However, because of the small number of participants in my study and the specialized nature of the programs represented, absolute anonymity could not be assured. When I met with participants for the first time (to collect their consent forms and begin the study), I explained this limit on anonymity and ensured they understood and were comfortable with this aspect of the study.

### **Voice**

The issue of voice was especially important to consider in my study because it involved a vulnerable population. Attendees of AEPs face pervasive stereotypes (e.g., they are “bad kids”), which can lead to shame and further marginalization, such that students feel they need to hide their experiences at AEPs. For example, some avoid including their AEP history on their resume for fear it will decrease the likelihood of their finding employment (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Consequently, it was all the more important to fairly represent the findings.

Because there were multiple voices in participants’ interviews—the participants’, my own, the theoretical framework, as well as the anticipated audience (Cortazzi, 1993, Lieblich et

al., 1998)—I gave much consideration to the way the participants’ voices were portrayed, the impact of my own voice, and to the influence of my theoretical framework. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that as qualitative researchers, we have multiple “I’s” and it is important not to fall into the voice of “narrative critic.” We need to avoid the task that fictional writers can engage in, that of criticism. We also need to avoid the impetus to create a simplistic “Hollywood plot,” or to create a scenario where characters are one-dimensional and everything works out in the end. Arvay (2002) highlights the importance of keeping in mind that things are always in process.

## Chapter Four

### Former Student Narratives

This chapter and the next (*Chapter Four* and *Chapter Five*) present the findings of my narrative inquiry. This chapter presents the former AEP student narratives and *Chapter Five* presents the cross-narrative analyses. The former student narratives and cross-narrative analyses, together, address my three research questions:

- (a) How do former students of AEPs perceive/describe their experiences in AEPs?
- (b) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs affected them at the time of attendance?
- (c) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs have contributed to their current life circumstances?

Before presenting each former student's narrative, I describe the AEP she attended. For example, I describe AEP#1 and then present the narratives of the two students who attended that program (Celia and Violet). The students who attended the same AEP attended at approximately the same time and had the same teacher (the teacher who took part in the teacher interview). As outlined in *Chapter Three*, the AEP descriptions are derived from the analysis of the teacher interviews and of documents describing the AEP. Because my document collection produced only a small number of documents, they were created predominantly from information revealed through the analysis of the teacher interviews. Consequently, and for ease of reading, unless there is a citation at the end of a sentence, the information in the descriptions of the AEPs comes from the teacher interviews. However, in cases of direct quotes from teacher interviews, a page number is used as a citation. Also, because most of the information in the AEP descriptions corresponds to the categories in the teacher interview protocol (i.e., student body and approaches

to relationship-building, student wellbeing, and student learning), I decided to use these categories as headings in the AEP descriptions.

All four AEP descriptions follow roughly the same structure and have similar headings. I describe the AEP's: student body, general characteristics (e.g., physical lay-out, hours of operation, mandate, and staff members), and approach to relationship-building; student wellbeing; and student learning. I then describe one or more categories of information that did not correspond to those in the teacher interview protocol, but were revealed in the analysis of the teacher interview and/or documents. And lastly, when research about the particular AEP has been conducted that is relevant to my study, the final section discusses this research. The description of each AEP does not represent the "truth" of the setting, but is presented as a way to juxtapose what are the teacher and official (in documents) perspectives on the program with the students' experiences.

My goal through the written narratives is for readers to hear AEP students speaking for themselves. Therefore, the vast majority of text in each narrative is taken directly from the former student's interviews. When content is from these interviews, page numbers are used as a citation, and when content is derived from the member checking procedure, it is cited as a personal communication. Each narrative follows a fairly similar structure: I include the former student's first impressions of the AEP; the structure of (e.g., physical set-up & attendance expectations), and activities and academics within the AEP; the former student's relationships with the teacher(s) and other staff and students; her personal growth while attending the AEP; her experiences after attending the AEP; and connections between her experiences at the AEP and her relationships, personal growth, and learning since leaving the AEP.

## **AEP#1**

***Student body.*** AEP#1 was established in 1971 in a small city on Vancouver Island, BC (“[AEP#1] History from 1971-2001,” 2012). It was for youth, ages 15 to 19 who were having difficulty with or had left the regular school system (Kent, n.d.). Among the students that attended the AEP, “... one commonality would be a little bit of feistiness: ‘We haven’t made it in the traditional school system.’ They were really ready to get engaged and excited” (p. 4). All of the students were experiencing challenges of some kind and most had experienced developmental trauma. They varied in terms intelligence, academic ability, and parental support; while some came from relatively intact families, others were living on the streets.

***General characteristics of the program.*** AEP#1’s mission was to provide an environment where students were listened to and were able to engage in their own learning process. Its educational focus was in three areas: wellbeing, academics, and life skills. Students elected to attend, they could not be “placed” in the program and they were admitted on a first-come-first-serve basis with a waitlist. Once enrolled, the staff worked to keep the students there for at least three years: “We thought that if they could stay with us for three years, we could really turn them around” (p. 10).

AEP#1 operated on a regular school schedule. It was funded by the local school district, which provided a building, maintenance, teachers, and educational materials, and by the Ministry of Social Services, which supplied the youth and family counsellors and life skills programming (“[AEP#1] History from 1971-201,” 2012). Neither funder dictated the structure and function of the AEP; rather, the staff decided how it operated. The program moved several times, but was always located in a house, with an academic room containing round tables, a living room with

couches, and a kitchen. Staff included a certified teacher, an art teacher, and two youth and family counsellors.

***Relationships.*** The staff engaged in a lot of relationship-building with the students at AEP#1. Although they worked to establish themselves as the leaders, there to guide the students, they shared their lives with them. For example, the program provided food and the staff and those students who chose to sat and ate their lunch together daily. In addition, one of the counsellors and teachers were husband and wife and, more than once, they had a student with nowhere to live, stay with them. The staff also collaborated with other adults in the students' lives, such as social workers and probation officers. The staff represented the student in his/her dealings with these individuals. In an effort to create stability in students' lives, the staff "... really ... went to bat for them. ... They needed to have some stability in order to learn" (pp. 7-8).

***Student wellbeing.*** At AEP#1, in an effort to address students' unique challenges, the staff did personalized goal-setting, using goal attainment scaling (GAS). The GAS process was initiated at the beginning of the academic year and involved one-on-one meetings between staff members and students where the staff member facilitated the student in defining areas of difficulty, both academically and personally, and defining goals that would useful in addressing these difficulties. The staff member refrained from judgement about the goals, rather, "... she [was] present only as a facilitator to help clarify, encourage, and, eventually, turn the goal into a meaningful communication with clear expectations that [were] behaviourally defined" (Moyer & de Rosenroll, 1984, p. 114). The staff member monitored the student's progress toward his/her goals and when necessary, helped him/her adjust them (Moyer & de Rosenroll, 1984).

***Student academic learning.*** Classes were taught to small groups of students and the students had a part in deciding the assignments/activities they would complete in order to meet



the course's requirements. "Our belief was that [they] left the regular school system for a good reason, so we're not going to repeat the same stuff. That means you've got to tell us what it is that you want to do to get an education. There's curriculum requirements, but how do you foresee doing that? ... It's their lives and they need to be highly consulted" (pp. 4-11).

***Life skills learning.*** In addition to academic activities, AEP#1 offered arts, outings, and multi-day trips. "We used to put a lot of our money into the arts because that was a really good medium to have in working with kids like that" (p. 7). Each day, the staff tried to bring the students out into the community at least once. Outings counted towards course credit and included going to the library, the Legion, and horseback riding. Semiannual multi-day trips, such as camping trips, allowed the staff and students to "... engage in each other's lives. ... [They were] rich learning experiences [where students] would have had to deal with some of [their] demons ... in a community" (p. 10).

***Student discipline.*** In addition to GAS, the staff used *committee* to address student behavioural issues. *Committee* took place when a student displayed unacceptable behaviour within the AEP. One appointed staff member and two peers of the student's choosing along with the student him/herself decided what changes s/he could make to his/her unacceptable behaviour during the coming week. The support people helped him/her to make these changes. After the week, the committee reported back to the other staff members about the student's progress. If the student was unable to make the changes three times, s/he was asked to leave the program.

***Staff role-sharing.*** Staff roles were not differentiated at AEP#1, "They couldn't compartmentalize themselves and say, 'I'm just a teacher' or 'I'm just a youth and family counsellor and I'll never go in the classroom'" (p. 9). At the beginning of each year, the teachers and counsellors reviewed the curriculum for program courses and, as a group, decided who

would teach what. Student issues that in other schools/programs would be addressed one-on-one with a counsellor were addressed within the larger community. For example, the program held weekly meetings, attended by staff and students where everyone shared how they had been, academically and personally over the past week.

### **Celia**

Celia began attending AEP#1 in 1977 and graduated from there five years later. She attended several high schools prior to attending AEP#1, the last of which, she said, “I lasted two weeks in ... and got kicked out. ... In elementary school and in high school ... I had lots of friends, but it wasn’t the greatest experience for me. ... [The] only thing I liked about high school was the friends, the social aspect. ... That and drama. ... I hated everything else. ... I wasn’t bullied or picked on. If anything, I was a bully because I was pretty tough and had to learn to be pretty tough at a young age” (pp. 1-2). “I started experimenting with drugs at a really young age ... [and] I’ve struggled with addiction since I was ten years-old. ... I [also] left home at 14 and never went back” (pp. 1-16).

Celia couldn’t recall exactly how she made contact with the AEP, she stated, “... but either I phoned or dropped in. I had to go on a waitlist because it was full, so it took a little while to get in. ... [But] from the moment I walked through the door [there], I knew that’s where I needed to be” (p. 2). “When I went to [AEP#1], I wasn’t living at home. I was living on the streets, but I went everyday because it was wonderful. It was my home” (p. 1). In regular high school, Celia said, “... mostly I was so high that nothing sunk in, but I wasn’t at [the AEP]. ... It just wasn’t acceptable. ... Not that I didn’t party after [program] hours. ... And that is about respect. Respecting the environment in the school, whereas I didn’t have any respect for high school whatsoever” (p. 5).

The inside of AEP#1, Celia shared, "... [was] comfort[able] and not set up like a school. The academic room had tables and chairs like a classroom, but no desks like a classroom [and there was] a living area set up like a living room. It was just comfortable and relaxing and inviting. If I had been up all night because I couldn't find a place to sleep, I could sleep on the couch. Nobody [would] judge me or tell me to get to class" (p. 8).

Celia said that the academic approach at AEP#1 worked well for her. She stated, "The way of teaching and learning [in school] didn't match for me until I went to [the AEP]. ... I loved going to [the AEP]. I loved learning. I went from F's to A's and B's. It's the way it was taught. It was taught by, and it's the way I learn, hands-on sort of stuff. So if we wanted to learn about Shakespeare, we'd go to a play. And I'd never been to plays. I'd never been exposed to the arts in any way" (pp. 1-3). "We were always doing stuff, going to plays, going to the art gallery. I did a ten-week course through the art gallery and that was for art 11. ... We also did photography. We had a darkroom. ... We'd do baseball, ... go to parks, go on hikes, go boating. Things that I would never, ever have been exposed to in my family or in my high school. ... [And the activities counted for] course credit, always" (p. 5-14). The staff also took the students on multi-day excursions, one of which was to Banff and on to Seattle. Celia said, "I would never have gotten that opportunity anywhere else" (p. 6).

"So it was all kinds of hands-on things until I was in the later grades, but [the staff] prepped me for that" (p. 3). "I was the only student in grade 12. ... I had to do my grade 12 English at [a local college] and I did my grade 12 history by correspondence. Because I was the only grade 12 student, they had to kind of work the program a little bit, but after me, a lot of [students] started graduating" (p. 1). By the time she finished at AEP#1, Celia said, "I was ready for college ... I was ready for more of a challenge. ... That bridging, going to [the college] to do

my English 12, that was good for me. ... I loved going to college. I loved it because I was ready. [The staff] prepared me for that. They prepared all the older students for it” (p. 19).

In her previous high schools, Celia said, “I certainly had no respect for teachers” (p. 1). “Because I was the bad kid in high school, I didn’t get treated well by teachers. I had a pretty horrible experience with teachers. The things they said and did were pretty ignorant. But [the staff at the AEP] were different. ... There was a teacher and counsellor team. ... They were both so cool. I admired them and I admired their lifestyle. The way they spoke to us [with] respect and [they] wanted the best for us. They were two people I trusted, where life on the street, you just didn’t trust anybody” (pp. 1-4).

The teacher, Celia said, “... had an amazing teaching style. She had such a gift. ... She had a sense of humour. She was closer to our age than not. She had some great life experiences. Her style just really fit with us. She was very patient and accepting” (p. 6). The counsellor, Celia said, “... was the only male that I ever had a really good relationship with. That I’d ever met that was gentle and loving, but in a really positive way. ... There was [also] an art teacher ... who was the most incredible woman. I adored her. Sometimes she’d have green hair. Back then, that was big thing. She was a funky dresser, lived in a funky place” (pp. 3-6). “There were other teachers [too]. I didn’t like all the teachers. There was ... [a] teacher that I didn’t like. We clashed big time” (p. 7). The staff, Celia said, “... seemed to get along really well with each other. You could tell when there was an oddball. Like a few oddballs ... didn’t work out. I knew that they didn’t because I was getting older, I was 18 by the time I graduated” (p. 7).

“The only time I ever got in trouble,” (p. 4) Celia said, the staff members at the AEP weren’t angry, “... they were disappointed in [me] and that was horrific for me, just horrific, especially because I loved [them] so much. ... They called my mom in. That was the only ...

[way] that they had to punish me. So they called my mom in and they met with her and then they apologized to me later. She was such a nut. And [they] said, 'We're sorry, we'll never do that to you again.' They weren't afraid to say they're sorry and 'Maybe it wasn't the best plan'" (pp. 4-5).

"It was the 70's, so things were really different back then. ... [The teacher and counsellor team] took me home every weekend. I stayed with them a lot. And they were like my parents. They took me in and parented me, not just taught me" (pp. 1-2). Celia said, "I have three older siblings that haven't done very well in life. Lots of mental health issues. I have a brother that committed suicide. ... It's because of [the AEP] and having [the teacher and counsellor team] that I survived and I'm different from them. Because they taught me what my parents didn't teach me. ... They had so much love and so much patience with me [even though] I was a brat. I was a serious, full-out bully. ... I've been so lucky" (pp. 2-3).

The biggest challenge Celia had while attending the AEP, she shared, "... was being in an abusive relationship. ... He was kicking [me] out and [I] was finding new places. ... My father would buy me a car to make sure I'd be going to school ... and then I'd go outside and he'd slashed all my tires and I couldn't go to school that day, ... but I'd get on the bus and I'd go anyway. ... My life was in crisis a lot until that [relationship] finally finished when I was 19. ... That was also a huge challenge for the [teacher and counsellor team] because I kept going back. ... The frustrations that [they] must have felt every time I went back to him. ... They had a lot to learn and I had a lot to learn and it was really grass roots kinds of stuff" (pp. 8-9).

The academic approach/activities within AEP#1, Celia said, helped to foster positive relationships among the students there. "All of the decision-making was collaborative. ... We were making our own guidelines, our own rules for how we wanted [things] to be, ... [which

created] a sense of community” (pp. 19-20). Also, the AEP offered, Celia stated, “... lots of life-skills classes about self-esteem and body image and ... [on the] the messages we give each other as women. ... As a student ... [at AEP#1], there’s not a lot of posturing ... [or] competitiveness. It just gets squashed. ... That’s where my relationship with women really started to grow” (pp. 9-11).

The students, Celia shared, “... were all in [a] very similar situation. We didn’t fit into the regular school system for whatever reason. None of us did, but we were all strong, independent [youth]. There were lots of good friendships formed” (p. 16). “Some of my very close and best friends were with me [at the AEP], but things change and people move on and not everybody was dedicated to graduating grade 12. There were only a few of us that did. ... Each year it would change and that was hard for me because you get really close and bonded in the program and then next year, some people would leave, new people would come. ...

“I didn’t necessarily like [all of the new students] because they were younger and they had to learn the ropes. So they were irritating and I wasn’t always nice, I just wasn’t. But for the most part, you learned quickly to get along with each other and to communicate and be accepting. I think that’s where I learned to be accepting. ... There were still [students] in the program you had to watch your back with, but that’s when I learned how to communicate and what communication skills were. We were taught that too” (pp. 4-7).

“In high school, I was a bully. ... That’s how my family was, so that’s how I survived in my family. Only the strong survived. ... I still carry guilt from high school. ... People feared me and I used that fear to get what I wanted” (p. 9). “That really wasn’t acceptable at [the AEP]. I had been a bully [there] a few times and that was addressed right away. ... I couldn’t use my fists anymore to deal with conflict. ... I had to learn a new way of being” (p. 9). When conflict arose

between students at AEP#1, Celia said, "... we'd have to do some kind of conflict resolution and work it out" (p. 7).

The staff helped Celia to use her strength of personality, she said, "... to get that bully inside of me to a more gentle place, a more understanding place. ... I was able to start to finally take that physical strength that I have and turn it into more of a spiritual thing" (p. 17). By the staff showing respect toward Celia, she trusted them to help her with her personal challenges. She described respect as "To be able to listen to somebody and not be judgemental. ... To value what people have to say" (p. 19). Celia stated, "I had never really trusted another adult in my life other than my grandmother, but that was at a really young age. ... Adults were not to be trusted and certainly not your friends" (p. 17). Celia also learned how to be resourceful while she was at the AEP. She said, "I'm much more able to ask for help[,] ... get supports ... and to gather resources ... than my peers from high school [are]" (p. 20).

Celia said the staff recognized students for their successes/accomplishments; for example, students received a certificate, signed by the staff, for each course they completed. At the AEP, Celia said, "... there were lots of rewarding moments for me. ... I just really enjoyed going to school" (p. 8). "I felt successful every day I went to the program. Just wanting to go to the program ... every day and not miss anything. ... Not wanting to skip. It speaks to how important that program was to me" (p. 16). Graduating was very meaningful for Celia. She shared, "My parents did show up to my graduation, but for me, it was having [the teacher and counsellor team] there that meant more to me than my own parents" (p. 8).

Since graduating from AEP#1, Celia said, "I've been very lucky to work in the [counselling] field. ... [I completed] a ten-month counsellor training program ... [and a number] of [other counselling] courses [which are] probably equivalent to a degree. ... I did so many

courses through [a local] college and addiction training. I did training on ritual abuse when ritual abuse was [a strong concern] in the late 80's, early 90's. ... I was working at some group homes, ... a residential training program for pregnant and parenting teens, ... [and] spent 20 years working ... as a youth and family counsellor [at AEP#1]" (pp. 10-12).

After working at the AEP for those two decades, Celia said, "I got burned out, really burned out, not with the [students], [but] with the politics [at the school district level and] not having [enough] funding" (p. 10). "[In 2007,] I was soul-searching ... [and decided to begin working] for the federal government. It [offers] a good pension plan and a good wage" (p. 10). Celia said she doesn't particularly enjoy this work. She stated, "[It's] a job. [Attending the AEP and then working there], all of that was my career and my life. ... I've grieved up until about a year ago for the [the AEP]" (pp. 10-12). Because it has been so difficult letting go, Celia shared, "I haven't gone back since I left, but I still see so many of [the students I worked with there]. So many I can't even count. ... There are so many [former students of AEP#1] out there that are like my [children]" (pp. 10-11).

"I've always been fortunate ... to have good friendships. I think it started to form in those years [I attended the AEP]. ... That's what you learn at [AEP#1]. You learn core beliefs about being [a community] and friendship. ... I'm [also] a good listener and I learned those listening skill from [the AEP]" (pp. 11-19). The most difficult things Celia has experienced since attending the AEP, she said, "... [were] my divorce from my husband, ... losing [my fourteen month-old daughter] and then six months later I lost my brother" (p. 11). "Drugs and alcohol ... certainly [have], at certain points in my life, been a real battle. Losing my daughter brought me back to addictions pretty quick. ... [These events, however,] certainly [have] contributed to who I as a person; my strengths and ability to raise my boys" (p. 11). Celia said she feels "pretty



fortunate” for the life she has had. She stated, “I mean, lots of losses, but I have two wonderful boys, my partner, and my family. Work” (p. 11).

“People have said, based on my life, ‘How did you make it?’ And [it’s] because of that program that I am the woman I am today. Because of people like [the teacher and counsellor team] and [the other] counsellors and teachers. And that’s what I gave back 20 years later because I knew what was important. [It] didn’t matter if I had a degree or how much school I had” (p. 16). She believes, as a youth, “... if you have one person in your life who believes in you and ... cares about you, that’s all you need. It may not be your mom or your dad” (p. 18).

From the time she began attending AEP#1, Celia’s “... learning [has] never stopped” (p. 12). Celia attributed her desire and ability to learn to her experiences as a student at the AEP. She said, “Everything about alternative [education] fit with my brain. ... It’s all about the way I learn. I didn’t learn well in a big classroom, sitting at desks, and learning from a book. ... I still don’t learn that way. It’s really hard for me. ... I’ll take a certain amount of information in and that’s about it. I have to take a break and go back to [it]. I’m more of a hands-on learner; ... I have to get out and do it. ... I think what [the AEP] showed me was to see what I needed and to try to adapt that in my life” (pp. 12-18).

### **Violet**

Violet attended AEP#1 for three years starting in 1980. “In the late ‘70’s,” Violet said, “my sister had been a student in the program and she introduced me to it” (p. 1). Violet decided to complete her senior year at a regular high school. She said, “I didn’t technically graduate from [the AEP]. I thought it might look bad on my resume. ... Now I see that it actually would have been a benefit for me to have stayed, but I was trying to keep all my options open” (p. 2).

Prior to attending the AEP, Violet said, “I always missed a lot of school. Not only did I have anxiety... [and] health issues, but there was always stuff going on at home. ... When I would go back to school, I would get in trouble for not being there and then I would not be motivated to go to school [at all]. ... By the time I hit grade eight, I had very low attendance. ... I had very few friends and very poor social skills. ... I was quite overweight and it made me feel very uncomfortable. ... I just didn’t fit in. ... I was afraid of what I was going to say and how [the other students] would treat me” (p. 3).

“I also remember getting into quite a bit of trouble because I actually picked things up quite easily, although I didn’t think that at the time. I thought I was pretty stupid because I wasn’t passing anything. ... It was twice this happened, that I happened to come on a day where there was a test. Having not been to class forever and not prepared or anything, I still managed to pass because for me, it was common sense stuff. Both times, I got accused of cheating, ... so that further kept me from wanting to go to school. ... I still managed to pass [grade eight]. I shouldn’t have ... [because] I failed all my courses, but they pushed me through. ... [In grade nine], I started in a new school and it was a repeat of the same. By several months in, I dropped out” (p. 3). The following year, Violet again tried attending high school at a new school “... and made it a month” (p. 3) before she dropped out. It was then she initiated contact with and started attending AEP#1.

“I had some history [with the AEP],” Violet said, “having seen my sister go through and her very positive experience. ... They used to pay the students money to teach skills to younger people, so a few of them took a photography class that I went to. ... [Also,] my sister did a project [when she was at the AEP] ... and I helped to do some transcribing for it. It was about her experiences being in a regular school and how it didn’t work and then she went to this new

program and it did work. [Through my involvement with these projects,] I ... [knew] that's what I wanted. ... I had to self-advocate to get in because people didn't really know about it or had misconceptions about it. I had to tell them about it because you had to have a referral and it was a push. Going to my former counsellor at the high school and trying to get her to sign the forms, she was a no-go at first, but I did convince her eventually. I just knew what was working and what [wasn't]. ...

“The first thing I remember [as a student at the AEP], was having a meeting with some of the teaching staff ... [and the counsellor] asked me about my goals. I felt comfortable enough to share that my goal was to actually come to school and not skip out. Up until then, I had always pretended that I was away because I was sick. ... To me, it was kind of a risk to do that and I wasn't judged for it, he just said, ‘That's great, good goal. How are we going to help you with that?’ ... That's when I thought, ‘This place is totally different’” (pp. 3-8). “We could swear, and it didn't matter what clothes we wore, whether our hair was done a certain way. It didn't matter. You could just be whoever you were. ... So my attendance went up and up, to where they couldn't keep me from there. That was my safe place” (pp. 5-7).

“[The AEP] was in a house ... and it was very much like a home. ... It was made to make people feel comfortable. There [were] sofas [and] a kitchen. ... There were all those different bedrooms [that] were used for small groups. ... The downstairs was a pit of smokers. ... That's where everyone hung out all day and the staff would come down and try to round us up again to class” (p. 4).

Violet said. “... [the staff at the AEP] would take us out for field trips quite a bit, whether it was hiking around [a local] lake or going to art shows. ... We used to have so much fun ... [and] the community-building was very important. ... We would deliver newspapers as groups.

... We'd [also] have a camping trip at the beginning of every year [and] then the final trip would be something more elaborate. ... We worked together to raise money to be able to do it" (pp. 6-9). "There was [also] a lot of us standing together and advocating for things. We went to peace marches and we would go to the school district and fight for our funding together. ... We were doing it together, but it was also very empowering because ... [it] gave us agency around what was happening. ... That we're not just victims, [but] that we have some capacity to change things" (pp. 8-22). Violet said these types of advocacy activities also taught the students that, "[You're not] in that position because of [your] personal failure. ... There's all these other factors going on in the system ... and that's not your fault" (p. 9).

Violet said the approach to academics at AEP#1 "... was very flexible. ... We would come in at different times; we didn't all come in at the same time. ... And a huge amount of energy was put into giving us ownership over [the program]" (pp. 4-26). "The students used to negotiate for grades, so if you came to 50 hours [of] the groups on whatever, then you could get social studies, but if you did that and went to interview a soldier, you could get a B. If you wrote a report, you could get a B+. And if you then brought him in and hosted something with the group, you could get an A" (p. 26).

Courses were taught in small classes at AEP#1; however, Violet said, "The teacher was teaching, but she didn't necessarily have a set ... lesson plan. She'd be willing to teach to the moment. Wherever we were going, she'd follow us. ... If something really interested me and we wanted to go off on a tangent, we could go off on a tangent and explore that. That worked and we got to talk things through. ... So we probably didn't cover all of the curriculum, ... but what we did cover, we really learned about. I wouldn't have remembered the other stuff anyways. ... [It was] more like a Master's level. ...

“I was learning things I was actually interested in learning and not just being assigned things that had no relevance to me. ... So we might have to take socials, but then we would be encouraged as a group, ‘Well, how do we want to do this? We have to learn these skills, well, how can we do it?’ We used to negotiate different ways of learning things. [For example], I remember, in socials, that we decided that we would each research our own neighbourhoods and then take people to our childhood neighbourhoods and tell them the important things that we knew about the history of it ... The important things that we knew just because we’d grown up there. ... We’d show off our neighbourhoods to our friends, which was a pretty interesting way of doing it” (p. 5).

