Finishing Post-Primary Education: a Systematic Review of Contextual Factors which Contribute to Student Retention in Alternative Education.

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A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

University of Limerick

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Submitted to the University of Limerick, October 2014
Abstract

Title: Finishing Post-Primary Education: a Systematic Review of Contextual Factors which Contribute to Student Retention in Alternative Education.

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Background: The EU set a target of reducing early school leaving to no more than 10% by the year 2020. Previous research indicates that the school context contributes to early school leaving. This systematic review aims to identify factors within the physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts which may contribute to student retention in alternative educational settings. This study contributes an important synthesis of existing evidence for policy makers, educators and other stakeholders to draw upon as they work toward achieving Ireland’s education goal for 2020.

Methods: A systematic review that included mixed-methods studies was employed. Twenty-three databases and reference lists of reviews were searched, eliciting 1,586 studies which were screened. Data from 24 studies that met the inclusion criteria was extracted and synthesised.

Results: Thematic analysis yielded ‘Schools as Safe Spaces’ as an over-arching concept comprised of four themes: 1) Creating a Sense of Acceptance; 2) Providing Responsive Curricula; 3) Fostering Caring Relations and 4) Establishing School Structures. These themes were underpinned by alternative education philosophy that produces sanctuary-like schools, cultural safety, learner-centred culture and reciprocal care. The philosophy and practices supported students’ success in alternative settings.

Conclusion: Marginalised students provided valuable insights about contextual factors that supported or interfered with graduation. Findings from this review suggest ways to strengthen school-based interventions to ensure the EU achieves its education goal. Contextual factors which may shape student retention, such as lack of safety, are amenable to interventions and should be further investigated. This synthesis facilitates an interdisciplinary approach as it draws on interdisciplinary research and is thus readily transferred across stakeholders. Implications for policy, practice and research for alternative and traditional schools are discussed as well as limitations of the present study.
Declaration

I hereby declare that the work contained within this thesis is entirely my own work other than the counsel of my supervisors, Dr. Nancy Salmon and Dr. Carol-Anne Murphy of the Department of Clinical Therapies, University of Limerick. This work has not been submitted for any academic award, or part thereof, at this or any other educational establishment. Where use has been made of the work of other people it has been fully acknowledged and fully referenced.

Signature: ______________________________

Date: ________________________________
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their help in assisting me in the completion of this thesis.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Nancy Salmon and Dr. Carol-Anne Murphy. Thank you both for your guidance, encouragement, patience, support and sense of humour throughout this project. Nancy, thank you for all your support and for going beyond the call of duty and supporting me out of hours.

I want to thank the Clinical Therapies Department for financially supporting me to undertake a Research Masters. A special thank you to Donna Ó Doibhlin for your expertise and assistance in helping me navigate and utilise the resources in the University of Limerick library.

To my parents, thank you for all the time you have invested in my learning. You have both always believed in me and have encouraged me to do my best and have given me many opportunities to pursue my education. I would also like to thank my little brothers for encouraging me to take breaks, play games and for always making me laugh.

To my boyfriend, thank you for listening to the latest instalment of thesis progress over the past year and a bit. Thank you for having the patience to fix my disastrous formatting and for your unwavering support throughout this project.

Big thanks to my friends for their continued patience and support.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Sunday’s Well Life Centre for their interest in my project and assistance in identifying Irish literature. I extend my gratitude to the authors of the included studies and organisations who not only provided me with copies of their papers and additional information but also recommended further reading and resources.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. i

Declaration ............................................................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................. iv

List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................ viii

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ ix

List of Abbreviations............................................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1  

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................................. 1

1.1  Background .................................................................................................................................... 1

1.2  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................. 2

1.3  Significance of the Study .............................................................................................................. 3

1.4  Overview of Chapters ................................................................................................................... 4

Chapter 2  

**The Theoretical, Conceptual and Contextual Frameworks** ......................................................... 6

2.1  Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 6

2.2  An Ecological Framework ............................................................................................................. 7

2.3  An Occupational Therapy Perspective ........................................................................................... 8

2.3.1  The Person-Environment-Occupation Model ..................................................................... 9

2.3.2  The Ecology of Human Performance Model ................................................................... 10

2.4  The School Context ...................................................................................................................... 12

2.4.1  Physical Context ...................................................................................................................... 13

2.4.2  Social Context ........................................................................................................................ 13

2.4.3  Cultural Context ...................................................................................................................... 13

2.4.4  Virtual Context ....................................................................................................................... 14

2.5  Chapter Summary ........................................................................................................................... 14

Chapter 3  

**Literature Review** ......................................................................................................................... 15

3.1  Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 15

3.2  Post-Primary Education System in Ireland ................................................................................... 15

3.3  Early School Leaving .................................................................................................................... 16

3.4  Early School Leaving in Ireland .................................................................................................... 17

3.5  Consequences of Early School Leaving at an Individual Level ................................................... 18

3.6  Consequences of Early School Leaving at Level of Economy and Society ............................... 19
Chapter 5  
Results ................................................................. 61

5.1  Introduction ................................................................. 61

5.2  Demographic Characteristics of Included Studies .................... 61
  5.2.1  Context and Participants of Included Studies .............. 61
  5.2.2  Methodology of Included Studies ............................. 63

5.3  Introduction to Findings ............................................... 85

5.4  Schools as Safe Spaces .................................................. 87

5.5  Creating a Sense of Acceptance ...................................... 88
  5.5.1  Fostering a Sense of Community ......................... 88
  5.5.2  Embedding Student Culture within the School .......... 90

5.6  Providing Responsive Curricula ..................................... 92

5.7  Fostering Caring Relations ............................................. 95
  5.7.1  Caring Teachers ....................................................... 95
    5.7.1.1  Balancing a Personal Connection with Authority .... 96
    5.7.1.2  Expecting Success ............................................. 99
    5.7.1.3  Caring Teachers are Responsive ....................... 100
    5.7.1.4  Caring Teachers are Respectful ....................... 102
    5.7.1.5  Caring Teachers can Self-Regulate ................... 104
  5.7.2  Caring Peers ......................................................... 105
  5.7.3  Reciprocal Care .................................................... 108

5.8  Establishing School Structures ....................................... 110
  5.8.1  Physical Environment .............................................. 110
  5.8.2  Supports ............................................................... 113
  5.8.3  Policies ................................................................. 115

5.9  Schools as Sanctuaries ................................................ 118

5.10  Chapter Summary .................................................... 119

Chapter 6  
Discussion ................................................................. 120

6.1  Introduction ............................................................... 120

6.2  Creating Schools as Sanctuaries ..................................... 121

6.3  Establishing Learner-Centred Schools .............................. 128
  6.3.1  Fostering Reciprocal Care within Schools ............. 133

6.4  Critiquing the Project .................................................. 141
  6.4.1  The Results ......................................................... 141
  6.4.2  Contribution to the Field ...................................... 142
List of Tables

Table 3.1 Early Leavers Classified by Nationality ....................................................... 22
Table 4.1 Databases Searched ..................................................................................... 42
Table 4.2 The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis ......................................................... 51
Table 5.1 Included Studies ........................................................................................ 67
Table 5.2 Quality Appraisal of Qualitative Studies/Qualitative Aspects of Studies ..... 82
Table 5.3 Quality Appraisal of Quantitative Studies/Quantitative Aspects of Studies .. 84
List of Figures

Figure 4.1 Pyramid of Evidence ................................................................. 33
Figure 4.2 Research Question Development through Scoping Review............. 37
Figure 4.3 Search Results ....................................................................... 45
Figure 5.1 Thematic Map ....................................................................... 86
Figure 6.1 Thematic Map with Philosophy of Alternative Education.............. 120
List of Abbreviations

CEBMa  Centre for Evidence-Based Management
DES   Department of Education and Science
DEIS  Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
EHP   Ecology of Human Performance Model
JCSP  Junior Certificate School Programme
LCAP  Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
LCVP  Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NBSS  National Behaviour Support Service
PRISMA Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PEO   Person-Environment-Occupation Model
SEBD  Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
UNCRC United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In Ireland and other Western societies, education is a key determinant of adult life chances (Byrne and Smyth 2010). National and international research recognises the negative consequences of early school leaving at an individual and societal level (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009). Ireland set benchmarks regarding student retention for the coming years. In the Europe 2020 Strategy adopted in 2010, EU Member States agreed that the rate of those aged 18-24 years of age leaving school without an upper secondary qualification should be at no more than 10% by 2020 (European Commission 2010). Ireland set a target to reduce the percentage of 18-24 year olds with at most lower secondary education and not in further education and training to 8% (Mallon and Healy 2012). Ireland’s action plan for reducing poverty and achieving social inclusion, NAPInclusion (Government of Ireland 2007) echoed this commitment and aimed that the proportion of the population aged 20-24 completing upper second-level education or equivalent would exceed 90% by 2013.

The latest report by the Department of Education and Science (DES) indicated that 90.13% of youth now completed post-primary education (DES 2014). These figures are based on records held in the post-primary database which has limitations. First, due to the lack of a comprehensive national tracking system, these figures do not consider educational pathways taken by students outside of the State-aided schooling system (e.g. Youthreach) (ibid.). Second, while the analysis allows for movement of students between mainstream schools, it is only possible to estimate the numbers of students who leave State-aided schools to attend privately-funded schools or those who leave school for other reasons including emigration or death (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). Regarding this shortcoming, the DES applied an adjustment (DES 2014). As a result, one could argue that these figures do not truly reflect Ireland’s retention rates. Additionally, due to the absence of a national database on primary level pupils it is impossible to identify the number of students who do not progress to post-primary education (NESF 2002, Smyth and McCoy 2009). It is estimated that approximately 1,000 students do not transition to post-primary education each year (Healy-Eames et al. 2010).
Studies indicate that student dispositions, academic abilities, family factors and life circumstances contribute to the likelihood of school completion (Eivers et al. 2000, Wehlage and Rutter 1986, Worrell and Hale 2001). Such research is criticised for its tendency to ‘blame the victim’ by focusing on the ‘failures’ of the student and their families. It was argued that the real causes for early school leaving were contained within the school system (Smyth 2005, Wehlage and Rutter 1986). Researchers reported that early school leaving occurred because of the structural and contextual flaws in the educational systems (Smyth 2005, Wehlage and Rutter 1986). According to Meeker et al. (2009), early school leavers believed the school and teachers were responsible for their school failure. It is noteworthy that schools are not neutral spaces, but are dynamic settings that shape and constrain opportunities for student success. Educators can influence and alter school conditions to support student retention (Baker et al. 2001).

Within Ireland, a number of curricular reforms and a range of supports to increase student retention were introduced in recent years. Similarly, other countries have a long history of education system reform (Levin 1997). One such example of reform is alternative education. Alternative education was established in the USA for youth whose needs were not met in traditional schools (Lehr et al. 2009a). Common characteristics of alternative schools include small size, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, student-centred curriculum, flexibility in structure and a supportive environment (Aron 2006). Henrich (2005) noted that alternative schools typically improved student attendance, grades and graduation rates and decreased behaviour problems. The fact that alternative education has reported good outcomes for students who experienced failure in traditional schools offers another solution: bringing practices from alternative education into traditional education.

1.2 Statement of the Problem
Increasing student retention remains an international concern. Despite the introduction of curriculum reform and supports within the Irish context, early school leaving remains a prevalent problem, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Barnardos 2006). Furthermore, recent budgets have undermined the progress in retention rates (Mallon and Healy 2012, Smyth and McCoy 2009). Ireland’s most recent early school leavers rate was reported as 9.87%, which is not far off the 8% target (DES 2014). Yet, Ireland’s early school leavers rate was 11.5% in 2010 when the Europe 2020 Strategy was adopted indicating that the 8% target adopted by the Irish Government was not very ambitious (Eurostat 2014). Furthermore, our rate of early
school leaving is notably higher than a number of countries such as Croatia (4.2%) and Slovenia (4.4%); therefore, whilst Ireland is on course to meet the 8% target there is still much room for improvement (DES 2014).

Critics argued that the number of students who leave school before graduation was an indication of the failure of traditional education (Bland et al. 2008, Smyth 2005, Wehlage and Rutter 1986). As solutions are sought, it is important to examine what contextual factors within alternative schools enabled those students who experienced failure in traditional schools to succeed. This study examined these contextual factors from the perspectives of students within alternative schools. Establishing contextual factors that support student success in alternative schools may suggest policy and practice innovations for traditional schools.

1.3 Significance of the Study
The methods used to frame this project recognised the complexity of early school leaving. Interdisciplinary research involves the process of addressing a multifaceted phenomenon by synthesising knowledge from two or more disciplines, creating a unique and more comprehensive understanding (Repko 2012). Many disciplines are interested in early school leaving and the school context including sociology, psychology, youth studies and education (Tilleczek et al. 2011). The range of disciplines that could contribute to the study was substantial and as a result informed all aspects of the research process, including the selection of the theories, the inclusion criteria and key-words employed during the search for studies. A detailed description of the conceptual framework is provided in Chapter 2 and it is referred to throughout other chapters demonstrating how an interdisciplinary approach guided the research process. This ensured that findings could be readily transferred across stakeholders and provided useful directions for future research.

A number of studies gathered information regarding contextual factors of alternative schools (Anderson 1982, De La Ossa 2005, Quinn et al. 2006, Watson and Watson 2011, Wilkins 2008). Although systematic reviews were completed in the area of alternative education, this systematic review provided a unique contribution by synthesising student perspectives regarding specific contextual factors which contributed to their retention in alternative settings. It was anticipated that findings would provide useful recommendations for both alternative schools and other educational settings while providing policy and practice guidance related to student
retention. It was expected that findings would contribute an important synthesis of existing evidence for policy makers to draw upon as they work toward achieving Ireland’s education goal for 2020.

Attending to the voices of students on schooling is a relatively new approach (Smyth 2005). Several authors argued that students’ can report valid, useful and challenging messages about what makes an effective school context (De La Ossa 2005, Marquez-Zenkov et al. 2007, Mitra 2004). Smyth (2005) noted that students who left traditional education contributed unique perspectives, yet in reality their perspectives were frequently disparaged. Smyth (2005) questioned whether the voices of early leavers were set aside by those in positions of authority because it could be interpreted as an admission that ‘troublemakers’ may have a point. In light of existing literature, the importance of considering student voices when shaping the school context is apparent. This study addressed what marginalised students perceived to be important contextual factors in their decision to stay in alternative schools across geographical locations, providing opportunity for a comprehensive understanding. While this study provided useful contributions to preventative measures in early school leaving, students cannot be treated as an homogeneous group (Smyth 2005). To address this limitation, this study applied a systematic and transparent process for searching, retrieving and coding studies. Using a systematic method to conduct reviews limits bias leading to more trustworthy results (Higgins and Green 2011). The use of explicit and transparent description of the review process allows for the review to be replicated and expanded to include new studies or criteria (Liberati et al. 2009).

1.4 Overview of Chapters

The chapters of this thesis are organised sequentially, to create a logical flow through the research process. Establishing a clear foundation for this systematic review is the aim of Chapter 2. The reader is oriented to the conceptual framework that guided all aspects of this study by drawing on theories from both psychology and occupational therapy.

The rationale for the project is presented in Chapter 3. A description of the post-primary education system in Ireland is offered. The literature surrounding early school leaving and the consequences it has at an individual and societal level are then considered. A description of factors contributing to early school leaving and preventative measures follows. The school context and educational supports are then described before focusing
on contextual factors that shape adolescent development. The methodology guiding the process of this systematic review is provided in Chapter 4. The methods used for gathering and analysing data are explained with specific attention to ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 describes the demographic characteristics of included studies before presenting the themes identified. The central concept, *Schools as Safe Spaces*, is organised into four core themes highlighting how alternative schools provided a safe space for students. The first theme, *Creating a Sense of Acceptance*, describes how schools created a sense of community and how student culture was embedded within the school. The second theme, *Providing Responsive Curricula*, addresses how curriculum met the needs of marginalised youth. *Fostering Caring Relations*, the third theme, identifies the attributes of caring teachers, caring peers and how reciprocal care was a feature in alternative schools. The final theme, *Establishing School Structures*, illustrates how the physical environment, school supports and policies established a sanctuary for students.

Attention then turns to establishing connections and contrasts between the findings of this study and existing literature in Chapter 6. Limitations of the present study are then considered. Implications for policy and practice within alternative and traditional education are discussed under *Creating Schools as Sanctuaries* and *Establishing Learner-Centred Schools*. Future directions for research follow. In the conclusion, Chapter 7, key elements flowing through the literature review, methodology, results and discussion chapters are drawn together. This chapter highlights the unique contribution of the findings to existing literature.
Chapter 2  The Theoretical, Conceptual and Contextual Frameworks

2.1  Introduction

All researchers bring a set of assumptions and beliefs to a study, and as consequence, research is naturally filtered through the researcher’s point of view, their theoretical perspective (Kilbourn 2006). A researcher must clarify their inquiry lens as his/her theoretical orientation guides and influences the research process, from the formation of questions, the collection of data and the interpretation of data (Kilbourn 2006). This study was informed by constructivism. Constructivism presumes (1) a relativist ontology where local realities are co-created; (2) a subjectivist epistemology that involves knowledge that is co-constructed and (3) a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, Guba and Lincoln 2005). Constructivism enabled the student researcher to explore the complex interaction between the school context and students’ experiences by acknowledging that students’ generate knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Furthermore, central to a constructivist approach is the understanding that research findings could be elicited and refined only through interaction between the investigator and respondents (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Systematic reviews are essentially a mechanism for bringing together the findings of multiple pieces of knowledge. It has been acknowledged that systematic reviews facilitate the co-creation of knowledge (McHugh and Domegan 2010).

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development (2005) served as the theoretical framework of this research. Given that school context and student retention were central to this project, it was acknowledged that the research topic could not be meaningfully researched in reference to a single theoretical framework. A theoretical framework involves the use of a theory or concepts resident within one theory to offer an explanation of an event (Imenda 2014). In contrast, a conceptual framework enabled the student researcher to tease out the various elements of context and the experiences students had in relation to these contextual domains. A conceptual framework enabled the student researcher to meaningfully explore the research topic through synthesising theories from psychology and occupational therapy (Imenda 2014). A combination of the most relevant aspects from Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development (2005), the Ecology of Human Performance model (Dunn et al. 1994) and the Person-Environment-Occupation model (Law et al. 1996) served as the conceptual
framework of this study. Whilst a conceptual framework is limited in scope; for example, it is limited to a specific research problem and/or context, it was appropriate for this project as it guided the research process to enable a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Imenda 2014). The contextual framework is discussed in this chapter and again in chapter 3. The educational and social contexts influenced what aspects of the three theories were relevant to this study to locate the study within the wider context. The following section describes the conceptual framework and illustrates how these worldviews informed the student researcher’s inquiry and shaped the research process.