“We used to do a lot of groups, like creative writing. They were awesome. We made books, .... creative writing books ... [that were] a combination of poetry and short stories. ... I did a lot of writing. I was a writer. ... I remember writing [this one] right after doing [a] peer helping group” (pp. 4-26):

What would you do if I told you a secret? What would you do? How would you act or react? Would you laugh and shrug it off? What would you do if I opened myself to you? If I took off my protecting layers and let you see me? Me as no one has ever seen me before. The whole me, not just one polished facet, not one small side. If you could see me (if I let you), the real me, would you be shocked? Would you turn away in disgust? What would you think of me afterwards? If I told you of my secret self, would you, could you just hold me? Tell me I’m okay? Let me know it’s all right to be me? (p. 15).

Violet experienced a couple of challenges with the academic model at the AEP. She said, “It’s hard to do work on a self-paced program where there’s always a choice, but at the same time, compare that to the fact that I wasn’t doing anything when I wasn’t in that situation. It was

challenging, but it still worked. ... [In addition, at the AEP], there was a lot of stuff I didn't learn that other students in other high schools would learn, like whether it was higher level math, or biology, or whatever. I did end up taking those things later [though]" (pp. 7-26).

The AEP had a unique approach to dealing with students' challenging behaviours. Violet said, "We used to have this thing called *committee*. ... If there was something that needed to be addressed, ... [for example,] if your attendance wasn't up to speed, ... we would have *committee*. And *committee* would have a couple staff members and whoever you chose from your group of friends. ... Your friends, this team, would be there to support you through *committee*. ... The rules became very strict when you were on *committee*. *First committee*, you couldn't be late, you couldn't be away unless you had a good reason and that lasted for two weeks. ... If you blew that, you got on *second committee* and *second committee* was stricter. And if you blew that, you're on *third committee* and *third committee* was even stricter, and then you're out. But in the meantime, it wasn't 'us and them,' it was, 'How can we help you to make it through this and it's up to you to then do it?'" (p. 10).

"All those things helped me realize that nobody was making me do this, but my education was for me. ... That was pretty special ... [because] before then, it was other people trying to force it on me. ... There were edges, it wasn't like we could just do anything, but it was definitely based around our needs, rather than some other system's needs" (p. 6).

"Although I did graduate and that was wonderful and it did really help me, it wasn't the main focus of what I was there for. I learned to be a stronger person. The academic part was the bonus that came because of that. But, still, academically I was happy" (p. 26). "A really high point was feeling academic success after feeling so stupid. I mean [in my previous high school],

they had me in the resource room because I didn't know my times tables. ... And so, to move from that to feeling successful ... was a really powerful thing.

“They really celebrated any of those successes. We would get certificates for every course we passed and be celebrated for it and I pasted them all up on my wall at home. It meant a lot to me; to feel that maybe I'm not so stupid after all. Part of me going to [regular high school for my senior year] was because I felt so successful in that small setting that I started to think, ‘Yeah, but this is a small pool’ [and] I wanted to see how [I'd] compare in a larger group. I ended up going on the honour role. That was something I was very proud of, but there's no way that would have happened without the supports from [AEP#1]” (p. 12).

“There were two counsellors and two teachers [at the AEP]” (p. 4). Violet said, “They were great staff, ... very, very respectful and warm. ... There wasn't really a leader. ... There was no power hierarchy there. ... Even the teachers had counselling backgrounds, so there was lots and lots of counselling going on all the time. ... There was so little difference between the roles of the different teachers and counsellors. ... It [was] such a holistic way that it is hard to pull any one part of it out. ... They all brought different skills and different interests and were willing to share them. They had different connections to people and resources from the community. ... And they liked each other so much. You could just tell they liked each other. ... It was like they were just really good friends and we were along for the ride. ... They really modelled what healthy community is like, which I hadn't seen modelled before at all, so that was really powerful” (pp. 4-19).

“It was the first time I felt I had safe adults that respected me and didn't want something out of me ... and weren't there to judge me or punish me. It was my first positive experience really, other than my grandparents, of being treated well by adults. ... The boundaries in those

days were a little soft. They would take kids home ... and [use] their personal vehicles to drive us around. ... You just don't do those things anymore, but at the same time, it was also good ... [because] we had people that would care enough to do those sorts of things" (pp. 5-6).

Violet said that the teacher she remembers most clearly at the AEP "... was very relationship-based, that's just who she was. ... She didn't get ruffled. She didn't have an ego that needed to be soothed or anything. She was just very gentle and caring and non-judgemental. ... It was ... that kind of unconditional positive regard that even when she didn't know me, that acceptance was there. ... [She showed] genuine respect and care and acceptance, wherever I was, whatever I brought. ... And it was not at all like she was on a different level than I was. Although she had experiences that she was happy to share, that would help us. ... Whenever [I'd] get the question, 'Who is your role model?' or 'Who is your favourite teacher?' that's her. I had built my career [after her]. I followed [her] model" (p. 10-19). Violet said her connection with this teacher gave her "... confidence that people are coming from a good place," (p. 29) which has helped her to keep her relationships healthy.

There were 14 students when the AEP first opened, Violet said, "... and it went up to 20 something when I was there. ... There was a huge sense of belonging [at the AEP]. That was especially important to me because I'd never felt that sense of belonging before. ... From always being an outsider to being in a group where I was welcome, I formed very strong bonds with other students as well as the staff. ... Because it was such a small group you got to know everyone very well. I had a very powerful friendship group.

"I remember finding it difficult after I left because I had become quite accustomed to all of these supports around me and coming in a year later and not recognizing anybody. Their job wasn't to take care of me anymore, they had to take care of the [students] that they had. [Only]



some staff had changed, but most of the students had changed. And just feeling like being somewhere where I felt so much a part of things, to feeling like an outsider again, that was difficult” (pp. 5-20).

“[The AEP] attract[ed] people with mental health issues and some drug and addiction issues. That was, for me challenging because I was very, very close to some people that had mental health issues. My best friend had what they would probably diagnose now as bipolar, so she would be the most fun person in the entire world and then she would be talking suicide. As a caretaker-type, I’d go up and down with her. There was another girl who had schizophrenia [and it was the] same kind of thing, I was trying to take care of her. ... [The schizophrenia] came on as she was there and seeing this person go crazy in front of me was scary” (p. 7).

Violet said that the staff at AEP#1 helped to identify and to foster her strengths: “[I] went on to be told I had leadership skills. I became a leader within the community, which was pretty astonishing given where I came from. ... peer helping... [or] peer counselling... was one of my most important courses. ... [It] became really important to me. ... Learning listening or counselling skills really helped with my anxiety. Up until then, I’d always been worried about what I was going to say; constantly fretting about what I was going to say. This taught me how to listen and how to phrase things, so it took away a lot of that anxiety” (p. 5). “It was, ‘Here are some key things you can say and how you can say them and then you just listen to the other person.’ That gave me [the tools] to bring that anxiety down—my social anxiety. In a small group” (p. 29). “I remember starting to feel the change of, ‘I’m not just an observer here’” (p. 8).

“We [also] used to have con res, ... conflict resolution, ... where with the support of a staff member, you learned to work it out with the other student, in whatever way that was. Whether it’s just getting to place where you’re saying, ‘Okay, we’re not going to agree, but I still

respect you and I'll still keep you safe. I'm not going to do anything to cause you grief here.' Or, actually working it out. ... It was something that was a real gift [for me] and it continues to be because conflict is hard" (p. 30).

"[Communication] became a real strength of mine because it was a natural strength that was given [voice]. ... It became quite natural for me" (p. 23). "I didn't know these things were strengths before that. [The staff] helped bring them out. ... The staff certainly made me feel they were valued, as they did other people, not just me" (p. 24). Having her strengths given voice to and appreciated was important for Violet, because before then, she said, "I saw myself as a complete loser. I was bottom of the [barrel]" (p. 24).

Violet said a large number of the students that attended AEP#1 with her "... are still connected; [for example], my sister-in-law is one of the students I went to school with. ... [Another of the former students and I] are co-moderators of a young grandparents support group ... [and] my best friend [from the AEP] is also a young grandmother and our kids ended up being friends and our grandchildren ended up being friends" (p. 12). "The supports that I gained in those days, including the people I'm still involved with right now make me a stronger person" (p. 16). "My reunion [for the high school I graduated from] is coming up, and I have no interest because I didn't have that bond. Unfortunately, [the students I attended the AEP with] are not all still around. It was a really high-risk group; ... [some] went into the sex trade ... [and] some of them have passed on since then" (pp. 12-20).

The AEP prepared Violet for college. She said, "I learned how to learn things deeply, rather than just surface learning. ... I didn't learn just how to repeat or regurgitate. ... It [was] about, 'Do I believe this? Does this work for me?' ... I remember when I was first in college, ... straight out of high school, ... and people would put up their hands ... and they would answer in

such a certain way; whereas I just wanted to have a conversation. And that's what the instructors wanted. They wanted this sort of thinking. That's what I learned to do at [the AEP]" (p. 21-26).

"Also, when I was quite young still, when I was 20, I joined a young mothers' group at a local community centre. ... Soon after I started, the people who were running it asked if I would take it over because they were leaving, which was a shock to me because it wasn't just for young moms. ... But because of the skills I'd developed around active listening and everything in the program, they knew that I had the skills to run a group even though I was very young. ... I was able to manage that quite well and that was one of the best things for me career-wise as well. I went on to do a lot of big-organizing types of things, but that was because of the experiences I'd had [at the AEP]. ... And it wasn't that long [before] I was the head of a personnel committee of the association that ran the parenting group and I was hiring and organizing community festivals" (p. 23).

Violet also learned self-advocacy skills at the AEP. The staff didn't actively teach the students these skills, she said, "... as much as invited us to join in it, so more modelled it. ... I was a young mom [and] getting into low-cost housing was challenging, but I knew how to do it. ... I knew how to [access] resources better. Working within the system for my benefit and for my family's benefit" (pp. 22-23). Her experiences at the AEP also influenced how Violet was as a parent. She said, "[The staff] used to teach us parent effectiveness training, PET it was called. ... Most of us didn't have kids, but those sorts of skills ... helped me to be a better parent [later on]. ... I was able to change my parenting, rather than follow the way I had been parented. I was able to learn different ways of being in the world" (pp. 16-29). Her two daughters, Violet said, "... are amazing, strong, powerful women. ... My daughter's an incredible mother, my

granddaughter's so healthy and strong and powerful. ... [My family is] really, really close, all of us. And they give me so much credit and I'm so proud of that" (p. 30).

Violet has a Master's in counselling, has worked as an alternative education teacher, and is now principal of AEP#1. Attending AEP#1, Violet said, "... really impacted my sense of purpose. I very much feel a sense of purpose [now], ... know[ing] that [the AEP will] help take other people in a different trajectory than they would have gone on otherwise. ... When I go and [see the students] graduate, I see their transformations and know that [I was] a part of that. ... I'm still a part of something that's very, very powerful and has been for a long time. ... I've been able to be a part of something I know worked so well for me, worked so well for my daughter [who later attended the AEP herself], and [for] so many of my friends" (p. 16). The AEP, Violet said, "... [is] getting better and stronger [and I'm] pretty proud of that. I'm proud of a lot of things. ... I'm proud of myself, that I've done what I wanted to do. ... I couldn't look forward and see that that was all going to happen, but I can look [back] and see, 'Yeah, that did happen!'" (p. 30).

Being at the AEP, Violet said, "... absolutely changed my life experience. ... I can't understate how important that was for me then. I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have that experience then. ... [Before the AEP, I] certainly wasn't heading toward anything positive and didn't believe I was going to, for the most part" (pp. 8-24). "[I was an] incredibly timid person [when I] went into that program ... [and] I know that it was during that time that I gained the self-confidence that I have now. ... I have a strong belief in my own ability to do what I want to do. I have been able to do everything that I've wanted to do and everything I've set my mind to, I've been able to accomplish and I have faith that that will be the case in the future as well" (p. 25).

## **AEP#2**

AEP#2 was formerly AEP#1 (see Figure 1, p. 78), and Violet, the principal at AEP#2, was a former student of AEP#1.

***Student body.*** AEP#2 was located in a small city in BC, Canada, and served up to 24 youth between the ages of 15 and 19. The program was open between 9:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. from Monday to Thursday and 9:30 to 12:30 p.m. on Friday. The youth attending the AEP had not found success in regular schools for a variety of reasons. Because of their past school absences, most had gaps in their learning. “They all [had] a sense of humour and they [were] kind and caring. They want[ed] a place where they feel they belong” (p. 2). Many of the students struggled with learning disabilities, anxiety and/or other mental health issues, past trauma, substance use, and/or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Also, many either lived in foster care or on their own and worked part- or full-time. Students came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, with parents who were unemployed to others who were upper middle class.

***General characteristics of the program.*** AEP#2’s mission was to provide a safe place where students could engage in different learning opportunities, including how to be in the world, and live up to their full potential. The program offered academics, counselling, and life skills learning to students. It was housed in an office space and contained an administrative office; a large academic room with desks, tables, and computers; a large kitchen; two counselling rooms; two bathrooms, one with a shower; and a large lounge with several couches and comfortable chairs (personal observation, April 25, 2013). Staff included a principal who was in charge of student discipline, a certified teacher, an education assistant, and two youth and family counsellors.

**Relationships.** Creating a community by building healthy relationships between staff and students and among students was a focus at AEP#2. The second week of each year was dedicated to group activities, such as *icebreakers* and *get-to-know-yous*, designed to create a sense of community and safety among staff and students (“[AEP#2]: Social and Personal Responsibility Curriculum,” 2011). Also, the AEP provided food and the staff and students (who elected to) ate lunch together every day. In a further effort to enhance students’ “... sense of belonging to the group” (“[AEP#2]: Social and Personal Responsibility Curriculum,” 2011), the AEP did *check-in* on Monday mornings and *check-out* on Thursday afternoons (personal observation, April 25, 2013; personal observation, November 4, 2013).

During these two activities, the staff and students sat in a circle in the lounge and with the facilitation of a counsellor, took turns talking (personal observation, April 25, 2013; personal observation, November 4, 2013). *Check-in* involved the staff describing the agenda for the coming week and the students sharing highlights from their weekend and their thoughts about the agenda (personal observation, November 4, 2013). *Check-out* was an opportunity for the staff to share with the students activities planned for the following week and concerns that had arisen during the week (personal observation, April 25, 2013). Students shared their thoughts about different aspects of the program and what they were looking forward to in coming week(s), both personally and in the AEP (personal observation, April 25, 2013).

Once a week, in the afternoon, the staff and students went on an outing. The outing was optional, but the program was closed at that time, so students had to leave if they chose not to go. At the beginning of each school year, the staff asked the students to provide anonymous suggestions for outings and the staff incorporated some of their ideas into the outings’ schedule. Typically, outings included going to the gym, kayaking, hiking, and barbeques. They also

included "... one academic-focused out-trip a month" (p. 8) such as going to the library, the museum, or watching the salmon spawn at a local stream. Although these activities were sometimes educational, their main purpose was to create a sense of community between and belonging in the students. They also gave the students "... an opportunity for playing and in playing, they're learning" (p. 10).

***Student wellbeing.*** When a new student arrived at AEP#2, s/he was assigned a counsellor and was expected to meet with her weekly. The counsellors played three main roles with students. First, they were available to students when they needed to talk about challenges they were facing; about what was happening for them either in the past or currently. Second, they connected students to community resources such as drug and alcohol counsellors and outreach workers. And third, the counsellors facilitated optional student workshops in the AEP, such as on body image, personal values, and dealing with anxiety ("[AEP#2]: Social and Personal Responsibility Curriculum," 2011).

The program staff sought to understand the students' interests and strengths "... and then give them those opportunities, like cooking class, baking,... [or] art ... where they [could] do things they love[d] to do ... [or] really shine" (p. 10). Staff members were able to identify students' interests and strengths by getting to know the students. Simply asking the students what they were good at wasn't effective because most of the students didn't know about their strengths until they were given an opportunity in the program to do something they were good at. Once the staff members identified a strength of a student, as much as possible, they tried to find and encourage the student to participate in programming that allowed him/her to use this strength.

***Student academic learning.*** During a typical day at AEP#2, students would have academics first thing. If they weren't able to concentrate on academics, they could do another quiet activity, like an art project. After the community lunch, the students chose between academics or another activity such as baking or art and the final block of the day was academics. The academic model at AEP#2 was self-paced and individualized. During academic blocks, the students could work on whatever subject/area they chose to and "... because they [were] all in different places," (p. 9) instruction was one-on-one. During the first week of the school year, each student attended a meeting with his/her teacher and counsellor to set up an individual program plan. The program plan included the courses that that the student needed and some that she wanted to take and on a schedule that allowed him/her to graduate within a specific timeframe.

Students were given a year to complete each course, but if that became unfeasible, they were allowed more time. Students that graduated from AEP#2 either did the full dogwood or an adult grad, which had fewer requirements. Although there were some quizzes and provincial exams, students were evaluated either by the teacher or through self-evaluation on their writing assignments and projects. For all forms of evaluation, the teacher provided and shared with the students a marking rubric.

***Life skills learning.*** For the second block of the day, which started at 10:30, the program staff held a workshop or had a guest speaker come in. Workshop and guest speaker topics included, for example, bullying, conflict resolution, dating violence, video awareness, learning styles, goal-setting, budgeting, and job skills ("[AEP#2]: Social and Personal Responsibility Curriculum," 2011). The goal of these activities was to teach the students life skills or "... how to be in the world" (p. 3). Although most of the workshop and guest speaker events were



optional, each week, there was one that was all-inclusive, that the teacher said, the students were "... meant to attend" (p. 7).

The staff worked to incorporate students' achievements into their life skills learning. "The planning 10 and the grad transition delivery [was] done through the life skills programming. [The teacher] work[ed] with the counsellors to outline all the PLOs for planning 10 and [they] talk[ed] about what groups would meet the PLOs and then they deliver[ed] those PLOs throughout the year and the [students had] to attend those groups and they ultimately [got] a course for it. [Their] goal [was] to give the [students] credit for what they [were] doing as much as possible" (p. 9).

### **Molly**

Molly attended the same school, a Christian private school from grade one to grade ten. In grade ten, "... something really bad happened with a guy" (p. 1) whom she attended school with. After that, Molly said, "Things [weren't] going well at school" (p. 2). She started drinking on her own and isolating herself. She stated, "And then it's hard to learn when you're isolating yourself and there's all these kids who you don't talk to" (p. 2). Molly no longer felt comfortable there and decided to leave. She tried attending a regular high school for a short time, but found it difficult to learn in that environment. She said, "The classroom was too big [and the teacher] couldn't focus on you. If I asked for help, he couldn't help me. ...

"I was still in contact with my counsellor [from the private school] because [when I was still attending there,] after everything bad happened, I would go and see the counsellor lots and talk to her ... I was kind of desperate [at this point]," (pp. 1-2) so the counsellor suggested looking into AEP#2. "I [then] had an interview with [the principal at AEP#2 who] said, 'I think

this is good for you” (p. 1). Molly began attending AEP#2 and three years later, in 2012, she graduated from it.

When she first started at AEP#2, Molly said, “I was really shy, but I remember everybody being super welcoming with big smiles on their faces, [which] was nice because I wasn’t used to that. ... I was still really shy at first, but it didn’t take me long to warm up to everybody” (pp. 2-3). The AEP was “totally different” (p. 3) than the previous schools Molly attended. She stated, “Because it was so small, [you couldn’t] isolate yourself. It’s impossible. ... Everybody knows each other. ... It was hard sometimes being in such a small space, ... [but] it was [also] good because somebody would notice that something was wrong and talk to me” (pp. 2-9).

“[The AEP] was [also] a lot more relaxed and accepting” (p. 3) than her previous schools, where, Molly said, “[I’d] get in trouble for a lot of things I do. At [the AEP], they’re respectful and teach you manners, but they’re just nicer about it” (p. 3). “We also got to show up late at the AEP. You couldn’t do that at my other schools or you’d miss your class. That was nice because lots of [the students there] had issues and couldn’t always make it on time” (Molly, personal communication, September 8, 2014).

“[It] was more like a home-life [than my previous schools], except you did your school work there too” (p. 3). The inside of the AEP, Molly said, “... was really cosy, big kitchen, bathrooms with a shower if you wanted. ... And then there was the academic room, which was the serious, quiet room; the room that we did the therapy [classes] in, with all the couches; and the office” (p. 7). A typical day at AEP#2 started with students eating breakfast and having a coffee. Molly said, “And then [on Mondays], we had *check-in* [where] we told everybody about our weekends. Then we [would] have first class, so you’d just pick whatever you wanted to work

on. I did painting a lot. I discovered that I really like painting, which I had no idea [about] at my other schools because I never really tried it out. I really like painting. It was a way of expressing my feelings” (p. 4). “I painted quotes sometimes ... [One time,] I made up my own quote; ... it was ‘Now, as you make your way through this world, what story will you choose?’” (p. 8).

At AEP#2, students went on “... a field trip every Wednesday” (p. 5) and they had the option to participate in a range of different group classes. Molly said, “We went to ... [the] butterfly gardens, rock-climbing, swimming, [and] canoeing. ... There were [also] lots of classes and activities you could do ... [including] different arts, ... dancing classes, [and] a cooking class. ... They were fun and [I] could find out what I really like, what I’m interested in” (pp. 3-5). In addition to art, Molly discovered that she really liked, “... dancing, swimming, [and] hiking” (p. 4). Molly is Christian and one thing she wishes the AEP offered that they didn’t was “... an optional bible study [group]” (p. 22).

Although the field trips were compulsory, Molly stated, “On Wednesdays, if you didn’t want to go on a field trip and you needed a job, you could go job hunting. [The art teacher] took us job hunting. [The staff] helped us with cover letters and resumes too” (p. 7). “They would [also] help you find what college you wanted to go to and took us on tours to [a local college] sometimes” (p. 17). Taking part in activities such as these where the staff “... would point you into the right direction” Molly said, “... gave me courage to do the things I needed to do to move forward” (pp. 15-16).

The academic model at AEP#2 was self-paced. When she first started at the program, Molly sat down with the academic teacher and together they figured out what she needed to complete in order to graduate. Molly said, “I got there and just remember starting my school work because I was behind” (p. 3). Molly said AEP#2’s academic model worked well and was

motivating for her. She stated, “I liked how [the AEP] was small and I could be one-on-one with the teachers. ... I could choose [whether or not] to do [work and the teacher] helped me with everything” (pp. 4-9).

The staff at the AEP, Molly said, “... were really good role models ... [and] I’d aspire to be like any of them” (p. 13). Molly had an “... art teacher [who was] really inspiring [and a] main academic teacher” (p. 5). There was also, Molly said, “... an assistant for [the academic teacher who] ... came two days a week. ... She would mostly help with math ... [because the teacher] can’t help everyone at once” (p. 6). “[And] if it wasn’t for [the art teacher], I probably wouldn’t be so creative” (p. 5). The art teacher had the students choose a card at her desk each day. It would say something like “creativity” and the student would then try “... to be creative [that day] somehow” (p. 5). The art teacher was “... somebody you could have fun with and talk to. ... Everyone liked to joke around with [her]” (p. 14).

The academic teacher, Molly said, “... was like a second mom to me. I didn’t really have a mom because she passed away when I was a kid. ... [This teacher was] really nice and serious, but she liked to laugh a lot. ... She was encouraging too; a lot of [the students would say], ‘I can’t do this, I’m so stupid’ and [the teacher] would always reassure [us] that we’re smart, we can do it. ... [She was also] really accepting of you. You could just be yourself. I could just be myself around anyone” (pp. 5-20). Molly discovered at AEP#2 that writing was a strength of hers. She said, “I’ve always kind of liked writing, but then [the teacher and the EA] told me that I was really good at it” (p. 16).

The students at the AEP, Molly said, “... all had this really big urge to graduate. None of us probably thought we were gonna be in there, so we all just wanted to graduate. And [the teacher] makes it pretty easy for us. I mean not easy, but she helped us out a lot” (p. 18). This

teacher, Molly shared, "... [would] always do my academics with me" (p. 5). At that time in her life, Molly said, "Everything was really hard for me most of the time, but it was fine because [the teacher] helped me through. ... Even though it's two years [since I attended AEP#2, the teacher] is still there for me. I can go there and [say], 'I've got this going on' and she'll help me or [just] talk to me" (pp. 5-14).

The AEP offered "... therapy classes [with] different themes ... and [individual] counselling sessions" (pp. 3-5). Molly said, "You could do [the therapy classes] if you wanted to and only a few students would do them. I would always go to them because it was really helpful. ... One time, we made key chains with [our] values [written on them]" (p. 5). And in another class, Molly explained, "... [the counsellor] made us say things that we liked about each other, so we did that and that made relationships better" (p. 15). The counsellor that facilitated the therapy classes Molly said was "really calming" (p. 5). She taught the students techniques to calm themselves down when they were experiencing anxiety, "... having a panic attack or something" (p. 5) such as "... counting backwards from ten to one or 100 to one" (p. 20).

Molly said, "I [also] had my own personal counsellor. ... At first I didn't think I would like her because she was different from everyone else. But she turned out to be really close to me, she was probably the 'funnest' person there. ... If I was going through a hard time, I could see [my] counsellor and talk to her. ... I just remember talking to her and that really helped me a lot. ... One time, I was having a really hard time and I stormed out of the school and I was like, 'I can't do this anymore!' And my counsellor came and calmed me down far away from the school. I had walked down the street. That was really nice. [It] wouldn't have happened at a normal school" (pp. 3-6).

Her personal counsellor, Molly said, helped her learn to trust by providing the space for her to “just open up” (p. 14) and the counselling classes, she said, taught her “... how to guard my heart. ... I had no trust until I went to [the AEP]. [The counsellors] helped me to build my trust back. Now I have back a balance between trusting people ... [and staying] safe. Before, I didn’t let anyone [in] or I would and it would be bad” (p. 14). The counselling classes, Molly said, “... [also] taught me to relax a little bit. [That] you don’t have to stress out about relationships” (p. 19).

Molly said that it was difficult for her to find her place among the various cliques at the AEP. She stated, “There were friends and then some people weren’t friends with each other. [You] had to pick your group of friends, but I’m not that kind of person, I’m friends with everybody. [Different cliques] would hang out at [different] place[s] at lunch and I didn’t want to be alone, so I’d have to pick people. That was tough” (p. 2). “I was friends with more people than [other students were, but] ... there’s still those people that you click with nicely ... [and] some ‘weirded’ me out” (p. 6).

Although the student body was very heterogeneous, there was a bond between the students at AEP#2. Molly said, “A lot of the [students] said they couldn’t imagine being friends with some of the [other students] that went there because we’re all so [diverse], but we just all got along. I guess because we’ve all been through something that [brought us] to the same place. It bonded us all together” (p. 4). “Students were always encouraging each other too. Like, ‘Oh, are you done your math? Congrats!’ Or we would help each other if we were doing the same thing” (p. 16). These and other experiences at AEP#2, Molly said, “... [made me realize] that I was a people person, that was one of my strengths. ... I was so shy before I went [there], so I didn’t know that about myself” (p. 16). Something Molly found “really hard” was that “... all of

the [students] smoked there” (p. 3). She said, “I smoked before I got there, but I definitely started smoking more when I got there” (Molly, personal communication, September 8, 2014).