2.2 An Ecological Framework

The factors contributing to early school leaving are complex, multifaceted and dynamic (Byrne and Smyth 2010). A systematic approach for organising these factors was gleaned from the framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory. The theory evolved to include an emphasis on the child’s biology as a primary environment in the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). It has four interrelated components (Bronfenbrenner 2005): (a) the developmental process, involving the dynamic relation of the individual and the context; (b) the person, with her/his individual repertoire of biological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural characteristics; (c) the context involving nested systems depicted in Bronfenbrenner’s earlier version of his theory (1977); and (d) time which involves a temporal dimension. These four components of Bronfenbrenner’s formulation of bioecological theory constitute a process-person-context-time model for conceptualising the integrated developmental system (Lerner 2005).

Using principles derived from Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (2005) assisted the understanding of the interactive processes that impacted student retention. The ecological perspective enabled the student researcher to provide a rich description of the school environment and its influences on student retention (Shaffer and Kipp 2010a). Bronfenbrenner (2005, 1994) divides the context of human development into nested layers, from proximal to distal influences on development. The microsystem, the most proximal influence on development, involves the relation between the developing adolescent and his or her immediate settings such as the classroom or family. The mesosystem refers to the interrelationships among microsystems, such as the relationship between the family, peers or school. The exosystem includes social structures that do not directly include the developing adolescent, such as school boards,
but which affect the immediate environment of the adolescent. The macrosystem encompasses cultural values and beliefs that shape all the other ecological systems. Finally the fifth, the chronosystem represents change or consistency over time, not only in the characteristics of the developing adolescent but also in the context in which they live (e.g. changes over the life course in family structure, socioeconomic status and place of residence). These five interacting systems were used as a framework to understand the environmental processes surrounding early school leaving. These nested systems shaped the literature review; for example, current legislation and policy situated in the exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem are discussed.

Bronfenbrenner’s framework enabled the student researcher to narrow the focus of this review to concentrate only on the school’s microsystem, with the understanding that all of the systems were mutually interdependent. Consequently, this review did not fully address the range of possibilities central to the bioecological theory and many studies examining other determinants of early leaving (such as the relationships with family or community) were excluded. By focusing only on the in-school context, an in-depth understanding of the school context’s role in student retention was gained. The framework facilitated the development of the inclusion criteria, narrowing the review by only including perspectives from students. It enabled the exclusion of studies which addressed the school, family and community relationships.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework facilitated the integration of research on the school context across various disciplines and theoretical perspectives, and facilitated a further exploration of its role in early school leaving (Hamm and Zhang 2011). Studying environmental influences in laboratory contexts makes little sense to ecological theorists (Bronfenbrenner 1977, Shaffer and Kipp 2010a), thus only studies conducted in schools were included in this review.

2.3 An Occupational Therapy Perspective

The focus of occupational therapy is to enable individuals to participate in everyday occupations to promote their health and well-being (Law 2002). The profession’s domain and process is centred on the engagement in occupation to support an individual’s participation in context (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). Education can be viewed as an occupation which occurs in the context of the school environment (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). Context as critical to human performance is a recurring theme in occupational therapy literature
(Cole and Tufano 2008, Dunn et al. 1994, Hagedorn 1995). Discussions emphasise that (a) the person must adapt to an environment which is challenging or is demanding on the person, and (b) that the environment shapes and influences performance (Creek 2006, Finlay 2004, Kielhofner 1997). In other words, the environment not only demands certain things from a person, but also provides conditions and resources that are necessary to support performance (AOTA 2002). When contextual demands are beyond the capacity of the person and resources available, one could feel overwhelmed, anxious or hopeless (Finlay 2004).

Several definitions of the environment were available within occupational therapy literature; however, across the literature, environments were broadly defined as those contexts or situations that occurred outside an individual and elicited responses within them (Law 1991). Suggested classifications of the context included:

- Physical, social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Creek 2008)
- Personal, social and physical contexts (Law et al. 1996)
- Physical, sociocultural and temporal contexts (Kielhofner 1997)
- Physical, social, cultural and institutional contexts (Finlay 2004)

Within this review, two occupational therapy models were used to define the school context: the Person-Environment-Occupation model (Law et al. 1996) and the Ecology of Human Performance model (Dunn et al. 1994). These models are now described.

### 2.3.1 The Person-Environment-Occupation Model (PEO)

The PEO model (Law et al. 1996) is embedded within the American Occupational Therapy Association’s framework document (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). The focus of the PEO model is the dynamic nature of occupational performance which occurs when the person (P), environment (E) and occupation (O) intersect (Law et al. 1996). This interaction is present over one’s life span. According to the PEO, it is not possible to consider a person separate from their environment (ibid.). The PEO adopts a transactional rather than an interactive approach by recognising that occupational performance is the product of dynamic, interwoven relationships that exist among the individual, their occupations and their environments (ibid.). In contrast, an interactive approach assumes the person and environment exist independently of one another and that they can be separated for study (ibid.). The components of the PEO model were used to organise the literature review. It provided a clear format to carry out a systematic analysis of the: person-environment (e.g. context in relation to
development); person-occupation (e.g. factors contributing to early school leaving) and environment-occupation (e.g. available supports). The model enabled the literature review to acknowledge the various factors which influenced student retention before focusing on the school context.

According to this model, the environment is external to the person and includes cultural, socio-economic, institutional, physical and social elements (Polatajko et al. 2007a). Having a broad definition of environment allowed the student researcher to make explicit those environmental elements which were not defined in Bronfenbrenner’s theory. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model describes a system to understand social and cultural structures in a person’s development (Dunn et al. 1994, Law et al. 1996). The PEO model complements Bronfenbrenner’s work by focusing on the social and cultural contexts but it also allows for a broader definition of context. It includes the physical context and the virtual context which is situated within the physical context.

Finally, the PEO model is grounded in the assumption that through maintaining a good fit between the three components (person-environment-occupation), optimal occupational performance is achieved (Law et al. 1996). The model emphasises that changing any of the three components may make a better or worse fit; therefore, early school leaving can be attributed to a poor person-environment fit rather than ascribed solely to the person.

2.3.2 The Ecology of Human Performance Model (EHP)

The EHP model (Dunn et al. 1994) centralises the relationship between the person, context and task and how these dynamic interactions impact a person’s performance. Like the PEO model, this framework emphasises context as a key variable in task performance, recognising that it can both support and inhibit performance (Cole and Tufano 2008, Dunn et al. 2003, Dunn et al. 1994). According to the model, performance cannot be understood outside of context. Dunn et al. (1994) acknowledged Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, p.515) term “ecological validity” which argued that research was not valid unless it was grounded in context.

The strength of the EHP model is how it defines context as interrelated conditions that surround a person (Polatajko et al. 2007a). Similar to the PEO model, the EHP model recognises that context includes the external environment comprising of physical, social and cultural elements (Dunn et al. 1994). The EHP model expands the definition of
context further to include the temporal environment, which connects well with Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) chronosystem. Temporal aspects reside within the person but are considered part of the context due to the social and cultural meanings attached (Polatajko et al. 2007a). Temporal aspects at the individual level include chronological age, development stage and life cycle (Cole and Tufano 2008, Dunn et al. 2003). Similar to Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) chronosystem, this model allowed the consideration of the developmental stages of adolescence. The EHP model provided more structure to consider a typical adolescent’s skills and abilities. While Bronfenbrenner acknowledges the relevance of biological aspects of the person, he devotes more attention to personal characteristics that an individual brings to a social situation (Tudge et al. 2009). This review did not obtain adequate information to analyse personal characteristics; therefore, the PEO and EHP models facilitated the student researcher to account for a typical adolescent’s abilities, skills and roles, while maintaining the focus on the school context. The EHP model also considers the temporal features of the task including when it takes place, how often, the duration and the flexibility of the task (e.g. whether the task sequence be rearranged) (Dunn et al. 2003). Craik et al. (2007) noted that temporal factors can be viewed as part of both personal and environmental influences. Similar to the EHP model, they noted the personal temporal factors included the person's age or developmental stage. Environmental factors encompassed the evolution of society over time including historical or cultural occurrences; for example, world events, policy changes or availability of technology (Craik et al. 2007). They noted that the temporal factors influenced the person and their context. Considering temporal factors enabled the student researcher to question how the current educational paradigm was meeting the needs of today's students.

According to the EHP model, a researcher should consider what the environment means to the person (Dunn et al. 1994). The EHP model recognises that the meaning a person attaches to a task or context strongly influences performance (ibid.). This resonated with marginalised students who cited school factors as influencing their decision to leave school (Byrne et al. 2008). The temporal environment captured the ‘fit’ between developmental needs and the school context, portraying the meaning of the school context for a typical adolescent. In other words, the interaction of the temporal, cultural, social, physical and virtual contexts influenced the adolescent’s experiences of school. For example, rigid rules and limited learning activities do not ‘fit’ well with adolescents who are seeking more autonomy (Andermann and Midgley 1997). Equally, the PEO
model acknowledges the importance of considering the environment from the perspective of the person and others within the environment (Polatajko et al. 2007a). The relevant features of the environment not only includes objective properties, such as physical conditions, but also subjective properties of how the developing person experiences their environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). As a result, qualitative studies which captured the experiences of students within the immediate school environment were included in this review.

Finally, the EHP model uses generic language. ‘Occupational performance’ is replaced with ‘task performance’ to increase interdisciplinary understanding of its concepts and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration (Cole and Tufano 2008, Dunn et al. 2003). Having found and integrated research from various disciplines using Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, the EHP model then guided the use of terminology to communicate the review’s results to its interdisciplinary audience.

The theories within the conceptual framework are commensurate. They did not present underlying assumptions which conflicted with one another. In fact, authors of the PEO model (Law et al. 1996) and EHP model (Dunn et al. 1994) cited Bronfenbrenner’s work when describing theoretical origins. The PEO model and EHP model are both built around the constructs of person and environment as related to performance (Dunn et al. 2003). A difference between these two models is the terminology surrounding occupation and task. This is not an issue as the PEO model indicates that occupations, activities and tasks are nested within each other (Law et al. 1996). Each model deepened the understanding of the core concepts embedded in the others. Each model made a unique contribution to the research process, shaping the literature review, developing the inclusion/exclusion criteria and supporting data analysis.

2.4 The School Context
There are many terms used for the school environment including learning environment and school climate but for the purposes of this review the term context was used. Context was derived from the Latin word *contexere* meaning “to weave together” (Oxford Dictionaries 2013). Context or contextual factors are broad terms that capture the interrelatedness of conditions within and surrounding the student that influences their school performance (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002, Boyd 1992). Through combining Bronfenbrenner’s theory with the two occupational therapy models, this review conceptualised the school context broadly to include the physical,
social, cultural and virtual contexts. The personal and environmental influences within the temporal context were beyond the scope of this review as the focus was on the school microsystem and the review did not obtain adequate information to analyse personal characteristics. Having recognised the temporal influences on other contextual domains, the temporal context was considered in the literature review and discussion chapters to gain a multifaceted understanding. Topics discussed included initiatives to combat early school leaving, the demands of schooling in relation to typical adolescent development and the current education paradigm. The temporal features of the task (e.g. schooling) were also considered. Having a broader understanding ensured recommendations were realistic and applicable for today’s schools and students.

2.4.1 Physical Context
The physical context is defined as the nonhuman elements including accessibility to and performance in environments that have natural terrain, plants, buildings, furniture, objects, tools or devices (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). This review defined the physical context as any characteristics of the school which were external to the people within the school. Characteristics used to describe the school’s physical context included size, noise, temperature, lighting, facilities, materials, equipment, space and layout (Anderson 1982, Hagedorn 1995, Higgins et al. 2005).

2.4.2 Social Context
The social context is characterised as the availability and expectations of significant individuals such as friends, and also includes larger social groups which are influential in establishing norms, role expectations and social routines (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). The definition of the school’s social context in this review encompassed the nature of social interactions which occurred in the school context (Lindstrom Johnson 2009). Characteristics used to understand the social context included teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, attachment to school, teacher qualities, respect and safety (Quinn et al. 2006).

2.4.3 Cultural Context
The cultural context is classified as the customs, beliefs, activity patterns, behaviour standards and expectations accepted by the society which the person is a member, and also includes political aspects such as laws that affect access to resources and affirm personal rights (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). School culture is a product of a complex interweaving of sociocultural, political, economic and
organisational factors, together with a collection of class, race and gender factors (Smyth and Hattam 2002). As a result, the term ‘school culture’ described various phenomena including instructional practices, racial composition, teacher-student relationships, school facilities, family background (Watson 2011), rules (Bernard 2012, Watson 2011), values and beliefs (Anderson 1982, Bernard 2012). The cultural context included academic and social expectations, instructional practices, rules, teacher commitment, peer norms, atmosphere, academic press, discipline and school goals (Anderson 1982).

2.4.4 Virtual Context
The virtual context addresses environments where individuals or objects are not actually present in the immediate physical space but which are experienced through electronic means including airways and computers (American Occupational Therapy Association 2002). For this review, the virtual context was defined as computer-based environments which allowed interactions with other participants, flexible and interactive curriculum, contributed to learning outcomes and provided access to a wide array of learning resources (Wilson 1996, Mikropoulos and Natsis 2011).

2.5 Chapter Summary
This chapter presented the conceptual framework underpinning this project. A combination of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development (2005), the Ecology of Human Performance (Dunn et al. 1994) and the Person-Environment-Occupation model (Law et al. 1996) served as the conceptual framework of this study. This framework shaped the aspects of context presented within this review to include the physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts. Definitions of these contexts were provided. Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological model guided the investigation of the school’s microsystem. It will become more apparent how these theories shaped the research process within the upcoming chapters: literature review, methodology, results and discussion.
Chapter 3  Literature Review

3.1  Introduction

Education is a key determinant of adult life chances in Ireland and across other Western societies (Byrne and Smyth 2010). The latest report by the DES indicated that 90.13% of teenagers now complete post-primary education (DES 2014). This is the second year that retention rates have reached 90% and refers to the cohort of students who sat their Leaving Certificate in either 2012 or 2013. In the Europe 2020 Strategy adopted in 2010 EU Member States agreed that the proportion of those aged 18-24 years of age leaving school without an upper secondary qualification should be no more than 10% (European Commission 2010). Ireland set a target to reduce the percentage of 18-24 year olds with at most lower secondary education and not in further education and training to 8% by 2020 (Mallon and Healy 2012). This is in conjunction with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), an international agreement on the rights of children. Article 28 recognises the right of a child to education and the requirement of State Parties to encourage regular school attendance and to reduce dropout rates (United Nations 1989).

To provide a background on the topic of student retention, this chapter will first describe the post-primary education system in Ireland. Early school leaving will then be defined followed by a discussion of the consequences and risk factors associated with exiting before graduation. Initiatives to combat early school leaving will be considered briefly. Finally, the school context will be examined in relation to early school leaving.

3.2  Post-Primary Education System in Ireland

Post-primary education in Ireland comprises voluntary secondary, vocational, community schools, community colleges and comprehensive schools (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2014). Although these school types vary in aspects of ownership, management and history, they have much in common (ibid.). They follow the curriculum prescribed by the State and take the same public examinations (ibid.).

Students generally transfer from primary to post-primary schools between the ages of 12 and 13 (DES 2013b). Post-primary education involves a three-year junior cycle where students study the Junior Certificate programme or in some cases the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). The JCSP is aimed at students who are identified as being at-risk of early leaving (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
2010). The programme provides a more flexible approach than a traditional subject-based curriculum. It is not an alternative to the Junior Certificate, but a framework enabling teachers and schools to develop an imaginative approach to the Junior Certificate course (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2010).

The Senior Cycle caters for students aged 15-18 years old. Transition Year immediately follows the Junior Cycle and is optional. Transition Year provides an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of educational inputs, including work experience. Transition Year emphasises one’s personal growth, social awareness and life skills (DES 2013b).

During the final two years of Senior Cycle students take one of three programmes, each leading to a State Examination- the traditional Leaving Certificate Programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCAP) (DES 2013b). The latter two can be described as programmes which feature a vocational focus and are aimed at preparing students for adult and working life.

The LCAP is structured around vocational education, vocational preparation and general education. Whilst certification in the LCAP is not recognised for entry into third level courses, students can proceed to Post-Leaving Certificate courses and continue their education (DES 2004). Through the practical and student-centred nature of the programme, students are encouraged to engage in active learning (Henry et al. 2008). The LCVP combines qualities of academic study with enterprise education, preparation for work and work experiences (DES 2004). The certificates obtained enable access to further education, employment, training and higher education (Henry et al. 2008).

### 3.3 Early School Leaving

Clarifying what is meant by early school leaving can be problematic as research and policy reports have used various definitions (Byrne and Smyth 2010). According to Ireland’s legal definition, early school leaving occurs when someone exits school earlier than the age of sixteen or before completing three years post-primary education (Education Welfare Act 2000). Within the European context, early school leavers include those aged 18 to 24 who have not attained an upper second-level education and who are currently not in education/training (Dale 2010).
For the purpose of this review, early school leaving was defined as exiting full-time post-primary education before completing the Leaving Certificate examination or equivalent in other countries (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). In Ireland and in other Western societies research indicated that a Leaving Certificate qualification or equivalent was the minimum requirement to successfully achieve positive adult outcomes (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009).

*At-risk* is the current term used to describe students who are deemed to be more likely than their peers to leave school without qualifications. Fairbrother (2008) argued this term was a person-centred explanation of school failure and imparted a deficit model where the problem lay within students. She argued that it did not take into account the school’s influence on excluding students. To redirect from deficiencies in students and their families, this review adopted the term *marginalised youth* rather than youth at-risk. Marginalised youth were defined as those who encountered inappropriate or insufficient educational experiences within their family, school or community (Pallas 1989). This concept identified students not through their personal characteristics, but through their relationship with families, communities and schools (Pallas 1989, te Riele 2006).

### 3.4 Early School Leaving in Ireland

In 2011/2012, the early school leaving rate averages for EU-27 was 14% and EU-15 was 15% (DES 2014). At national levels, the early leaver figures varied from 24.9% to 4.2% (ibid.). The proportion of early school leavers in Ireland was 9.7% which was well below the EU average (ibid.). While Irish rates were lower than the European average, our rates were notably higher than a number of countries such as Croatia (4.2%) and Slovenia (4.4%).