Molly went into treatment for substance abuse while she was attending AEP#2. She stated, “I went to a detox centre ... for ten days ... to quit drugs and alcohol. ... I got really addicted to ecstasy. ... I told somebody [at the AEP], ‘I don’t want to do this anymore’ ... and [my counsellor] recommended [the detox centre] to me” (p. 3). “It was my choice [to attend the centre]. It probably wouldn’t have worked if it wasn’t a choice” (p. 8). Molly also quit smoking while she was at the detox centre and when she returned to the AEP, she encouraged other students to also quit smoking. She said, “I tried to encourage [the other students]. ... I started a sheet at the school [for students to record] how many days [they could] go without smoking. ... That was really cool because all of my teachers were really proud of me” (p. 3).

In 2012, one course shy of graduating high school, Molly moved to another city for seven months. She said, “I moved to Calgary with my boyfriend who became really abusive shortly after” (Molly, personal communication, September 8, 2014). The skills the staff at the AEP taught students about “... how get a job and how to budget,” Molly said, “helped me in Calgary” (p. 21). “[The staff] also really helped me to empower myself to be a woman ... [and that] really helped me get through that [relationship]” (p. 10). When Molly returned home, she went back to the AEP, for one semester, to complete her outstanding course.

Molly said she believes that without AEP#2, she wouldn’t have completed high school. She explained, “I probably wouldn’t have graduated if I didn’t go to [the AEP] because, [without it], I probably would have never gone back to school [after] everything that happened [at my previous schools]. [The AEP] was totally different. You [had] the encouragement [and] just ... everything you needed there” (p. 15). Molly saw herself transform while attending AEP#2. She

said, “When I first went there, I was kind of bad. I was really heavily into partying and drinking and drugs. ... [The staff at the AEP] really helped me become who I am. [They] helped me forget about all that bad stuff. ... I became confident. ... I was never confident until I went to [the AEP]. ... I came there in pretty bad shape and ... left [feeling] really good” (pp. 8-15).

When she returned from Calgary, in addition to attending the AEP, Molly said, “I got a job at a hotel housekeeping. It [was] hard, I couldn’t keep it going because it wrecked my knees” (p. 10). After that, she worked at an ice-cream shop. “And now,” she said, “I [haven’t had] a job for a really long time. I never really decided what I wanted to take at school. I thought I wanted to do early childhood [education], but then I was like, ‘No, I don’t really want to work with kids.’ Then I thought I wanted to do makeup and aesthetics, but my dad convinced me not to do that. So now I’m studying to be a personal trainer ... part-time [at] night school. ... Some of my schoolwork is self-paced [and] it helps that I’ve already done that” (pp. 10-17).

Molly has also started volunteering at a youth group at a local church. She stated, “There’s a lot of troubled kids that go there. It’s more like an outreach. ... We have mostly boys, so that’s a challenge. ... [Being at the AEP] really helped me ... because I’ve already been there and been in an environment full of [troubled] kids” (pp. 11-12). Also at AEP#2, Molly said, “I had to listen to every single person’s problems. ... There [were] lots of different issues going on, so nothing really surprises me anymore” (p. 19). Volunteering at this group, Molly said, “... has been a high point. I never thought I would do something like that” (pp. 11).

Molly was in another relationship for a time and she “... just recently got out of it” (p. 12). She said, “It ended up getting abusive. ... It took me a really long time to say goodbye to him even though he abused me. ... That was difficult [because] I’d already been through abuse and then [the AEP] helped me out. And then I had it happen again. A different kind of abuse, but



still. That was hard because I haven't had anybody to help me through that" (p. 12). However, through all of the challenges she has faced, Molly has been able to find solace in her Christian faith. She stated, "God has really shown me his grace throughout my life and if I didn't believe and trust in him, I wouldn't be here today because the things I've been through were just simply too much for my own strength, and sometimes you need to lean on someone, and for me, that was God" (Molly, personal communication, September 8, 2014).

### **AEP#3**

*Student body.* AEP#3 was located in a small city on Vancouver Island, British Columbia and served students who were at-risk and in grades 9 to 12. Although the program could support up to 40 students, typically about 25 students attended at one time. Most of the students in the program had suffered some form of trauma—they were "... damaged in some way" (p. 3). The majority of the students were either in foster care, in a care-home program, or living on their own, and working part- or full-time. Prior to entering AEP#3, most of the students had switched high schools at least once and dropped-out for a period of time and, as a consequence, they had experienced gaps in their education and were behind academically.

*General characteristics of the program.* AEP#3 was housed in a small building that was previously an elementary school. There was an administrative office; a large academic room with a variety of seating options including individual desks and group tables; a large lounge with several couches and comfortable chairs; two small counselling rooms; and a kitchen where the staff and students ate a daily catered lunch and the students learned about cooking and nutrition (personal observation, May 6, 2014). The program was open between 9:30 and 2:30 from Monday to Thursday and between 9:30 and 12:00 on Friday, but students arrived and left at different times. Although the staff was accommodating of differences in students' attendance and

ability to get to work/concentrate, they also tried to provide structure by having daily mandatory schedules/activities. The goal of providing this kind of structure was to prepare students for environments, such as the work that "... demand you [be] there on time and do what you're supposed to do when you're supposed to do it" (p. 17).

The goal of AEP#3 was "... non-judgementally, with respect, to support the [students] in the path they've chosen" (p. 10). Program staff included a receptionist, a certified teacher, an education assistant (EA), and two youth and family counsellors. The teacher and EA supported the students academically and the two counsellors, who had an open-door policy with the students, were there when the students needed to talk; helped them access resources such as subsidized housing and community programs; and liaised with other professionals such as social workers. Throughout each day, students had appointments with the counsellors. The teacher, the EA, and counsellors kept each other abreast of what was happening in students' lives; "As a teacher, you have to understand the students a bit to know where they're coming from ... [and] what their circumstances are at the time. ... If they [are] having a crisis in their personal life, then I really couldn't expect them to be how they usually are in the academic room" (pp. 7-11).

**Relationships.** The staff members aimed to treat each student as an individual and to show him/her that s/he was cared for. They also taught students skills to maintain positive relationships with one another. For example, a unit in the family studies course centred on skills for getting along with others, including older people, friends, and in the workplace. In addition, on Monday mornings, the AEP did *check-in*, where the staff (with the exception of the receptionist) and the students sat in the lounge together, discussed their weekends, and the staff shared with the students, and asked for feedback from them about upcoming activities and events at the AEP (personal observation, May 12, 2014). One of the counsellors facilitated *check-in* and

she, along with the other staff members, encouraged respectful communication, including listening skills between the students (personal observation, May 12, 2014).

***Student wellbeing.*** The academic philosophy at AEP#3 was that successes build on successes. Students were given the opportunity to experience success with the goal of increasing their motivation and future successes. When they first arrived, students were asked what they felt was an academic strength of theirs and what they found most challenging academically. They were encouraged to start on tasks in which they were likely to experience success. In addition, because many students struggled academically, they were given opportunities to experience success in different areas such as artistically, musically, or in public speaking. The strengths of students were honoured at the end of the year when they all received a certificate that listed their accomplishments and key strengths.

***Student academic learning.*** AEP#3's academic model was self-paced and individualized. When a student first arrived at the program, the teacher asked him/her to complete a casual writing and math task in order to determine his/her ability in these two areas. After this was complete, the teacher and the student sat down together and created an individual graduation plan that included the courses the student needed and some that s/he chose out of interest. The student was given materials for the courses s/he was taking and worked both independently and one-on-one with the teacher to complete them. During a typical day, staff and some students arrived at 9:30, the students had coffee and a snack, did academics for an hour, took a break, and did academics again until lunchtime.

***Life skills learning.*** AEP#3 had a three pronged approach to supporting students, providing: academic instruction, counselling, and life skills supports. Each day, after lunch, there were different activities and/or guest speakers: Monday was fitness; Tuesday was a guest

speaker; Wednesday was arts and/or crafts including sewing; and Thursday was a guest speaker. Guest speakers included professionals working in the area of tenants' rights, sexual health, and Aboriginal cultural awareness. Mostly, attendance at the guest speaker activities was optional, but sometimes it was mandatory. The staff also took students on field trips, including horseback riding and rowing. The goal of the field trips was to help students "... get along and not be too abrasive or know how to manage themselves in various situations, like in the work environment [or] with friends" (p. 13).

**Research.** Artz and Nicholson (2010) compared the experiences of female students in AEP#3 to those in a public high school in the same city. They examined: (a) the victimization experiences of adolescent girls and their use of violence and aggression in school; and (b) adolescent girls' experiences of feeling connected to and supported by their schools. A total of 83 adolescent girls participated from these two sites. Quantitative data on participants' histories of victimization, use of aggression, and school climate were obtained using The Survey of Student Life (SSL). Results indicated that in spite of reporting significantly higher levels of past victimization than the public school students, the girls from AEP#3 reported using significantly lower levels aggression at the time of the study. Compared to those attending the public high school, the students attending AEP#3 also reported significantly higher levels of teacher encouragement, classroom collaboration, and school connectedness. From these and other findings, the authors conclude that "... the alternative program, by offering a cooperative, encouraging atmosphere that supports the girls' feelings of belonging and connectedness in the program also provides a context in which the use of aggression is not required" (Artz & Nicholson, 2010, p. 169).

## Autumn

In grade ten, "... after hopping around from school to school" (Autumn, personal communication, August 30, 2014), Autumn left regular high school. She had been struggling to cope with personal challenges, including the divorce of her parents, the death of a close grandparent, and anxiety. In her final semester of regular high school, she became pregnant. Autumn said, "I was unable to cope ... keep up, or catch up. ... [I was] at a dead end with [regular school], so I had to find a different way to complete it" (p. 4). One of her teachers connected her to AEP#3. Autumn said that it was comforting for her to have the guidance of this teacher; he reassured her, "Okay, here's a program you can try out. ... This isn't the end of the road for you" (p. 4).

Autumn began attending AEP#3 in Fall 2009, graduating four years later, in Spring 2013. She said, "Those four years that I spent there were just fabulous. There was so much going on; I learned so many things" (p. 40). When she first arrived at the program, the students and staff were very welcoming to Autumn. She was able to talk to "... one of the girls who was there and had been there for a couple of years ... [and who] was just finishing up some stuff" (p. 4). Talking to this student provided Autumn with "... a bit of an insight" (p. 4) into the program. "And," Autumn said, "[a] counsellor had just started as well, so I wasn't really alone in the part of it; fresh start for a couple people" (p. 4).

Autumn met with the teacher to determine her level in various subjects. Autumn stated, "She'd have us do a little practice [to] see what our skills are; what we're capable of doing. ... And then she can offer up suggestions in terms of what kind of classes [we] can take" (p. 34). Although some of the courses were mandatory, Autumn was able to choose many based on her interests. The teacher helped Autumn create a graduation plan "... and then when you get settled,

if anything changed, you could meet [with the teacher] again and they'd figure something out" (p. 35).

Autumn said there was a good deal of flexibility in the academic delivery model at AEP#3; for example, courses were self-paced, and although students were encouraged to arrive to academic blocks at specific times, "... so that you're not distracting anybody" (p. 8), they were not questioned or reprimanded if they were late. Autumn said, "Switching on to alternative school and being more self-paced with yourself was difficult, ... [especially because] I'm a little bit of a procrastinator. ... [However,] you know that you've got the support and that's what helps ground you is having the support system" (pp. 1-23). The teacher was always present during academic blocks. Autumn said, "[She] would do her rounds and then sit down and if we needed help, we'd come up and see her" (p. 35).

When she started at the AEP, Autumn told herself, "'Yeah, I'm gonna do this,' [but found that] you get there, you kind of get comfortable, and then you spend all your time talking" (p. 5). In addition, when Autumn needed help, she sometimes had to wait while the teacher was helping another student, which she stated, "... was another way you'd get distracted" (p. 9). There was always an education assist (EA) at the AEP; however, this EA changed several times while Autumn was attending and Autumn found that the helpfulness of the EAs varied.

In her third year at the AEP, Autumn became determined to graduate as quickly as possible. To this end, she decided to get "... the bare minimum [required to graduate] done" (p. 7) and reduce her participation in non-academic activities. She told the staff, "Anything that is absolutely mandatory, fine, I won't fight you, I'll just do it. I'll show up. I'll be there. But anything else, I just tune it out" (p. 25). She said, "Sometimes [the staff] really tried to push you to do the activities because sometimes they're quite important. [But] sometimes [they would]

have guest speakers come in [and] they're talking about something that didn't necessarily affect you personally, or wasn't something you were interested in and you're like, 'Do I really have to participate in this?' And generally the answer was 'Yes, you have to' because they're trying to enforce that you partake in class activities" (p. 25).

Autumn began to have frequent conversations with the teacher about her academic progress/coursework options. The teacher supported her coursework choices. Autumn said, "There was definitely no pressure in the school. Once you kind of had your mind set on something, [she] tried to help guide you through your decision, like, 'Why are you making this decision?; What is appealing to you?; Is this a good move for you?; ... How is all this kind of stuff going to affect you later once you get out?'" (p. 7). It was through these conversations that Autumn gained clarity about what she wanted to pursue in college.

The AEP focussed not just on academics, but on life skills. Autumn said, "Life skills [was] an added bonus of an alternative school versus another school" (p. 8). The students were given a say in the kinds of life skills activities that were offered. "When you come back to school [after the summer], they do a check-in; what [you] want to do this year" (p. 14). She had the opportunity to "... learn to participate in group activities, ... learn to cook, ... [and] learn things about the outside world [such as] what community has to offer you" (p. 33). Autumn said, "When you go through regular high school, it's like, 'Okay, you're coming to school to get a career and that's it. And that's it, that's all there is to life. You're gonna go get a career and you're done.' Whereas [at the AEP], it was more, 'Okay, you've got some schooling stuff, once you're out of here, it's not just gonna be this. You've got to work with what you've got. You've got to just do it. And make sure that you're caring for yourself and that you're caring for anyone

that might be involved in your life.’ And [this] gives you a more realistic view of your life” (p. 33).

The two activities Autumn most liked at the AEP were field trips and the weekly meetings, or *check-ins*. Field trips included weekly trips to the gym and end-of-year picnics, usually at a local beach. Field trips were a chance for everyone to spend “... time together, but outside of school” (p. 11) and the staff counted many of them toward course credit; for example, “... the gym counted as PE” (p. 35). *Check-in*, done at the beginning of the week, was an opportunity for the students to talk about their weekends and how they were doing and for staff and students to settle the schedule for the week. Autumn said, “Then you know for the week, ‘Okay, you’ve had a bad weekend and you’re okay.’ ... [It allowed you to gauge] when was a good time to be communicating with who and in what way; ... who you’re dealing with on a day-to-day basis. ... It was [also] kind of moulding the week, shaping it. There were already things that were set in stone, but ‘what else did we want to do as a group?’ It might not always be appealing to everybody, so kind of pick and choose what you want to do” (pp. 11-24).

The staff and students worked together to establish and maintain a positive environment in the AEP and to make decisions about the way things operated. Autumn said, “We helped them better the program. We really held onto the motto ‘no gossip’ because nobody likes it when people talk about you behind your back. ... The teachers were there just for enforcement. ... And kitchen hours; they worked with us for a little while. It was trial and error for break-time because some of the [students] were like on the dot ‘Okay, it’s break-time now’ or ‘Can we have it 15 minutes early?’” (p. 6).

By attending the AEP, Autumn said she was able to explore more career options than she would have been able to in regular high school. In regular school, she said, students are required



to organize a graduation plan in grade 11, and present it in grade 12; to "... pick something and get out" (p. 2). This approach wouldn't have worked for Autumn. She stated, "I was very, very lost in what I wanted to do. I wasn't sure, hadn't pinpointed anything yet. ... It was nice not having that pressure to really solidify something before you got out there" (p. 2).

The AEP became a "home away from home" (p. 3) for Autumn. She said, "The people that you're surrounded by, the environment, just everything was so together, just tight knit, and you definitely felt at home and wanting to be there a lot" (p. 3). She would often begin her day at the AEP by going to the kitchen for a snack because she didn't "... always have time to make breakfast in the morning" (p. 8). And at lunch, the staff and students, "Everyone would sit down and chat about what's in the news or whatever. ... Just having the reinforcement of it's a nice place to be. All those things were good; a good motivation to be there" (pp.10 -28).

Autumn said the staff at the AEP was encouraging of students. She said, "They want you to feel that you are an important person because we all are. So they really want to encourage that. And just remind us that, 'You're important and this is what you're good at, so keep doing it'" (p. 28). For example, Autumn said they told her that she had leadership qualities. Autumn said the encouragement of the staff helped her maintain her motivation to attend/complete school: "I felt like I needed to have that little bit of a backup. In case I fell back into not feeling motivated again, I've got someone behind me saying, 'You know what, you're really good at this and you can do it and we believe in in you'" (p. 29). The staff also recognized and rewarded the accomplishments of students, including good attendance. Autumn said, "It was just little treats and not that bragging is necessarily good, but you get to the age where you understand where it's coming from" (p. 29).

Autumn said that all members of the staff were very friendly to the students. Even the receptionist did a daily check-in with them and the students, "... liked to say 'hi,' see how she's doing" (p. 10). Autumn had a very close, mother-daughter like relationship with her teacher at the AEP. She said, "It's funny because she was like the mom or parent. ... It's a maternal thing" (p. 20). Autumn admitted, however, that this degree of comfort caused the occasional conflict. She said, "You get lenient on certain things and cause conflict here and there" (p. 20). Autumn appreciated how the teacher would bake a cake each month for the students who had birthdays that month. The students would choose the type of cake they wanted and the teacher "... went to the moon and back" (p. 29) to make it. Even now, Autumn said, "If something really big happens, like when I made the Dean's List the first time, I phoned [this teacher] right away. I was like, 'So, guess what?'" (p. 29).

Prior to entering the AEP, when Autumn was having a difficult time, she said, "I didn't necessarily know how to reach out and ask for help. [My mom] tried getting in touch with someone who specifically dealt with youth. She sent me to this counsellor and ... [she was] weird. We didn't click. So honestly, I gave up after that. I mean, 'Honestly, I can't do a thing about this'" (pp. 26-27). Autumn said the counsellors at the AEP had a "... very much open door policy" and their attitude was, "If you need anything, we're here. We're not going to force ourselves on you, but we need you to know that we are, for sure, here" (p. 27). Autumn credited this open and inviting approach for her trying counselling again.

For the most part, there were two counsellors working at the AEP, and in general, Autumn said she connected well with them. She said, "The counsellors would help with any kind of conflict you had outside because you generally saw it in school. It was an opportunity to get it out and just talk about it and then set it aside and just leave it there for now and then you can deal

with it later” (p. 31). The counsellors “... were [also] willing to really work through things with you” (p. 21) and because Autumn had some court stuff going on with the father of her child when she was attending the AEP, she “actually had the opportunity to [work something through with the counsellor]” (p. 21).

One counsellor was “... very, very calming [with a] calming aura about her. She made you feel more relaxed. [She would say], ‘Okay, let’s focus on what we need to focus on and throw away all of the other garbage’” (p. 10). Autumn appreciated another of the counsellors who had children herself. She said, “She could offer some other advice that maybe we couldn’t get elsewhere or that we wouldn’t take kindly to” (p. 21). Autumn noted that youth aren’t always open to advice from their parents: “Your parents always try to offer you advice, and you’re like, ‘Really? Go away.’ ... So it was another door for advice to come in and you look at it differently because it’s not coming from immediate family” (p. 21). This counsellor, Autumn said, “... also helped me figure out ... things like, ‘Where’s [my son] going to go after this? What day-care?’” (p. 21). Working with the counsellors, Autumn said, “... gives you that extra, ‘Okay, I can do this. I’m recognizing that I need help with this.’ ... [I] learn[ed] how to accept the help that’s being offered” (p. 27).

Autumn shared that throughout her life, she erred on “... the safer side of things,” with a mom who “... was very sheltering” (p. 2). At the AEP, Autumn saw “... more of the negative side of things” and found it somewhat difficult being with students “... [who] don’t really have many options” (p. 2). Although she never “... felt like [she] fully fit in” at the AEP, she said, “You make connections with the girls and you are able to kind of weed out who was going to be a good match for you as a friend” (p. 3).

The students helped each other out. Autumn said, “If you need someone to watch your children, or if you need some kind of help or advice, there’s always gonna be someone that you can talk to. ... And I think that since going there my relationship with my family has been a little bit closer [because] you get that sense of looking out for other people” (pp. 15-22). The students were also careful not to repeat what they heard at the AEP: “It was almost like a mini Vegas kind of thing. ... You were there to have fun and to learn things and to experience life. ... ‘What happens at [the AEP] stays at [the AEP]’” (p. 24). If there was conflict between students, Autumn said the staff helped them deal with it, “... not necessarily annihilate any conflict, just work with it when it comes up ... because it ripples out ... like a ripple effect. If there’s some conflict over here, it’s hitting you too. It’s hitting everybody. And it makes things very tense, ... so [everyone there tries] to keep it to a very minimum, ... to keep it a good environment” (p. 22).

When she first left the AEP, Autumn missed the structure that the program provided. She said, “We had a routine, and you have to make your own routine [once you leave]. Keeping the structure is difficult” (p. 16). However, attending a self-paced program, Autumn said, “... gives you the confidence in yourself that, ‘Okay, you can do this and you don’t necessarily have to rely on anyone.’ ... I think [AEP#3] was a healthy transition between college and high school because in [regular] high school, you’re relying on the teachers” (pp. 23- 39).

Autumn started attending college in Fall 2013, shortly after graduating from the AEP. Although she still struggles with procrastination, Autumn said she now knows how to prioritize and organize her work “... and to actually get it done” (p. 25). Her experiences at AEP#3 have also helped her to connect with her college classmates. She said, “You learn at [the AEP], where everybody’s very different, everybody’s had different experience, some not so great ... [to] accept people for who they are, as a whole, rather than [focus on] their faults. ... You [don’t]

forget about the other side, but you put it aside and say, ‘Okay, I realize that you’re a good person ... and this is good for me’” (pp. 3-15). “Knowing yourself [also helps] and being able to present that to someone else and say, ‘Okay, this is how I can help the group and this is what we should really avoid for me’” (p. 30).

“[In addition,] I had a lot of problems with asking questions and being forward when I was going to regular high school, [but the academic approach at AEP#3] gives you a one-on-one with the teacher and seeing it from their side of it. And having an understanding of where they’re coming from and what they’re trying to do. ... And it gives you that strength and ability to communicate in a totally different way. Now being in college, I feel more open to communicating with the teachers. Of course, they highly encourage it because at this point, they expect, if you’re going to miss class, they want to know. ... [And] the teachers don’t necessarily know your background, so it’s nice to get in touch with them and say, ‘Okay, here’s where I’m coming from, here’s where I’ve been, and this is where I am now. So how can we work with this? What would you suggest I do?’ ... They might have more ideas than you would necessarily know” (pp. 19-26). Autumn has had “huge success” in college, which she attributes the confidence she gained during her time at the AEP. She said she has learned to “... just be confident in what you do and it will come through” (p. 28).

By working with the staff at the AEP to understand her options related to coursework, college programs, and accessing community services, Autumn said, “[I learned to keep] a broad perspective, knowing there are more options and that it’s up to me to make those choices and do what fits” (p. 39). The knowledge Autumn gained from the guest speakers at AEP#3 has also come in handy post-graduation; for example, by listening to a guest speaker discuss renting an apartment, Autumn said, “I know that under no circumstance, whatsoever should rent ever be

late. So I always go out of my way to make sure that I get rent on time” (p. 14). Now, when she encounters guest speakers, Autumn thinks, “Okay, what they have to say is very valuable and very important and potentially will be a gateway for me at some point” (p. 39).

At this point in her life, Autumn is most proud of her son, graduating from high school, and nearing the end of her college program. “When things started spiralling” downhill prior to her entering the AEP, Autumn thought, “‘I’m never going to get there, never getting there’ ... And then when I went to [a different high school in grade ten], I was like, ‘Okay, I can do this.’ And then you get pregnant and you’re like, ‘Here we go again. Here’s another obstacle.’ ... I feel a lot different now that I’m graduating [from college]. I never thought that I would be graduating. I thought I would be stuck forever” (p. 37).

Autumn said she thinks “... there should definitely be a little more support in the community, from government, from whatever to really encourage these kinds of programs because there’s a lot of people who go un-helped and have to struggle through these things and [the AEP] made a night and day difference for me. I would not have known where to go once I had [my son]. I probably wouldn’t have had half the friends I do. I wouldn’t have had the confidence I do in myself now. I’d be a lost youth, not knowing where to go. And not necessarily in a bad position with drugs and alcohol, just lost. ... [The AEP] has been a huge foundation for a lot of the [students]. ... Just getting them out there and doing what they need to do” (p. 40).

### **Beth**

Beth attended AEP#3 for three years while Autumn was there, graduating in Spring 2013. She said, “Before that, high school sucked. I went to [a regular high school] before that. The school itself wasn’t a bad school. Certain people made it crappy, so halfway through 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I dropped out of there and tried doing [a different program] online. [That] just didn’t work for me

because I worked full-time. ... And then I decided to go to [AEP#3] and it was the best decision” (p. 1).

On her first day at the AEP, Beth felt a little overwhelmed. She said, “There weren’t very many new students when I was starting, so it was mostly girls from before that who were comfortable and knew how the school worked and everything that was going on there. ... [However,] as the day went on, you realize how easy it was to find your place there” (p. 2). Unlike the students at the regular high school she attended, Beth found the students at the AEP to be very welcoming. She said, “As soon you walked in, they were all like, ‘Oh, hi’ and babbling away. They introduced you and told you how the school worked and what went on in the school” (p. 2).

Beth was able to choose many of her courses and she liked the self-paced academic model at the AEP. She said, “I got to pick my extra courses that I wanted to do. So if there was something extra I wanted to do, then I could do it. And I had the time to do it. [At a regular high school], if you have certain courses, then you have certain blocks where you can only do certain things; whereas [at the AEP], you have all the time you need and you can do whatever courses you want. ... If I didn’t have enough time to finish assignment one, I didn’t have to rush home and finish assignment two [for] the next day. ... I [also] liked [that when] I finished something, I could move on to the next thing. I didn’t have to wait for the next day to get the assignment. ... My social studies, I did it in two months, so I was like, ‘Yay!’” (pp. 15-17).

Nonetheless, Beth experienced a few difficulties with the self-paced model at the AEP. Coming from regular high school, Beth said, “I was so used to having a teacher do it all with me. So then trying to go by myself, ... if I had a question, it wasn’t ‘Ask the whole class and everybody tell.’ If someone’s doing a course with you, you can ask them. [At the AEP], you

have to wait and wait for the teacher. And she has to find the books for it and stuff like that. Sometimes it took longer for that reason” (p. 3). There were also times when Beth sensed the teacher became overwhelmed being “... the only... teacher and ... the main person who [did] most things” (p. 5). Beth said it would have been beneficial for both the teacher and the students if the teacher delegated more responsibilities to the education assistant (EA). Beth stated, “She needs to give the assistants more jobs to do” (p. 5).