As previously mentioned, this is the second year Irish retention rates have reached 90% (DES 2014). It is important to distinguish between various retention rates at points with the system. A recent DES report found that 7,713 students left post-primary schools before making it to sixth year in 2010, with 4,414 leaving before the senior cycle (Tickner 2013). The data from the 2009/2010 school year found that 1,573 students stayed in school until first or second year only. A further 1,777 students did not continue school beyond third year and 1,064 students left school during or after transition year (ibid.).
The 7,713 students who left school in 2010 accounted for 2.5% of total post-primary enrolments, a fall from 3.7% in 2002 when there were 11,498 early leavers (Tickner 2013). Despite Ireland’s success over recent years at increasing the numbers who complete the Leaving Certificate, giving Ireland one of Europe’s highest school completion rates (Mallon and Healy 2012), the figures raise concerns about those students leaving school at such an early stage and the supports available to promote their retention.

3.5 Consequences of Early School Leaving at an Individual Level
In Ireland and internationally, early leavers were found to experience disadvantages in relation to employment opportunities, employment quality, access to further education/training, and broader social outcomes (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009). Early leavers experienced higher rates of overall and long-term unemployment in all age groups (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Byrne et al. 2008, Clancy 2005, Crombie 1996, NSSE 2010). They were up to four times more likely to be unemployed than their peers with higher qualifications, even before the current recession (Barnardos 2009). Those with higher levels of education were more likely to be found in professional occupations while a disproportionate number of early leavers were found in less skilled manual and service occupations with lower earnings (NSSE 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009).

Access to further and higher education is generally restricted to Leaving Certificate completers, especially those with high grades (Byrne et al. 2008). While 85% of those who completed the Leaving Certificate go on to pursue post-school education, 64% of those who left school following the Junior Certificate and 52% who left prior to Junior Certificate progressed to further study (Byrne et al. 2008).

An examination of the Irish prison population found that educational disadvantage was associated with higher levels of incarceration (Flynn 2007). A high number of prisoners in Mountjoy Prison were early leavers (O'Mahony 1997, Stokes 2004). The Prison Adult Literacy Survey completed in Irish prisons found a link between anti-social behaviour and educational disadvantage, indicated by low literacy levels in the 300 prisoners surveyed (Morgan and Kett 2003). Having examined existing research, the authors concluded that poor literacy skills restricted a range of life choices and therefore was a pre-disposing factor in criminal activities (Morgan and Kett 2003). They
recommended the prevention of early school leaving should be at the core of intervention to reduce crime (Morgan and Kett 2003).

In terms of broader social outcomes, crime, violence, unsafe sex, alcohol and drug misuse, and suicide were significantly higher among early leavers (Foster 2000, NSSE 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009). An international literature review found reasonably strong evidence that educational attainment affected health (Feinstein et al. 2008). Another international review concluded that people with lower levels of education had lower levels of general health, higher mortality rates and a higher incidence of particular conditions including stroke, diabetes, asthma and cardiovascular disease (Higgins et al. 2008). These findings are reflected in Ireland as early leavers report lower levels of general health, higher anxiety and depression, and are more likely to have a medical card and have higher mortality rates (Barnardos 2009). Data from the European Union Survey of Income and Living Conditions found poor health was more frequently reported by those with lower education, especially those with only primary education (Layte et al. 2007). These findings remained when controlling for age, gender and social class.

3.6 Consequences of Early School Leaving at Level of Economy and Society

Early school leaving rates effect societal developments and economic growth (European Commission 2011). This is because early leavers tend to participate less in democratic processes and are less active citizens (NSSE 2010). Moreover, innovation and growth rely on a skilled labour force (European Commission 2011). Early leaving also involves substantial costs to society including higher expenditure on welfare, health and prisons (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009). Smyth and McCoy (2009) estimated the lifetime cost for a typical early school leaver: welfare payments (€10,543 per annum); tax foregone (€17,000) and lone parent welfare payments (€4,000 per female). They recognised that early leaving involved greater expenditure on health services and that crime involving early leavers cost the State €280 million per annum.

3.7 Factors contributing to Early School Leaving

Many factors place a student at-risk of early school leaving. Some studies emphasised factors at the level of the individual and family (Eivers et al. 2000, Franklin 1992, Saraiva et al. 2011), while other studies emphasised the school environment (Christle et al. 2007, Knesting 2008, Smyth 2005). Byrne and Smyth (2010) argued that it was misleading to focus on one set of factors, as early leaving was complex and
multidimensional in nature and involved a long-term process of disengagement from school.

3.7.1 Individual, Family and Community Level Factors

A disproportionate number of early leavers tend to be from disadvantaged areas, indicating a link between socioeconomic status and educational success (Combat Poverty Agency 2003). Educational disadvantage occurs when individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system compared to their peers (Nolan 2005) and is defined in the Education Act (1998, p.32) as “impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools”. Socioeconomic status is typically measured by parental education, occupation or income and lower socioeconomic status is associated with early leaving (Eivers et al. 2000, Gamoran 2001). Students from families with unemployment backgrounds showed considerably higher levels of early leaving. Evidence indicated that 12% of students with unemployed parent(s) left school prior to completing their Junior Certificate examination, compared to 2% or less of those from farming, professional, employer/manager, non-manual and manual backgrounds (Byrne et al. 2008).

While poverty is a significant contributing factor, there are other family-related causes for early leaving. A stable finding on the intergenerational transmission of educational opportunities, found parental cultural characteristics had a stronger influence on their children’s educational outcomes than parental economic characteristics (De Graaf and De Graaf 2002). These complex factors included attitudes of parents towards education, parents’ experiences of the education system and the learning resources in the home environment (Gamoran 2001). Within the Irish context, parental education affected the educational achievement of children (Layte et al. 2007). Similarly, students from single-parent and step-families were more likely to leave school than students from two-parent families (Rumberger 1995).

International research found ethnic minority groups had higher early leaving rates (Eivers et al. 2000, Rumberger 1995). In Ireland, high rates of early leaving were found among the Travelling community (DES 2005b). It was indicated that up to 80% of 12 to 15 year old Traveller children did not attend post-primary schools (Barnardos 2006). The proportion of Travellers completing the Leaving Certificate in 2007/2008 was estimated to be less than 20%, which was considerably lower than the national average
of 84% (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). Between the academic years of 2009/2010, 5% of early leavers were in receipt of Traveller Support (Tickner 2013). Additionally, in recent years there was an increase in migrant students in schools (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). It was estimated that 8% of students in post-primary schools had nationalities other than Irish (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2009). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009) noted that prior to the economic boom, the migrant population in Ireland comprised of mainly English-speaking people from the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand. They found non-English-speaking migrants was a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland, largely comprised of first-generation migrants (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2009). Table 3.1 depicts the characteristics of early leavers by nationality. A higher percentage of early leavers are from nationality groups other than Irish. Nearly 50% (46.7%) of students with a nationality from the EU 15 (excluding Ireland and the UK) were early leavers (Tickner 2013). This compared to just 1.7% of students with an Irish nationality (Tickner 2013). This gap may continue to rise as international research cited by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009) suggested that educational outcomes of second-generation migrants may be poorer than those of the first generation migrants in several countries.
Table 3.1 Early Leavers Classified by Nationality

This table depicts the students enrolled in 2009/2010 and not in 2010/2011 (excluding those students in the final year of senior cycle in 2009/2010) (Tickner 2013 p.15).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Total Enrolment</th>
<th>All Early Leavers</th>
<th>% of Total Enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irish Nationality</td>
<td>283,721</td>
<td>4,895</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Nationality</td>
<td>6,363</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of a State in the EU 15 except Ireland and the United Kingdom</td>
<td>3,010</td>
<td>1,405</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of State in the EU 12</td>
<td>8,061</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of Another State in Europe other than the EU 27</td>
<td>1,106</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of the USA or Canada</td>
<td>1,404</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of a Country in Latin or Southern America</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of a Country in Asia</td>
<td>3,754</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of a Country in Africa</td>
<td>3,989</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality of a Country in Australasia or Oceania</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>312,153</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,713</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Personal factors including substance abuse, pregnancy, working while at school and legal difficulties can lead to early school leaving (Johnston et al. 2004, Mecker et al. 2009). A literature review by Healy-Eames et al. (2010) found higher rates of early leaving were consistently found among males. The latest report by the DES indicated a gender gap of 3.59% remained in the retention rates at national level between males and females for the 2007 cohorts (DES 2014). This gender gap increased slightly from 3.15% for the 2006 cohorts; however, showed a decline from 2005 cohorts (3.78%) and 2004 cohorts (4.1%) (DES 2012a). Furthermore, low levels of educational achievement were associated with people with disabilities, including physical, intellectual, mental and sensory disabilities (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). A student’s experience of school was also a significant predictor of early leaving. Truancy, absenteeism, suspension, poor academic performance, disruptive behaviour and having to repeat a school year can effect successful school completion (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Gamoran 2001, Johnston et al. 2004, Meeker et al. 2009, Rumberger 1995). In conclusion, student demographic
characteristics, socioeconomic background, home climate, student circumstances and student experiences of school are associated with early school leaving.

3.7.2 School Factors

Irish studies found that the school one attends, more so than their individual circumstances, significantly influenced youths’ truancy levels (Byrne et al. 2008, Darmody et al. 2010). Students cited a dislike for school, poor academic performance, lack of social skills, rejection from school, perceived cultural irrelevance of school, conflict with teachers and isolation as reasons for leaving school (Azzam 2007, Byrne and Smyth 2010, Meeker et al. 2009, Smyth 2005, Wilkins 2008). When asked to rate factors influencing their decision to leave school, Irish students rated school factors (62%), followed by economic or work factors (60%), family factors (14%) and health factors (5%) (Byrne et al. 2008). McGrath (2009) argued that the current mainstream model did not integrate students’ realities and their concerns in modern education. Similarly, Healy-Eames et al. (2010, p.7) noted that Ireland’s “one size fits all” instruction and assessment did not provide youth with equal opportunities to grow or to recognise and use their full range of talents and skills. More supports and interactive and varied teaching instruction to support student learning needs was recommended (Healy-Eames et al. 2010).

In many instances, Irish policy makers appear to be aware of the complexities of learning and the benefits of adopting a holistic view of learning. Sections 13(4) and 23(2) of the Education Act (1998) highlighted the need to create a school environment that supported learning. Furthermore, Ireland’s National Children’s Strategy (Ireland 2000, p.10) employed a “whole child perspective”, and recognised that children’s educational achievement relied on many factors including social, cultural and intellectual factors. These complexities were recognised by Growing up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children which was commissioned in 2006 (Greene et al. 2008). The study was designed to inform the development of effective and responsive policies and services for children (Greene et al. 2008). The study uses Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model as its framework, recognising the interaction between the family, neighbourhood, school and religious contexts (Greene et al. 2008). Through its whole child perspective, the study acknowledges that a child develops within a multi-layered context. Aspects of the school context considered in Growing Up in Ireland include students attitudes to school, absenteeism, academic performance, characteristics of teachers and schools and peer relations (Williams et al. 2009). These school factors are
discussed further in the upcoming section on school context. Attention now turns to preventative measures connected to these factors that are embedded in policy initiatives.

### 3.8 Educational Supports that Consider Early School Leaving

Within Ireland, one of the most significant developments in relation to social inclusion or disadvantage in education was the development of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Action Plan (DES 2005a). DEIS spans across preschool, primary and post-primary levels. DEIS has two key features: first, a standardised approach to targeting resources and second, a more streamlined and integrated delivery of supports (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). The delivery of DEIS through the School Support Programme includes, but is not limited to, the School Completion Programme, Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinators, access to the JCSP and LCA, School Meals Programme and additional funding under school books grant scheme (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). This initiative identifies disadvantage at the level of schools, not individual students. Post-primary schools are selected by (1) medical card data for Junior Certificate candidates; (2) Junior Certificate retention rates by school; (3) Junior Certificate exam results aggregated to school level and (3) Leaving Certificate retention rates by school (DES 2013a). A report found a retention rate of 80.1% for the 2006 cohorts, compared to 68.2% for the 2001 cohorts indicating the average retention rate for DEIS schools is increasing (DES 2012a).

Further educational supports for potential early leavers in Ireland can be categorised under: (1) curricular reform; (2) alternatives to traditional school such as Youthreach and Life Centres; (3) key agencies working with schools, namely the National Education Welfare Board, the National Council for Special Education and the National Educational Psychological Services; (4) targeted programmes and supports such as the National Behaviour Support Services and language support teachers for migrant students who do not speak English and (5) professional development and support for teachers (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). To avoid duplication, a detailed description of these supports are found in a report by Healy-Eames et al. (2010). Internationally, the National Dropout Prevention Network (2013) identified school-community collaboration, safe learning environments, alternative education, professional development, individualised instruction, educational technology, mentoring and active learning among others as effective strategies which had a positive impact on retention rates. Alternative education at an international level is now described as the purpose of
this study was to identify contextual factors within alternative schools that contribute to student retention.

3.8.1 Alternative Education

Alternative education involves numerous service delivery models including charter schools, public alternative schools, continuation schools, schools-within-schools, career-focused schools and special programmes (Aron 2006, Knoeppel 2007, Menendez 2007). Some settings serve students who exhibit challenging behaviours, while others focus on academics and serve students who struggle academically compared to their same-aged peers (Gable et al. 2007). In some instances, students with behavioural and academic difficulties are served within the same alternative setting (Menendez 2007). For the purpose of this review the term alternative school was used to encompass these various service delivery models.

There is no consensus on a definition of alternative education (Aron 2006, Van Acker 2007). This review defined alternative education broadly, as schools or programmes set up by local authorities, schools, community and voluntary organisations or other entities to serve young people who were at-risk of or experiencing academic failure in a traditional school environment. Alternative educational settings cater for struggling students who are failing academically or may have special educational needs, behavioural difficulties, poor attendance or other similar situations which may contribute to academic failure (Aron 2006, Van Acker 2007). They provide an opportunity to achieve in a setting where innovative learning methods are used (Aron 2006). While alternative schools include diverse educational programmes and service delivery models, they are often characterised by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios and modified curricula (Aron 2006). For the purpose of this review alternative education fell outside of traditional education, special education or pure vocational education (Aron 2006, Gutherson et al. 2011, Van Acker 2007).

Raywid (1998) developed a three-level classification for categorising the range of alternative schools. Schools in level 1 involved changing the student. These schools were temporary assignments that often contained therapeutic interventions and had a remedial focus. Level 2 focused on changing the school. These highly innovative schools focused on changing the curriculum and instructional approaches. They provided a personalised whole-student approach that featured individual instruction, self-paced work and career counselling. These schools were characterised by highly
positive school climates. Level 3 attended to changing the educational system and included programmes which tried to make system-wide changes in educational systems. Examples of these alternatives included the small-school movement and the school-within-a-school movement. Although this typology provided a structure for understanding alternative schools, the distinction between types remained blurred as alternative schools had mixed strategies and objectives and often served a diverse student population (Van Acker 2007). Henrich (2005) noted that alternative schools typically improved student attendance, grades and graduation rates and decreased behaviour problems.

This project aimed to identify contextual factors within alternative schools which contributed to student retention. In order to address this aim, it seemed appropriate to include only level 2 and level 3 schools in this review as they focused on changing the school and educational system to better meet the needs of their students. Level 1 schools were not appropriate for this study as they did not focus on the school context; rather, they focused on changing the student. Furthermore, alternative schools faced challenges of engaging marginalised students who had been rejected by other schools and who had a history of school failure and personal difficulties. There were similarities between the factors contributing to early school leaving in section 3.7 and McCall’s (2003) list of principle reasons for referral to an alternative school: (1) behavioural dysfunction; (2) need for academic remediation; (3) social skills dysfunction; (4) family disruption or conflict and (5) chronic absenteeism. Only one of these factors was required for a student to meet an alternative school criterion. Yet, McCall (2003) found students with behavioural and academic difficulties often experienced problems in the family and community and also presented a pattern of chronic absenteeism in school. As students in alternative schools were unsuccessful in traditional school contexts, it seemed appropriate to obtain their experiences of contextual factors that contributed to their retention within alternative schools. Through identifying contextual factors which kept marginalised students engaged in the educational system, it was anticipated that findings from the current project would provide useful recommendations for both alternative schools and other educational settings.

3.8.2 Purpose of Alternative Education

The purpose of alternative schools is debated by researchers, educators and policy makers (Quinn et al. 2006). The U.S. Government stated the purpose of alternative education was to serve students who were at-risk of academic failure (Carver et al.
2010), implying dropout prevention was the main concern. Advocates for alternative education claimed that academic achievement was improved and behaviours of early school leavers and those at-risk of early leaving were better managed; thus, enabling students to graduate from post-primary school (Dugger and Dugger 1998, Jeffries and Singer 2003, Johnston et al. 2004, Raywid 1994). In contrast, Kim and Taylor (2008) found the alternative school in their study did not provide an equal or equitable education, a finding that does not comply with the UNCRC which stated under article 28 that children should have equal opportunities in education (United Nations 1989). Researchers questioned whether alternative schools existed to serve their enrolled students or to serve the traditional schools by warehousing disruptive students (Kim and Taylor 2008, Lehr et al. 2009b). Van Acker (2007) proposed that alternative education (a) provided protection for the majority of students from the dangerous behaviour of a few and (b) provided a more intensive and meaningful educational programme to marginalised and targeted students.

Since the late 1980s in the U.S., educator reformers sought ways to restructure schools to improve student performance (Brand et al. 2003, Newmann and Wehlage 1995). Restructured schools can be characterised by positive teacher-student interactions, fostering a sense of community and safety, small class sizes, high expectations, and adequate supports and resources (Guhn 2009). Alternative schools are the clearest example of a restructured school and the reforms currently pursued by traditional schools are practices that alternative schools pioneered (Aron 2009, Loflin 2003, Raywid 1994). It is understood from the school reform movement that struggling schools do not automatically improve by implementing new programmes on unsteady structural and cultural foundations (Rowan et al. 2004). Positive change requires strong leadership and cooperation (Rowan et al. 2004). As a result this review examined contextual factors within alternative schools to inform the foundations required to keep marginalised students in traditional schools.

3.9 Educational Contexts and Adolescent Development

Adolescents spend a large portion of their day in school or pursuing school-related activities. While the main objective of school is academic development, schools also effect adolescents in the area of physical and mental health, safety, civic and social development (Marin and Brown 2008). This influence can be seen in the types of occupations carried out within schools, which include academic (e.g. reading, writing), non-academic (e.g. lunch, after-school activities, sports) and may also include
prevocational and vocational activities (Swinth 2003). Social participation, where students interact with peers, teachers and other school personnel, occurs during these occupations (Swinth 2003).

The school context has many challenges. Other than the obvious cognitive and academic challenges, students are also expected to follow rules, cooperate with their peers, respect authority and to become good citizens (Shaffer and Kipp 2010b). Due to the challenges imposed by the school context, frequent undesirable changes that occur when students make the transition from primary to post-primary school include loss of self-esteem and interest in school, decreased academic performance (Baer 1999, Eccles et al. 1996, Seidman et al. 1994), increased behavioural difficulties (Eccles et al. 1996), truancy and early school leaving (Baer 1999, Eccles et al. 1996). One explanation for these changes was that young people were under-going puberty during this transition (Shaffer and Kipp 2010b). Opposing this view, Eccles and her colleagues argued that the importance of transition to post-primary school was not when adolescents made a school change but what their new school was like (Eccles et al. 1991). Eccles and colleagues’ research on early adolescent development was grounded in person-environment theory, where the intersection of social environments and developmental stage influences behaviour, motivation and mental health (Eccles et al. 1996, Eccles et al. 1993, Eccles et al. 1991). A good life stage-environment fit, where the social environment meets the adolescent’s developmental needs, can decrease the likelihood of behavioural, motivational and psychological difficulties; thus, easing the transition from childhood to adolescence (Eccles et al. 1993). Equally, a poor stage-environment fit caused by a mismatch between the social environment and an adolescent’s needs may impede psychosocial development (Eccles et al. 1993).

A mismatch between developmental needs and educational environments negatively effects not only early adolescents’ psychosocial functioning but also to their school-related outcomes (Baer 1999, Eccles et al. 1991, Feldlaufer et al. 1988). Environmental changes associated with the transition to post-primary education appear to be harmful. This is due to the emphasis on competition, social comparison and ability self-assessment at a developmental stage of heightened self-awareness, a changing self-concept and greater peer orientation (Eccles et al. 1993, Feldlaufer et al. 1988, Roeser et al. 2000). The first year of junior high school in the United States is characterised by a decrease in the emphasis on higher level thinking skills at a time when adolescents are experiencing increased cognitive ability and onset of abstract thinking (Eccles et al.
Additionally, there is an emphasis on whole-class task organisation, when the adolescent has more individualised needs (Eccles et al. 1993). There is also greater importance placed on teacher control and discipline which decreases adolescent decision-making and choice at a time when teens are seeking autonomy (Eccles et al. 1993). Eccles et al. (1993) argued that the decrease in personal and positive relationships with teachers following transition to post-primary education is problematic during early adolescence when youth are searching for positive adults relationships outside of their homes.

It appears that traditional schools are unresponsive to students’ desires for certain types of interaction, challenges and opportunities that support their well-being. Comer (2005), an advocate for environments that support both development and learning, advised educators to create a school culture that facilitated growth in six critical developmental pathways. These included physical (including brain development), social/interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic and cognitive/intellectual. Comer (2001) contended for schools to be successful, they must create conditions which provided opportunities for development and learning, including positive social and academic interactions between students and staff. Therefore, the decline in student well-being and academic achievement can be avoided.

3.10 Chapter Summary

Early school leaving is complex and multifaceted. Risk factors at an individual, family, community and school level interact and contribute to gradual disengagement from school. Bronfenbrenner (2005) emphasised the importance of environment on development in his bioecological theory. He argued that an individual is situated within interconnected environmental layers which all impact and shape development (Bronfenbrenner 2005). Consequently, intervention at the school level can be beneficial in addressing early school leaving (Bradshaw et al. 2008). It is recognised that schools and school personnel cannot change the individual, family and community factors which may put youth at-risk of early school leaving (Christle et al. 2007, Guhn 2009). It is however possible to provide protective factors that may reduce these risks by providing safe and positive learning environments; setting high yet achievable academic and social expectations; by facilitating academic and social success and by keeping students in school (Christle et al. 2007).
Currently in Ireland there are educational supports within traditional schools, yet these are failing to retain 9.87% of students (DES 2014). A number of subgroups tend to have higher rates of early school leaving than the general population. Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, males, students with disabilities and students from ethnic groups have higher rates of early school leaving compared to other sub-groups of the population (Healy-Eames et al. 2010). With increasing requirements for educational attainment and qualifications, not having the Leaving Certificate is associated with significant negative outcomes such as unemployment, lower earning, limited or no access to further education and training, crime, drug-taking and a poorer quality of life which involve associated costs for society (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Healy-Eames et al. 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009). A student’s decision to leave school is made consciously and their explanations have often included perceived cultural irrelevance of school, rejection from school and absence of respect by school for their lives, aspirations and experiences (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Smyth 2005). Smyth (2005) argued that these school barriers were not a novel revelation, but persist over time indicating a need to produce schools that facilitated learning. He urged researchers to interrogate the school environment to provide information about how school conditions can lead to successful academic experiences (Smyth 2005).

Accordingly, this project examined alternative schools given that their student body consisted of youth who did not succeed in traditional classrooms (Kennedy 2011a). Alternative schools were designed to better meet the needs of marginalised students through a smaller, more personal learning environment and with greater flexibility than a traditional school (Aron 2006, Knoeppel 2007, Knoeppel 2002). Students within these settings often have a history of behaviour problems, low academic achievement and many of these students were placed in alternative schools due to these difficulties (Kennedy 2011a). Alternative schools are challenged to motivate and educate these disengaged students (Aron 2009). Reviewing the literature on these schools may uncover contextual factors to break the cycle of disadvantage for particular groups of students and enable them to graduate (Henrich 2005). Furthermore, this review may provide suggestions for how traditional schools can support those particular groups of students who are over-represented in early school leaving figures to stay in school.

3.11 Aim of Review

The aims of this review were (1) to systematically gather marginalised students’ perceptions concerning contextual factors that contributed and interfered with their
decision to stay in alternative education; (2) to identify which contextual factors were best supported by current evidence; (3) to facilitate stakeholders to learn from disciplines with parallel person-environment interests and (4) to provide evidence-based recommendations to inform policy and practice while also identifying priorities for future research.

**Refined Research Question:**
Using studies which draw on the voices of marginalised students, what factors of the physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts contribute to student retention in alternative schools?

**Sub-Questions Include:**
1. What contextual factors are consistently associated with student retention in published literature?

2. What contextual factors do marginalised students perceive as important in their decision to stay in alternative education?

3. What contextual factors do marginalised students perceive as interfering with their decision to stay in alternative education?
Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

A systematic review that included mixed-methods studies was conducted to examine and synthesise research related to how alternative school contexts can increase student retention to inform practice, policy and research in this area. This chapter provides justification and a detailed description of the approach used in this systematic review. Specifically addressed is a description of the search and selection process of studies included in the review. The process for extracting, managing, coding and analysing data is also presented.

4.2 Justification of Methodology

This project aimed to identify student perspectives on contextual factors which contributed to their retention. There is a vast amount of existing literature regarding the alternative school context and its influences on student performance. These studies used quantitative or qualitative approaches. Using qualitative methods such as interviews to obtain Irish student perspectives on contextual factors which contributed to their retention in the Life Centres was a viable option. Life Centres are an alternative to traditional education in Ireland. They provide support for 12-18 year olds whose needs have not been met in traditional education (Edmund Rice International 2011). A mixed-methods approach was another alternative, whereby surveys gathering student perspectives supplemented by interview data could have been pursued. It was acknowledged that research literature in this area existed but was not synthesised. A decision was thus made to synthesise existing literature to inform practice, policy and future research.

Synthesis of research has a vital role in transmitting research to lay persons and in determining the direction of subsequent research, policies and practice (Suri 2000). A systematic review requires an explicit and well-defined process for searching and selecting studies included in the review as well as for coding and analysing data found in studies (Jesson et al. 2011). This explicit and transparent method minimises bias, leading to more reliable results (Higgins and Green 2011). Providing a detailed description of the review process enables the search strategy to be replicated or expanded to include new studies or criteria (Liberati et al. 2009).
Traditionally, systematic review methodology favoured quantitative forms of evidence, particularly randomised controlled trials (Dixon-Woods et al. 2008). The dominant approaches used in educational research are qualitative (Andrews 2005, Akey 2006, Darmody et al. 2010, Torgerson and Torgerson 2001), correlational and quasi-experimental methodologies (Akey 2006). A decision was thus made to use a systematic review that included mixed-methods studies.

There appears to be a lack of clarity regarding how to define the school context and which methods to use in order to study it. This may be due in part to the multiple disciplines (e.g. psychology, ergonomics, architecture etc.) with research interests in the school context, each having unique assumptions underpinning their work and informing research designs (Higgins et al. 2005). Anderson (1982) argued that much research about school contexts would remain unreported if stringent design or analysis criteria were applied; however, some systematic reviews raised questions about the strength of methodology employed by educational studies (Blank et al. 2009, Vreeman and Carroll 2007). It can be argued that educational research tends to use lower hierarchy research designs (figure 4.1). Those study designs most susceptible to threats to internal validity reside at the bottom of the pyramid and those least prone reside at the top (Ho et al. 2008). Responding to these concerns, quality appraisal of included studies was conducted, and those studies with poor methodology were excluded.

![Figure 4.1 Pyramid of Evidence (Ho et al. 2008, p.1676)](image-url)
This review did not attempt to define a single set of variables which supported student retention in the school context. Rather, without eliminating studies for using lower hierarchy research designs, this project identified potential factors which (a) marginalised students’ perceived as important contextual factors in keeping them in school and (b) kept recurring in association with student retention regardless of methodology design. In other words, this review included all types of evidence in the hierarchical pyramid of evidence.

Typically systematic reviews focus on questions of effectiveness, such as what intervention works best (Harden 2010). This review aimed to identify not only what works but also why it works and for whom. A systematic review which included mixed-methods studies enabled the current project’s questions to be addressed as it facilitated an understanding of research participants’ experiences reported in the literature (Harden 2010, Higgins and Green 2011). Therefore excluding studies on the grounds of their methodology could have significant consequences (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005). For example, excluding qualitative studies because they are considered to be lower hierarchy research designs would have inhibited a review of student perspectives. Attending to both qualitative and quantitative studies about a particular topic is advantageous. Individual studies typically take place in different contexts. These multiple perspectives across a range of contexts create a more nuanced account, as connections are identified (Abrami et al. 2008). A single study can rarely be generalised nor can it provide definitive answers to research questions within the social sciences (Suri 2000). Additionally, economic constraints can restrict the scale of a single study; thus, a comprehensive investigation involving a combination of results from various individual studies is useful (Suri 2000). Systematic reviews enable us to compare research designs that lead to specific findings without having the bias, constraints and limitations associated with one particular research design (Abrami et al. 2008). Methodological triangulation which enhances validity is one of the most cited reasons for combining qualitative and quantitative research (Adamson 2005). It is acknowledged that well designed and executed systematic reviews can provide policy makers, teachers, parents and students with critical information from which to structure school contexts (Abrami et al. 2008, Harden 2010).

The systematic review of the current project enabled a review of research where student voices were centralised through the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative studies which obtained student perspectives. Student voice is defined as the opinions and
perceptions of students (Mitra 2004). Evidence suggested the importance of listening to students given that they have both useful and challenging ideas about what makes an effective learning environment (De La Ossa 2005, Marquez-Zenkov et al. 2007, Mitra 2004). Research which centralises marginalised student voices is commonly recommended (Daniels 2005, Kennedy 2009, Mitra 2004). Under article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations 1989), children have a right to express their views on all matters affecting them. Listening to the voices of young people is embedded in Irish policy development process as a key goal in the National Children’s Strategy (Ireland 2000). Considering policy and research, the importance of attending to student voices in this project became apparent.

Research reported differences between students’ and teachers’ perspectives regarding the school context and early school leaving (McCall 2003, te Riele 2006). For instance, when asked to describe the biggest difference between alternative and traditional schools, students reported individual attention while school officials stated less rules (McCall 2003). In this particular study, school officials cited poor parenting as the main reason for early leaving, whilst students reported poor treatment by the school. These differences signify the importance of taking into account student voices. Within the current project, synthesising studies in a systematic way provided a greater breadth of perspectives and a deeper understanding of issues from the point of view of those individuals targeted by alternative schools (Harden et al. 2004). Understanding issues from the perspectives of the people they affect is important for effective social policy development (Harden et al. 2004).

Finally, many prior reviews examining the traditional school context looked at only one aspect of the context, primarily the physical context (Blackmore et al. 2011, Higgins et al. 2005, Kidger et al. 2012, Lindstrom Johnson 2009, Weinstein 1979). Reviews surrounding alternative education aimed to identify characteristics of effective programmes without specifically considering the school context (Glassett 2012, Gutherson et al. 2011, Klima et al. 2009). This review added to existing research by examining contextual factors within alternative education contributing to student retention. There is little research literature on alternative provision in Ireland; therefore, literature was sought internationally. This review used a broad definition of school context through considering four interconnected aspects of context: physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts. This facilitated an exploration of how various aspects of the context interacted and how this influenced the students’ experiences of school. As a
result, a more comprehensive understanding of contextual influences on student retention was obtained. Furthermore, having a broader definition yielded many more studies compared to if only one aspect of the school context was studied.

4.3 Guidelines Informing this Review

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement guided the reporting of this review to ensure key information was conveyed in order to increase the review’s usefulness (Liberati et al. 2009). The PRISMA statement provides a 27-item checklist to ensure transparent reporting of a systematic review. This checklist addresses title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion and funding in relation to the review (Liberati et al. 2009). Furthermore, the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews (Higgins and Green 2011), the Supplementary Guidance for Inclusion of Qualitative Research in Cochrane Systematic Reviews (Noyes et al. 2011), the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination’s Guidance for Undertaking Reviews (CRD 2009) and the EPPI-Centre Methods for Conducting Systematic Reviews (EPPI-Centre 2010) informed this review. These guidelines directed the review process, including the inclusion/exclusion criteria, the search process, data extraction and data analysis. These guidelines are referred to throughout this chapter.

4.4 Preliminary Scoping Review

A scoping review involves mapping the existing literature and is used to explore the extent of literature in a particular domain, to identify appropriate parameters of the review (e.g. define the target population) and to identify the potential breadth of the review (Armstrong et al. 2011). Initially a scoping review was carried out to determine the quantity of literature in the area of early school leaving which assisted the research question to be narrowed (Jesson et al. 2011) (figure 4.2).
The initial research question sought to identify key-stakeholders’ perceptions about how to create a positive learning environment in post-primary education. The literature was vast; thus, the question was reviewed. Following revisions, the research question narrowed to the perspectives of marginalised students, their teachers and parents regarding how the school context can support student retention. The volume of studies found during this part of the scoping review remained unwieldy with 256 relevant articles identified within the ERIC databases alone. The theoretical framework, specifically Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological framework, prompted a narrowing of the inclusion criteria to focus only on the perspectives of those individuals within the school microsystem: the students and staff. The volume of studies remained unmanageable. Finally a decision was made to attend solely to marginalised students’ perspectives on contextual factors contributing to student retention in alternative schools. It is acknowledged that the perspectives of staff, parents, school boards and other stakeholders are valuable; however, the concern here was the perspectives of
students. Narrowing the inclusion criteria to these key-stakeholders yielded a return of 1543 hits, of which 37 were identified in ERIC.

4.5 Eligibility Criteria

Literature reviews regarding dropout prevention consistently reported several limitations. The lack of a common definition of ‘at risk students’ and ‘early school leaving’ were considered challenging (Abrami et al. 2008, Glassett 2012). Other limitations involved the concentration on predictor variables (e.g. peer relationships, grade retention, stress and coping, socioeconomic status) (Abrami et al. 2008) and the inability of literature to depict the complexity and scale of the issue due to high number of dropout related correlates (Abrami et al. 2008, Rosenthal 1998). The expansion of school success definitions to include graduation but also academic, social and behavioural competence (Abrami et al. 2008, Christenson et al. 2001) further increased the difficulty of working with this literature.

Given the complexity of the literature within this field, the current review could have incorporated materials from wide-ranging literature including educational programmes for students with special needs, school reform programmes, correctional centres, counselling services for families, vocational education programmes for early school leavers and dropout programmes in traditional schools among others. Setting clear parameters for inclusion was crucial. The following criteria were used to determine whether a study would be included in the review for the purpose of identifying contextual influences on student retention:

- Studies published in a peer-reviewed journal.
- Studies published in English.
- Studies which are empirical and primary in nature.
- Participants must include young persons who are attending or have attended an alternative school.
- Studies must report the perspectives of students/former students.
- Studies must investigate contextual factors which influence positive outcomes and/or barriers to positive outcomes in young people.
- In keeping with Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory, studies must address the school’s microsystem.
All empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals were included. Reviews and opinion-based pieces were excluded. Reviews typically contain their own syntheses and opinion-based pieces may not be supported by evidence. Dissertations were excluded as it was not feasible to include them due to the scope and resources of this review. Other exclusion criteria employed within this review comprised the following:

- Studies not published in English.
- Studies not empirical or primary in nature (e.g. a discussion, opinion piece or review of studies).
- Studies which do not investigate contextual factors which influence positive outcomes or barriers to positive outcomes for young people who are attending or have attended alternative schools.
- Studies which addressed Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

The research reported in articles must have investigated outcomes for an alternative school directed toward school-aged youth, defined as those attending alternative post-primary schools, or the equivalent in countries with a different schooling structure, approximately corresponding to ages 11-18. Recent early school leavers between the ages of 18-25 were included if the school under study was explicitly oriented toward post-primary school completion or the equivalent. The perceptions of graduates from alternative schools were considered.

Samples from populations broadly at risk because of economic disadvantage, individual risk variables, and closely related factors were included (e.g. inner city schools, students from low socioeconomic families, teen parents, students with poor attendance records, students with low test scores or who are over-age for their grade). Samples consisting exclusively of specialised populations, such as students with disabilities or other special needs were included as long as their school did not resemble a level 1 school under Raywid’s (1998) typology. Research reported that 12% of the population in any alternative school had disabilities (Lehr and Lange 2003). Samples of the general population not identified at risk of early leaving were excluded.