Beth experienced feelings of comfort and success by participating in the various activities and listening to the guest speakers at AEP#3. She said, “We’d go out and do things like go for walks down to beach and go places and it made it more like a home environment than a school environment. You were more comfortable to be there” (p. 1). “We got our FoodSafe and we had a lady come in and teach us CPR. They teach you other skills. And we had other opportunities like customer service and that sort of stuff. So we had other option that allowed you to be successful in other ways [than strictly academically]” (p. 19). In her last year of the program, the staff started an activity called “... *Super Stars of the Month* [where] if somebody buckled down and did a bunch of work one month, or if they were super helpful with one thing, [they would be recognized]. ... I got that a couple of times for being helpful” (p. 16). Being recognized, Beth said, “... makes you feel better that somebody recognizes that you’re doing something” (p. 16). She said it also increased her motivation, “Realizing that they do realize, if somebody does finish a course, then they reward you for it. And then you’re like, ‘Oh, I want to finish it to be recognized for it’” (p. 16).

What Beth most liked about the AEP was the “... helpfulness of the teacher. [And] even if [she] was busy, there was always someone else there to help” (p. 1), such as the EA or the other students. “And then there were a couple of new courses that had come into the school. And



I had tried them first, so I was being a guinea pig for a couple of them. [The teacher] did them along with me, [so] it wasn't too bad" (p. 3). This teacher, Beth said, "... became more of a friend than a teacher. And it was nice, because you walk in [the academic room] and there's her desk and she has a big filing cabinet that's covered in pictures ... [of] previous [students] and she's got us all over her desk. You can tell that she loves her job and she loves [the students]. She's definitely in there with us and she loves going out and doing stuff with us. She always tries to encourage us. ... She's like everyone's own personal cheerleader and if you need to sit down and talk to her, she's there for you" (p. 5).

There was one EA employed at AEP#3 at any given time, but this person changed a few times while Beth was attending. One EA "... was there for the first year, almost two years" (p. 13) that Beth was at the AEP. Beth said, "I had a better relationship with her [than with the teacher] because her desk was just behind mine, so she was always there to help me. And she wasn't as busy as [the teacher]. Because [the teacher], she had everything to do" (p. 13). Beth appreciated how this EA "... would come down to [the students'] level, not just 'I'm your teacher,' but 'How are you?' Stuff like that" (p. 14).

There were two counsellors working at the AEP. One was there the entire time Beth was attending and the other changed three times. The counsellors were always available to talk to the students and they helped them to access resources. Beth said, "They were always in the classroom when they weren't doing anything else. They were always walking around and seeing how everybody was doing" (p. 6). One of the counsellors, Beth said, "... would be like, 'Well, here's my cell phone number if you need to text me or call me.' And if you needed her for something, she was always there. ... And their door was always open [when] you needed [something] and they'd help you with absolutely anything, even outside of school. [For

example,] they'd take us once a month to the birth control clinic. ... They were always very helpful and they always knew what they could do to offer help, like [for] some of the [students] with housing issues. They always knew where to turn for help" (pp. 6-14). Having the support of the counsellors, Beth said, "... made the 'overwhelmingness' of it all a little less scary" (p. 13).

Beth was surprised to find that, like at her previous high school, there were cliques at the AEP. She said, "[That] definitely wasn't something I expected to find at [the AEP] because there wasn't really that many of us. There were only 25 [students] or something like that. So I figured we'd all work together and be one big group, like family. But you still had the 'populars' and the nerds" (p. 3). The staff tried to get students who didn't normally interact to interact more by, for example, "... if there were things you needed a partner [for], they would put one of the 'populars' with the not-so-popular kind of thing" (p. 3). But unfortunately, Beth said, this "... didn't make much of a difference" (p. 15). Although they generally got along, about once a month, a fight would break out between students at the AEP. If the students were unable to resolve the conflict themselves, the staff would intervene. Beth said, "They'd do the, 'You have to see where this person's coming from and you need to put your opinions aside and realize what's going on for them'" (p. 6).

Beth spent more time working on her academics when she first started at the AEP than she did once she was there for a time. She said, "When I first started there, I was wanting to finish my school stuff as fast as I can and ... I didn't really talk to most people. ... And then [later on], it became, 'We'll talk a whole bunch and then do school work eventually.' We all did it and then lots of us helped each other do different courses" (p. 2). Beth made a couple of close friends at the AEP. She stated, "There were two people that were always there and you can

always get them to help you with something or you can always have them to talk to” (p. 13). Beth still sees one of these friends “... three or four times a week” (p. 8).

Since her time at the AEP, Beth has had a baby and is about to start college. Before graduating from AEP#3, Beth was required to complete a grad transition plan, which was less involved than at most schools. She said, “In another school, you have to make a big portfolio, [whereas at the AEP], you just have to pick a job that you want to do and research different schools, the cost of courses, and stuff like that” (p. 9). Beth talked to an advisor at a college and to professionals in various fields in order to find a college program that was a good fit for her. She is about to begin a legal administrative assistant program at a college, which she said, “... is in our backyard pretty much, so I don’t have to pay for day-care” (p. 8). Beth recently quit the job she had been working at for six years because she felt “There was no point in working while going to school, because I’d just be working for somebody to watch [my child] while I’m at work” (p. 8).

Beth said she sees a couple of connections between her experiences at the AEP and her experiences since graduating. Completing high school made Beth feel successful and gave her the confidence to pursue her goals in life. She said, “It made me realize that if I set my mind to it, I can do it” (p. 16). In addition, by attending a program with such a diverse student body, Beth has learned to skilfully interact with and empathise with others. She said, “You learn to deal with different kinds of people. [You learn that] there’s all different kinds of people and different situations and you accept them anyways. Then, outside of school, you realize there’s all these different people and you don’t know what they’re going through, so you learn that’s just who they are” (p. 17). Beth has stayed connected to the AEP, visiting regularly.

## **AEP#4**

***Student body.*** AEP#4 was located in a small city in BC and targeted youth between the ages of 15 and 18 who had left the mainstream school system due to social, emotional, or behavioural difficulties (“[AEP#4],” 2014). All of the students at the program were experiencing challenges of some kind, such as special needs, autism, foetal alcohol syndrome, and psychological disorders such as schizophrenia. Many also suffered neglect; struggled with drug and alcohol use; lived in foster care or on their own; and worked part- or full-time. “They ... needed a leg up ... [and] were motivated to graduate” (pp. 6-11).

***General characteristics of the program.*** AEP#4 was housed at a large school that was previously a psychiatric hospital (AEP#4 receptionist/personal communication, September 25, 2014). The mission of AEP#4 was to enable the students to do their best, achieve their goals, and to graduate high school. In addition to the AEP, there was a continuing education and a distributed learning program in the building. The AEP was on the main floor of the two-story building and was comprised of several large classrooms that the teachers decorated in a comfortable and inviting manner, such as with round tables, comfortable chairs, small kitchenettes, and plants. There were counselling offices and a large cafeteria that was shared by all students at the school. Staff included a principal, vice-principal, and program coordinator; a full-time math, science, social studies, and English teacher; a part-time PE teacher; and several youth and family counsellors.

***Relationships.*** Relationship building was an important component of the AEP. There was a poster in each classroom that outlined the program’s own version of the three R’s: respect, responsibility, and reliability. The staff at AEP#4 sought to be reliable adult figures in the lives of their students, “... just a steady aunt or steady grandma” (p. 3). Staff members offered non-

judgemental listening and unconditional positive regard and “Out of the relationship-building came trust, and with trust, [the students/youth] were willing to try and they were willing to fail. Most of those kids came in feeling very inadequate” (p. 6).

***Student wellbeing.*** When students first arrived at the AEP, they were assigned and introduced to a teaching associate (TA) and a counsellor. The TA, who was a teacher at the AEP, met with the student to talk about his/her educational and future goals. S/he checked in with the student regularly, tracked his/her progress, and did his/her graduation plan. The counsellors were not only available when students needed to talk, but facilitated conflict resolution between them and teachers and other students and helped them to arrange and attend meetings about such things as housing and health.

The teachers at AEP#4 tried to incorporate students’ interests and strengths into the course assignments. For example, the beginning of a new course, the English teacher talked to the students to find out what they were interested in, what their passions were, and she worked to match their readings to these interests and passions. She had a selection of fiction and non-fiction stories that reflected the lives of the students; stories about outsiders and of hope.

***Student academic learning.*** New students at AEP#4 met with the program coordinator to set up their timetable. The program coordinator worked to incorporate courses that appealed to the students, who were often put-off by academics, so that they took ownership of their timetable. The AEP offered mornings, afternoons, whatever fit the student’s schedule; “We were very flexible and very wanting to meet their needs, [to] meet them where they were” (p. 7).

Courses were self-paced and individualized, with classes for each subject. Students in the class would be either in different places in the same course, or in different years and that although classes started at specific times, teachers were accommodating to students who arrived

late and/or left early. Also, students never failed courses at the AEP; rather, if they could not finish the course, it was set aside until a time they could pick it up again.

**Staff collaboration.** At the start of each academic year, the staff met to revisit the goals of AEP#4, and together, decided if there was anything to change, omit, and/or add. The staff worked as a team to support the students. Every Friday, they met and provided student updates. They were careful not to share confidential student information; “We’d just say so-and-so needs TLC and support in their courses” (p. 9).

### **Kat**

Kat graduated in 2012 from AEP#4, which she had been attending off and on for five years. In her previous school, a regular high school, she said, “I just really wasn’t doing well at all, so by the end of grade nine, I pretty much wasn’t even going to school. And then at the beginning of grade ten, I tried again ... for a month, until I completely stopped going altogether” (p. 1). Kat and her mom met with her high school counsellor and Kat proposed she switch to the AEP. This counsellor told Kat, “Don’t go to there ... bad kids go there and it’ll make things worse” (p. 2). “So for a couple of months,” Kat said, “I just wasn’t going to any school at all because we were influenced by her saying that” (p. 2). Kat said she doesn’t remember exactly how she ended up going to the AEP. She shared, “... probably my mom [got] mad at me and [said], ‘Well, you need to do something’ ... and then I enrolled at [the AEP]” (p. 2).

Kat stated that prior to entering AEP#4, “I really didn’t like high school at all ... It was really not a positive experience for me” (p. 1). She faced “... emotional stuff and social issues going on between teachers and other students” (p. 2). She said, “I was having issues with anxiety and depression and one of my coping mechanisms was drinking and behaving in really dangerous and self-destructive [ways]. Comments [were also made] from specific teachers ...

[that] just seemed really hurtful. ... I experienced being bullied quite a bit and then I bullied other people” (pp. 3-8). “[The high school] really wasn’t a supportive environment for me to be in. ... It was just really challenging, and then I just wasn’t meeting expectations and then that ended up in me feeling worse about myself than I already did. I don’t think I realized that at the time, I didn’t have the emotional intelligence to notice that, but now when I look back, if I had had more support, I would have done a lot better” (pp. 1-2).

“Looking back, I had this idea of myself from such a young age, even kindergarten or grade one. I was told that I was a bad kid, so I believed that. ... Not even necessarily having someone say that specifically, but through the stuff that they were saying. ... I never thought that I could get good grades ... [or] that I would go to college, just from having those ideas pressed on me” (p. 3). Kat’s dad is First Nations, but she mainly lived with her mom who is Northern European. Kat stated, “I [also] experienced a lot of racism in the sense that people wouldn’t know I was native and, growing up, I would hear a lot of really negative things about it, so I internalized that. I was ashamed of the fact that I was Native” (p. 8).

When Kat first started at the AEP, she “... was just kind of freaked out. A new environment; it was scary” (p. 4). However, she found the staff welcoming and her main teacher, or teacher advisor, Kat said, “... was instantly warm to me” (p. 2). Kat began to realize that there were “... all these people being so supportive, telling me that I can do all these things, helping me do all these things, showing me that I can do it. And it made the world of difference” (p. 3). This was a “huge change” from her previous high school, where she said, “... the teachers were expecting me to fail ... instead of telling me, ‘Oh, wait, you can do that’” (p. 2). When she entered the AEP, Kat said, “... I didn’t even know if school was something that I wanted to do at

all because my confidence was so low, but being there for a bit, my confidence started to grow and I realized, ‘I can graduate if I really want to’” (p. 4).

The staff at the AEP “... really did a good job of creating an environment that promoted learning. The classrooms were nice, the teachers were so welcoming, they served lunch in the program” (p. 2). Kat said the classrooms were comfortable and inviting, with desks usually set up in a circle and one teacher had a variety of skin lotions for students to use. Kat stated, “That’s something so little, but it’s nice to have stuff like that and other classrooms, they would have a fridge with granola bars” (p. 8). The AEP also had “... a really good lunch program. It was always different stuff and then sometimes they’d have a hot lunch too” (p. 4). The lunch program was really important to Kat, she said, “... [because] I didn’t have my stuff together enough to put a lunch together for myself every day and you can’t learn and focus when you’re hungry” (p. 2).

For the most part, the academic model at the AEP was self-paced. Kat said, “[For example], they had teachers for math, so when you had math block, you would go there, but everyone in the classroom would be working on different stuff [and] for English, [it was] the same thing” (p. 6). When students first arrived at the AEP, they were assigned a teacher advisor. Kat explained, “We’d have planning, which would be in your main classroom, so you’d do that with [your teacher advisor]. And for different subjects, you’d go to different teachers, but [your teacher advisor] kept track of everything for you and if you were hoping to graduate soon, they’d help you build a plan for that and keep you on track” (p. 5).

This academic model worked well for Kat. She said, “When I was in regular school, I was on a timeline and I would never hand my stuff in on time or hand it in at all. And I would get anxious and I would feel bad about myself. My marks would drop so low. At that point in my life, I just couldn’t deal with deadlines like that and as soon as it built up a little bit, I’d just



become way too overwhelmed and I would lose any desire to get any of it done. I'd just shut down. So the self-paced was the only way I think I could have gotten high school done" (p. 19).

There was "a sense of community" at the AEP where students felt "important in a way" (p. 5). Kat shared, "I never got bullied there. I never had anyone make any mean comments to me when I was there [and] I never really saw anyone else do that. ... For the most part, the biggest thing was just respect. There was respect between the teachers and the students, there was respect between the students, and even if people had behaviour issues and acted out, overall there's an underlying respect through the entire place" (p. 3). The teachers created this atmosphere of respect. Kat said, "You get to call them by their first names, which ... is a little thing, but that does create a better level of respect because it's like nobody's above anybody else. [This] is how learning should be, two people working together, not necessarily someone above you telling you what to do" (p. 4).

"The teachers that were [at the AEP] were really committed to what they did and it seemed like they rarely ever had bad days even despite the stuff that was going on. ... They had a lot of patience. Not everyone would be able to do the job that they do and be able to keep their cool and to stay so positive. ... It's not like you're teaching a bunch of kids and you're just doing the lesson. There might be as many as 15 kids in your class and they're all doing different things and you need to know what they're working on. You have to know what type of learner they are because clearly the regular school system hasn't worked for them and that's why they're [at the AEP]" (p. 4). Also, Kat said, "Because a lot of [the students] were [living] on their own, they [had] to work, so [the teachers] were really accommodating of that" (p. 7).

Of her relationships at the AEP, Kat's relationship with her teacher advisor was particularly important to her. Kat said, "I don't think I would have graduated if it wasn't for her.

... The relationship I built with her, I'm never going to forget that. I'd never had that type of relationship with a teacher before where they showed that much kindness toward me. ... Just believing in me way more than I believed in myself" (pp. 4-14). When she first started attending the AEP, Kat missed a lot of school. She stated, "I would go for a couple of days and they wouldn't see me for a couple of weeks. And when I came into the classroom, [my teacher advisor] would be so happy to see me and so supportive and know exactly where I left off. ... Usually when I was away for a period of time, it was because some really bad event happened over that period of time. And I would come back and [my teacher advisor] wouldn't say anything like 'Where have you been?' or 'You have so much stuff to do.' There not being any judgement, that's probably what it was. She wasn't judging me, she was just happy with the fact that I was there and since I was there, she was going to help me get what I was able to get done, done" (p. 5).

Kat also felt she could open up to her teacher advisor. She said, "There were also definitely times when I was going through stuff and I felt safe enough to open up to [her]. ... [She] acknowledge[d] the struggles that we were going through as teenagers or preteens. I think a lot of the time that's all you really need is someone acknowledging that, 'Yeah, I think that what you're going through right now is really hard'" (p. 17). In addition to being assigned a teacher advisor, Kat was also assigned a counsellor at the AEP. There were counsellors at her previous high school, but Kat said, "There's way more kids and you're not necessarily introduced to these people and encouraged to talk to them. It's more like if you need that, you have to go out and seek that, which is really challenging when you're a teenager" (p. 5).

The counsellors had an open-door policy with students. Kat said, "I think that makes a difference too, how laid back it all is ... [because] sometimes you're in a slump and you need

help just then or you really need to talk to someone ... and it totally was an open-door policy” (p. 5). The AEP also connected Kat to a youth substance abuse counsellor who, Kat shared, “... would actually come and meet me at school” (p. 9) in a room that the AEP provided for outside professionals. Kat has continued to talk to a counsellor when she feels the need. She said, “Being at [the AEP] is when I took the initiative to start forming those counselling relationships, where I did have the space where I could really talk things through. Even to this day, I take advantage of that. Even when I’m feeling good, I go back and I talk. Even just recognizing my strengths and what I’m doing right is really important to me. And I learned the importance of that through [AEP#4]” (p. 21).

Kat said that all the staff at the AEP made an effort to acknowledge and talk to her. “Knowing all your teachers, walking down the hall and having everyone know who you are, that’s a good feeling. ... Even the principal and the vice-principal, I knew them very well and talked to them frequently. Whereas at [my previous high school], I don’t think I ever talked to any of them except for when I was in trouble. ... [The principal] was amazing, so amazing. ... He was someone you could sit down with and talk to about anything. Also he would just stop you in the hallways and have conversations with you about random stuff, which was something I totally wasn’t used to. ... A lot of teenage kids just want to be heard and just want to have conversations with adults about stuff that doesn’t really matter. And not a lot of people will take time out of their day ... to stop and listen to you. So that’s cool when that does happen” (pp. 2-6).

The principal, Kat said, “... was also really good about helping with grad plans because within the school system they have the ability to give credits for stuff outside of classes. But at [my previous high school], I didn’t know that at all. They didn’t really tell me that much. For

example, I was barely going to school [at the AEP], but I was doing a lot of knitting and so I got credit for textiles 12 or 11 for that. They would just sit down and brainstorm with me and be like, ‘Okay, what are you doing right now? What are your accomplishments?’, which was really cool because a lot of the typical courses in school I didn’t excel at. The easiest one for me was probably English, but the other stuff didn’t come easy” (pp. 6-7). “Also, if they ever thought you were really good at something, they would try to give you any opportunity to show that off in a leadership role. ... They gave us any opportunity they could to show who we are, establish who [we] are, share whatever we had to share” (p. 16).

In addition to giving them credit for things that fell outside of the standard curriculum, students were recognized at weekly assemblies. Kat said “It was every Tuesday and we would all have to go and they would do a rundown of things that were gonna happen- what’s going on-, but they would also do these things called *Thinkies*, [where] if you got a chapter of your work done or if you displayed really good behaviour, [a staff member] would write your name down ... and at our assembly, they would read them out and say what it’s for. ... And they would do a draw for chips and pop. ... It’s a recognition of what everyone’s doing. ... [Even] if you did a random act of kindness and somebody noticed, they would recognize you for it and ... that really reinforces positive behaviour” (p. 9).

“It’s just neat how [the staff at the AEP] recognized ... skills [other than academic] because I was just basing my success on [things] like my grades in math and my grades in science and if they weren’t good, then I felt bad. But [this made me realize], ‘Wait, I’m really good at other things, but I’ve never focussed on that before’” (p. 7). Kat began to feel good about her accomplishments and about herself. She stated, “I just looked at being able to catch up in school as being such an accomplishment and I think that [this] was the first time that I actually

really looked at my accomplishments or even recognized myself for the work I was doing. In school before, I was just focused on failures and what I was doing wrong. I learned to acknowledge my successes no matter what size they were, which started to make me feel more positive about myself. Back then I wasn't doing it much, but it's a habit that I picked up that I've become better at over time" (p. 15).

Kat didn't engage very much with the other students at AEP#4. She said, "I went in there not really knowing anyone and that was actually really refreshing because it's like I was at school to do school" (p. 2). Because of the interpersonal difficulties she experienced at her previous high school, Kat stated, "[It] was nice to go there and have a break. I went there and I did the work and I left. ... I kept to myself a lot when I was there and one of my best friends ended up switching over too, so I didn't necessarily make that many friends when I was there" (p. 3).

"[However,] one person really did reach out to me and even if it wasn't that cool to be friends with the new girl, she didn't care. She was also really tough. No one will mess with me if I'm friends with her. ... [She] had my back. ... She was a protector and stood up for people. ... I noticed that a lot of them were like that with each other. They were all really close and even though I was kind of on the outside because I had come from a different school and didn't grow up with any of them, I could just tell that they were really there for each other" (pp. 12- 15).

"Most of [the students there] were really intimidating in the sense that you didn't want to mess with them. ... [However] looking back, I never got bullied there, I never had anyone make mean comments to me when I was there [and] I never really saw anyone else do that. ... The people I did make friends with, to this day, when I see them, they're so ... wonderful [and] ... kind. And they're definitely the type that would have been labelled as 'bad kids' too" (p. 3).

Kat felt a kinship with the students at the AEP that she hadn't felt at her previous high school. She said "I think that had I stayed at [my previous high school], I would have been a lot harder on myself because I wouldn't have had people that I could relate to. It's hard enough being a teenager going through your stuff, but when you're at a school with like 1000 kids, you just slip away and feel like you're so different than everyone. ... I had a lot of close friends [at my previous high school], but none of them were experiencing the same stuff, so I felt ashamed and embarrassed about what I was going through.

"But at [AEP#4], I knew everyone, or at least recognized everyone I was going to school with [and] I had an idea of what was going on for these people. I knew that I wasn't the only one going through something." (p. 18). "Pretty much every single person there had some sort of big struggle in one way or another, so that united everyone. But at the same time, everyone's experiences were so different, whether it was challenges going on at home, or if they had severe learning disabilities, or disabilities of any sort. Those are all very different things, but all in all it's a struggle that you have to face and that you're getting through. ... We were all people that didn't fit in in regular school, but since we were all together, it didn't matter. ... And these people could so easily be written off and labelled to be certain things when they're wonderful people that are just going through stuff. ... [This] was a really big learning experience for me too. This is what the world is like for a lot of people" (p. 7).

Sadly, the girl who reached out to Kat—protected her at the AEP—passed away recently. Kat said, "She passed away two months ago, so that was a really big challenge. ... She had been through a lot and [the AEP] was a place where she could go to school and she did learn. ... There were definitely other people I knew who have passed away who were former students of [the AEP], but she was the only really good friend of mine [that did]" (p. 13).

Kat had the opportunity to learn about her First Nations heritage while attending the AEP. She said, “A lot of my lifetime, I didn’t really have those ties to my culture and I really started to become introduced to it and embrace it when I was at [the AEP] because they have opportunities for that. The population of Indigenous students is really high [there] ... and they have an Indigenous education teacher and you get to make drums and stuff. Just having those positive opportunities to get to do stuff like that was really life changing for me” (p. 11). Kat’s teacher advisor encouraged her to pursue these opportunities, and consequently, Kat said, “... propelled my desire to learn more about my culture, where I came from, and taught me to be proud of it. ... She played a really big role in me finding my identity culturally” (pp. 8-14). “I also got to meet my dad’s whole side of the family after I graduated. So that was life changing, figuring out where I came from ... [and] connect[ing] to my culture” (p. 11).

Taking Indigenous studies at the AEP, Kat stated, “... [is] how I chose the route that I wanted to take, ... that I specifically want to work with Native kids” (p. 8). She recently completed an Indigenous family support worker certificate program at a local college, an experience which was “so positive” (p. 18) for her. A few times during this program, Kat became anxious and overwhelmed and she thought, “I can’t focus. How am I going to be able to do this? ... I was freaking out and I couldn’t focus and I was really frustrated” (p. 11). Kat was diagnosed and provided with support for ADHD during her time at AEP#4. She said, “I’d actually forgotten that I had ADHD, completely forgotten. And then I remembered a couple months into my program. ... It just hit me. I was like, ‘Wait, I actually have a learning disability. I shouldn’t be so hard on myself’” (p. 11).

Kat has been hired as an Indigenous support worker with a local school district and she’s now planning on going into Indigenous studies at university and transferring to social work. Kat

has been able to use some of the staff at the AEP as references. She said, “They’ve been supportive of me now, in this stage of my life. ... I [even] had the opportunity to go back and do my practicum [at the AEP] last year, ... so it was full circle” (pp. 2-10).

Kat said, “During the time I was at [AEP#4], my main coping mechanism was drinking and that’s what made school and everything so hard for me. So, since then, I’ve developed a self-care plan for myself ... and I’m taking care of myself in all ways” (p. 21). Kat said she learned many of the self-care techniques she employs “... through talking with my counsellor at [the AEP]” (p. 21).

“Right now, in my life, I have so much going on and I don’t think I would have had the confidence to be doing everything I’m doing if it hadn’t been for [the AEP]. And I definitely didn’t have the confidence I have now then, but I think [my experiences there] propelled me to try these new things and really go for my goals. ... When I was 13, if I could look at what I’m doing now, I wouldn’t have believed it at all. And what I’m doing now might not be a huge deal to a lot of people, but for me, it’s a really big success, especially because of where I was and I can just tell that started [at the AEP]. ... Up until then, I really didn’t have a lot of successes or positive experiences, especially with school, so I can clearly see that’s when it all started. I can say that with certainty” (p. 17).



## Chapter Five

### Cross-Narrative Analyses

In this chapter, I describe the seven themes that were evoked during my readings of the former AEP students' narrative interviews. I describe each theme, include excerpts from the former AEP students' interviews that relate to each theme, and discuss links to the research I reviewed in *Chapter Two*. The themes are *relationships*, *counselling*, *strengths*, *flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning*, *life skills learning*, *structure and culture*, and *physical set-up*. Each theme represents a feature of the program(s) that most, and usually all of the former AEP student participants emphasized in their narratives (i.e., that they (a) spent a good deal of time discussing, (b) mentioned several times, and/or (c) explicitly underscored as important). The seven themes expand upon the five themes (i.e., *ambiance*, *belonging*, *pedagogical skill*, *program flexibility*, and *self-awareness*) Morrissette (2011) distilled from his qualitative interviews with graduates of an AEP.

Five of the seven themes correspond to one of the three categories of program characteristics (*relationships*, *student wellbeing*, and *student learning*) that my literature review revealed could be potentially powerful in the lives of AEP students (see Table 1, p. 69) and two are new. The theme *relationships* corresponds to the category of *relationships*; *counselling* and *strengths* correspond to *student wellbeing*; and *flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning* and *life skills learning* fit with *student learning*. The two themes that do not correspond to one of these three categories (i.e., *structure and culture* and *physical set-up*) could constitute a fourth category, representing the *ambiance*.