The settings of studies were also considered in terms of inclusion and exclusion criteria. In keeping with Raywid’s (1998) typology of alternative education, level 1 schools which involve changing the student were excluded, although it was recognised that these are an important part of alternative provision. Examples excluded under level 1
included character programmes, behaviour improvement programmes, correctional centres, residential or day-time treatment settings. Level 2 programmes were included as they involved changing the school to meet student needs. Level 3 that involved those schools which made system-wide changes and included schools-within-schools were included; for example, an alternative programme within a traditional school. In this sense, alternative programmes are different from alternative schools, although these terms are used inter-changeably in the literature. Alternative schools are in separate facilities and often include different rules and norms from traditional schools (Klima et al. 2009). Both alternative schools and programmes were included in this review as they both cater for marginalised students and they have similar characteristics; for example, they usually offer small class sizes, more individualised instruction and alternative curriculum (Klima et al. 2009). Only alternative schools that led to certification equivalent to the Leaving Certificate were included as this has been identified as the minimum requirement to successfully achieve positive adult outcomes (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Smyth and McCoy 2009). Alternative schools with an academic and vocational focus were included. Pure vocational programmes were excluded as they did not focus on achieving the Leaving Certificate or equivalent in other countries. Abiding by the theoretical framework of this review, only the school’s microsystem was considered; therefore, studies focusing on interventions with family and the community were excluded.

The outcomes sought for inclusion in this review differed for qualitative and quantitative studies. All eligible qualitative studies investigated the attitudes, experiences and understandings of marginalised students regarding an alternative school context they experienced. The alternative school context included the physical, social, cultural or virtual contexts. All eligible quantitative studies assessed the school context effects on at least one outcome variable that represented school completion or dropout. Qualifying outcome variables were those that aligned with or were similar to the following categories: school dropout, student retention, graduation, attainment of the Leaving Certificate or similar certificate, or enrolment/non-enrolment in school. Quantitative studies measuring students’ perceptions of their school context using questionnaires were included. Questionnaires developed for the purpose of a study were included; however, questionnaires with established reliability and validity were preferable.
Eligible studies were recently published for the research to be applicable to contemporary students. The date of publication was initially between the years 2000-2012. Due to the large volume of articles found during the search, a decision was made to only include studies where data collection occurred in 2000 or after. The EPPI-Centre guidelines (2010) recognised that the scope of the review may need to be refined if an unmanageable number of studies met the review’s inclusion criteria.

4.6 Search Strategy for Identification of Relevant Studies

A comprehensive search strategy was devised and conducted to identify and retrieve all potentially relevant results meeting the inclusion criteria. Systematic reviews require a thorough, objective and reproducible search within a range of sources (Higgins and Green 2011). Given the scope, resources and timeframe of this project only three sources were used to identify relevant studies: electronic databases, the reference lists within relevant articles and reviews identified during the search.

The student researcher emailed the Life Centres in Ireland to identify any relevant research in the Irish context. The Life Centres stated there was a dearth of research literature in the Irish context and they could only identify dissertations and studies which did not address the school context. Therefore, no Irish studies were included in the current review.

4.6.1 Electronic Databases

A comprehensive search involves challenges; for example, identifying alternative terms and increasing the precision of a search strategy to reduce the number of irrelevant papers retrieved without missing relevant studies (CRD 2009). Researchers conducting systematic reviews are advised to seek assistance from those with expert skills in information retrieval strategies (CRD 2009). The faculty librarian for Education and Health Science in the University of Limerick was consulted for advice regarding appropriate databases to search and the development and combination of keywords. Consulting an information specialist, minimises bias and researcher oversight (Dixon-Woods et al. 2008). Each database was searched from 1st of January 2000 to 31st of December 2012. A total of 23 databases were searched (Table 4.1).
Table 4.1 Databases Searched

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<td>Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts</td>
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<td>Education Research Abstracts online</td>
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Four methods were used to identify keywords: (1) database thesauruses; (2) key terms from articles situated across various disciplines; (3) key terms from databases and (4) key terms used in previous reviews in this area. Keyword searches within each database included combinations of keywords grouped into three main categories:

1. Targeted population/behaviour/outcome: at-risk OR early school leav* OR graduation OR school completion
   AND

2. Influence: school environment OR school culture
   AND

3. Targeted setting: alternative school OR alternative program*

Separating dropout terms such as at-risk or school failure and outcome terms such as graduation or student attrition was trialled; however, more results were obtained when combining these two sets. In keeping with PRISMA guidelines, refer to appendix A for a full electronic search strategy conducted in one major database as an example (Liberati et al. 2009). The search strategy took into account that index terms varied across databases. Additionally, some databases did not use wildcard characters (e.g. a special character that represents one or more other characters) and/or only allowed a limited number of keywords in a search. In these cases, keywords were combined in various ways. The combination with the most hits was searched for relevant articles. The search strategy was reviewed by the faculty librarian in the University of Limerick and supervisors.
4.6.2 Reference Lists
Reviews found during the search were not included; however, their reference lists were searched for relevant studies (Appendix B). In addition, the references of the retrieved relevant studies were examined for further eligible studies and the reference of these studies in turn until this strategy was exhausted (Appendix C).

4.7 Conducting and Documenting the Search and Selection Process
A comprehensive search log was maintained in Excel to record all searches including (1) database or main source searched (2) number of hits. Title and abstracts were initially reviewed for relevance, with the final eligibility screening based on the entire article. Following procedures used by Lehr et al. (2003) and Abrami et al. (2008) if articles were questionable during the review of title and abstracts, they were included in the next stage of selection which involved more detailed inclusion/exclusion criteria and review of full text.

The full text was obtained for all potentially relevant abstracts in the second stage of selection procedures (n=120). Bibliographic information and which source yielded the article were put into an excel spreadsheet. If the study was in electronic format, it was saved to Endnote. Hard copies were stored in a file drawer. Twelve articles could not be obtained through the library. These twelve authors were emailed to request a copy of their study, and in cases where the email of the authors could not be obtained, the university/institution the author was associated with was emailed or the journal itself. Nine full text articles were received following requests by email. For the remaining three articles, inter-library loans were requested from the library in the University of Limerick without success. Therefore these studies were discarded because the full text was not available (Pollard and Thorne 2003, Macey et al. 2009, Schultz and Harris 2001). Considering the additional inclusion criteria applied that data collection must have occurred in 2000 or onwards, it is likely that Pollard and Thorne (2003) and Schultz and Harris (2001) would have been excluded.

Following retrieval of the full-text and documentation of each article in Excel, each study was screened using specific headings in excel which obtained basic information to ensure the study met the inclusion criteria (Appendix D). For those studies which met the inclusion criteria, their references were searched to identify any further relevant studies (n=32). One study was identified and having searched this study’s references, no further eligible studies were identified. For articles that did not specify their year of data
collection (n=17), the student researcher contacted the authors requesting this information. All authors responded except two. One study was published in 2001. As it was very unlikely that data collection occurred after 2000 it was excluded. Another study was published in 2011 and was included in the review since it appeared that the data collection window fit within the inclusion criteria for the current project (Jones 2011).

4.8 Results of Search

The database search yielded 1543 results (Figure 4.3). A search of reference lists of reviews identified in the search yielded 43 potentially relevant studies. Of these 43 studies, duplicates and articles found in the database searches were excluded. Sixteen original studies were identified, retrieved and screened for eligibility criteria. In total 1586 title and abstracts were reviewed by the student researcher. Following review of title and abstracts, the full article was obtained for the remaining 120 studies. These studies were screened for eligibility using specific headings in excel. Involvement of at least two researchers at all stages of a review is recommended to minimise bias and error (CRD 2009). Given the scope and resources of this project, it was not feasible to have two reviewers conduct all stages of this review. In addressing this limitation, 35% of these 120 studies were independently screened by two reviewers to enhance consistency and reliability. These reviewers included supervisors and a peer with a PhD. Agreement was reached via consensus or through a third party when the initial reviewers could not reach a clear agreement. Thus, 19% of articles were screened by a third reviewer. Following review of full-text, 32 studies met the inclusion criteria. See Appendix E for details of excluded articles and the reason for exclusion. The references of these 32 studies were reviewed, and one additional study met the inclusion criteria, bringing the final number of relevant studies to 33 studies.
Articles excluded following quality assessment (n = 9)

Records identified through database searching (n = 1543)

Screening

Included

Records screened (n = 1586)

Eligibility

Additional records identified through reviews

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 120)

Eligibility (n = 32)

Records excluded with reasons (n = 88)

Eligibility assessed for full-text articles (n = 1466)

Identified

Twenty-four studies included for review, including quantitative studies (n = 1), mixed-method studies (n = 5) and qualitative studies (n = 18)

References from eligible full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 32)

Number of studies identified during this process (n = 1)

Figure 4.3 Search Results
4.9 **Quality Assessment**

The final 33 articles were quality assessed by the student researcher. Of these 33 studies, 24% were independently appraised by two reviewers, including research supervisors and peer with PhD, to address reliability. Agreement was reached via consensus. There was no need to consult a third party.

4.9.1 **Qualitative Quality Assessment**

There is a debate about whether qualitative studies should be critically appraised and whether they should be excluded from a systematic review on the basis of quality (Harden et al. 2004). Some authors argued that studies should be included regardless of scientific merit (Sandelowski et al. 1997). Others argued that reports with poor quality should be excluded (Campbell et al. 2003). Similar to Thomas and Harden (2008), the view was taken that the quality of qualitative research should be assessed to avoid drawing unreliable conclusions. There is no commonly agreed criteria for assessing qualitative studies (Hannes 2011, Sandelowski et al. 1997); yet, a systematic review requires a consistent and reproducible approach to appraising evidence. Established tools were used to appraise the quality of the studies.

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP 2013a) qualitative tool was considered for the assessment of qualitative articles given the precedent for using this tool in published systematic reviews (Hannes 2011). Unfortunately, there is no rating scale for this system; therefore, a decision was made to use a tool developed by Cesario et al. (2002) which included a rating scale and good criteria (Appendix F). Following a comprehensive search, it appeared that this tool was not used in published systematic reviews to date. The face and content validity of the tool was assessed by two guideline development teams who supported its utility (Cesario et al. 2002). Although reliability has yet to be established, this tool appeared to offer the foundation for consistent and fair critical appraisals of studies.

Applying this rating consistently across all studies included in this review enabled the student researcher to make more objective and consistent determinations regarding the quality of each article. This tool consisted of five categories: descriptive vividness, methodological congruence, analytical preciseness, theoretical connectedness and heuristic relevance (Cesario et al. 2002). The qualitative studies were rated using the criteria within these five categories. It is noted that not all qualitative studies should be evaluated with the same criteria as they have different approaches and methods and
therefore require different ways to determine if they are trustworthy (Krefting 1991, Morse et al. 2002). For instance, phenomenological approaches aim to describe the experience of the phenomenon under study and not to generalise to theories or models (Krefting 1991). Criteria were ignored when they were not relevant to eligible studies. On the scale of the tool, a rating of 3 indicated that more than 75% of criteria was met, 2 that between 50% and 74% of the criteria was met, 1 that between 25% and 49% of the criteria was met and 0 that there was no evidence that criteria was met. Any uncertainties were discussed with supervisors or a peer with PhD and resolved with agreement of the awarded score. Based on the evaluation of the total scores, studies were designated a quality rating of QI, QII or QIII. For example, a rating of QI indicated that 75% to 100% of the total criteria in each of the five categories were met. QI studies indicated a well-constructed qualitative study.

4.9.2 Quantitative Quality Assessment

Following exclusion of studies based on the inclusion criteria, only survey designs were used in both the quantitative and mixed-methods studies. The CASP cohort tool was considered for appraisal of survey designs (CASP 2013b); however, its questions were too specific and did not relate to the included studies. For example, one question in this tool was: “Was the follow up of subjects complete enough?” The Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMa) (2010) adapted Crombie’s (1996) work and developed a tool entitled “Critical Appraisal of a Survey” (Appendix G). This tool addressed most questions required for a survey but did not address all elements of a solid quantitative research study. For instance, it did not require identifying whether relevant literature was reviewed, whether ethical procedures were completed, nor did it identify the sample size or the questions included in the surveys. The McMaster critical review form for quantitative studies asked these broad questions (Law et al. 1998) (Appendix H). Therefore, both the McMaster critical review form and the CEBMa tool were used to address the quantitative studies and the quantitative aspects of the mixed-methods studies.

For the purpose of this review, a similar rating system to the qualitative appraisal tool was devised. That is, if 75% to 100% of the total criteria were met it was rated as QI, if between 50% and 74% of the total criteria were met it was rated as QII, and if less than 50% of the total criteria were met it was rated as QIII. The total criteria involved combining criteria from the McMaster critical review form and the CEBMa tool. This facilitated consistency between the qualitative and quantitative research studies,
especially those studies which used mixed-methods. Aspects of the McMaster tool (e.g. ‘outcomes’ and ‘intervention’ sections) were not considered during the critical appraisal as they were not relevant to the included studies. A comprehensive search found the McMaster tool was not validated (Amstar 2012) and there was no information about the validation of CEBMa’s tool. Despite these limitations, the combination of these tools appeared to offer the foundation for consistent, comprehensive and fair critical appraisals of studies.

Following quality assessment, a decision was made to only include articles rated as QI and QII, that is, studies deemed “good” and “fair” respectively. Studies rated as QIII, indicating that the methodology was “poor”, were excluded based on their quality rating. The rating of “poor” is a comment on the quality of the papers written from those projects, rather than a question of the value of those research studies. Following quality assessment 24 articles remained. See appendix I for the nine articles excluded at this stage.

4.10 Data Extraction and Analysis Procedure

4.10.1 Data Extraction

Ideally more than one reviewer is involved in data extraction for each included study. Reviews of each study are then compared and differences resolved through discussion. This promotes consistency of data extraction and reduces errors (Noyes and Lewin 2011). In cases where this is not possible, Cochrane recommends that a sample of data extraction is validated by a second reviewer (ibid.). Twenty four per cent of data extractions were reviewed by supervisors and a peer with PhD in keeping with Cochrane’s recommendation. Disagreements were resolved via discussion and consensus.

An inclusive approach was adopted for data extraction (Noyes and Lewin 2011). This approach involves gathering and extracting all themes and other qualitative data identified in the primary studies which are relevant to the review questions, regardless of whether or not they are illustrated directly by a verbatim quote (ibid.). Inclusive approaches were used in previous reviews which obtained youth perspectives (Jamal et al. 2013, Thomas and Harden 2008). While this approach is more resource intensive, it avoids omitting findings of potential value to the synthesis (Noyes and Lewin 2011). Data was extracted from each included study regarding: (1) characteristics of study participants (including age, gender, country); (2) type of alternative educational setting
These five elements were translated into headings within an excel spreadsheet. Additional columns were created in excel to address domains identified by the theoretical framework of the review, that is the physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts. Extracted data was recorded within relevant excel columns. This approach focused data extraction on findings relevant to the review question and aims (Thomas and Harden 2008). This framework was flexible allowing the analysis to evolve in an inductive way; for example, ‘positive peer dynamics’ and ‘expectations’ are examples of additional headings that were added as the analysis progressed (Noyes and Lewin 2011).

The initial data extraction provided a broad overview of the included studies. The student researcher returned to reading full-text studies during the synthesis process to become immersed in the data. In reviews of qualitative studies, it is typical that the reviewer moves among reading primary papers, data extraction and synthesis in several cycles as key concepts and themes emerge from the synthesis (Noyes and Lewin 2011).

### 4.10.2 Thematic Analysis

There are debates regarding whether it is feasible or appropriate to synthesise qualitative evidence and whether it is acceptable to synthesise qualitative studies derived from various traditions (Sandelowski et al. 1997, Thomas and Harden 2008). It was proposed that qualitative research was not generalisable and was specific to a particular context, time and group of participants (Thomas and Harden 2008). In synthesising such research, reviews de-contextualise findings. These debates raise paradigmatic concerns that are beyond the scope of this project. Most studies within this review did not identify their paradigm of inquiry or explicitly comment on their theoretical framework; thus, it was not possible to make an overarching comment about the philosophical underpinnings of the various studies. Instead, critical appraisal of articles was thoughtfully and consistently conducted. No articles were removed because of the paradigm of inquiry but rather were excluded because the quality of the research article was not adequate. The student researcher concurred with arguments that qualitative research should be used more widely to inform policy and practice (Campbell et al. 2003, Newman et al. 2006). It was recognised that education policy and practice asked
questions which required qualitative research to answer them (Davies 1998). The importance of qualitative research is clear as is the need for methods to synthesise findings while also maintaining the integrity of individual studies (Sandelowski et al. 1997).

Data analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel. Thematic analysis followed the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006) (Table 4.2). Thematic analysis involved identifying prominent ideas and summarising the findings of studies under these headings (Braun and Clarke 2006, Dixon-Woods et al. 2008). It provided an organised and structured method for approaching this dataset (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005). Findings of studies were initially coded followed by developing descriptive themes and finally generating analytical themes (Thomas and Harden 2008). The flexibility of this approach enabled the integration of qualitative and quantitative data (Dixon-Woods et al. 2008). Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis was a flexible research tool which could potentially provide rich, detailed and complex accounts of data, enhancing trustworthiness of the analytical process.

Trustworthiness was used to describe methods used to establish credibility of the research (Harrison et al. 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described trustworthiness in qualitative research using the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a convincing interpretation of the data from the participants’ original data. Transferability is the degree in which the findings may be applied beyond the project. Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the overall research design. Confirmability is a measure of whether findings can be readily traced back to the data. A difficulty often encountered is the lack of explicitness about procedures and aims in thematic analysis, including failure to indicate the extent to which thematic analyses are descriptive or interpretive (Dixon-Woods et al. 2008). Given that much qualitative research presents findings in themes, it can be difficult to move beyond summarising the original themes when synthesising primary studies. Using the detailed excel spreadsheet combined with the inclusive approach to data extraction within the current project effectively addressed this concern. This allowed identification of higher-order thematic categories beyond those identified within the primary sources (e.g. ‘individualised instruction’ was placed under the theme ‘responsive curricula’) (Dixon-Woods et al. 2008).
### Table 4.2 The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarise yourself with the data:</td>
<td>Reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes:</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes:</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report:</td>
<td>Selection of extract examples. Analyse selected extracts and relate analysis back to the research question and literature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An inductive approach to thematic analysis was employed as the analysis was data driven (Braun and Clarke 2006). The student researcher was interested in moving away from contextual headings to identify different factors within the contexts. This element to thematic analysis reduced researcher bias (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using the six stages of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) reduced researcher bias and simultaneously enabled an inductive approach.