Tables 2 and 3 present summaries of how the themes relate to the former students' narratives. Specifically, Table 2 shows how the seven themes are reflected in one student's

(Autumn's) narrative transcript. Table 3 provides a snapshot of which themes were present across interviews. Both tables are structured to show the subordinate categories of *relationships*, *counselling*, *strengths*, *flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning*, *life skills learning*, *structure and culture*, and *physical set-up* nested within the “super” categories, or themes, of *relationships*, *student wellbeing*, *student learning*, and *ambiance*.

Table 2

*Themes in Autumn's Narrative*

| Theme               |   | Example from Autumn's narrative   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Relationships       | <b>1. Relationships</b>                 |   |
|                     | <i>Relationship with teacher</i>        |   |
|                     | Academic guidance                       | “[She] tried to help guide you through your decision, like, ‘Why are you making this decision?’” (p. 7)   |
|                     | Non-authoritarian approach              | “[The] one-on-one with the teacher[s] ... [gives you] an understanding of where they're coming from and what they're trying to do. ... And it gives you that strength and ability to communicate in a totally different way” (p. 19). |
|                     | Affection                               | The students would choose the type of cake they wanted and the teacher “... went to the moon and back” (p. 29) to make it.  |
|                     | Maternalism                             | “It's funny because she was like the mom or parent. ... It's a maternal thing” (p. 20).   |
|                     | <i>Relationship with other students</i> |   |
|                     | Activities/practices                    | “[Check-in allowed you to gauge] who you should be communicating with and in what way” (p. 11).   |
|                     | Support                                 | “If you need someone to watch your children, or if you need some kind of help or advice, there's always gonna be someone that you can talk to” (p. 22).   |
|                     | Empathy                                 | “You learn at [the AEP], where everybody's very different, everybody's had different experience, some not so great ... [to] accept people for who they are” (p. 15).  |
| Student Wellbeing   | <b>2. Counselling</b>                   |   |
|                     | <i>Services</i>                         |   |
|                     | Calm                                    | “[She was] very, very calming [with a] calming aura about her. She made you feel more relaxed” (p. 10).   |
|                     | Self-care education                     | “She could offer some other advice that maybe we couldn't get elsewhere or that we wouldn't take kindly to” (p. 21).  |
|                     | Connection to resources                 | “She also helped me figure out ... things like, ‘Where's [my son] going to go after this? What day-care?’” (p. 21).   |
|                     | <i>Accessibility</i>                    | “[The counsellors had a] very much open door policy” (p. 27).   |
|                     | <i>Benefits</i>                         |   |
|                     | Day-to-day issues                       | “It was an opportunity to get it out and just talk about it and then set it aside and just leave it there for now” (p. 31).   |
|                     | Pivotal life issues                     | “[The counsellors] were willing to really work through things with you ... and I actually had the opportunity to [do that with them]” (p. 21).  |
|                     | Accessing help                          | “[I] learn[ed] how to accept the help that's being offered” (p. 27).  |
| <b>3. Strengths</b> |   |   |
|                     | Discovering strengths                   | “[The staff] remind us that, ‘You're important and this is what you're good at, so keep doing it’” (p. 28).   |

| Theme            |  | Example from Autumn's narrative   |
|------------------|--|---|
|                  | Positive Outcomes  | "In case I fell back into not feeling motivated again, I've got someone behind me saying, 'You know what, you're really good at this and you can do it and we believe in you'" (p. 29).                         |
| Student Learning | <b>4. Flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning</b> |   |
|                  | Academic delivery model  | "[Attending a self-paced program] gives you the confidence in yourself that, 'Okay, you can do this and you don't necessarily have to rely on anyone'" (p. 23).   |
|                  | Course selection & content   | "[the teacher would] have us do a little practice [to] see what our skills are; what we're capable of doing. ... And then she can offer up suggestions in terms of what kind of classes [we] can take" (p. 34). |
|                  | Attendance expectations  | Students were encouraged to arrive to academic blocks at specific times, "... so that you're not distracting anybody" (p. 8).   |
|                  | <b>5. Life skills learning</b>   | "Life skills [was] an added bonus of an alternative school versus another school" (p. 8)  |
| Ambiance         | <b>6. Structure and culture</b>  |   |
|                  | Schedule/activities  | "We all worked together to ... [determine] the way things worked. ... [For example,] kitchen hours" (p. 6).   |
|                  | Behavioural norms/interventions  | "We helped them better the program. We really held onto the motto 'no gossip'" (p. 6).  |
|                  | <b>7. Physical set-up</b>  | "It was a home-away-from-home. ... I felt at home and want[ed] to be there" (p. 3).   |

Table 3

*Themes Across the Former AEP Students' Narratives*

| Theme         |   | Definition  | C | V | M | A | B | K |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Relationships | <b>Relationships</b>                          | Qualities of key relationships at the AEP                                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|               | <i>Relationship with teacher</i>              | The student's relationship with her teacher                                   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|               | Academic guidance                             | The instrumental academic support teacher provides                            | × | × | × | √ | √ | √ |
|               | Acceptance                                    | The teacher's acceptance/lack of judgement                                    | √ | √ | √ | × | × | √ |
|               | Non-authoritarian approach                    | The teacher's egalitarian approach to interacting with students               | √ | √ | × | √ | √ | √ |
|               | Affection                                     | The teacher's affection/warmth  | √ | √ | × | √ | √ | √ |
|               | Maternalism                                   | The teacher's mother-like quality   | √ | × | √ | √ | × | × |
|               | <i>Relationship with other students</i>       | The student's relationship with other students                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|               | Activities/practices                          | The activities/practices that fostered positive student/student relationships | √ | √ | √ | √ | × | √ |
|               | Kinship                                       | The student's kinship with other students                                     | √ | × | √ | × | × | √ |
| Support       | The support students' provided to one another | ×   | × | √ | √ | √ | √ |   |

| Theme                    | Definition  | C  | V | M | A | B | K |
|--------------------------|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empathy                  | The understanding the student developed about others                        | √  | × | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| <b>Student Wellbeing</b> | <b>Counselling</b>  | The counselling provided at the AEP  |   |   |   |   |   |
|                          | <i>Services</i>   | The qualities/components of the counselling services   |   |   |   |   |   |
|                          | Calm/non-judgemental  | √  | √ | √ | √ | × | × |
|                          | Self-care education   | ×  | × | √ | √ | × | √ |
|                          | Connection to resources   | ×  | × | × | √ | √ | × |
|                          | <i>Accessibility</i>  | √  | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
|                          | <i>Benefits</i>   | The benefits associated with partaking in the counselling services   |   |   |   |   |   |
|                          | Day-to-day issues   | ×  | × | × | √ | √ | × |
|                          | Pivotal life issues   | √  | × | × | √ | × | × |
| Trust                    | √   | ×  | √ | × | × | × |   |
| <b>Student Wellbeing</b> | Communication skills  | √  | √ | × | × | × | × |
|                          | Accessing help  | ×  | × | × | √ | × | √ |
|                          | <b>Strengths</b>  | Students' discovering and/or using/developing personal strengths at the AEP  |   |   |   |   |   |
|                          | Discovering strengths   | ×  | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
|                          | Using or developing strengths   | √  | √ | × | × | × | √ |
|                          | Positive outcomes   | ×  | √ | √ | √ | × | × |
| <b>Student Learning</b>  | <b>Flexibility &amp; structure in the organization of academic learning</b> | In the way academics were organized/delivered at the AEP, the provision of both flexibility, or choice, and support in the form of appropriate structure |   |   |   |   |   |
|                          | Academic delivery model   | √  | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
|                          | Course selection & content  | √  | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |

| Theme           |                                 | Definition  | C | V | M | A | B | K |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|                 | Attendance expectations         | The structure with flexibility in student attendance expectations | × | √ | √ | √ | × | √ |
|                 | <b>Life skills learning</b>     | The life skills learning  | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | × |
| <b>Ambiance</b> | <b>Structure and culture</b>    | Exercising control over the goings-on & culture at the AEP        |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|                 | Schedule/activities             | Having a say in the schedule/activities                           | × | × | × | √ | × | × |
|                 | Behavioural norms/interventions | Having a say in behavioural norms/interventions                   | √ | √ | × | √ | √ | × |
|                 | <b>Physical set-up</b>          | The homelike physical set-up                                      | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |

Note. C=Celia, V=Violet, M=Molly, A=Autumn, B=Beth, K=Kat.

## Relationships

### Relationships

Of their experiences at the AEPs, the former AEP students in my study spent the most time discussing their relationships with teachers and other students. This parallels: (a) research showing that students in AEPs place primary importance on their sense of connection to teachers and students within their programs (Jones, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Morrissette, 2011; Raywid, 1994; Velloso & Vadeboncoeur, 2015); and (b) Battistich et al.'s (1997) contention that of SDT's three basic psychological needs, belonging may be at the forefront for marginalized students. The former AEP students spoke of the positive qualities, and benefits of their relationships with teachers and with other students. Specifically, they perceived their teachers provided academic guidance and were non-judgemental, non-authoritarian, affectionate, and maternal towards them. From their point of view, these relationships enhanced their ability to communicate with, and feel empathy for, teachers, and led to a general confidence that people have good intentions. Furthermore, the former AEP students perceived their connections with other students at the AEPs were fostered through program activities/practices, reinforced by their shared histories/challenges, supportive, and taught them empathy.

#### **Relationship with teacher.**

*Academic guidance.* Four of the former AEP students shared that their teachers provided instrumental academic guidance/support to them. For example, Autumn described how her teacher at AEP#3, rather than pressuring students to take specific courses, guided them through their own decision-making. The teacher asked questions such as, "Why are you making this decision? What is appealing to you? Is this a good move for you?" (Autumn, p. 7). This approach is consistent with one of the autonomy-supportive teacher behaviours Reeve (2006) identified

(i.e., *clearly acknowledging student perspectives*) as well as de Jong and Griffiths' (2006) suggestion that an important practice in AEPs is adults helping students to develop reflective thinking skills. It is also consistent with McGregora's et al.'s (2015) finding of the efficacy, in AEPs, of teachers facilitating students in setting their own learning goals.

Kat said her main teacher, or teacher advisor, at AEP#4 supported her in accessing the Indigenous education offered at the program, and in so doing, played a crucial role in her finding her cultural identity. Beth and Molly shared that their teachers helped them with their coursework. Beth was the first to take two newly-added courses at AEP#3, which she said were manageable because the teacher provided her with ongoing help with them. Similarly, the teacher at AEP#2 "always" did Molly's academics with her. Molly said, "Everything was really hard for me most of the time, but it was fine because [the teacher] helped me through" (p. 9). Kim (2011) contends that *relational pedagogy* is essential for AEP teachers and Beth's teacher's approach to supporting her with the new courses is consistent with a key skill related to *relational pedagogy*; specifically, continuing to learn and sharing learning with students.

**Acceptance.** Like the participants in Morrissette's (2011) study, four of the former AEP students in my study said that they valued their teachers' accepting/non-judgemental attitude toward them. Celia and Molly described their teachers as "accepting," and Molly said that as a result, "You could just be yourself. I could just be myself" (p. 20). Kat and Violet shared that they appreciated the non-judgemental approach of their teachers. Whenever Kat returned to AEP#4 after a prolonged absence, her teacher advisor didn't question or reprimand her, rather, Kat said, "She was just happy with the fact that I was there and since I was there, she was going to help me get what I was able to get done, done" (p. 5). In the same vein, Violet said that the staff members at AEP#1 were the first adults in her life whose role she felt wasn't to judge or to

punish her. These comments are consistent with Tobin and Sprague's (2006) finding that within AEPs, student behaviour management is facilitated through the use of positive versus punitive practices.

***Non-authoritarian approach.*** Four of the former AEP students discussed ways in which their teachers' interactions with them were non-authoritarian in nature; that is, their teachers treated them as equals. Kat said that the teachers at AEP#4 allowed students to call them by their first names, which created an atmosphere of respect wherein "... nobody [was] above anybody else" (p. 4). Beth said of her teacher at AEP#3, "She's definitely in there with us and she loves going out and doing stuff with us" (p. 5). Likewise, Violet shared that the teacher at AEP#1 didn't act "... like she was on a different level than [students]" (p. 10) and Celia attributed this teacher's "amazing teaching style," (p. 6) in part, to the fact that she was close in age to the students.

Autumn said that her one-on-one interactions with the teacher at AEP#3 gave her an understanding of this teacher's intentions and perspective, and consequently, a sense of empathy for her. These personal interactions also gave Autumn the confidence/ability to openly communicate with and ask questions of teachers in general. Now, in college, Autumn is able to talk to her teachers about her background, current situation, and needs, and in turn, obtain their feedback.

***Affection.*** Five former AEP students spoke of ways in which the teachers at the programs they attended showed affection/warmth toward them. Expressing warmth toward students is a key behaviour associated with the quality of teacher *involvement* shown to contribute to students' belonging need satisfaction (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007). Autumn said that every month, the teacher at AEP#3 baked a cake for the students' whose birthday fell on that month. The students



chose the type of cake and, Autumn said, the teacher "... went to the moon and back" (p. 29) to prepare it. Beth said that it was obvious that this teacher loved her job and the students. She had pictures of the students all over her work-space and she was highly encouraging of them, "... like [their] own personal cheerleader" (Beth, p. 5).

Both Violet and Kat said that even before the teachers at the AEPs they attended knew them, they were warm towards them. Violet said the teacher at AEP#1 showed her unconditional positive regard, or warmth and care regardless of Violet's emotional state or what she was able to contribute. This relationship has given Violet confidence that people in her life have good intentions, which she said, helps her to keep her relationships healthy. Kat and Celia said that their teachers believed in them, wanted the best for them, and Kat said that she doesn't think she would have graduated high school if it hadn't been for her relationship with the teacher at AEP#4.

*Patience/even temper.* Celia, Kat, and Violet described their teachers as patient and/or even tempered. Celia said the teacher/counsellor team at AEP#1 "... had so much patience with me," in spite of the fact that "... I was a brat. I was a serious, full-out bully" (p. 3). Kat said that the patience of the teachers at AEP#4 allowed them to keep their cool despite the challenging nature of their work. She said that not everyone would be able to do that type of work and stay positive. Similarly, Violet said of her teacher at AEP#1 that, "She didn't get ruffled" (p. 19).

*Maternalism.* Celia, Molly, and Autumn stated that the teachers at the AEPs they attended were like mothers to them. Celia said that the teacher and counsellor at AEP#1 not only taught her, they parented her. This parenting shaped Celia's future. She credits it for her success in life and she tries to emulate it in her work as a youth and family counsellor. Molly shared that even now, she returns to AEP#2 to talk to and receive help from the teacher who "... was like a

second mom to [her]” (p. 5). Family-like ties between teachers and students was found by Kim and Taylor (2008) to be an important component of successful AEPs. Nonetheless, although comforting, Autumn said that the familial quality of her relationship with her teacher at AEP#3, posed a challenge. Because she was so comfortable with this teacher, she sometimes overstepped boundaries, which resulted in conflict.

### **Relationship with other students.**

*Activities/practices.* Five former AEP students identified activities/practices within their AEPs that helped them to communicate, and/or to establish positive relationships with other students. Autumn said, the *check-in* activity that was done at the beginning of the week at AEP#3 gave her a sense of how the other students were doing and the ability to work out “... when was a good time to be communicating with who and in what way” (Autumn, personal communication, March 18, 2015). Violet described how the peer counselling course at AEP#1 taught her important communication skills, including listening and phrasing, which helped her to alleviate her social anxiety and to connect with others.

Kat attributed the positive interactions among students at AEP#4 to the atmosphere of respect that the teachers created there. She said that because of this underlying respect, even now, when she bumps into other former students, they’re “wonderful” and “kind” to her. The effort on the part of Kat’s teachers to create a respectful environment parallels a practice that the former AEP students in Morrissette’s (2011) study found particularly valuable; specifically, teachers’ creating a non-intimidating and supportive ambiance within the program.

Celia linked the skills she learned at AEP#1 to her ability to foster positive friendships and to establish and maintain close friendships. Finally, Molly shared that during the therapy classes at AEP#2, the counsellor asked the students to tell one another what they liked about

each other, which improved relationships between students. This activity, facilitated by Molly's counsellor, coincides with one of the five principles of strengths-based education Lopez and Louis (2009) identify; namely, networking with peers who can avow your strengths.

***Kinship.*** As in other research looking at the experiences of AEP students (B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996; Jones, 2011), all of the former AEP student participants in my study spoke of a feeling of not fitting in at regular school. Kat, Celia, and Molly said that because all of the students at the AEPs they attended had experienced and/or were experiencing personal challenges, they felt a kinship and/or were able to connect with one another. In her previous high school, Kat said she had felt alienation and shame because of the challenges she was experiencing. She said that although the students at AEP#4 were all very unique, they were alike in that they were experiencing a major challenge of some kind. This brought a sense of belonging and comfort to Kat. She said, "... I had an idea of what was going on for these people and I knew that I wasn't the only one going through something like that. ... Since we were all together, it didn't matter" (Kat, pp. 7-18).

***Support.*** Kat, Beth, Molly, and Autumn all shared that the students at the AEPs they attended generally looked out for/supported one another. This peer support could be linked to the satisfaction of their need for belonging. Osterman's (2000) literature review revealed that students' sense of belonging contributed to them supporting one another. Kat said that one student in particular reached out to her and "... had [her] back [at AEP#4]" (p. 15), and Beth said there were two students at AEP#3 she could always talk to and count on for help. At AEP#2, Molly said students helped each other with their coursework and they "... were always encouraging each other, like, 'Oh, are you done your math? Oh, congrats'" (p. 16). Autumn said that through her peer relationships at AEP#3, she gained "... that sense of looking out for other

people” (p. 15) and that by applying this to her familial relationships, they have been strengthened.

*Empathy.* Autumn, Beth, Kat, Celia, and Molly all said that by attending the AEPs with a diversity of other students, and more specifically, by having the opportunity to hear about these students’ lives, they were challenged, and learned to be understanding and accepting of others. Autumn said she learned not to prejudge people, but rather to look at them as individuals and to focus on their good qualities. These skills, she said, have helped her to connect with her college classmates. Beth, Kat, and Molly all said that at the AEPs, they became familiar with the various and acute challenges that many people face and Kat and Beth both said that now, outside of school, they have a heightened empathy for others. Molly said that by hearing about “... every single person’s problems” at the AEP, “... nothing really surprises [her] anymore,” (p. 17) which she feels is an asset in her current volunteer work with youth-at-risk.

## **Student Wellbeing**

### **Counselling**

There were two key ways in which the former AEP students’ wellbeing was supported at the AEPs—through counselling services, and through a focus on their strengths. All of the former AEP students in my study described the nature and the value of the support they received from the counsellors at the AEPs they attended; support that predominantly targeted the maintenance and/or improvement of their social and/or emotional/psychological wellbeing. The counselling services provided at these AEPs correspond to Kim’s (2011) call for AEPs to incorporate practices that support students’ emotional wellbeing. They are also consistent with PP researchers’ call for schools to teach wellbeing, in the form of handling day-to-day stressors and thinking more realistically and flexibly about the problems they face (Seligman et al., 2009).

The former AEP students in my study said that the counsellors at the AEPs they attended: offered calm/non-judgemental listening, self-care education, and connections to outside resources. They also said the counselling services were highly accessible. Finally, they discussed benefits from taking part in the counselling at the AEPs, including the ability to resolve both day-to-day and pivotal life issues, and enhanced trust and communication skills.

### **Services.**

***Calm/non-judgemental.*** Four former AEP students described the value of the calm and/or non-judgemental approach of the counsellors at the AEPs they attended. Molly described one of the counsellors at AEP#2 as “really calming” (p. 5) and, similarly, Autumn said that the serene disposition of one of the counsellors at AEP#3 made her feel relaxed and able to focus in on the issue(s) at hand. Celia said that the staff at AEP#1 gained her trust by being non-judgmental and valuing what she had to say and Violet shared that the non-judgemental attitude of one of the counsellors at AEP#1 enabled her to express herself honestly.

***Self-care education.*** Three former AEP students discussed the self-care education, or tools to maintain/improve emotional/psychological health, that they received from the counsellors at the AEPs they attended. One of the counsellors at AEP#3 provided Autumn with advice, she said, “... that maybe we couldn’t get elsewhere or that we wouldn’t take kindly to [if it was] ... coming from immediate family” (p. 21). Molly talked about the skills she was able to acquire by taking part in the therapy classes at AEP#2. For example, she learned techniques, such as counting down from ten to one, that she can use if she is “... having a panic attack or something” (p. 5) and Kat shared that many of the self-care techniques she now employs, such as focussing on her successes, she learned from her counsellor at AEP#4.

**Connections to resources.** Beth and Autumn shared that the counsellors at AEP#3 connected students to outside resources. Beth said that the counsellors at AEP#3 helped students "... with absolutely anything, even outside of school" (p. 5), like health and housing issues. She said, "... they always knew what they could do to offer help" (Beth, p. 6). Autumn said one of the counsellors at AEP#3 helped her to take care of her personal affairs, such as arranging day-care for her son. And at AEP#2, when Molly was struggling with drug addiction, her counsellor connected her to a residential detox centre, where she received support to stop using drugs and alcohol. Although not done by counsellors, per se, McGregora et al.'s (2015) study revealed the efficacy of staff at AEPs connecting students to outside resources such as housing supports.

**Accessibility.** The former AEP students discussed ways in which the counselling services at the AEPs they attended were open in nature/highly accessible. Kat, Autumn, and Beth appreciated the open-door policy of the counsellors at the AEPs they attended. Kat said that this was important because sometimes when you're experiencing difficulties "... you need help just then" (p. 5). In a similar vein, Beth said that because the counsellors "... door was always open" (p. 7) at AEP#3, she was able to access their services straightaway when she needed something. Autumn said that when she was struggling with various personal issues prior to entering AEP#3, her mom connected her to a counsellor with whom she didn't click. She said, "... I gave up after that. I mean, honestly, I can't do a thing about this" (Autumn, p. 26). Autumn credits the inviting disposition and open-door policy of the counsellors at AEP#3 for her trying counselling again.

Five former AEP students discussed further ways in which the counselling services at their AEPs were easily accessible. When they weren't busy with other things, Beth said the counsellors at AEP#3 were in the academic room, checking on students. Violet described a similarly casual approach to engaging with students at AEP#1. She said that because the adults at

the program all provided counselling to the students, "... there was lots and lots of counselling going on all the time" (Violet, p. 5). Compared to her previous high school, Kat said that there were more counsellors at AEP#4 and she was introduced and encouraged to talk to them. At her previous high school, she said, "... it's more like if you need that you have to go out and seek that, which is really challenging when you're a teenager" (Kat, p. 5). AEP#4 also provided a room for outside professionals to use, which allowed for the meetings between Kat and her youth substance abuse counsellor to take place at the program.

Beth said that the one counsellor at AEP#3 with whom the students had a particularly good relationship gave out her cell phone number so that the students could contact her outside program hours. Likewise, at AEP#2, Molly said the counsellors would go above and beyond what counsellors at other schools would do. She shared that once, at the program, when she "... was having a really hard time[, she] ... just stormed out of the school and ... was like, 'I can't do this anymore!'" (Molly, p. 4). Her counsellor followed her a fair distance down the street to calm her down.

### **Benefits.**

*Day-to-day issues.* Autumn and Beth said they appreciated that the counsellors at AEP#3 were available to help them with day-to-day challenges/issues. Autumn said that when she was experiencing a challenge in her personal life, it would manifest at the AEP. She said that with the help of the counsellors, she was able to "... get it out and just talk about it and then set it aside" (Autumn, p. 31). Beth said that the ongoing help she received from the counsellors at AEP#3 to deal with various aspects of her personal life "... made the 'overwhelmingness' of it all a little less scary" (p. 13).

**Pivotal life issues.** Consistent with the AEP student participants in Jones' (2011) study, two of the former AEP students in my study discussed the value they perceived in being able to work through pivotal personal issues at the AEP. By gaining her trust, Celia said she permitted the staff at AEP#1 to help her work through her personal issues. In this way, she was able stop being a bully; to transform her physical strength into spiritual strength. Autumn said that the counsellors at AEP#3 "... were willing to really work through things with you ... and I actually had the opportunity to [work something through with one of them]" (p. 21).

**Trust.** Two former AEP students shared that the counsellors at the programs they attended helped them to regain their trust in others. As mentioned, by respecting her, or by providing non-judgemental listening and valuing what she had to say, the staff at AEP#1 gained Celia's trust. Previous to this, with the exception of her grandmother when she was very young, she had never trusted an adult. In the same way, Molly said, "I had no trust until I went to [AEP#2]" (p. 14). The one-on-one counselling she received at AEP#2 taught her to open up and to trust, and the therapy classes taught her to guard her heart. She said she now has a balance between trusting people and staying safe.

**Communication skills.** Celia and Violet discussed improvements to their communication skills that they linked to the conflict resolution provided at AEP#1. Celia described how conflict resolution taught her how to deal with difficulties without using her fists. Violet shared that this conflict resolution, facilitated by the counsellors, taught her how to deal with discord in relationships. She still draws upon these skills, she said, "... because conflict is hard" (Violet, p. 30). The positive outcomes Celia and Violet ascribe to having taken part in conflict resolution at AEP#1 correspond to de Jong and Griffiths' (2006) recommendation that AEPs provide adult



mentoring for students to change negative behaviours by such things as developing prosocial behaviours.

*Accessing help.* Two former AEP students said that by working with the counsellors at the AEPs, they learned how to access, and/or accept help. Autumn said that it was only by working with the counsellors at AEP#3 that she realized she needed, and learned how to accept help. Correspondingly, Kat said that it was during her time at AEP#4 that she started forming counselling relationships, "... where," she said, "I did have the space where I could talk these things through" (p. 21). She said that now, even when she's feeling good, she'll go to see a counsellor and talk, "Even just recognizing my strengths and what I'm doing right" (Kat, p. 21). Talking about what she's doing right parallels several of the strengths-based interventions (e.g., identifying personal strengths) Seligman et al. (2005) found contributed to increases in happiness and decreases depression in participants.

### **Strengths**

Another way in which the former AEP students' wellbeing was supported at the AEPs they attended was through a focus on strengths. Specifically, they shared that they were given the opportunity to discover and/or use/develop their strengths while at the programs. Five of the former AEP student participants shared that they discovered, two said they used, and one said she developed personal strengths at the AEPs. Also, three spoke of short- and/or long-term gains in such domains as motivation and academic self-efficacy as a result of the opportunity to identify and/or use/develop their personal strengths.

Consistent with the majority of the PP strengths-based literature (Miller, 2008), in general, the former AEP students, as well the teacher participants expressed a trait versus experiential view of strengths. This is evidenced in the way the former AEP students

predominantly spoke of *discovering* and *using*, versus *developing* strengths. Also, in their interviews, the three teachers who discussed their approach to attending to students' strengths (the teachers from AEPs #2, #3, and #4) spoke of helping students to discover and to use pre-existing strengths. For example, the teacher of AEP#2 said the staff sought to understand students' strengths "... and then give them those opportunities, like cooking class, baking ... where they [could] ... really shine."