**Phase 1: familiarise yourself with the data**

The first phase of analysis involved reading and re-reading the data in order to become familiar with the content (Braun and Clarke 2006, Noyes and Lewin 2011). The student researcher was immersed in the data by actively seeking to identify preliminary patterns across the studies and recorded any such patterns.

**Phase 2: generating initial codes**

In the second stage of the analysis Microsoft Excel was used to assist with highlighting and organising data codes. The authors’ original findings, using their original terms and key codes were listed in Excel. Text was copied and pasted directly from each article into the spreadsheet, creating an audit trail which increased the trustworthiness of the
analysis. These findings were categorised under contextual headings: physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasised that moving through the phases of analysis was not a linear process but one where each phase was revisited. The articles and preliminary codes were reviewed as the analysis progressed, with the student researcher gradually refining the code list. For example, codes that emerged within each layer of context were then compared across studies. A search was undertaken for the presence or absence of these codes within all the included studies. The codes that appeared to be prominent within a particular context heading were reviewed and agreed with supervisors. Examples of the revision and change to codes included: integrating extracts coded as ‘flexibility’ into ‘positive discipline strategies’, ‘positive curriculum’ and ‘school care for students’; integrating extracts coded as ‘respect’ into ‘positive discipline strategies’, ‘teacher care for students’ and ‘student care for peers’, ‘school care for students’ and ‘student care for school’ and changing a code from ‘teacher-student relationships’ to ‘teacher care for students’.

**Phase 3: searching for themes**

During this stage the identified codes were organised into tentative themes. A preliminary analysis of codes shared across contextual domains was completed. Sticky notes were used to visually display codes and these were categorised under broader conceptual headings. Photos were taken of this process to maintain an audit trail. These clustered codes were presented and discussed with both supervisors which led to their refinement. Similar codes were identified within the four contexts and a decision was made to move away from contextual headings due to this repetition. For example, ‘sense of belonging’ was identified both in the social and cultural contexts, and ‘safety’ was identified in the physical, cultural and virtual contexts as a broad code and within the social context ‘safety’ was a sub-code under the various relationships.

Initial thematic maps were drawn manually on paper to aid the organisation of codes into themes, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Overarching themes considered were: (1) teacher and student expectations which included teachers expectations of students and students expectations of their teachers and their schools; (2) philosophy of alternative education; for example, the beliefs that underpinned the practices within the schools; (3) practice of that philosophy; for example, how the school’s philosophy was seen in everyday practice within schools and (4) outcomes, including students academic outcomes but also including how practices created a safe caring community, reciprocal respect and changed students’ attitudes towards school. It
was during this stage that original themes identified in each study were disrupted and the analysis extended beyond the student researcher’s original expectation about the direction the analysis would take. The initial thematic map was formed in excel and the number of articles mentioning a particular theme was identified and their ID number was put beside the code. This thematic map was then further refined as headings were merged under the broader headings of (1) alternative education philosophy and (2) school practices of this philosophy (Appendix J).

**Phase 4: reviewing themes**

The initial themes were reviewed and refined in this phase. The themes related to practice of philosophy were reorganised under one over-arching theme of ‘schools as safe spaces’ as it captured the sense of safety, sense of belonging and care students perceived. It was at this stage that subthemes were collated. For example, the thematic title ‘teacher care for students’ was renamed as ‘caring teachers’. Within this revised theme the attributes and qualities caring teachers possessed were listed as sub-themes. These revised themes and sub-themes appeared more reflective of the data and the perspectives of students.

All the collated extracts for each theme were read to check that they formed a coherent pattern. Furthermore, student quotes were copied and pasted directly into Microsoft word under the thematic headings. The whole data set was re-read in order to do this and to check for any additional data that may have been missed in earlier coding.

The themes were reviewed and refined a second time during this phase resulting in the integration of themes and sub-themes into a final set of themes. Examples of changes made included: the previous theme of ‘caring peers’ had sub-themes of ‘positive peer dynamics’, ‘caring peers are supportive’, and ‘caring peers are accepting’. These sub-themes were integrated under one theme ‘caring peers’. The theme of ‘school structures’ had its sub-themes integrated under ‘physical environment’, ‘supports’ and ‘policies’.

**Phase 5: defining and naming themes**

The data extracts for each theme were collated and the student researcher identified what was interesting about them and why. Sub-themes which maintained the complexity and diversity of student’s views were also identified. By the end of this phase, the student researcher was able to define the content of each theme in a couple of sentences.
Phase 6: producing the report

This stage of the analysis involved producing the report which is presented in the results chapter. Data extracts which captured the essence of themes were selected. Final analysis and interpretation of the selected data extracts were completed and arguments were formed in relation to the research question.

4.11 Trustworthiness

Newton et al. (2012) acknowledged that systematic reviews presented a range of dilemmas, yet argued that reflexivity and auditability addressed these tensions. Reflexivity involves active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact the research findings (Horsburgh 2003, Sin 2010). Reflexivity entails the researcher taking deliberate steps to minimise their influence on the research process and to document these clearly (Sin 2010). Within this review subjective decisions were made; for example, the selection criteria involved decision making based on the inclusion criteria. Reflexivity facilitated trustworthiness in this project. Trustworthiness was also promoted through the use of auditability. Auditability involves an audit trail which allows another researcher to follow the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described (Shenton 2004). Methods used to promote reflexivity and auditability within this review will now be discussed.

Throughout the research process, both supervisors provided input. The first supervisor, Dr. Nancy Salmon has a clinical background in occupational therapy. Her professional practice specialised in paediatrics, school and community-based services, augmentative and alternative communication and disability rights. Dr. Salmon’s research interests include enabling people with disabilities to become effective co-researchers and supporting people with intellectual disabilities to live well in the community. The second supervisor, Dr. Carol-Anne Murphy has a clinical background in speech and language therapy. Her clinical experience involves providing services to children and adults across the life span in a range of settings. Dr. Murphy’s research interests include the development and delivery of effective speech and language therapy services to children with speech and language delay/developmental language disorders from preschool through adolescence. This work encompasses children in clinical and school settings. The student researcher drew on their depth of clinical and academic experience in resolving dilemmas. This occurred at various stages of the research process; for instance, when developing the research question and when making key methodological decisions. An example of a methodological decision was choosing the appraisal tools to
carry out the quality assessment of eligible studies. The applicability of available appraisal tools was discussed among the student researcher and supervisors and agreement was reached via consensus.

Critics of systematic reviews are correct that a simple process of synthesising findings is not possible (Clegg 2005, Hammersley 2001, MacLure 2005). Hammersley (2001) compared this process to a mosaic image. The mosaic image in some ways described the synthesis of this review, as some pieces fitted or overlapped while others did not fit at all, and some studies challenged rather than complemented each other. The evolving analysis was discussed with the research supervisors at regular intervals. Initially the original concepts and terms identified in primary sources were put into excel. They were categorised into the layers of the context (e.g. physical, social, cultural and virtual) to focus data extraction on findings relevant to the reviews question. The framework was flexible allowing the analysis to evolve inductively. This then directed the student researcher toward new readings and further data analysis which continually modified the emerging themes. Morse et al. (2002) acknowledged responsive approaches ensured trustworthiness as it allowed the researcher room to relinquish ideas that were poorly supported and allowed room to acknowledge conflict within the data.

The student researcher acknowledged that it is good practice to have a minimum of two researchers involved in the synthesis to minimise bias and error (CRD 2009). Newton et al. (2012) argued that the interpretations of a single researcher should be considered an acceptable qualitative approach if it is done with sensitivity, adequate reflexivity and within a constructivist framework. They believed it was more important to have a single interpretation that contains the participants’ meanings, than to have multiple interpretations that potentially fail in this. While Newton et al. (2012) were talking about a single qualitative study, the same argument could be made for systematic reviews, although it is appreciated the volume of work can be over-whelming. Within this review the research student did the majority of interpretation, and supervisors provided critical and constructive insights to enable deeper analysis. They challenged the student researcher to be reflexive which added strength to the interpretation of findings. For example, the supervisors prompted the student researcher to move the analysis away from describing positive teacher-student relationships, to identifying attributes caring teachers possessed. They provided alternative interpretations for participant quotations and prompted the student researcher to represent the divergent perspectives of participants, rather than representing participants’ experiences as a
unified whole. This demanded the student researcher to question underlying assumptions and the approach used.

The research student and supervisors do not deny that they influenced the findings of this review. Popay et al. (1998, p.348) argued that:

*given the involvement of the researcher in the research process, the question is not whether the data are biased, but to what extent has the researcher rendered transparent the processes by which data have been collected, analysed and presented.*

Koch (2006) contended that whilst readers may not share the author’s interpretation, they should be able to discern the means by which it was reached. To achieve this, Koch presented an audit trail to readers entailing clear explication of theoretical, methodological and analytic decisions made throughout her study. Opposing this view, Morse et al. (2002) argued that while audit trails keep proof of decisions made throughout the research process, it does little to identify the quality of those decision, the rationale behind those decision or the responsiveness and sensitivity of the investigator to data. They concluded that audit trails were not effective in identifying poor reliability or validity. It keeping with guidelines informing this review, an audit trail was maintained. This review applied a systematic and transparent process for searching, retrieving and extracting data from studies.

Using a systematic method to conduct the review limited bias in results, enhancing the trustworthiness of findings (Higgins and Green 2011). In keeping with PRISMA guidelines a trail of the decision making processes was kept, making the review process explicit and transparent to allow readers assess the strengths and weaknesses of the review (Liberati et al. 2009). In addressing concerns raised by Morse et al. (2002), methodological memos explaining the rationale behind particular decisions were kept. The audit trail maintained through supervision records helped towards assuring trustworthiness (Appendix K). Furthermore, analytic memos were kept. The student researcher perceived that it was a strength of this review that the process carried out was described explicitly; for example, how each phase of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed.

4.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it relied exclusively on secondary use of anonymous information (Tri-Council 2010). Vergnes et al. (2010) noted ethical considerations were rarely discussed in relation to systematic reviews. They argued that
this could lead to consequences such as systematic reviews being grounded in unethical research and compromised by conflicts of interest. In light of these concerns, this section discusses ethical considerations in relation to this project.

The PRISMA checklist guiding this review did not contain an item for the ethical assessment of included studies. It is argued that PRISMA guidelines among other guidelines should include ethics to increase awareness in the scientific community about the need for high ethical standards in research on humans (Vergnes et al. 2010, Weingarten et al. 2004). Weingarten et al. (2004) argued reviews should indicate if included studies respected fundamental ethical principles and this would encourage reviewers to identify those studies that were so unethical that there may be doubts about the morality of the results. These concerns were addressed by the chosen quality appraisal tools. The qualitative appraisal tool by Cesario et al. (2002) had a category concerning ethical rigor. The McMaster critical review form for quantitative studies had a section dedicated to describing ethical procedures (Law et al. 1998).

Within this review not all studies reported their ethical procedures sufficiently. It can be argued that such studies should be excluded from this review to avoid basing practice on studies that did not respect ethical principles (Vergnes et al. 2010). Nonetheless, insufficient reporting of ethical issues in original papers does not necessarily mean that the studies were not conducted ethically, although it may imply a lower concern for ethical issues within the studies (Tuech et al. 2005). It is recommended that reviewers should make a decision whether to include studies with insufficient ethical procedures and to make this explicit to readers (Vergnes et al. 2010, Weingarten et al. 2004). This review did not exclude studies due to insufficient reporting of ethical procedures. One consideration for including only peer-reviewed published studies was that unpublished papers may not be subject to the same requirements for ethics (Vergnes et al. 2010). It was thought editors of peer-reviewed journals would consider the ethical nature of studies accepted for publication. Unfortunately, this appeared not to be the case in all peer-reviewed journals; for example, the peer review guidelines for the journal ‘Urban Education’ did not address ethical procedures (Urban Education 2014). These limitations were overcome by ethically assessing each study which will now be described.

In keeping with recommendations, the ethical procedures of studies were assessed using both the qualitative and quantitative quality appraisal tools and brief report of this
ethical assessment of original studies is reported in section 5.2.2 (Vergnes et al. 2010, Weingarten et al. 2004). The overall quality ratings of articles were influenced by their ethical procedures. Readers are informed of ethical insufficiencies of some included studies in this section. Weingarten et al. (2004) argued that implications for future research should address the ethical gaps observed in the included studies. It is important to make such recommendations to make the scientific community aware of the need for high ethical standards and the need for good quality reporting of ethical considerations (Vergnes et al. 2010, Weingarten et al. 2004). Such recommendations are made in section 6.8.

Confidentiality was not an issue as the studies in this systematic review were papers that were in the public domain. Methods were developed so that participants in published reports were unidentifiable, thus ensuring confidentiality (Vergnes et al. 2010). Furthermore, there were no ethical issues regarding the original informed consent of participants as the raw individual-level data for each study was not accessed (Vergnes et al. 2010). Ethical conduct guidelines do not require researchers to seek consent from individuals for the secondary use of non-identifiable information (Tri-Council 2010). Regarding consent to use these studies, 15 authors responded to email contact requesting additional information. This provided informal consent for inclusion of their study in the systematic review (Vergnes et al. 2010).

Ethical issues were considered in the conduct of this review in that systematic methods were used to limit bias in results, leading to confidence in the results and conclusion of this review (Higgins and Green 2011). For example, a thorough search was completed with the assistance of an information specialist. There was an element of subjectivity in the overall process of performing systematic review (e.g. during study selection or interpretation of results). To address this, explicit and transparent descriptions of the review process were provided to increase trustworthiness of findings. This enables the review to be maintained and expanded by adding additional studies to the original review as more data becomes available (Higgins and Green 2011). Furthermore reflexivity was used to contribute to the overall strength and trustworthiness of data collection and analysis (Tri-Council 2010). Bias in the reporting of this review was avoided by reporting minority and conflicting views within the results chapter.

In keeping with ethical conduct guidelines all studies reviewed were treated fairly (Tri-Council 2010). Involvement of at least two researchers at all stages of a review is
recommended to minimise bias and error (CRD 2009). Given the scope and resources of this project, it was not feasible to have two reviewers conduct all stages of this review. In addressing this limitation, a second reviewer assessed a sample of articles during study selection, quality appraisal and data extraction to enhance consistency and reliability. Inclusion/exclusion criteria and critical appraisal criteria were explicit. Verification, a process involving checking and confirming was used to ensure trustworthiness (Morse et al. 2002). Steps taken to reduce researcher error included double-checking of data extraction by the first author. In other words, the student researcher used an iterative rather than linear approach, moving back and forth to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, data collection and analysis (Morse et al. 2002). These approaches ensured that articles were reviewed fairly and consistently at each stage of the process. The student researcher completed all stages of the review. Finally, there was no conflict of interest due to funding, personal beliefs, personal relationships and institutional relationships in this study.

4.13 Critiquing the Project

Critiquing research to examine trustworthiness, value and relevance is a crucial aspect of evidence-based practice (Burls 2009). There are numerous checklists available to evaluate systematic reviews such as the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP 2013c). A set of questions based on the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme guided this evaluation (ibid.).

4.13.1 The Results

- How precise are the results? Are the multiple perspectives of marginalised youth within the review considered? Are reasons for any variations in results discussed?
- Are the layers of context within alternative schools attended to sufficiently?

4.13.2 Contribution to the Field

- What is the utility of these findings? Can they be used to inform policy, practice and research?
- Can the results be applied to marginalised youth not involved in the study?
- Could the findings inadvertently harm marginalised youth?

These questions are returned to in chapter 6, inviting evaluation of this systematic review.
4.14 Chapter Summary

This review included 24 studies, 18 qualitative, 5 mixed-methods and 1 quantitative. A systematic review allowed the student researcher to synthesis existing research to understand the experiences of marginalised students in a variety of contexts. This approach enabled student voices to be centralised. Potential studies were identified through: (1) a comprehensive search of 23 databases; (2) reviews (n=6) identified during the database search had their references checked for potential relevant studies and (3) the references of 33 relevant articles were searched for potential studies. Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis method identified contextual factors which contributed to student retention in alternative schools.

In the next chapter the key findings are presented. Chapter 5 introduces the participants and context of included studies and the methodology used within the included studies. This is followed by the results of the thematic analysis. All quotes from participants in the current project are italicised to highlight their voices.
Chapter 5  Results

5.1  Introduction
This chapter describes the demographic characteristics of included studies. Specifically addressed is a description of the participants, context and methodology of included studies. The findings each study contributed is presented in tabular form, as are the results of the quality assessment. The themes identified through analysis follow. The overarching concept, *schools as safe spaces*, is organised into four core themes. The first theme, *creating a sense of acceptance*, describes how schools created a sense of community and how student culture was embedded within the school. The second theme, *providing responsive curricula*, addresses how curriculum met the needs of marginalised youth. *Fostering caring relations*, the third theme, identifies the attributes of caring teachers, caring peers and how reciprocal care was a feature in alternative schools. The final theme, *establishing school structures*, illustrates how the physical environment, school supports and policies established a safe place for students. The concept of *schools as sanctuaries* is then introduced.

5.2  Demographic Characteristics of Included Studies
This section describes the demographic details of the included studies. A description of the methodology employed by these studies follows.

5.2.1  Context and Participants of Included Studies
There were twenty American studies, two Canadian and two studies from the UK included in this review (Table 5.1). The fact that most studies came from America reflected the history of alternative schools. Alternative schools emerged in the 1960s to meet the needs of students in American education (Lehr et al. 2009a). Sixteen studies were conducted in an alternative school (Table 5.1). Atkins et al. (2005) included three alternative education programmes. Nativity schools are middle schools which provide education for youth from high-poverty urban communities and were the focus in Fenzel and Domingues (2009) (n=4) and Fenzel and Monteith (2008) (n=9). Community day schools were addressed in Kennedy (2011a) (n=4) and Swaminathan (2004) (n=1). Special schools for students with social emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) were included in Macleod (2007) (n=2) and Sellman (2009) (n=1). McDonald et al. (2007) covered two charter schools, a middle and high school.
This review included 1,200 students, although two studies did not specify their sample size. Ten studies specified an age range of 12-20 years old. In two studies the mean age was identified as 12.2 (Fenzel and Domingues 2009) and 12.3 (Fenzel and Monteith 2008). Considering former students were included in this review, it can be assumed the age range was more diverse. Twelve studies did not specify the age of participants. There were 606 males and 361 females, although 8 studies didn’t specify gender. Ethnicity was specified in 5 studies: 95 African American, 104 Caucasian, 11 Hispanic/Latino, 1 Irish-American, 12 biracial and 13 participants identified themselves as ‘other’.

Five studies included former students. Three studies aimed to gain an understanding of the experiences of students who had graduated from alternative schools; therefore, their target population aligned with the aim (Morrissette 2011, Swaminathan 2004, Antrop-González 2006). Participants within Swaminathan (2004) graduated within four years before the study, while participants in Antrop-González (2006) graduated up to 14 years prior to the study. Morrissette (2011) did not specify when the participants in his study graduated and could not provide this information when the student researcher contacted him via email. Cassidy and Bates (2005) justified interviewing three former students who were away from the school for two to three years to determine whether their perspectives differed from current students. Khalifa (2010) did not specify his selection process nor did he justify why he chose to interview former students. Antrop-González (2006) argued that including graduates allowed participants to relate their schooling experience to work and other life experiences. While this is true, this gap of time may have led to former students’ memories of events and relationships not being accurate or their retrospective opinions being affected by life events which had occurred since graduating. This contributed to each study’s low procedural rigor rating; for example, Khalifa (2010) received a rating of 1 (poor) (see Table 5.2, 5.3). The other studies included current students although some included participants such as teachers, administrators and parents. The inclusion of participants other than the students occasionally made it difficult to identify the voices of students. This contributed to the applicability rating score of 1 (poor) in three studies (Atkins et al. 2005, McDonald et al. 2007, Khalifa 2010) (Table 5.2).

The sample sizes of all the qualitative studies were relatively small. Sellman (2009) had 6 participants, although this was an appropriate sample size as a case study approach was used (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007). There were a small number of students in a
number of studies; for example, 4 in the Wilkins (2008) study, and 8 in the Kennedy (2011a). The small number of participants lowered the methodological quality (see procedural rigor in Table 5.2). Students within alternative schools are not a homogeneous population and therefore it was unlikely the participants in the included studies provided views representative of the whole population. Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) recommended 15-30 participants for grounded theory studies to enhance representation of the population. Within Kennedy’s (2011a) grounded theory study only two teachers and eight students agreed to be interviewed, which she recognised as a limitation. Furthermore, there is an issue about transparency in Khalifa (2010) and McDonald et al. (2007) as the number of participants were not specified. This affected their quality rating score.

The most common sample characteristics provided in studies included the number of participants and age and gender of those participants. Other characteristics specified included socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, grade level and length of time in the school. Six of the studies did not describe their participants, with four only stating the number of participants in the study (Carter 2012, Kennedy 2011a, Khalifa 2010, Watson and Watson 2011). This lowered ratings in the descriptive vividness. By omitting pieces of demographic information the studies did not show how representative their participants were of the general population within alternative schools. The literature surrounding alternative schools found students attending alternative schools were a heterogeneous group which included ethnicity, disability and types of challenges students had faced. This lack of information about participants could have implications for considering the transferability of the qualitative studies and the generalisability of quantitative studies to different contexts.

5.2.2 Methodology of Included Studies

Eighteen studies were qualitative, five studies used mixed-methods, although in the study by Sinha (2007) only the qualitative findings were relevant to the review. One study used quantitative methods. The use of qualitative methodology by most of the included studies was relevant to their purpose of providing an in-depth understanding of the experiences of students in alternative schools. Qualitative methods were useful in identifying contextual factors that students perceived to contribute to their retention in alternative schools.
Twenty-two of the twenty-four included studies used interviews and where studies specified what type of interview the majority were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate methodology to elicit participants' experiences and perspectives (Longhurst 2010). Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews are flexible and offer participants the opportunity to explore issues they felt are important (Longhurst 2010). Twenty of the interview studies used additional measures including school document analysis, observation, focus groups and school records. Others provided questionnaires and/or interviewed participants other than the students such as teachers and parents. The data collected from participants other than students were not relevant to the review question as they did not draw on the perspectives of students. Studies were not penalised for this, irrelevant data was simply excluded.

Sellman (2009) was the only study to use focus groups in isolation. Focus groups have a number of strengths such as being appropriate for exploratory studies in new areas, with the potential to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction of the group (Longhurst 2010, Peek and Fothergill 2009). Focus groups have limitations; for example, not all of the participants in the group may be equally articulate or sufficiently confident to express their views, therefore the perspectives obtained may not be accurate (Peek and Fothergill 2009). Participants within the Sellman (2009) study were boys with a diagnosis of SEBD. Research demonstrated that a degree of comorbidity between speech and language difficulties and SEBD exists and that generally boys are affected by speech difficulties at a much higher rate than girls (Tommerdahl 2009). This can affect their confidence and ability to interact socially (Tommerdahl 2009). In response to these issues, Sellman (2009) noted that the participants volunteered and may have been the more articulate students from the school. This observation was shared by the principal. Sellman (2009) received a fair rating for procedural rigor as due to miscommunication he was not present during the recruitment process and could not comment on this process. Moreover, there was an overreliance on one data source. Sellman (2009) did not triangulate information elicited through focus groups with any alternative data source. Some authors triangulated data eliciting student perspectives with observations, school document analysis and data collected from other participants who were not students. For instance, Swaminathan (2004) wanted to learn from student perspectives how schools facilitated or impeded those considered ‘at risk’ of failure. Interviews with students were informed by data
collected through observations at the school, observations of teacher meetings, student-teacher conferences and parent-teacher conferences, as well as interviews with the teachers. These methods provided a more comprehensive understanding of student experiences and contextualised the findings. Triangulation was attained using quantitative data which captured student perspectives through questionnaires in four studies. Coyl et al. (2004) and McDonald et al. (2007) used mixed-methods to triangulate the data to validate findings and supported this with appropriate references. Fenzel and Domingues (2009) briefly stated qualitative data informed the findings from surveys. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) noted a strength of mixed-methods studies was that the limitations of one method were offset by the strengths of the other.


The procedure of data collection was described in varying detail across studies. Antrop-González (2006) and Khalifa (2010) provided little description of procedures which limits dependability. The limited transparency of their studies contributed to their respective low rating in descriptive vividness and methodological congruence (Table 5.2). Three studies provided no information on their approach to data analysis (Antrop-González 2006, Macleod 2007, Wilkins 2008) while two others provided limited detail (Khalifa 2010, Sinha 2007). Twelve studies explicitly stated that they tape-recorded

Another source of trustworthiness in qualitative studies was how well the researchers conveyed the depth and richness of their findings. Some studies; for example, the study by Schussler and Collins (2006), provided high quality detailed analysis and included rich data. While these studies made extensive use of excerpts from the transcripts, others used quotes sparingly which meant information within the findings was not supported with data (e.g. Sellman 2009). Atkins et al. (2005) used fewer extracts from the transcripts and these were mostly from participants other than students. Hence the focus on the perspective of students was limited and this affected the descriptive validity, which contributed to lower ratings in analytical preciseness and theoretical connectedness (Table 5.2).

Most studies included participants under the age of 18 which most ethical boards deem as a vulnerable population (Tri-Council 2010). Some participants were assigned vulnerable status because of disability. It was estimated that about 12% of all students in alternative schools were students with disabilities (Lehr and Lange 2003). Within the reviewed studies, ethical procedures; for example, issues of consent and confidentiality, were briefly outlined. Six studies considered more than one ethical issue: Sellman (2009) discussed anonymity, informed consent, confidentiality, safeguarding procedures with regard behaviour/incident management in the focus groups and how two students availed of their right to withdraw during a focus group session. Consent from parents, anonymity and confidentiality were addressed in three studies (Cassidy and Bates 2005, Coyl et al. 2004, Wilkins 2008). Morissette (2011) addressed these same issues except parental consent was not required as graduates were interviewed. The study by San Martin and Calabrese (2011) was the only study that explicitly reported having ethical approval. Other studies barely referred to ethical practice. No evidence of ethical rigor was noted in ten studies (Table 5.2; Table 5.3). Although some studies included participants over 18 years old, ethical issues such as confidentiality and anonymity are still essential. Furthermore, unaddressed ethical issues may have introduced error into student responses as they may have felt uncomfortable to disclose information not knowing whether it was confidential.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference (Year) Design</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Sample Characteristics (*only student data was included in current project)</th>
<th>Research Methods</th>
<th>Contextual domain addressed</th>
<th>Outcomes: Supportive factors identified</th>
<th>Outcomes: Barriers identified</th>
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<tr>
<td>Antrop-González (2006) Qualitative</td>
<td>USA Alternative high school grades 9-12 (school of choice)</td>
<td>Current students (n=3) Aged 17, 18, 19 1 male, 2 females Students who graduated (n=2) in 1986. Both females. Staff (n=3)*</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews School document analysis Observation</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural Virtual</td>
<td>Accommodates student culture Caring teacher-student relationships Familial-type atmosphere Interactive curriculum School as a sanctuary Gang free space</td>
<td>Some students felt marginalised as they did not see their culture present in curriculum. The school addressed this.</td>
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<td>Atkins et al. (2005) Qualitative cross-case analysis</td>
<td>USA 3 alternative education programmes</td>
<td>Students (n=16) 10 males and 6 females 7 students with disabilities who were on probation. 9 students with no disabilities and who were on probation. Staff, family members, probation officers and juvenile justice officials* Overall sample size (n=43)</td>
<td>Observation with fieldnotes Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Social Cultural</td>
<td>Support structures such as homeroom Instruction: creative, interactive, group work or one on one instruction Support services: childcare and parenting services seen as necessary by many students Policies: flexible attendance options, smoking policies, school completion options, no expulsion policy</td>
<td>Shortage of curricula options Programmes described as easy and not challenging Researcher believed no expulsion policy explained more extreme behaviours observed</td>
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<td>Reference (Year) Design</td>
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<td>Carter (2012) Qualitative case study</td>
<td>USA Alternative high school grade 9-12 (caters for at-risk students)</td>
<td>Students (n=42) in sophomore, junior or senior years. First-year students not selected. Gender unspecified Staff*</td>
<td>Unstructured interviews Observation with fieldnotes School document analysis Focus groups</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>Location of school School and class size Caring teachers Informal environment School structure promotes caring</td>
<td>Too much freedom, some students wanted more discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005) Ethnographic case study approach</td>
<td>Canada Alternative school with two programmes: (1) shorter term court-referred programme and (2) continuing programme for students who completed court-mandated time and applied to stay on or for those who came through private referrals</td>
<td>Current students (n=14) from both programmes. Former students (n=3) who were away from the school for 2-3 years. Gender unspecified Aged 14-20 Length of time in school from 2 weeks to 2 years administrators (n=3), teachers (n=5)* School demographics: 70% male, many students have disabilities, struggle with substance abuse and are labelled as having ‘severe behaviour disorder’. Range of racial and ethnic backgrounds include: Aboriginal, South Asian, East Asian, African-Canadian and Caucasian.</td>
<td>Structured interviews School document analysis Observations with fieldnotes</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural Virtual</td>
<td>Physical: small school, student work displayed, good appearance, space for group work Virtual: computer part of every work station Relationships: caring teacher-student relationships, two-way respect, personal and academic support, friendship metaphor Discipline: staff do not overreact, issues resolved quickly, conflict resolved through discussion, no rules for behaviour, non-punitive Caring and casual atmosphere Safety</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Coyl et al. (2004)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Alternative high school Students (n=83) completed survey (43 males and 40 females) Ages 15-19, 75 Caucasian, 3 Latino/Hispanic and 5 ‘other’ Students (n=21) were interviewed. Demographic details unspecified</td>
<td>3 questionnaires adapted from: (1) Friendship Strength Scale (2) School-related BAI Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>Small school (max. 100 students) Informal atmosphere Family metaphor describing positive peer and teacher-student relationships Acceptance and respect Flexible schedules</td>
<td>Physical: looks like industrial complex, no playing fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fenzel and Domingues (2009)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Four nativity schools for at-risk youth and two comparison Catholic schools. Data from Catholic schools were not used in current project. A mean of 11.3 students per school were interviewed. Demographic details unspecified. Nativity school students (n=167) completed surveys (94 males and 73 females). Mean age 12.2 years and 94% qualified for free/reduced lunch Staff were interviewed*</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews Focus group Observations with fieldnotes The following questionnaires were adapted (1) Self-Perception Profile for Children (2) Classroom Environment Scale (3) Talent Development Student Survey Administrators provided academic and attendance data for each student and information about the school programmes</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>Small classes (12-16 students) Group advisories and summer camp activities developed positive peer relations and sense of community Supportive teachers Academic achievement: students who perceived rules as fair and school as enjoyable were more likely to do better in test scores, especially in math and reading</td>
<td>13.3% of Nativity students identified difficulties related to teachers’ behaviours and school rules (too many or too strict)</td>
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<td>Fenzel and Monteith (2008) Mixed-methods</td>
<td>USA 9 nativity schools for at-risk urban youth and two comparison Catholic schools. Data from Catholic schools were not used in review.</td>
<td>Students (n=470) in grades 6-8 completed surveys, 317 males and 153 females. The mean age was 12.3 A mean of 11.3 students per school were interviewed. Demographic details unspecified.</td>
<td>Interviews Observations with fieldnotes The following questionnaires were adapted (1) Scale of Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Orientation (2) Classroom Environment Scale (3) Talent Development Student Survey Administrators provided academic and attendance data for each student and information about the school programmes</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>Small class sizes (5-16 per class) Supportive teachers Group advisories and summer camp activities developed positive peer relations and sense of community Learning was task-orientated Academic achievement: students who perceived rules as fair and school as enjoyable were more likely to do better in test scores, especially in math and reading</td>
<td>13.3% of Nativity students identified difficulties related to teachers’ behaviours and school rules (too many or too strict) 8.3% identified concerns about peer difficulties</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jones (2011) Ethnography</td>
<td>USA Alternative high school</td>
<td>Students (n=24) 8 were new students, 8 were typical students and 8 were highly involved students Sample reflected demographics of school (e.g. 62% boys, 91% White)</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews including follow up interviews Observation with fieldnotes</td>
<td>Social Cultural</td>
<td>Small teacher-student ratio Personal caring relationships with teachers Sense of community Interactive curriculum Service projects where students shape school Discipline: students given opportunities to reflect on actions through mediations with peers and teachers</td>
<td>Find transition difficult, hard to adjust to caring community</td>
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<td>Kennedy (2011a) Grounded theory</td>
<td>USA 4 Community Day schools for middle school students</td>
<td>Students (n=8). Students from the four schools were recruited Teachers (n=2)*</td>
<td>Observation with fieldnotes Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Social Cultural</td>
<td>Caring teachers Informal atmosphere Sense of safety</td>
<td>Some students felt they got things people in jail would get</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khalifa (2010) Ethnography</td>
<td>USA Alternative high school for at-risk youth</td>
<td>Students (n= unspecified) Former and current students</td>
<td>Observations with fieldnotes School document analysis Interviews</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>No vandalism Culturally responsive school Family type atmosphere No exclusion policy except for grave offences</td>
<td>None</td>
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</table>
| Kim and Taylor (2008)  | USA Alternative high school | Students (n=9)  
Aged 15-17  
5 females, 4 males  
3 Caucasian, 1 Hispanic, 4 African-American, 1 half Irish and half Native American  
4 teachers, 1 administrative assistant and 1 associate superintendent interviewed* | Structured interviews  
School document analysis  
Observation with fieldnotes | Physical Social Cultural Virtual | Small classes (6-10 students)  
Supportive, caring teachers  
Teachers committed to student success, provided individualised support | Disliked newly constructed school  
Initially disliked being placed in alternative school but now like school  
School only allowed students to stay for two years but students wanted to stay until graduation  
Principal and student expectations differed  
Scarce evidence of rigorous curriculum |
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<tr>
<td>Macleod (2007)</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2 special schools for students with SEBD</td>
<td>Students (n= 14). 7 students from each school were recruited 11 males, 3 females Aged 12-15</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews Used data from school survey which was part of another study</td>
<td>Social Cultural</td>
<td>Relationships: good quality relationships with teachers, felt valued by staff Curriculum: alternative curriculum acted as incentive to attend school</td>
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<tr>
<td>McDonald et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Mixed-methods</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Charter schools (1 middle and 1 high school in their 2nd year of operation). Schools of choice</td>
<td>Middle school students (n=unspecified) High school student (n=unspecified) Focus groups (n=unspecified) Faculty, parents and administrators*</td>
<td>Focus groups Interviews Questionnaires relevant to the purpose of this review: (1) the School Observation Measure (2) the School Climate Inventory (3) Rubric for student-centred activities</td>
<td>Social Cultural Virtual</td>
<td>High expectations Caring teachers Instruction: student-centred instruction observed occasionally and more frequently than first year of operation. The use of technology was higher than first year of operation and national norms.</td>
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<td>McNulty and Roseboro (2009)</td>
<td>USA Alternative school (grades 6-12)</td>
<td>Students (n=9) Males from 7th grade 4 African-American, 5 White Aged 12-14 Interviews conducted with family members, teachers, administrators and parole officers*</td>
<td>Observations with fieldnotes 3-4 interviews conducted with each student</td>
<td>Physical Cultural</td>
<td>Small classes (approx 10 students)</td>
<td>Physical: School building described as dumpster. Reinforced students’ identification of themselves as ‘bad kids’. Instruction: Lack of resources and innovative teaching. No small group or individual remediation observed. Discipline: Authoritarian power structure. Tight rules with no flexibility and exclusionary practices caused student resistance Anti-democratic nature of school</td>
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<td>Morrissette (2011) Phenomenological research</td>
<td>Canada Alternative school</td>
<td>Graduates from alternative school (n=20) 14 males and 6 females, 4 were First Nations or Aboriginal.</td>
<td>Open-ended interviews with minimal structure</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>Physical: physical arrangement safe, display of graduates on wall Relationships: supportive, personal, respectful relationships with teachers. Provided support about issues outside of academic context. Teachers as mentors. High expectations Supportive atmosphere and sense of community within school Instruction: the schools flexibility allows students to learn at own pace and foster their own unique learning styles</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poyrazli et al. (2008) Quantitative cross sectional study</td>
<td>USA Alternative school (6th-12th grade)</td>
<td>Students (n=102). Aged 12-19 42% were girls, 58% were boys. Ethnicity: 70% were African American, 12% bi-racial, 7% Latino/a, 4% Caucasian and 7% noted ‘other’</td>
<td>(1) demographic questionnaire (2) Academic achievement- students were asked to indicate what grades they usually got (3) Psychological Sense of School Membership Questionnaire (3) Questionnaire obtaining students’ perceptions of teachers, administrators and counsellors</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Students who had a more positive perception of their teachers, counsellors and administrators also reported greater sense of school membership. Male students and older students had more negative perception of administrators compared with female and younger students</td>
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<td>San Martin and Calabrese (2011) Qualitative case study</td>
<td>USA Alternative high school</td>
<td>Students (n=8) 4 males and 4 females</td>
<td>Semi-structured paired interviews  Group discussions  Participant generated documents and visual presentation for district administrators and teachers</td>
<td>Social Cultural Virtual</td>
<td>Relationships: Caring staff, positive peer relations  Support structures: mentorship programmes  Sense of safety  Sense of family and community  Curriculum: Students enjoyed interactive, meaningful and relevant curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum: worksheets and other traditional forms of teaching caused boredom and loss of interest. Students wanted to make decisions about learning and rules</td>
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<td>Reference (Year) Design</td>
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<td>Schussler and Collins (2006) Naturalistic inquiry</td>
<td>USA Alternative high school</td>
<td>Students (n=16) Aged 15-18 8 males and 8 females Faculty interviews*</td>
<td>Student interviews Observations with fieldnotes Attendance records School artefacts</td>
<td>Physical Social Cultural</td>
<td>Small school and class size was most compelling explanation for why teachers could know students personally and provide academic support Sense of safety Sense of family including teachers and students Relationships: Caring teacher-student relationships. Teachers concerned about student academic, personal and social development. Caring peer relationships. Students had desire to reciprocate care towards school and teachers High expectations</td>
<td>Relationships: Personal relationships with teachers could (1) jeopardise students' academics and (2) took away from teachers authority to impose consequences.</td>
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<td>Reference (Year) Design</td>
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<td>Outcomes: Barriers identified</td>
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<td>Sellman (2009) Grounded theory case study</td>
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<td>Students (n=6) Boys with SEBD Aged 13-16</td>
<td>Seven, 45 minute duration focus groups</td>
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<td>Relationships: Feeling valued by school/staff, good quality relationships with teachers Discipline: Students considered that restraint protected school environment and people within the school</td>
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<td>Students (n=20) Aged 12-21 All African American</td>
<td>Interviews Focus groups Observations with fieldnotes</td>
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<td>Small size enabled people to know each other Relationships: teachers cared for students and provided individualised help. Students spoke to staff about personal issues. 13/20 students talked about positive peer dynamics. Flexible schedule</td>
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| Swaminathan (2004) Qualitative | USA Community school | Graduates (n=16)  
All participants graduated within 4 years prior to study  
8 males and 8 females  
Teachers (n=?)* | Observation  
Semi-structured interviews | Physical  
Social  
Cultural | Space: student photos on walls, school had resources  
Sense of safety: no cliques, violence or labels  
Relationships: students felt valued by teachers, teachers had high expectations  
Discipline: few punitive measures, conflicts resolved through discussion, exclusionary practices only used in extreme cases  
Students empowered to make decisions about their learning and schedules  
Rituals took place to promote integration and recognise student efforts | None |
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<td>Physical Social Cultural Virtual</td>
<td>Space: computer stations, walls decorated with student artwork and desks for group work Relationships: caring teachers Instruction: learner-centred, flexible and interactive Flexible schedules</td>
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<td>Space: computer stations, walls decorated with student artwork and desks for group work Relationships: Caring teachers, positive peer relationships Instruction: learner-centred, flexible and interactive. Students liked having responsibility and ownership to meet personal work deadlines Technology: Computers provided choices, resources and an interactive means to learning.</td>
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<td>Wilkins (2008) Qualitative</td>
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<td>Small size enabled the development of relationships within the school Relationships: Positive peer dynamics, positive teacher-student relationships Sense of safety Sense of community: school events helped establish a sense of community Discipline: students perceived disciplinary procedures as fair and non-punitive. Students conformed to expected behaviours so there was little need for discipline</td>
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Table 5.2 Quality Appraisal of Qualitative Studies/Qualitative Aspects of Studies