***Discovering strengths.*** The former AEP students discovered their personal strengths while attending the AEPs either by the staff pointing them out, or by engaging in program activities that allowed their talents to come to the fore. At AEP#1, students were able to take part in a wide range of activities, including peer helping and creative writing, two areas in which Violet excelled. She said, "I didn't know these things were strengths before that. [The staff] helped bring them out" (Violet, p. 24). Molly said that the staff at AEP#2 was very encouraging of students. Students would often say to the teacher, "I can't do this. I'm so stupid." And [the teacher would] always reassure [them] that [they're] smart, [they] can do it" (Molly, p. 5). Although Molly had always enjoyed writing, she didn't realize that she had an aptitude for it until the staff at the AEP pointed it out. In addition, through the opportunities afforded her at the AEP, especially being part of a close-knit community, Molly overcame her shyness and discovered that she was a people person.

Autumn said that the staff at AEP#3 was very encouraging of students and "... remind[ed] us, 'You're important and this is what you're good at, so keep doing it'" (p. 28). They told Autumn that she had leadership qualities. Beth didn't explicitly mention *strengths*, but she said the life skills learning at AEP#3 allowed students the experience of non-academic *success*. At AEP#4, the staff brainstormed with Kat what her non-academic

strengths/accomplishments were and counted these toward course credit. Having her extracurricular activities acknowledged was important to Kat, because, she said, "... a lot of the typical courses in school I didn't excel at. The easiest one for me was probably English, but the other stuff didn't come easy" (p. 7).

***Using or developing strengths.*** Consistent with the literature on PP strengths-based education (e.g., Lopez & Louis, 2009), three of the former AEP students said that the staff at the AEPs encouraged them to use/develop their strengths by creating new or accessing underutilized resources. Kat said when the staff at AEP#4 noticed a strength in a student, they tried to give him/her opportunities to use that strength. She said, "If they ever thought you were really good at something, they would try to give you any opportunity to show that off[,] ... share whatever we had to share[, and] ... to establish who [you] are" (Kat, p. 16). With the help of the staff at AEP#1, Celia was able to use her strength of personality in a positive way. She said "[They] welcomed that and used that as a tool to try to get the bully inside of me to a more gentle place, a more understanding place" (Celia, p. 17). Finally, also at AEP#1, Violet was given the opportunity, through the peer helping program, to develop her communication skills. She said, "[Communication] became a real strength of mine because it was a natural strength that was given [voice]. ... It became quite natural for me" (Violet, p. 23).

***Positive outcomes.*** The former AEP students spoke of positive shifts in such areas as their motivation and academic self-efficacy as a result of identifying and using or developing their personal strengths at the AEPs. Molly credits the encouragement of the staff at AEP#2, including them pointing out her strengths, for her graduating high school. She said, "I probably wouldn't have graduated if I didn't go to [the AEP], ... [if I hadn't had] the encouragement" (Molly, p. 15). Similarly, Autumn said that the encouragement of the staff at AEP#3 helped her

to maintain her motivation for school. She said, “I felt like I needed to have that little bit of a backup. In case I fell back into not feeling motivated again, I’ve got someone behind me saying, ‘You know what, you’re really good at this and you can do it and we believe in you’” (Autumn, p. 29). Having an understanding of her strengths has helped Autumn successfully engage in group projects in college. She stated, “Knowing yourself [helps] and being able to present that to someone else and say, ‘Okay, this is how I can help the group and this is what we should really avoid for me’” (Autumn, p. 30).

Lastly, by developing her strengths at AEP#1, Violet was able to overcome her social anxiety, choose and advance her career, and improve her academic self-efficacy. By taking part in the peer helping program at the AEP, Violet learned key things to say and how to listen (e.g., she acquired “... [the tools] to bring that anxiety down. [Her] social anxiety,” p. 29) and was able to make headway in her career. When she was twenty, because of her active listening skills, she was selected to facilitate a young mothers’ group, which was “... one of the best things for [her] career-wise” (p. 23). She said, “I went on to do a lot of big-organizing types of things, but that was because of the experiences I’d had [at the AEP]. ... And it wasn’t that long [before] I was the head of a personnel committee of the association that ran the parenting group and I was hiring and organizing community festivals” (p. 23). Moreover, due to her academic success at AEP#1, Violet was inspired, post-graduation, to pursue a Master’s degree and a career in counselling. Before attending the AEP, Violet didn’t know she had academic abilities. She stated, “I saw myself as a complete loser. I was bottom of the [barrel]” (Violet, p. 24).

In line with previous research (e.g., Vadeboncoeur, 2009), the former AEP students in my study were not aware of their personal strengths before they were identified/brought out at the programs. Of the five principles of effective strengths-based education Lopez and Louis (2009)

identified, the former AEP students in my study shared information aligned with *individualization* and *intentional development*. Four former AEP students shared that the staff personalized their learning process through *individualization*, or thinking about and acting upon their unique interests and strengths (e.g., “This is what you’re good at, so keep doing it”). And Violet spoke of the way the staff at AEP#1 the *intentional development* of her strengths during activities.

In order to discover their personal strengths, Lopez and Louis (2009) suggest students complete a measure, such as the Clifton Strengths Finder. However, most of the personal strengths the former AEP students in my study discussed would not have been detected by such a measure (e.g., art and writing). Their strengths-identification was primarily facilitated by engaging in novel activities and their AEPs afforded them this opportunity through the provision of a wide variety of activities. In fact, the teacher participants of AEPs #2 and #3 spoke of giving students’ many opportunities, including cooking and art, so that they could “really shine.” This corresponds to Gentry’s (2009) assertion: “To recognize whether talent exists there must be opportunities for talent to emerge” (p. 265).

Several former AEP student participants discussed gains associated with the identification and use of their personal strengths in line with those identified in the PP literature. For example, Violet spoke of gains in academic efficacy (Austin, 2005), Molly spoke of enhanced productivity (“I probably wouldn’t have graduated if I didn’t go to [the AEP];” Clifton et al., 2006), and Autumn alluded to enhanced self-knowledge (“Knowing yourself [helps];” Clifton et al., 2006). Autumn and Violet spoke of a gains in an area not discussed in the PP literature. Autumn discussed gains in her motivation to attend, or perseverance in school (“In

case I fell back into not feeling motivated again, I've got someone behind me saying, 'You know what, you're really good at this'") and Violet said she was able to advance her career.

## **Student Learning**

### **Flexibility and Structure in the Organization of Academic Learning**

As in other qualitative studies of AEP students' experiences (e.g., Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette, 2011), the former AEP students in my study did not discuss the content of their academic learning. Rather, they emphasized the way their academic learning was organized. Specifically, they all articulated that the academic model at the AEPs they attended provided them with both a high degree of flexibility or choice as well as support in the form of appropriate structure. They discussed three areas of academic learning at the AEPs they attended in which they were provided with this flexibility and structure: the academic delivery model, course selection and content, and the teachers'/programs' expectations for attendance. Their descriptions of the provision of flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning at the AEPs, and the benefits of such approaches, are in line with research on AEPs and from a SDT perspective.

***Academic delivery model.*** All six former AEP students spoke of the flexibility within their AEPs' academic delivery model and of the structure that their teachers' support and guidance provided to this model. The self-paced academic models at AEP#2 and #3 were similar—there were academic blocks, but students chose what to work on during these blocks. Autumn shared that the academic model at AEP#3 taught her organizational skills and allowed her to build her confidence, both of which she links to her success in college. However, she also said this model required self-motivation, which she often lacked. In contrast, Beth maintained a good level of motivation to engage in coursework at AEP#3. She said she appreciated being able

to move through coursework at her own pace and often finished it quickly. Both Autumn and Beth liked the one-on-one help from the teacher at AEP#3—it was one of Beth’s favourite things about the program and Autumn said it was comforting “... know[ing] that you’ve got the support and that’s what helps ground you is having the support system” (p. 23).

Kat said that when she was an adolescent, she couldn’t deal with deadlines, and that therefore, a self-paced academic model was the only model that would have worked for her/allowed her to complete high school. She appreciated that the teachers provided one-on-one support, attending to the unique learning needs of each student. Molly liked that at AEP#2, she could choose what to work on during academic blocks and that she “... could be one-on-one with the teachers” (p. 4). She said the students at the program were very motivated to graduate “... and [the teacher] makes it pretty easy for us. I mean not easy, but she helped us out a lot” (Molly, p. 18). At that time in her life, Molly said, “Everything was really hard for me most of the time, but it was fine because [the teacher] helped me through” (p. 9). Molly is now attending night school, which is partially self-paced, and she said it has been helpful having previous experience with this academic model.

Violet shared that at AEP#1, although courses were taught to small groups of students, there was no set lesson plan. The teachers allowed the students to guide the conversations/subject matter and Violet said, “Wherever we were going, she’d follow us” (p. 26). Violet learned critical thinking skills through this process, which prepared her for the requirements of college. However, similar to Autumn, Violet experienced some difficulty with her motivation within the self-paced academic model of the AEP. She said, “It’s hard to do work on a self-paced program where there’s always a choice, but at the same time, compare that to the fact that I wasn’t doing anything when I wasn’t in that situation. It was challenging, but it still worked” (Violet, p. 7).

The importance the former AEP students in my study placed on the flexibility of their AEPs' academic model aligns with de Jong and Griffiths' (2006) suggestion that an effective practice within AEPs is teachers providing maximum flexibility in their students' learning process. Moreover, the style of support offered by teachers in the AEPs ("one-one-one", "positive", and/or "patient") is in line with a teacher behaviour that former AEP students in Morrissette's (2011) study described as beneficial; that is, offering guidance without becoming overbearing. The teacher support described by the former AEP students in my study is also consistent with the type under the category of *structure* within SDT, specifically, the teacher adjusting his/her teaching strategies to the level of the students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

***Course selection and content.*** All of the former AEP students shared that their AEPs provided them with structure with flexibility in course selection and/or course content. When students first arrived at AEPs #2, #3, and #4, they met with a teacher to create a timetable. Autumn said at AEP#3, "[The teacher would] have us do a little practice [to] see what our skills are; what we're capable of doing. ... And then she can offer up suggestions in terms of what kind of classes [we] can take" (p. 34). Both Autumn and Beth said there were courses they needed to take to graduate at AEP#3, but they were able to choose others based on their interests. Autumn said the timetable she created was not set in stone. Instead, "... when you get settled, if anything changed, you could meet [with the teacher] again and they'd figure something out" (Autumn, p. 35). She appreciated that the staff at AEP#3 counted activities that students were doing outside of their assigned courses toward course credit, so for example, going to the gym counted toward PE.

At AEP#4, Kat said that students' teacher advisor would help them with their timetables on an ongoing basis. She said, "[Your teacher advisor] kept track of everything for you and if



you were hoping to graduate soon, they'd help you build a plan for that and keep you on track” (Kat, p. 5). This is aligned with Morrissette's (2011) finding that former AEP students valued their teachers' providing a clear structure in terms of actions required to graduate. At AEP#4, staff also brainstormed with students what they were doing outside of the program and when possible, counted these activities for course credit. Kat said, “... I was doing a lot of knitting and so I got credit for textiles 12 or 11 for that” (p. 7).

At AEP#1, the staff and students together decided on assignments to complete within individual courses, which Violet said gave students a sense of ownership over their learning. For example, she said in socials, the students decided that they would each research their own childhood neighbourhoods and take the class there to share what they had learned. The fact that AEP#1 counted non-traditional “... hands-on sort of stuff, ... like going to plays ... for course credit,” was very important to Celia. She said, “... it's the way I learn. ... I have to get out and do it. ... I think what [AEP#1] showed me was to see what I needed and to try to adapt that in my life. ... I loved learning. I went from F's to A's and B's” (Celia, pp. 3-18). In her last years in the program, she had to do traditionally-formatted courses, but the staff had prepared her for that. And in turn, completing these courses prepped her for college. Celia said, “That bridging ... was good for me. ... I loved going to college. I loved it because I was ready” (p. 19).

Teachers meeting with students to create a timetable when students first arrive at the AEPs is in line with Morrissette's (2011) finding that AEP teachers should engage students at the point of initial contact to understand their unique needs. And the teachers aligning courses and assignments with students' needs and interests is consistent with Reeve et al.'s (1999) description of teacher autonomy support (i.e., fostering students' needs, interests, and preferences). The gains in autonomy and competence that have been linked to autonomy support

(Skinner & Belmont, 1993) are evidenced in several of the former AEP student participants' statements, including, "I think what [AEP#1] showed me was to see what I needed and to try to adapt that in my life. . . . I went from F's to A's and B's" (Celia, pp. 3-12). Moreover, the enhanced positive emotionality that has been shown to be associated with autonomy-supportive classrooms (Patrick et al., 1993) is apparent in Celia's statement, "I loved learning."

***Attendance expectations.*** Five former AEP student participants mentioned that their AEPs provided structure with flexibility in student attendance expectations during academic blocks. Violet said of AEP#1 that although the courses were taught in small classes, students did not arrive at the same time and Molly said of AEP#2, "We also got to show up late at the AEP. That was nice because lots of [the students there] had issues and couldn't always make it on time" (Molly, personal communication, September 8, 2014). Similarly, even though specific subjects were only offered during specific blocks at AEP#4, Kat said because many students worked, the staff was still accommodating of differences in attendance. Allowing for differences in student attendance was found by Vadeboncoeur (2005) to be an important practice in AEPs.

Autumn said that although the staff at AEP#3 encouraged students to come into the academic room at the same time, they were not questioned or reprimanded if they arrived late. When no longer attending the program, she missed the structure that these expectations provided. She said, "We had a routine, and you have to make your own routine [once you leave]. Keeping the structure is difficult" (Autumn, p. 16). The provision of clear expectations, or of *structure*, has been shown by SDT researchers to meet students' need of competence (e.g., Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The staff at the AEPs being flexible with student expectations depending on students' abilities is also an example of the provision of structure (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007).

## Life Skills Learning

In line with de Jong and Griffiths' (2006) assertion that the development of life skills is an important practice in AEPs, five former AEP student participants spoke of the life skills learning in the form of workshops and guest speakers, within the AEPs they attended. At AEP#1, the students' learned life skills in relation to self-advocating and garnering resources. Violet said, "... we would go to the school district and fight for our funding together. ... They gave us agency around what was happening [and] I [became] very much a self-advocate. ... I knew how to get the resources better" (pp. 22-23). Celia also learned how to "... gather resources" (p. 20) while at AEP#1. She said, "If I need something, I'm very resourceful and I think I learned that at [AEP#1]" (Celia, p. 2). The parent effectiveness training (PET) offered at AEP#1 taught Violet key parenting skills that her own parents had not had. As a result, she said, "I was able to change my parenting, rather than follow the way I had been parented. I was able to learn different ways of being in the world" (p. 16). Also at AEP#1, through the "... life skills classes about self-esteem and body image ... and the messages we give each other as women," (p. 11) Celia said she learned how to develop and maintain good friendships with women. She said, "That's where my relationship with women really started to grow ... [and since then,] I've always been fortunate to have good friendships" (Celia, pp. 9-16).

At AEP#2, Molly learned how to make a resume, look for work, and budget. She said that "... know[ing] how to get a job and how to budget" (Molly, p. 21) helped her make her way when she was living in a different province. Molly also learned, she said, "... what was safe and unsafe [partying, which] definitely [helped] when I went out to parties" (p. 17). Autumn said that "Life skills [was] an added bonus of an alternative school versus another school" (p. 8). AEP#3 provided her with the opportunity to learn about such things as cooking, her rights as a tenant,

and community supports. She said this learning gave her a more realistic view of what her life would be like once she finished high school and also helped her post-graduation. For example, now, living on her own for the first time, she always makes sure her rent is paid on time. Beth also discussed the life skills learning at AEP#3. She said, “We did other things, like ... FoodSafe and we had a lady come in and teach us CPR. So they teach you skills ... that allowed you to be successful in other ways” (Beth, p. 15).

These examples of life skills learning mirror a key aspect of teacher *autonomy support* and *involvement* as described in the SDT literature (Reeve et al., 1999; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007)—specifically, acknowledging and addressing students’ needs. Teacher autonomy support and involvement have been shown to contribute to the satisfaction of students’ SD needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence. In the above examples, one of the former AEP students spoke of a link between her life skills learning and her autonomy need satisfaction (“They gave us agency around what was happening”); one spoke of a link between this learning and her belonging need satisfaction (“That’s where my relationship with women really started to grow”); and four spoke of a link to their competence need satisfaction (e.g., “[The] skills ... allowed you to be successful in other ways”).

## **Ambiance**

### **Structure and Culture**

The former AEP students spoke of the unique ambiance of the AEPs they attended. This ambiance was created in two main ways. First, by students and teachers together determining structure of, and culture at the AEPs—or students negotiating the schedule/activities and behavioural norms/interventions within the parameters the staff outlined. Such practices were not only discussed by the former student participants, but by all four teacher participants in their

interviews. For example, the teacher of AEP#1 said, “Our belief was that [our students] left the regular school system for a good reason, so we’re not going to repeat the same stuff. ... It’s their lives and they need to be highly consulted.” The second way that the unique ambiance of the AEPs was created was by a homelike physical set-up.

***Schedule/activities.*** Autumn said that at AEP#3, the staff and students “... all worked together to ... [determine] the way things worked. ... We helped them better the program. ... [For example,] kitchen hours; they worked with us for a little while. It was trial and error for break-time” (P. 6). The students also had a say in determining yearly and weekly activities, including workshops and guest speakers. Autumn said, “When you come back to school [after the summer], they do a check-in; what we want to do this year” (p. 14). And a key purpose of the weekly activity called *check-in*, was for students to express their opinions about and to have a say in determining upcoming activities.

***Behavioural norms/interventions.*** Celia, Violet, Autumn, and Beth all shared that at the AEPs they attended, the staff and students collaboratively created the culture, or established norms for appropriate student behaviour and/or addressed student misbehaviour. At AEP#1, students determined their personal goals for their time in the program and helped the staff to understand how best to aide them in meeting these goals; and staff and students together addressed student behavioural issues. Violet said, “I ... share[d] that my goal was to actually come to school and not skip out ... [and] he just said, ‘That’s great, good goal. How are we going to help you with that?’” (p. 4). Students at AEP#1 also had a say in establishing program rules/guidelines. Celia said, “... decision-making was collaborative. ... We were making our own guidelines, our own rules for how we wanted [things] to be, ... [which created] a sense of community” (pp. 19-20). When an aspect of a student’s behaviour became problematic at

AEP#1, Violet said the staff would initiate a *committee*, where a group of students and staff together defined the difficulty, looked for solutions, and supported the student to make changes. Collaborative activities such as these gave Violet the sense that her education was for her and that no one was making her complete it. She said, “There were edges, it wasn’t like we could just do anything, but it was definitely based around our needs, rather than some other system’s needs” (Violet, p. 6).

At AEP#3, the students played a key role in establishing behavioural norms and resolving conflict. Autumn said the students helped to develop guidelines for student behaviour, such as “... no gossip ... and the teachers were there just for enforcement” (p. 6). Beth said that when a fight broke out between students at AEP#3, the staff would have the students try to work it out on their own. Only if they were unable to, she said, “They’d do the, ‘You have to see where this person’s coming from and you need to put your opinions aside and realize what’s going on for them’” (p. 6).

Staff providing students with control over the goings-on and the culture at the AEPs, is congruent with autonomy-supportive teaching practices SDT researchers outline (Reeve et al., 2009). These practices are believed to meet students’ needs of autonomy and competence (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In their interviews, the former AEP students in my study did not perceive connections between exercising this type of control within the AEP and their competence need satisfaction, but did perceive links to their autonomy (e.g., “It was definitely based around our needs, rather than some other system’s needs”) and belonging (e.g., “[The collaborative approach created] a sense of community”).

## Physical Set-up

All of the former AEP students spoke of the relaxed, homelike physical environment at the AEPs they attended. This homelike physical environment was created by the configuration and use of the physical space and the provision of food. It is interesting that this environment was created in four very different buildings: a house, an office space, a former elementary school, and a former hospital. Violet said of AEP#1, “It was very much like a home. It was made to make people feel comfortable. There were sofas, a kitchen, ... [and] they brought a dog to school” (pp. 6-8). “At lunchtime, we’d be in the kitchen making food. ... Sometimes we’d have big meals together” (p. 9). Celia described the ambiance of AEP#1 as “... comfortable and relaxing and inviting. If I had been up all night because I couldn’t find a place to sleep, I could sleep on the couch. Nobody’s going to judge me or tell me to get to class. It was what I needed. ... I wasn’t living at home. I was living on the streets, but I went everyday because it was wonderful. It was my home” (pp. 1-8). Compared to the previous schools she attended, Molly described AEP#2 as “... more like a home life, except you do your school work there too. ... It was really cozy, big kitchen, bathrooms with a shower if you wanted. ... Everyone would usually do their hair and makeup at school. ... They also had food there, so that was nice” (pp. 3-7).

Autumn said the set-up of AEP#3 was “... very casual. ... The environment, just everything was so together. ... It was a home-away-from-home. ... I felt at home and want[ed] to be there” (pp. 3-5). The provision of a kitchen and food was important to her. She didn’t “... always have time to make breakfast in the morning,” (Autumn, p. 8) so she would often start her day at the AEP by going to the kitchen for something to eat. And at lunch, the staff and students, “Everyone would sit down [in the kitchen] and chat about what’s in the news or whatever. ... Just having the reinforcement of it’s a nice place to be. All those things were good; a good

motivation to be there” (Autumn, pp.10 -28). Beth also said of AEP#3 that “... it [was] more like a home environment than a school environment. You were more comfortable to be there. ... You walk in [the classroom] and there’s [the teacher’s] desk and she has a big filing cabinet that’s covered in pictures of ... the previous [students]. She’s got us all over her desk” (pp. 1-5).

The “laid back” atmosphere of AEP#4, Kat said “promoted learning” (pp. 2-5). “[The teachers] had set up [the classrooms] how they wanted them. It wasn’t desks facing a teacher; usually they were in a circle ... [and some] classrooms would have a fridge with granola bars” (Kat, p. 8). The fact that the AEP offered a lunch program was important to Kat. She shared, “I didn’t have my stuff together enough to put a lunch together for myself every day and you can’t learn and focus when you’re hungry. ... That place is like my second home” (Kat, pp. 2-16).

Vadeboncoeur’s (2015) case study revealed the efficacy of AEPs providing spaces with comfortable seating options for the purpose of students’ engaging in intimate conversations and/or study. Moreover, the importance of the configuration of materials within classrooms is mentioned in the SDT literature. Reeve et al. (2009) identify an autonomy-supportive practice as teachers arranging seating and materials to facilitate student engagement in conversation and with learning materials. However, as opposed to a sense of autonomy or competence (which are associated with autonomy-supportive teaching practices; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), the physical environment at the AEPs appeared to contribute to the former AEP students’ belonging need satisfaction (i.e., “... it was wonderful. It was my home”). It also made them feel comfortable and at-ease (e.g., “You were more comfortable to be there”) and increased their motivation to attend, or perseverance in school (e.g., “I went everyday because it was wonderful. It was my home”).



## Summary of Convergences and Divergences Between Previous Literature and My Analyses

Table 4 highlights convergences and divergences between the themes, or the categories of program qualities/practices revealed in my literature review and summarized in Table 1 (p. 69) and those revealed in the narratives of the former student participants in my study and summarized in Table 3 (p. 166). As can be seen, my cross-narrative analyses not only add a new category (*ambiance*), but elaborate on those in Table 1 by generating subordinate categories.

Table 4

### *Program Characteristics: Convergences With Literature and New Contributions*

| Theme   | Convergences With Literature  | New Contributions  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Relationships</b><br><i>Teacher/student relationship</i> | <p><b>Academic guidance:</b> Teachers offer instrumental academic guidance to students. For example, they listen carefully, clearly acknowledge students' perspectives, and continue to learn and share their learning with students.</p> <p><b>Acceptance:</b> Teachers show acceptance/lack of judgement toward students; they take a compassionate perspective on them. They also use positive versus punitive measures for student behavioural management.</p> <p><b>Affection:</b> Teachers give affection/warmth to students, by, for instance, showing an interest in and supporting them.</p> | <p><b>Non-authoritarian approach:</b> Teachers' interactions with students are egalitarian in nature.</p> <p><b>Maternalism:</b> Teachers act maternally toward students.</p>                                  |
| <i>Student/student relationships</i>                        | <p><b>Activities/practices:</b> AEP incorporates practices that help foster positive relationships between students. These include having students collaborate with each other in pursuit of common goals and discuss and reflect upon one another's strengths.</p>   | <p><b>Empathy:</b> By learning about the various and acute challenges faced by their diverse classmates, students are challenged and grow to understand and accept their classmates and others in general.</p> |

| Theme                    | Convergences With Literature   | New Contributions   |
|--------------------------|--|---|
|                          | <p><b><i>Kinship:</i></b> Students feel a sense of kinship, or belonging with other students at the AEP.</p> <p><b><i>Support:</i></b> Students look out for/support one another (perhaps linked to their belonging need satisfaction; Osterman, 2000).</p>  |   |
| <b>Student Wellbeing</b> | <p><b><i>Counselling (“mentoring”)</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Day-to-day and pivotal life issues:</i></b> Counsellors help students work through their day-to-day, as well as major life issues.</p> <p><b><i>Communication skills:</i></b> Counsellors teach communication skills in the form of reflective thinking and conflict resolution.</p> | <p><b><i>Calm/lack of judgement:</i></b> Counsellors are calm and non-judgemental.</p> <p><b><i>Self-care education:</i></b> Counsellors teach techniques to maintain/improve emotional/psychological health, such as relaxation exercises.</p> <p><b><i>Connection to resources:</i></b> Counsellors connect students to outside resources such as housing supports.</p> <p><b><i>Accessibility:</i></b> Counsellors have an inviting manner and an open-door policy.</p> <p><b><i>Trust:</i></b> Counsellors teach students to “open up” and to trust.</p> <p><b><i>Accessing help:</i></b> By working with counsellors, students learn what their needs are and how to accept/access help.</p> |
|                          | <p><b><i>Strengths</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Discovering strengths:</i></b> Staff helps students discover their strengths.</p> <p><b><i>Using or developing strengths:</i></b> Staff helps students use and/or develop their strength by creating new or having</p>   | <p><b><i>Discovering strengths:</i></b> Students discover their personal strengths by the staff pointing them out or by engaging in activities that allow their strengths to come to the fore.</p>  |

| Theme                   | Convergences With Literature   | New Contributions   |
|-------------------------|--|---|
|                         | <p>students access previously underutilized resources.</p> <p><b>Positive outcomes:</b> Strengths identification and use lead to gains in self-knowledge, academic efficacy, and productivity.</p>   | <p><b>Positive outcomes:</b> Strengths identification and use lead to gains in students' motivation to attend school.</p>                                     |
| <b>Student Learning</b> | <p><b>Flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning</b></p> <p><b>Behavioural expectations:</b> Teachers provide structure, or clear parameters for behavioural expectations, while also being flexible depending on students' abilities.</p> <p><b>Course selection and content:</b> Teachers inform students of courses they need to graduate and provide parameters for course content; but in both cases, students are provided with choices based on their interests.</p> <p><b>Attendance expectations:</b> Staff is flexible with student attendance expectations, depending on students' abilities and needs.</p> | <p><b>Academic delivery model:</b> The academic delivery model is flexible (e.g., self-paced) and the teachers' support provides structure to this model.</p> |
|                         | <p><b>Life skills learning</b></p>   | <p><b>Life skills learning:</b> Life skills learning is provided at the AEP.</p>  |
| <b>Ambiance</b>         | <p><b>Structure and culture</b></p>  | <p><b>Schedules/activities:</b> Students have a say in the AEPs' schedule (e.g., break time) and the types of activities they engage in.</p>                  |

|                 | Theme                         | Convergences With Literature | New Contributions  |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| <b>Ambiance</b> |                               |                              | <b><i>Behavioural norms/interventions:</i></b> The staff and students collaboratively establish norms for appropriate student behaviour and/or address student misbehaviour. |
|                 | <b><i>Physical set-up</i></b> |                              | <b><i>Physical set-up:</i></b> The physical set-up of the AEP is home-like (i.e., there are comfortable seating options and food is provided).                               |

## Chapter Six

### Summary and Conclusions

As I stated in my introduction, research indicates that a startling number of youth in North America are disengaging from and/or dropping out of school (e.g., Bowers et al., 2013). These youth are increasingly either electing to attend or being placed in a growing number of AEPs (e.g., Kim, 2011). However, there is relatively little research on effective practices within AEPs, especially "...on the connection between [AE characteristics and] student outcomes related to improvements in school behaviours, graduation rates, and post-school success" (Jolivette et al., 2012, p. 16). My study contributed to the promising body of literature investigating student perceptions of connections between AEP characteristics and outcomes for them (e.g., Kim, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

On a personal level, as a counsellor and as a researcher, I have encountered many youth for whom the mainstream school system has not worked, and a good number who have positive things to say about their experiences in AEPs. In my study, I wanted to hear from them. In light of the prevailing negative conceptions of AEPs and of the students who attend them (Kim, 2006; 2011), stereotypes that function to further marginalize AEP students, in my study, I wanted to hear "good examples" of AEPs meeting the acute and varied needs of their students. Because many of the challenges youth-at-risk face persist into adulthood, I also wanted to understand whether and how former students link positive experiences in AEPs to sustained positive outcomes post-AEP.

To ground my study, I drew on research on AEPs. I also drew on self-determination theory (SDT) and positive psychology (PP), two bodies of theory and research that suggest what aspects of AEPs might make them successful (i.e., attending to students' motivation, wellbeing, and strengths). Situated within the promising new field of research examining good alternative

education practices from the perspectives of the students themselves (e.g., Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette, 2011), I conducted narrative interviews with former students of AEPs. I asked three main research questions:

- (a) How do former students of AEPs perceive/describe their experiences in AEPs?
- (b) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs affected them at the time of attendance?
- (c) How do they perceive/describe how their experiences in the AEPs have contributed to their current life circumstances?

In this final chapter of my dissertation, I consider key findings from the narratives of individuals who attended AEPs for at least one year, and have been away from the AEP for at least one year. Also, I discuss the contributions my study makes to theory, research, and practice, acknowledge its limitations and consider possible directions for future research.

### **Key Findings**

All of the former AEP students in my study reported very negative experiences in “regular” high school, and that they had reached a critical juncture in their engagement in school at the time they entered the AEPs. In contrast, they reported primarily positive experiences in the AEPs. My analyses revealed answers to my three research questions. The former AEP students described their experiences in AEPs and how these experiences facilitated their success both while they were attending and, to a lesser extent, after their time in these programs.

My cross-narrative analysis revealed seven recurrent themes, or aspects of the AEPs that the former AEP students underscored. The seven themes are *relationships*, *counselling*, *strengths*, *flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning*, *life skills learning*, *structure and culture*, and *physical set-up*. Five of the themes (*relationships*, *counselling*,

*strengths, flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning, and life skills learning*) align with one of the three categories of practices that my literature review revealed to be potentially effective for use with AEP students—that is, social, emotional, and academic, or as represented in Table 1 (p. 69), *relationships, student wellbeing, and student learning*.

My study revealed that the former AEP students' social needs were attended to most directly by their *relationships* with their teachers and other students. Their emotional needs were addressed through *counselling* services and opportunities to recognize and/or to use/foster their personal *strengths*. Finally, their academic needs were attended to through the *flexibility and structure in the organization of academic learning* and the *life skills learning* at the AEPs. My cross-narrative analysis revealed two themes that do not directly correspond to the categories of social, emotional, or academic (but do link well with the SDT literature). These two themes (*structure and culture* and *physical set-up*) represent a fourth category I've called *ambiance*.

### **Relationships**

Research indicates that students attending AEPs place principal importance on their relationships with teachers and with other students (e.g., Jones, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Morrissette, 2011). This was mirrored in my study. Of their experiences at the AEPs they attended, the former AEP students spent the most time discussing qualities of their relationships with a key teacher and with other students. Also consistent with previous literature on AEPs (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Smith et al., 2008), these relationships appeared to be especially important to them because of their experiences of isolation/alienation at their previous schools.

Each of the six former AEP students identified one teacher at the AEP she attended with whom she had a close bond (the one who participated in my study) and described characteristics of this teacher that helped establish/maintain this bond. Similar to other qualitative investigations

of AEP students' experiences (e.g., Jones, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Morrisette, 2011), although the former AEP students in my study appreciated the academic guidance this teacher provided, they emphasized her emotional/psychological support (i.e., her accepting and affectionate manner). My study revealed two qualities of this support not in this literature: five of the former AEP students said their teacher was non-authoritarian and three said that she was mother-like.

Two of the former AEP students associated their strong relationships with their teacher at the AEPs they attended to gains in their ability to cope with challenges, or their resiliency. Also, strong bonds with their teachers increased two of the former AEP students' understanding of/empathy for their teachers as well as and one former AEP student's ability to communicate with others who could help her. Many young people have under-developed help-seeking abilities, and unfortunately, the more they need help, the less likely they are to seek it out (e.g., Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Consistent with my findings, Rickwood et al.'s study investigating factors that inhibit versus facilitate help-seeking in young people, indicated that help-seeking is aided through established social relationships built on trust and understanding. Rickwood et al. highlight the need for investigations into how best to establish these kinds of relationships and my study identified qualities of individuals (i.e., teachers and counsellors) that enable young people to do just that.

Through activities that addressed/strengthened aspects of student/student relationships, such as those that brought to light students' challenges, half of the former AEP students in my study said they developed a kinship with other students and four said they were challenged, and learned to be understanding/empathic toward others. And consistent with Osterman's (2000) review of SDT literature, it may have been the students' sense of kinship with one another at the



AEPs that inspired them to support one another. A sense of kinship with, and understanding of, other students at AEPs was also reported by participants in Jones' (2011) qualitative study of former AEP students' experiences. However, Jones' study did not reveal how such relationships can be developed.

### **Counselling**

Although practices that support students' emotional/psychological wellbeing are important for all students (e.g., Seligman et al., 2009; Zins et al., 2007), they are particularly so for students attending AEPs. These students experience increased rates of disabilities, addictions, and mental health disorders (e.g., Duncan et al., 1995; Fergusson & Horwood, 1997). There is little research documenting effective practices for supporting students' emotional/psychological wellbeing within AEPs (e.g., D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). My study indicated that students' emotional/psychological wellbeing can be supported at AEPs through the counselling services there and through activities that help students to recognize and/or use/develop their personal strengths.

The former AEP students' narratives revealed aspects of the counselling services at the AEPs that were particularly important to them. For example, most described their counsellors as calm and/or non-judgemental; three discussed the self-care techniques, or tools to maintain/improve emotional/psychological health that they were taught (such as tools to reduce their anxiety); and three said that when necessary, their counsellors liaised with other professionals such as addictions counsellors. All of the former AEP students also said that the counselling services at the programs were highly accessible, which facilitated them in accessing this support, or in "help-seeking."

Two of the former AEP students said the counsellors helped them work through day-to-day issues and two said they helped them work through pivotal life issues. Although this help was in the emotional/psychological domain, it influenced their ability to engage in/concentrate on academics. Autumn alluded to this when she said that talking to the counsellors at AEP#3 allowed her to "... to get it out ... and then set it aside" (Autumn, p. 31). Consequently, these findings underscore the growing recognition by educational researchers and practitioners that students' emotional needs must be addressed in order for them to optimally engage in academic learning (c.f., Zins et al., 2007).

The former AEP students linked the counselling at the AEPs to enhancements in three areas (areas in which youth attending AEPs often struggle) (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Rickwood et al. 2005). By taking part in the counselling at the AEPs, two former AEP students said they gained an ability to trust others, two experienced improved communication skills, and two spoke of an enhanced ability to accept/access help from others.

### **Strengths**

Consistent with previous research on AEP students (e.g., Vadeboncoeur, 2009), because their shortcomings or "failings" had taken centre stage at their previous schools, the former AEP students in my study were not aware of their personal strengths prior to attending the AEPs. Most of the former AEP students said they discovered one or more of their personal strengths and half said they were able to use/develop these strengths at the AEPs. Their strengths were highlighted at the AEPs in one of two ways: by a staff member pointing them out and/or brainstorming with them what they might be or by engaging in activities that accessed (or developed) them.

Because they had fallen behind and were struggling in traditional subjects, in order for their strengths to come to fore during activities, it was necessary that they were offered a wide variety of activities at the AEPs. Such activities included peer helping, creative writing, and life skills learning. Another set of activities that would access AE students' unique strengths are outlined by Rogers and Schofield (2005). Based on their qualitative study in an AEP, these authors advocate AE programming, "... that engages struggling students in curricular projects that allow them to creatively draw on the material contexts of their lives and their multiple literacies" (p. 218). Such programming would integrate students' out-of-school literacies, such as cultural resources and their multimedia literacies, like videos.

Consistent with an approach advocated by PP researchers (i.e. Lopez & Louis, 2009), three former AEP students said staff at the AEPs helped them use/develop their strengths by creating new or having them develop underutilized resources. For example, Kat said, "If they ever thought you were really good at something, they would try to give you any opportunity to show that off" (p. 16). Several of the former AEP students discussed positive outcomes associated with the identification and use/development of their personal strengths. These positive outcomes were in areas that had been problematic for them (and many students attending AEPs) (Foley & Pang, 2006) and had negatively impacted their success at their previous schools. For example, Autumn said that having her strengths pointed out by the staff at AEP#3 increased her motivation for/perseverance in school. And by using or developing their personal strengths, both Violet and Molly talked about reductions in their social anxiety and Violet spoke of improved academic self-efficacy.

## **Flexibility and Structure in the Organization of Academic Learning**

The organization of the academic learning and the content of the life skills learning at the AEPs under investigation were autonomy-supportive—staff at the programs recognized/incorporated students' needs, interests, and preferences (Reeve et al., 1999). The theme *structure and culture* (i.e., students exercising control over the goings-on/culture at the AEPs) also represents an autonomy-supportive component of the AEPs. Because of their focus on student autonomy, of the seven themes, practices highlighted in these three (*flexibility and structure...*, *life skills learning*, and *structure and culture*) most directly attend to student empowerment. I argue in *Chapter One* that the empowerment of youth attending AEPs is extremely important.

As with other qualitative investigations of AEP students' experiences (e.g., Jones, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrissette, 2011), the former AEP students in my study did not discuss the content of their academic learning. In fact, Beth said, “[Academics] was kinda something to get through” (p. 15) and Kat said, “It’s not about the individual courses; it’s one thing in your life that you have to get done to be able to move on to the next part” (p. 25). However, the former AEP students did discuss the flexibility, or choice, and support in the form of appropriate structure, that were present in the organization of their academic learning at the AEPs.

My review of the literature on AEPs, SDT, and PP strengths-based education revealed the importance of teachers providing structure, or clear parameters for academic activities and behavioural expectations while also being flexible depending on students' abilities (e.g., Jones, 2011; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). The former AEP students said they were provided with this type of structure and flexibility in the academic delivery models, course selection and content, and staff attendance expectations at the AEPs. All

six former AEP students discussed the flexibility inherent in their AEPs' academic delivery models, which were predominantly self-paced, and the structure that their teachers' support provided to these models.

The majority of the former AEP students said that although there were defined academic blocks at the AEPs they attended, staff members were accommodating of differences in student attendance. This accommodation was essential because most of the former AEP students in my study had commitments and/or issues that prevented them from attending school on time and/or regularly. These commitments/issues would have prevented them from succeeding "regular" high school where regular attendance is generally mandatory.

The majority of the former AEP students linked their involvement in academic models that provided both a high degree of flexibility and also appropriate structure to positive outcomes for them. As is the case for many AEP students (e.g., Foley & Pang, 2006), Kat struggled with anxiety. She said that the self-paced model at AEP#4 prevented the escalation in anxiety and resultant disengagement from coursework that she experienced at her previous high school. Several linked their involvement in flexible, yet structured academic delivery models to gains in their autonomy. Also three said it helped them not only complete their coursework at the AEP, but provided them with such things as organization skills and self-confidence to succeed at college. It is important to prepare students in AEPs for college because not only are youth-at-risk less likely to complete high school (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006), they are also less likely to enter college (e.g., Seffrin & Cernkovich, 2008), and if they do, they are less likely to persist there (e.g., Johnson & Reynolds, 2013).

## **Life Skills Learning**

In contrast to the content of their academic learning, the former AEP students in my study did value the content of their life skills learning. Although previous research on AEPs highlights the importance of life skills learning (e.g., de Jong & Griffiths, 2006), it does not specify characteristics of this learning. The life skills learning at the AEPs under investigation in my study was in the form of workshops and guest speakers. It included topics targeting important aspects of students' non-academic lives such as self-esteem/body image, "safe partying," making a resume/looking for work, budgeting, tenant rights, and CPR.

Four of the former AEP students linked the life skills learning at the AEPs they attended to their sense of competence. Because the content of the life skills learning at the AEPs was matched to students' non-academic concerns, the former AEP students in my study reported that it helped them to find success in their personal/work lives. Consequently, my study indicated that life skills learning may not only be an appropriate way of fostering autonomy, but also competence in youth-at-risk and within the unique context of AEPs.

## **Structure and Culture**

Most of the former AEP students said that they had a say in, or a sense of control over the goings-on and culture at the AEPs. In particular, they said that staff and students collaboratively negotiated the schedule/activities and established norms for appropriate behaviour and/or addressed student misbehaviour. These practices not only targeted the former AEP students' autonomy, but their sense of personal agency and responsibility (two areas that did not appear to be well-developed prior to their attendance at the programs). In general, agency and responsibility are important qualities to develop in youth attending AEPs (Gottfredson, 2005; Parrot & Strongman, 1984; Tarnowski & Nay, 1989). Research indicates that youth who

experience challenges such as delinquent behaviour and/or have LDs, challenges that are overrepresented in students attending AEPs (and were experienced by several of the former AEP students in my study), also typically perceive low levels of control over their circumstances and (perhaps as a consequence) assume less personal responsibility in academic settings.

As mentioned, researchers argue that belonging need may be at the forefront for marginalized populations (e.g., Battistich et al., 2007), such as youth-at-risk and in AEPs; however, little is known about how to foster this need in these youth and contexts. My study indicated that among other characteristics of AEPs (e.g., relationships with teachers and other students), a sense of control over the structure of, and culture within AEPs can contribute to students' sense of belonging.

### **Physical Set-up**

All of the former AEP students described a relaxed, homelike physical environment at the AEPs they attended, which they related to the configuration and use of the space (e.g., comfortable seating options, kitchens) and the provision of food. These homelike physical environments were especially important to the former AEP students in my study (and likely important to students at AEPs in general), at least in part, because they all had negative associations with traditional school settings. In addition, most had troubled home-lives (and thus especially benefitted from a “home-away-from-home”) and couldn't meet their food intake needs on their own—“... and you can't learn and focus when you're hungry” (Kat, p. 2).

Four of the former AEP students linked the homelike physical set-up, including the provision of food at the AEPs they attended to their sense of comfort (e.g., “You were more comfortable to be there,” Beth, p. 1). Also, most linked this environment to gains in areas in which many AEP students experience deficits (e.g., B.C. Teachers' Federation, 1996; de Jong &

Griffiths, 2006). For example, the majority of the former AEP students made links to their sense of belonging, one to her learning, and one to her motivation to attend, or perseverance in school.

### **Contributions to Theory**

#### **Self-Determination Theory**

My study built on SDT in two important ways. First, it revealed conditions that helped students to meet their needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence within AEPs. SDT holds that classroom conditions can support students' psychological needs (Reeve, 2006). Although the majority are relevant to AEPs, these conditions have been primarily researched in mainstream school settings.

The former AEP students in my study said that their autonomy was supported at the AEPs they attended through, for example: (a) flexible attendance expectations; (b) life skills learning in alignment with their needs and interests (e.g., budgeting and housing); and (c) having a say in, or sense of control over, the schedule/activities and behavioural norms/interventions. Their need for belonging was supported at the AEPs through: (a) non-authoritarian teachers; (b) practices that brought to light other students' challenges; and (c) the ability to exercise control over the schedule/activities and behavioural norms/interventions. Finally, their need for competence was supported by, for example, teachers incorporating into the curriculum activities in which their unique strengths came to the fore. These activities were "non-traditional" and included peer helping and life skills learning.

The second way my study contributed to SDT is by revealing that the need for belonging may be at the forefront for female students. SDT does not prioritize psychological needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Vallerand, 2012) and SDT research typically has shown no difference in need satisfaction between females and males (Sicilia, Sáenz-Alvarez, González-Cutre, & Ferriz,



2014). However, the former AEP students in my study spoke most about their sense of belonging at the AEPs they attended. The fact that all of the former AEP students in my study were female likely contributed to this emphasis on belonging. Research from other perspectives has shown that females place greater importance on comforting skills, intimate communication, and interdependence than do males (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005). Violet spoke to this in her interviews. She said, “I think females really operate in terms of relationship; that’s so important to us” (p. 19). There is a need for more research on the relative importance of belonging need satisfaction with a larger sample and representation from across the gender spectrum.

### **Positive Psychology**

My study built on PP theory in two key ways. First, it strengthened PP’s foundation through connections to SDT (PP has been criticized for lacking a strong theoretical foundation) (Fernandez-Rios & Novo, 2012; Miller, 2008). In *Chapter Two*, I argued that the approach, or attitude that an educator takes while delivering PP strengths-based education can be informed by SDT. Specifically, this approach will be most effective if it is autonomy-supportive—if it incorporates choice and encourages self-regulation (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). My findings corroborated this argument. The former AEP students’ unique strengths came to the fore, not only through the provision of a wide range of activities, but through choice as to whether and how to participate in them.

The second way my study contributed to PP theory is by revealing that PP’s highly structured approach to strengths-identification may not be optimal in all contexts. Most of the PP literature, for the purpose of strengths-identification, encourages the use of an instrument such as the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* (e.g., Lopez & Louis, 2009). However, a more flexible (and

malleable) view of strength fits with the basic tenets of PP and, perhaps, can be more easily applied in educational contexts, including AEPs. The majority of the personal strengths the former AEP students in my study discovered at the AEPs would not have been detected by the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*. They described the efficacy of the more casual approach that was adopted at the AEPs.

## **Contributions to Research**

### **Alternative Education Programs**

There is a dearth of research investigating the impact of AE practices on student outcomes such as “... improvements in school behaviours, graduation rates, and postschool success” (Jolivette et al., 2012, p. 16). My study contributed to the promising new field of research employing in-depth qualitative methods to investigate students’ perspective on the impact of AEP practices (Jones, 2011; Morrisette, 2011; Kim, 2011). My study built on these investigations in two important ways. First, it is unique in its efforts to examine whether and how AEP characteristics support students beyond their time at the programs. The challenges faced by youth-at-risk often persist into adulthood (e.g., Zigmond, 2006) and, consequently, the long-term implications of AEP characteristics are important in determining their merit. Second, unlike its predecessors, my study is grounded in theory and research that is relevant for understanding what best practices might look like in AE, attending to students’ motivation, wellbeing, and strengths. These bodies of research and theory helped me to create a vision of what successful AEPs might look like, and I used this vision in my study in three ways. It helped me to define my research questions and methods; develop my interview protocols; and understand when something in the participants’ narratives was important.

## **Self-Determination Theory**

My study contributed to SDT research in several ways—first, by the use of in-depth qualitative interviews. Most of the research in the field of SDT has used survey self-report measures (e.g., forced choice questionnaires), which represent researcher-derived categories and not those identified by participants, in their own words (Urduan & Turner, 2005). The second way my study contributed to SDT research is by including students who attended AEPs. Although SDT interventions hold great relevance and promise for youth in AEPs, my review of literature revealed no studies on these students in these contexts.

The third way my study contributed to research in the field of SDT is by investigating the positive impact of autonomy-supportive teaching practices. Most studies in the field of SDT have focused on the negative impact of controlling teaching practices. Finally, my study built on SDT research by investigating whether and how students' needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence are met. Of SDT's three basic psychological needs, autonomy has received the majority of attention (Osterman, 2000; Sheldon & Ryan, 2011), which is unfortunate considering that the three needs hold different import to different groups of students (Deci et al., 1992). Correspondingly, my study revealed that of SDT's three basic psychological needs, the former AEP students prioritized the satisfaction of their need of belonging while they were attending the AEPs. They also underscored the satisfaction of their needs for autonomy and competence, which they perceived to be a vehicle through which other needs and issues could be addressed.

## **Positive Psychology**

My study built on PP research in two key ways. First, it contributed to the study of *positive institutions*, in particular, positive schools. Of the three pillars of PP, *positive subjective experience*, *positive personal traits*, and *positive institutions* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi,

2000), the first two have received the majority of attention (Hart & Sasso, 2000), with little research on the latter, especially in the area of school/educational psychology. The former AEP students in my study perceived that the AEPs they attended were positive institutions, in which their social, emotional, and academic needs were met. The second way my study contributed to PP research was by investigating the use of strengths-approaches with youth-at-risk in AEPs. Most of the studies in the field of PP have included limited samples, omitting, for example, marginalized individuals, who could benefit from strengths-based practices (Henrich et al., 2010).

### **Implications for Practice**

My study provides a view of AEPs as positive contexts that can effectively support some youth-at-risk. The implications of my study for practice are twofold. First, school administrators, educators, and members of the general public need to re-examine their current notions and acquire an authentic view of AE students and contexts. Second, when encountering students like those in my study, staff at regular school and AEPs should attend to the social, emotional, and academic needs of this population by: (a) helping them to meet their three SDT psychological needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence; and (b) focussing on their strengths.

As discussed by the former AEP students in my study, negative stereotypes of AE contexts and students serve to further marginalize AE students; they act as a deterrent to access to AEPs, affect district support of AEPs, and have a deleterious effect on how AE students are treated by members of the larger society (e.g., Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 1994; Vadeboncoer, 2005). Several of the former AEP students in my study experienced difficulties in accessing AEPs. For instance, when Kat spoke to the school counsellor at her previous high school, this counsellor told her, “Don’t go to there ... bad kids go there and it’ll make things

worse” (p. 2). Also, Celia said she left her career as a counsellor at AEP#2 because of politics at the district level that resulted in the AEP not receiving enough funding. Finally, Violet chose to graduate from a mainstream high school, to which she didn’t feel connected, because she thought that the AEP would look bad on her resume.

In order for preconceived notions and negative stereotypes of AEPs, and of the students who attend them, to be replaced by a more authentic and empathic perspective, it is paramount that educators, school administrators, as well as other members of the general public acquire a more accurate view of these students and contexts. One way this can be achieved is through exposure to AEP students’ stories, or narratives. As a first step toward this goal, the narratives in my study, and in other similar studies, should be made required reading for school administrators and educators in both regular schools and in AE settings.

The former AEP students in my study, like participants in other similar studies (e.g., Jones, 2011; Morrissette, 2011; Vadeboncoeur, 2005), described very negative experiences at “regular” high school. Although they felt that they were underserved academically, they highlighted experiences of social and emotional adversity to a greater extent. Researchers and practitioners more and more understand the need to educate the heart as well as the mind; however, social-emotional wellbeing is not “top of mind” in educational research, and in practice in regular schools (c.f., Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman, & Zumbo, 2014). This is especially problematic for youth-at-risk because they are especially in need of interventions that address their social-emotional wellbeing (e.g., Fergusson & Horwood, 1997).

In contrast to their experiences at regular high school, the former AEP students in my study described very positive experiences at the AEPs they attended. They described characteristics of the AEPs that they perceived addressed their social, emotional, and academic

needs and that facilitated their success, not only while they were attending, but beyond their time at the AEPs. If these characteristics had been in place in their previous schools, the negative experiences that led to them attending the AEPs in the first place could have been avoided. For example, if the staff at her previous schools had worked to understand and to share with Kat what they recognized as her personal strengths, they might have focused less on her “shortcomings.” This in turn might have prevented Kat from developing negative self-schemas. She said, “Looking back, I had this idea of myself from such a young age, even kindergarten or grade one. I was told that I was a bad kid, so I believed that. ... Not even necessarily having someone say that specifically, but through the stuff that they were saying. ... I never thought that I could get good grades ... [or] that I would go to college, just from having those ideas pressed on me” (p. 3).

The characteristics of the AEPs that the former students in my study described align with research and theory from a SDT and PP perspective. In particular, they described: (a) important characteristics of the counselling services they received; (b) how their three basic psychological needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence were met; and (c) how the staff facilitated them in identifying and using and/or developing their personal strengths within the AEPs. Based on my study, staff at other AEPs—and regular high schools—, when working with similar students to those in my study, should consider incorporating the following characteristics into their practice.

First, they should facilitate students in working through day-to-day and pivotal life issues with the help of a counsellor. In order to facilitate their engagement in counselling, it is important that the counsellors make themselves available to students by introducing themselves, encouraging students to make contact when necessary, and adopting an open-door policy.

Counsellors should also assume a non-judgemental manner and teach students skills (or self-care techniques).

Second, staff should promote student autonomy—and learning—through a flexible, yet structured approach to academics. For example, they should: (a) allow students to move through courses at their own pace, with a teacher on-hand to offer academic support when necessary; (b) inform students about required courses and provide clear parameters for course content, but when possible, allow students to choose courses and assignments that align with their interests; and (c) provide students with defined academic blocks, but also flexibility around attendance. Staff should further promote student autonomy by allowing them a say in, or a sense of control over, life skills learning opportunities and schedules and activities.

Third, staff should help students meet their need for belonging by: (a) carefully developing and managing their relationships with them; (b) offering activities that facilitate positive student/student relationships; and (c) providing a home-like physical environment at the program/school. My study revealed that although teachers should provide academic guidance, the provision of emotional support is primary. Also, it revealed that one way that staff can facilitate positive relationships between students is by allowing them to share aspects of their personal lives, including their unique challenges, with one another.

Finally, staff members should promote student competence by providing them with: (a) life skills learning opportunities that correspond to their needs and interests and (b) the opportunity to identify and use/develop their personal strengths. In order for students' strengths to come to the fore, staff should offer a wide variety of activities such as art and peer counselling.

## Limitations and Future Directions

### My Sample

There are two key limitations in my sample: bias and size. These limitations do not represent fatal flaws in my study, but rather, influence the representativeness of my findings. One possible source of bias in my study is that, unintentionally, my recruitment process attracted all female participants. As mentioned, research shows that females place greater importance on relational qualities, such as comforting skills, intimate communication, and interdependence than do males (Ryan et al., 2005). Correspondingly, of their experiences at the AEPs, the former AEP student participants spent the most time discussing their relationships with a key teacher and with other students. Also, of SDT's three basic psychological needs, they discussed their need for belonging the most. Had males also participated in my study, the former AEP students' (a) relationships at the AEP and (b) belonging need satisfaction may not have been at the forefront. They may have identified other factors as especially important such as challenging tasks and competence need satisfaction.

Another possible bias in my sample is that my recruitment may have yielded particularly interested/invested teachers and did yield successful students. One way I recruited participants was by asking teachers already participating in Dr. Perry's study, *Promoting Positive Life Outcomes for Children and Youth Who Struggle in School*, to both participate in my study and to contact former students to invite them to participate. Because they had previously volunteered to be a part of Dr. Perry's study, the teachers in my study may represent a particularly interested/invested group of teachers. I asked these teachers to invite any former students to participate, not just successful ones. However, because all of the former AEP students in my study graduated from high school and were doing relatively well in their lives at the time of



participation, teachers may have chosen to recruit former students who they judged were particularly successful in and beyond the AEP.

Many AEP students do not find success while attending, and/or after their time at, AEPs (e.g., Kim, 2011). It could be that the same characteristics that the former AEP students in my study found helpful, students who do not find success at AEPs find problematic. For example, the former AEP students in my study appreciated having a say in, and a sense of control over, the *structure and culture*, including behavioural norms/interventions at the AEPs. This sense of control might not benefit all AE students, including those with emotional-behaviour disorder (EBD) who are overrepresented in AEPs (Duncan et al., 1995). Research indicates that although students with EBD can learn to handle choice and responsibility with time, they initially benefit from highly structured classrooms, "... in which expectations, rules, and schedules are clearly defined, specified, explained, and enforced" (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 179).

In order to understand features of AEPs that promote positive outcomes for *all* students, not only female students who find success at AEPs, future studies investigating AEP students' experiences should attempt to have representation from across the gender spectrum. Also, they should consider recruiting participants in a different way. For instance, they might first acquire lists of former students of particular AEPs, invite them all to participate, then recruit their former AEP teachers. I worked toward representativeness in my study by not assuming former students would report uniformly positive experiences in their AEPs or attribute outcomes to their experiences in their AEPs or to these experiences alone.

The second limitation of my sample is that it is small. Although there is no norm for sample size in narrative research (e.g., Kim, 2011; Patsiopolous & Buchanan, 2011), "... most narrative studies are conducted with smaller groups of individuals than the sample size employed

in traditional research” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 9). Narrative researchers must themselves determine a suitable number of participants for their topic and with the resources they have available (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). My recruitment yielded six former AEP students, which was sufficient for my study for three important reasons.

First, the information in the former AEP students’ narratives allowed me to answer my research questions. O’Reilly and Parker (2011) write: “... the researcher should be pragmatic and flexible in their approach to sampling and ... an adequate sample size is one that sufficiently answers the research question” (p. 192). Second, their six narratives were enough to capture a range of experiences and not too many such that experiences became repetitive (Lieblich et al., 1998; Mason, 2010). Third, I was able to make full use of the interviews with former AEP students by including in my results all of the themes and examples revealed in my analyses. This may not have been the case with a larger sample and it is “... potentially unethical to recruit further participants to a study and not make full use of the data they provide” (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 195). Nonetheless, it is difficult to achieve representativeness with a small sample and future studies might consider using a larger sample from a greater number of AEPs.

### **Narrative Interviews**

There are a couple of limitations with narrative interviews related to the notion that a definitive “truth” in stories may not exist and that all interpretations are subjective in nature (Badley, 2003). First, it can’t be assumed that stories will be told in the same way at different times and in different contexts, and, correspondingly, stories that are elicited in interviews will be different from stories that naturally arise in other contexts (Bold, 2012). In my study, participants might have felt hesitant to reveal what they perceive as their own imperfections or to “lose face” (McCracken, 1988). In order to mitigate this potential hazard, to reassure participants

that "... the potential loss-of-face that can occur in any conversation... is not a grave danger in the present one" (McCracken, 1988, p. 38), I used several tactics. I told them how I will protect their identity in my research; that they can discontinue their participation and/or retract any of their comments at any time; and that they will have an opportunity to provide feedback about my results—in particular, about anything they would like changed, added, or omitted from the portion pertaining to their interviews. I also attempted to present myself as a non-judgmental and friendly listener, as "... benign, accepting, curious (but not inquisitive)... [and] prepared and eager to listen to virtually any testimony with interest" (McCracken, 1988, p. 38).

Another limitation with narrative interviews is that the researcher's interpretations of participants' stories are not objective. They are influenced by his/her previous experiences, assumptions, and personality (Yow, 2005). As a way of checking the accuracy of my interpretations, I asked the former AEP students to provide feedback about the narratives I wrote for them and I gave them the opportunity to comment on the portions of my cross-narrative findings that pertained to their narratives. I also kept and referenced a reflexive journal and had two other researchers act as reviewers to determine that my data corroborated the themes I identified. However, these limitations with narrative interviews suggest that the stories participants tell, and the analysis of the interviews don't necessarily represent the actual events as they took place. In order to capture the "actual events" at AEPs, future studies might consider using methods such as program observations, with multiple observers and/or videotaping. Incorporating these additional methods will allow for triangulation, or corroboration of data, in the study of practices that generally work for AEP students.

## **Analysing Documents**

A key limitation involved in combing through and referencing existing documents is that the information in many documents is not recorded with research in mind. As a result, it may be overly subjective and/or incomplete. Also, because documents get dated and updated, not all of the documents I retrieved were a good representation of what was going on at the precise time the former student attended the AEP. Finally, at least one of the documents I included in my study was likely generated at the district level (i.e., “[AEP#4],” 2014) and thus, reflected a mission/mandate, rather than what was happening on site. In order to mitigate these hazards, researchers conducting similar studies might consider only including research articles that were created at the time of interest in their document analysis. To help me in my selection of quality documents and websites, I asked teachers and administrators for recommendations, and I used Scott’s (1990) criteria for choosing and handling documentary sources: *authenticity*, *credibility*, *representativeness*, and *meaning*. I also focused on content that was created when the former student attended the AEP.

## **Future Directions**

There are two other ways in which researchers examining effective qualities of/practices within AEPs could advance my findings. First, they might consider using experimental design. This would allow for cause-effect conclusions to be drawn about the impact the AEP characteristics I identified have on student outcomes. Such studies could employ quantitative measures of both: (a) the characteristics of the AEPs that the former AEP students in my study emphasized in their narratives; and (b) the outcomes they linked to these characteristics. Finally, future studies could draw on other bodies of literature and theoretical approaches in addition to, or in place of, the SDT and PP strengths-based literature that guided my data collection and

analysis. For example, they could draw on the psychological resilience literature. Psychological resilience, considered as a process rather than a trait, and aided by protective factors, is an individual's ability to positively adapt to stress (e.g., Rutter, 2008; Grossman et al., 2011). My participants' experiences at the AEPs, especially their relationships with their teachers and/or counsellors, appeared to be protective factors, providing a buffer against negative outcomes, and promoting positive outcomes. Celia articulated this very well. She said, "It's because of ... [the teacher and counsellor team] ... that [I made it]. ... They took me in and parented me, not just taught me. ... As I get older, I'm able to see it more clearly. I always said as a counsellor too, if you have one person in your life who believes in you and loves you and cares about you, that's all you need. It may not be your mom or your dad" (pp. 2-18).

### **Final Thoughts**

My study contributed to our understanding of important characteristics of effective AEPs from the perspective of former students. It revealed: (a) some important social, emotional, and educational characteristics of AEPs; and (b) associations between these characteristics and positive short- and long-term outcomes for students. In general, my study revealed that the experiences some students have in AEPs, specifically the memories they have of these experiences, are extremely positive. The former AEP student participants in my study felt they were well supported at the AEPs and that they learned important skills while there that have sustained them over time. A view that AEPs can be positive contexts for supporting some youth-at-risk is important because negative conceptions of AEPs abound (e.g., Kim, 2011) and funding for them is continually threatened. My study counters these stereotypes and makes a case for continuing to make effective AE programs available to students who are unsuccessful in mainstream programs.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Former Student Interview #1 Protocol

As much as possible, participants will be encouraged to use their own words to describe their experiences. Though there is a logical flow to the topics in this protocol, it is intended to be flexible enough to allow participants to lead the conversation. In addition, I am not committed to asking every question or asking questions in the order they appear, so long as the broad topics are addressed. When appropriate, I will follow the questions outlined in the protocol with probes to get more detail. These probes could include, for example, “Tell me what that was like for you?” \*Note, the most open-ended questions are left aligned, and under these questions, probing questions are numbered.

#### Opening Procedures

- Begin with an informal conversation with the participant for a minute or two (e.g., introductions, perhaps ease of finding the meeting location, offer of something to drink/water).
- Thank the participant for meeting and review the information in the *Information Letter and Consent Form* with him/her. Highlight the information in the various sections of this form, such as study’s purpose and procures; the time commitment; potential benefits and risks of participation; and confidentiality.
- If the participant is still interested in participating, have him/her sign the consent form. Remove the last page of the consent form (& keep) and give the first three pages to the participant for reference.
- Remind the participant of the previous invitation to bring items from their time in the alternative program. If s/he has brought items, ask him/her to bring them out.
- Finally, make sure s/he is comfortable and ready to begin the interview, and turn on the audio-recording device and begin the interview.

#### High School Experiences

When did you last attend high school?

Tell me about your high school experiences.

1. What were some of the things you most liked about high school?

2. When you look back now, what are some of the most difficult things you experienced?

### **The Alternative Program**

How did you come to attend the alternative education program?

1. Was it your choice to attend the program?
2. Do you remember some of the reactions you had when you first arrived? **If yes**, can you describe these for me?

Tell me about your experiences in the [name of program] program, from the time you entered to the time you left?

1. How would you compare your experiences in this alternative program to your experiences in other high schools and/or other programs?
2. What was a typical day like in the program?
3. Tell me about some common activities in the program.
4. What was the teacher(s) like?
5. Were there other adults working in the program? Tell me about them.
6. Can you tell me about the other students?
7. How was the inside of the program set up (e.g., were there several rooms, what were the work spaces like)?
8. What were some high points from your time in the alternative program?
9. Can you think of some challenges you had while you were there?

### **Artefacts**

Did you bring any items from your time in the alternative education program? **If yes**, please share them with me. Tell me what they mean to you.

### **After the Alternative Program**

Tell me about what you've been doing since your time in the alternative program.

1. What are some high points you've experienced since your time in the alternative program?
2. Tell me about some important relationships you've had.
3. What are the main challenges you've experienced?
4. Have you continued to learn (e.g., in school, in a work setting, and/or on your own)? Tell me about these experiences.

**Closing Question**

Is there something I should have asked you that I didn't think to?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

## **Appendix B**

### **Former Student Interview #2 Protocol**

As much as possible, participants will be encouraged to use their own words to describe their experiences. Though there is a logical flow to the topics in this protocol, it is intended to be flexible enough to allow participants to lead the conversation. In addition, I am not committed to asking every question or asking questions in the order they appear, so long as the broad topics are addressed. When appropriate, I will follow the questions in the protocol with probes to get more detail. These probes could include, for example, “Tell me what that was like for you?”

\*Note, the most open-ended questions are left aligned and under these questions, optional probing questions are numbered.

#### **Opening Procedures**

- Begin the interview with an informal conversation with the participant for a minute or two (e.g., asking how s/he has been since the last time you met, asking what s/he’s been up to, perhaps sharing what you’ve been doing).
- Thank him/her for meeting and review the purpose of this second interview (to delve deeper into his/her experiences at the alternative program and whether and how s/he sees connections between these experiences and what s/he’s been doing since).
- Then make sure s/he is comfortable and ready to begin the interview, and turn on the audio-recording device and begin the interview.

#### **Experiences in the Alternative Program**

##### ***Relationships***

What are some of the key relationships you had in the alternative program? Tell me about them.

What did these relationships mean to you?

1. What stands out in your mind about your relationship with your teacher(s)?
2. If there were other adults working in the program, what kind of things come to your mind when you think about your relationship with them?
3. What about the other students in the program? Tell me about your relationships with them.

##### ***Wellbeing***

In general, would you say your experiences in the alternative program made you feel successful?

**If yes,** tell me about some experiences that made you feel successful.

**If no**, can you tell me what happened in the program to make you feel this way?

1. Did you/do you feel some things got in the way of your being successful in your alternative program? Can you tell me about some of these? Have you experienced similar challenges since your time in the program? **If yes**, can you describe these to me?
2. What were your strengths as a student? Did you or do you feel these strengths were valued by the staff and/or students in your alternative program? **If yes**, can you explain/give examples?
3. Do you see connections between these experiences and your:
  - a) Feelings about yourself (e.g., self-confidence)?
  - b) Motivation to attend/complete school?
  - c) Belief that you could achieve your goals in life?
4. Would you/can you connect your experiences in the alternative program and things that were happening in your life outside school while you were attending the program? **If so**, what are some examples?

### ***Learning***

Are you satisfied with what you learned (and the amount that you learned) in the alternative program? Explain.

Can you describe for me the way that academics were taught in the alternative program?

1. Did this approach work for you? **If yes**, why did it work for you? **If no**, why didn't it work for you?
2. Did this approach fit your academic needs? Did it fit with what you consider to be your academic strengths? **If yes**, how did it fit your needs/strengths?

### **Experiences after the AEP**

Now we'll talk about your experiences since you've left the alternative education program.

### ***Relationships***

What skills do you have that help you keep your relationships with other people (e.g., friends, family, and/or coworkers) healthy and successful? Did you learn or improve any of these skills in your alternative program? **If yes**, how did you learn or improve them there?

1. What are the skills that you have that help you deal with problems in relationships? Did you learn or improve any of these skills in your alternative program? **If yes**, can you tell me how you learned or improved them there.

***Wellbeing***

What are you most proud of in your life now? How did you come to get or achieve this (or these)?

1. Do you connect your experiences in the alternative program and your ability to get or achieve this (or these things)? **If yes**, what are these connections?

Can you tell me some of the ways you've been able to deal with challenges in your life?

1. Did you learn any of these coping strategies in the alternative program? Can you describe how or give a couple examples?

***Learning***

Can you connect your experiences in the alternative program and your learning (e.g., in school, work, and/or on your own) since you left the program? If yes, tell me about the connections you're making. Give an example or two.

1. Have they helped you with your learning? **If so**, how?

**Closing Questions**

If you could wave a magic wand and create the "perfect" alternative education program, what would it look like?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

## **Appendix C**

### **Teacher Interview Protocol**

As much as possible, teachers will be encouraged to use their own words to describe their perceptions of the way that the alternative education program functioned when their former student was enrolled. Though there is a logical flow to the topics in this protocol, it is intended to be flexible enough to allow teachers to lead the conversation. In addition, I am not committed to asking every question within a category or asking questions in the order they appear, so long as the broad topics are addressed. Finally, when it seems appropriate, I will follow questions with other probing questions. Such questions would look like, for example, “Can you share more about what that was like for you?”

#### **Opening Procedures**

- Begin with an informal conversation with the participant for a minute or two (e.g., how his/her week’s been, perhaps sharing a bit about my week).
- Then thank the participant for meeting and review the information in the information letter and consent form with him/her. Highlight the information in the various sections of this form; especially, describe the study’s purpose and procures, the time commitment, potential benefits and risks of participation, and confidentiality.
- If the participant is still interested in participating, have him/her sign the consent form. Remove the last page of the consent form (& keep) and give the first three pages to the participant for reference.
- Finally, make sure s/he is comfortable and ready to begin the interview, and turn on the audio-recording device and begin the interview.

#### **Work History**

Tell me about your work history.

- How long have you been working in this alternative education program?
- Where did you work before you began working here?
- What made you want to teach in an alternative setting?

#### **The Alternative Education Program**

##### ***Student Body***

Tell me about the students you teach.



When was [student name] enrolled in the program? During the time that s/he was enrolled, were the students similar to the ones you teach now? **If not**, how were the students different when [student name] was enrolled?

- When [student name] was enrolled, were there common characteristics among the students? **If yes**, what were these?
- What were some differences you saw between students? How did [student name] stand out for you?

### ***Program Goals***

Tell me about the mission or goals of this program? Do they fit well with your mission/goals for teaching and learning? Can you give some examples?

Have the mission and/or goals changed since [student name] was here? **If yes**, how have they changed? Why have they changed?

Was the program well-resourced when [student name] was enrolled? Did you feel you had the resources you needed to meet the mission and goals of the program at that time? To meet your mission/goals for teaching and learning? To meet the needs of the students in the program?

### **Characteristics of the Program**

#### ***Relationships***

Is helping students to build positive relationships (with you/other staff/their peers) a goal of the program? **If yes**, how do you approach that goal? Can you give some examples?

- Was this also a goal when [student name] was attending the program? **If yes**, was it approached in the same way that it is now?

What do you do to foster positive relationships with your students?

- Would you characterize the relationship you had with [student name] as positive? How did you know?
- Was this always the case? **If not**, can you explain how your relationship with [student name] changed over time?

Were there other adults working with the students when [student name] was enrolled in the program? **If yes**, who were these individuals?

- How would you characterize their relationships with students? With [student name]?
- How would you characterize the relationships [student name] had with other students while s/he was in the program?

### ***Student Wellbeing***

Can you describe a typical day in the program? What are some common activities?

What was a typical day like when [student name] was enrolled?

- How do you think these activities (or this context) supported the students in the program when [student name] was enrolled?

How does [name of program] address the personal challenges faced by students? Can you give some examples?

- When [student name] was attending, did the program help students to cope with their personal challenges in the way it does now? **If not**, please explain/gives examples of the way the program's approach has changed since [student name] attended.

### ***Student Learning***

Student's academic needs within alternative programs like [name of program] are diverse. When [name of former student] was attending the program, how was instruction organized to meet students' diverse academic needs?

- Were students on individualized programs?
- How were they evaluated?
- How were their unique capabilities/strengths identified and encouraged?

### ***Closing Questions***

If you could wave a magic wand and create the "perfect" alternative education program, what would it look like?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that has not yet been addressed?

## Appendix D

### Documents Included in Document Analysis

[AEP#1] *History from 1971-2011* (2011). Unpublished manuscript.

[AEP#2]: *Social and Personal Responsibility Curriculum* (2011). Unpublished manuscript.

[AEP#4] [Website], (2014, September 15). Retrieved from

<https://ce.sd61.bc.ca/>

Artz, S. & Nicholson, D. (2010). Reducing aggressive behavior in adolescent girls by attending to school climate. In M. Chesney-Lind & N. Jones (Eds.), *Fighting for girls: Critical perspectives on gender and violence* (pp. 149-173). New York: SUNY Press.

Kent, A. (n.d.). Moms enjoy day care at own school. *Victoria Times-Colonist*.

Moyer, L. S., & de Rosenroll, D. A. (1984). Goal Attainment Scaling: Its use with pregnant and single-parent teenagers in an alternative education setting. *Canadian Counsellor*, 18(3), 111-116.

## Appendix E

### Information Letter and Consent Form for Former Students

#### *Study: Former Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Their Alternative Education Experiences: A Narrative Analysis*

#### **Dear Former Student,**

I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. The purpose of this letter is to describe my research study to you and invite you to participate in it. My research study is part of my degree program.

#### **I. STUDY PURPOSE AND INVITATION**

My study, titled “Former Students’ Perceptions of the Impact of Alternative Education Characteristics: A Narrative Analysis” will investigate: (a) how adults who attended alternative education programs during high school remember their experiences in those programs; and (b) what connections, if any, they make between those experiences and experiences they’ve had since leaving the program. I would like to interview you since you attended [name of alternative education program] for at least one year and have been out of this program for at least one year. Also, I would like to interview your teacher from [name of alternative education program] to learn about the program from his/her point of view. Research like this is needed to help us understand what more might be done to support youth in alternative education programs.

#### **II. STUDY PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will interview you twice. We can meet at a place and time that you choose. The interviews could last for one and a half hours, depending on how much you want to talk. In the first interview, I would like to hear your story about high school, what it was like for you, how you came to be in the [name] alternative program, what that experience was like for you, and what you’ve been doing since you left the program. In the second interview I will ask you to reflect on particular experiences in the alternative program and how they are connected to your life since leaving the program. My interview questions will be open-ended, so that you can direct our conversations. The interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed to text. You will have an opportunity to read and comment on the interviews and my interpretations of them.

#### **III. TIME COMMITMENT**

You will be asked to dedicate approximately five hours to my study, including: the brief conversation we’ve already had about my research project (15 minutes); reading and signing the consent form (15 minutes); one and a half hours for each of the two research interviews; and one to two hours to read and comment on the interviews and how I have interpreted them.

#### **IV. POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

I hope participating in my study helps you to discover positive things about yourself. Sharing your insights about what your experiences in the [name] program have meant to you can benefit other youth in similar

programs. Your experiences can help researchers and teachers to make alternative education programs work for youth.

#### **V. POTENTIAL RISKS**

Risks associated with participating in my study are small. However, I understand that reflecting on your past experiences may cause emotional upsets. If you experience any uncomfortable feelings as a result of participating in this research, please consider speaking with someone who is close to you or to your former teacher. If you are in Victoria, consider accessing counselling at the Esquimalt Neighborhood House (250-360-0644) or calling the Vancouver Island crisis line at 1-888-494-3888. If you are in the lower mainland, consider accessing counselling at the Covenant House (604-647-4480) or calling the Vancouver crisis line at 604-872-6311.

#### **VI. PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

#### **VII. CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will keep everything you tell me during the interviews in strict confidence. Every effort will be made to keep your identity in this study private. In publications and presentations that result from this study, a pseudonym will be used instead of your real name and information about your alternative education program that could identify you or your program will be disguised or left out. **However**, because my research is about a small number of participants in very unique situations (e.g., your former classroom), I cannot guarantee absolute anonymity.

#### **VIII. CONTACT INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY**

If you have any questions or would like further information about this study, please contact me or my supervisor.

#### **IX. CONTACT FOR CONCERNS ABOUT THE RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you can contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services (604-822-8598) or if long-distance, email ([RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca)).

#### **X. ACCESS TO THE STUDY RESULTS**

If you would like to receive a summary of my research results, please provide me with your contact information when you sign and submit the consent form (see page 4 of this document).

**\*\*Please return this page. Keep the study information (pages 1 & 2) and a copy of this page (page 3) for your own records\*\***

**CONSENT:**

I have read the letter describing this research study, titled “Former Students’ Perceptions of the Impact of Their Alternative Education Experiences: A Narrative Analysis.” I understand the nature of my participation in it. I understand my participation is voluntary and the nature of my participation prevents the researchers from guaranteeing absolute anonymity in reports and presentations that result from it. I understand I may withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences.

My signature indicates my desire to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

I do not wish to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a summary of the results of this study.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

### Information Letter and Consent Form for Teachers

#### *Study: Former Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Their Alternative Education Experiences: A Narrative Analysis*

#### **Dear Teacher,**

I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. The purpose of this letter is to describe my research study to you and invite you to participate in it. My research study is part of my degree program.

#### **I. INVITATION AND STUDY PURPOSE**

My study, titled "Former Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Alternative Education Characteristics: A Narrative Analysis" will investigate: (a) how adults who attended alternative education programs during high school remember their experiences in those programs; and (b) what connections, if any, they make between those experiences and experiences they've had since leaving the program. I would like to interview students who attended an alternative education program for at least one year and who have been out of the program for at least one year. Also, I would like to interview the teachers that these students had while they were in the program. The teacher interviews are designed to gather information about the alternative education program; particularly, teachers' perspectives about what was going on in the program when their former students (the ones in my study) were enrolled. You are invited to take part in this study because you are a teacher in an alternative education program [name of program].

#### **II. STUDY PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to contact one or more of the students who have attended (but are no longer attending) [name of alternative education program]. These former students would include individuals who attended the program for at least one year while you have been working there and have been out of the program for at least one year. I will ask you to share an information letter I have prepared for them. The letter will describe my study and ask if they are interested in participating. If they are interested in participating, you can ask them if you can supply me with their contact information so that I can contact them directly with further information. If any of your former students agree to participate in my study, I would also like to interview you at a place and time of your choosing for approximately one to one and a half hours. During the interview, I will ask a series of open-ended questions about the program in which you work, especially about the time when the former student was enrolled. The interview will be audio-recorded and will later be transcribed into a text document.

#### **III. TIME COMMITMENT**

You will be asked to dedicate approximately three hours and 15 minutes to my study, including: the brief conversations we've already had about my research project (30 minutes), reading and signing the consent form (15 minutes), one hour to contact former students in order to determine if any are willing to participate in my study; and an hour and a half for the interview with me.

#### **IV. POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

I hope participating in my study helps you to reflect on positive aspects of this alternative education program. Hopefully, you will experience a sense of satisfaction in sharing insights about your work. Your insights will be used in writing the results from my research, which will inform researchers, policy makers, and practitioners about how alternative education programs can meet the unique needs of youth who struggle in school and in life.

#### **V. POTENTIAL RISKS**

The risks associated with participating in my study are minimal for you and your former students. However, I acknowledge that sharing life histories could be emotionally upsetting for some former students. If you agree, I will suggest to former students that they might get support from you if they are feeling upset during or after the time they are participating in the study. I will also make the former students aware of a range of resources they can access if they are feeling emotionally vulnerable.

#### **VI. PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

#### **VII. CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will keep everything you tell me during the interviews in strict confidence. In publications and presentations that result from this study, a pseudonym will be used instead of your real name or the names of your students. Information that could identify you or your program will be disguised or left out.

**However**, because my research involves a small number of participants and very unique situations (e.g., the program), I cannot guarantee absolute anonymity.

#### **VIII. CONTACT INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY**

If you have any questions or desire further information about this study, please contact me or my supervisor.

#### **IX. CONTACT FOR CONCERNS ABOUT THE RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you can contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services (604-822-8598) or if long-distance, email ([RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca)).

#### **X. ACCESS TO THE STUDY RESULTS**

If you would like to receive a summary of my research results, please provide me with your contact information when you sign and submit this consent form (see page 4 of this document).



**\*\*Please return this page. Keep the study information (pages 1 & 2) and a copy of this page (page 3) for your own records\*\***

**CONSENT:** I have read the letter describing this study, “Former Students’ Perceptions of the Impact of Their Alternative Education Experiences: A Narrative Analysis” and I understand the nature of my participation in it. I understand my participation is voluntary and the nature of my participation prevents a guarantee of absolute confidentiality of the data. I understand I may withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences.

My signature indicates my desire to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

I do not wish to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a summary of the results of this study.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_