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Table 5.3 Quality Appraisal of Quantitative Studies/Quantitative Aspects of Studies

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Note: The quantitative aspect of the study by Sinha (2007) was not appraised as the findings were irrelevant to the review’s questions.
5.3 Introduction to Findings

Participants represented in studies included in this systematic review differed in many ways through age, ethnicity, geographic location, length of time at the school, criminal offenses and the types of challenges they faced in their lives. Yet there was a remarkable consistency regarding their descriptions of positive alternative school contexts. This analysis presents participants’ perspectives of the practices which contributed to schools as safe spaces, a key concept underpinning participants’ positive learning experiences.

Based on this analysis, components of safe schools may be organised into four key dimensions (figure 5.1). First, a safe school provided an accepting learning environment. Schools within this review created a sense of acceptance through fostering a sense of community and by embedding student culture within the school. Second, providing responsive curricula created a safe space for participants as it fostered academic success through catering for participants’ learning needs. Third, safe schools fostered caring relations. Within this section, how participants were able to establish positive caring relationships despite being labelled as ‘disruptive’ and sometimes ‘violent’ youth will be described. Participants viewed care in very practical ways. Caring teachers possessed many attributes including being supportive, responsive and respectful. Caring peer relationships were also essential in creating positive learning contexts. Within these two caring relationships, participants were both recipients and givers of care. Finally, school structures established a safe space for participants. Aspects of the physical environment, support structures and policies which created a safe space will be described.
Within this analysis the fit between the participant and their context will be considered as guided by the conceptual framework of this project. Through exploring this intersection of person and context, the ways in which schools can influence participant behaviour will be described. Not only can schools increase participants’ motivation and engagement, but they may promote their desire to graduate and continue to achieve beyond second-level education. How participants’ attitudes appeared to change as a result of their context, from being ‘disruptive’ to becoming respectful youth will be discussed. This analysis examines how practices in alternative schools catered for participants’ developmental needs and as a result created a safe space. Through provision of acceptance, responsive curricula, caring relations and supportive structures, schools provided participants with safety, giving them comfort, support and motivation to learn. When reading the results, please note that the figure (n=) refers to the number of articles which mentioned a particular concept. Appendix L lists the articles which
mentioned the concept. The results of the analysis were written so that participants in each study are also described as participants of the broader review.

5.4 Schools as Safe Spaces

The concept of schools as safe spaces broadly captured the perspectives of participants regarding their school’s care towards them. Participants reported feeling psychologically, emotionally and physically safe (n=7). This is noteworthy as most participants were labelled disruptive or violent in their previous schools which caused others to feel unsafe. Participants felt able to share problems at home and to ask for help. They were safe from adults who yelled at or labelled them. Participants made reference to the presence of gangs in their previous schools and described their alternative school as a safer space.

At my old high school I was tired of all the gang fighting and stabbings. People would even pull fire drills to get out of school. I could even walk out whenever I pleased and nobody would challenge me. At this school I can’t even walk down the hall without a teacher coming up behind me to ask me what I’m up to. At this school, the teachers care what I’m doing. They also don’t put up with fighting or gangs in the school.

(Antrop-González 2006, p.291)

This participant was intimidated by gang presence and disliked the lack of rules regarding attendance in her previous school. Participants commented that one of their reasons for choosing the alternative school was its policies against gang presence. The author, Antrop-González (2006) described rules inhibiting gang presence such as no mobile phones and not wearing gang colours, jewellery or hats with gang insignias. Teachers supervised participants after school to make sure everyone returned home safely. Participants described how disputes were resolved before they escalated.

What I like about the school is how it runs, you know, everything calm and smooth. And if there’s a little ripple, it’s fixed, quick.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.88)

Participants liked the calm atmosphere and how issues were resolved quickly to prevent violence (n=2). In addition to feeling physically safe, participants described how they felt psychologically and emotionally safe. Participants felt able to ask questions and admit their lack of knowledge (n=2).

It makes me more comfortable, the environment. Some things...you’re supposed to know, but you just don’t. Like something simple, like which side your heart is on. Like some people don’t know that I guess. I think it’s on your left side.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.91)
Furthermore, participants described how they could relax and begin to enjoy learning (n=2).

*I could be myself and didn’t have to be cool. In all my years of high school I don’t think I have had a better experience.*

*(Morrissette 2011, p.177)*

In contrast to previous traditional schools, participants experienced a sense of safety within their alternative schools. Participants could be themselves and didn’t have to be concerned about their safety. The alternative schools provided participants with a safe place which enabled them to learn. “*There’s no fighting and everybody is really nice to you. Everybody gets along with each other and gets their work done*” *(Wilkins 2008, p.17).* A safe environment contributed to student retention (n=2) and fostered a sense of community. “*As a school family, you feel safe. This school is awesome. I don’t want to leave*” *(San Martin and Calabrese 2011, p.118).* The family atmosphere created a place for participants where they experienced safety and a sense of belonging. A school was a safe space when it (1) created a sense of acceptance through fostering a sense of community and affirming students’ cultural identities; (2) promoted academic success using responsive curricula; (3) supported caring relationships and (4) had structures which fostered a culture of care and which maintained student integrity. These elements will each be described in turn.

5.5 Creating a Sense of Acceptance

Within this section, school practices which fostered a culture of care and acceptance will be described. Participants’ perspectives regarding fostering a sense of community will first be described followed by how schools embedded student culture. Changes in participants’ attitudes and behaviours towards school as a result of their perceived belonging are presented.

5.5.1 Fostering a Sense of Community

Participants valued the sense of community established within schools. Familial descriptors emphasised a strong sense of belonging and identification to the school community.
Participants related their sense of belonging to engagement in learning and in the school community. Within this section, these personal changes and factors which contributed to fostering a sense of community will be described.

Participants attributed changes in attitude toward school to perceived belonging. Most participants within this review were at-risk of early school leaving; however, they enjoyed attending their alternative schools, commenting positively on the acceptance they experienced. ‘‘I feel like I’m accepted here for who I am’’ (Jones 2011, p.227). This feeling was further emphasised as many participants described school as ‘‘my place’’ (n=2). Perceived acceptance appeared to create behavioural changes as participants felt more comfortable in their environment. A participant linked this feeling of acceptance to greater participation in this excerpt:

*Participant: I feel much more comfortable with myself than I would at [my old school]... It has helped me grow a little more because I would still probably be in the same shell that I was in.*

*Interviewer: Do you think that a feeling of comfort has affected how you participate in classes and the school community?*

*Participant: I think it has a lot. That sense of freedom but tolerance but equalness has very much so helped me in the classroom and in school, because it helps me go day to day comfortably and not feel stressed.*

*Jones 2011, p.227*

Many who felt marginalised in previous schools felt accepted in their alternative schools. This sense of community was critical in participants’ decisions to stay in school (n=4). Perceived support was essential in establishing a sense of community and included help with personal issues, academic issues and with creating attachments within the school. Staff devoted considerable time to cultivating a strong sense of community (n=2).

*[Compared to other schools] there’s more like programs...get-togethers for the entire school, like all the winter things and stuff, and like all the different foods and everything [referring to a multicultural luncheon]. And that’s nice. In other schools they don’t bother doing that.*

*Wilkins 2008, p.17*
School functions provided opportunities for teachers and students to interact. This promoted a caring school community where students felt safe and accepted. Schools also demonstrated acceptance through acknowledging student culture.

5.5.2 Embedding Student Culture within the School

Two schools in particular embedded student culture within their environments. They did this (1) through symbolic representation of student culture which will be discussed under school structures and (2) through accommodating students’ cultures. Participants discussed the importance of learning about their own culture. They spoke of “brainwashing” they received in previous schools due to limited exposure to their own cultural history.

In Hartford and Chicago I was brainwashed. There was always a side of me that wanted to learn more about my culture. I wanted to learn more than what the schools were telling me. It was at [alternative school] that I heard of Puerto Rican writers like Lola Rodrígues de Tió, Luis Muñoz Marín and Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos. But when I was in school they never taught me what I wanted to know. They would only teach me to pledge allegiance to the United States flag and sing the Star Spangled Banner. These are all lies. They never told me about the splendid little war and how the United States went into Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. They never told me how they went in and took Hawai‘i. In the public schools they never taught me about the slaughtering of people in Vieques. The teachers always tried to make the United States seem all high and mighty.

(Antrop-González 2006, p.292)

This participant expressed frustration due to the limited cultural curriculum he experienced in his previous school. He appeared satisfied with his education in the alternative school as his cultural history was acknowledged. Puerto Rican nationalism was a strong political ideology at this school. Nonetheless, not all participants adopted this ideology as one participant explained:

At the school, I was able to respect people who supported independence for Puerto Rico but I don’t believe that Puerto Rico should be independent. It think it’s fine the way it is. It would be hard for Puerto Rico to survive on its own because it’s too small.

(Antrop-González 2006, p.292)

Participants had room to explore and develop their own perspectives (n=1). Mexican-American, African-American and other participants of multiple ethnicities were encouraged to explore their respective histories. One participant commented:
At first the school talked a lot about Puerto Rico. But then [the school principal] came up to me and asked me if I wanted to learn more about my culture and history. I was kind of mad about that because I was asked too late. I said that I thought an African-American class should be a part of the school. The next year, there was an African-American class with books and information about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and stuff on slavery. I thought that was really cool.

(Antrop-González 2006, p.293)

The school was challenged by this participant to incorporate her history into the curriculum. The school effectively addressed this culturally relevant learning need. The author, Antrop-González (2006) observed teachers using multiple history texts when addressing various ethnic perspectives regarding life in the United States. The school was cognisant of its need to fulfil not only the curricular needs of its Puerto Rican students, but those of other ethnicities. As understood by Antrop-González (2006), the school provided a safe space for students to explore their respective histories and to affirm their racial/ethnic identity.

In addition to respecting participants’ racial/ethnic culture, alternative schools acknowledged youth culture, including behaviours and fashion (n=1). Unlike previous schools, staff were engaging rather than demonstrating apprehension around participants.

*Here is like a family type atmosphere, so they like try and help you more, talk to you more if you got problems, but at [my other high school] is so big that it’s hard to do that. Plus the teachers and principal acted like they was scared of most of us [Black students].*

(Khalifa 2010, p.632)

The author Khalifa (2010) noted participants were aware that their cultural behaviours were not accepted at previous schools. He commented that it was unclear whether staff feared participants or whether there was a cultural misunderstanding. In contrast, the alternative school acknowledged their culture. For example, teachers were observed responding to the verbal cultural expressions and the Black English language that students spoke. Some staff even spoke to students in a similar manner. The author noted most of the teaching staff were White, though the percentage of Black staff was much higher than other schools in the area (approximately 40%). The principal was also Black. The author reported that the principal would not allow teachers to devalue the students’ culture. He described how teachers would send a student out of their classroom for being disorderly or donning hyper-ghettoized clothing and the principal would send the student back to the classroom. The school leader would explain why he did not feel the student should be removed from class and would mediate and advocate
for the student. The author reported that the types of music, fashion and the relationships between the students and their families were recognised by the school (Khalifa 2010).

5.6 Providing Responsive Curricula

By definition, alternative schools provide varied instructional strategies to accommodate the learning styles of each student. Strategies evident in the studies reviewed included: providing student choice, enabling student control, employing technology and developing interactive curriculum.

Flexibility, choice and control in the instructional approach were identified as elements of the school which motivated participants. Across studies, participants had many instructional choices including (a) learning packets, booklets or worksheets; (b) technology projects such as creating PowerPoint presentations, brochures or WebQuests; (c) computer-based instruction; (d) traditional lectures or classrooms; (e) group work; (f) one on one instruction; and (g) creative instructional strategies like hands-on learning activities (n=5). Participants agreed that having choice and control over their instructional approaches had a significant impact on their learning (n=4). Participants appreciated that they could explore ways of learning so that they could accommodate their own learning style.

*Everyone gave me the time to do my work...People didn’t stand in my way... I mean things caught on more better, I don’t know, most of the time I am slower to catch onto things so they kind of broke things down and showed me. I mean they don’t pressure you to get things done on time, they let me do it on my own time even though it took longer than I expected. Without the pressure, I figured out the best method...I found out that I work better in the classroom setting than on my own. It was the fact that if I needed help I did not have to go far.*

(Morrisette 2011, p.182)

Participants engaged in an active, self-paced and reflective process. For example, participants completed a certain amount of credits every few weeks and they arranged their schedules accordingly. These approaches increased responsibility and ownership in their learning.

*When I started high school, I really didn’t like it, so I tried out the Innovation Academy [the charter school]. I was doing fine there, but then I got really sick, and they wouldn’t work around that. I was sick and they were just saying that I fell behind and that I missed things, and they wouldn’t understand. I think that is when [the alternative school principal] said he would help me, and he pulled me in here. It’s working out for me. I come in, start up my station [computer] and start working. You don’t have to sit in your desk and listen all the time. I like working at my own pace, you know. I am a hard worker. I always turn in my*
required credits. Basically, you make your own rules for yourself, and you meet your own expectations.

(Watson 2011, p.1508)

Four studies reported schools which used technology to engage students. Technology enabled self-paced learning and provided instructional choices. One school noted that two of its technology choices (technology project and computer-based instruction) from the four available instructional choices were the most popular instructional choices (Watson and Watson 2011). Participants enjoyed the interactive nature of technology.

Technology is really important [to me]. It is the latest... cutting edge... The learning is hands-on. The activities are more than just teachers talking to you; you are working with sites like YouTube and interacting with people in other locations [throughout the world]. I want more projects and no lectures. I want no more read and answer the questions, filling out the sheet; it is so boring. I might like to create posters about different people. I think we should do things with first hand experiments, interactive lessons, and hands-on learning in biology, instead of reading about things.

(San Martin and Calabrese 2011, p.115)

Participants valued the applied and interactive learning. In contrast, traditional methods of learning such as reading and filling out sheets caused boredom and disengagement.

I want more activities, like group projects. I loved it when we did projects. It’s so long and hard when you have to read the book and answer questions on your own. In history, we have 100 questions to read and answer. I can only do so much of that in a day. I want to participate in debates during history or do experiments in a science lab. I do not learn much with worksheets.

(San Martin and Calabrese 2011, p.115)

Participants agreed that interactive methods made learning enjoyable and increased engagement; however, experiences of computer-based instruction were mixed. Positive experiences will first be described, followed by negative experiences. For some participants computer-based instruction enabled greater success which increased their self-confidence in their ability to learn.

Now I have been doing A+ [computer-based programme]...my grades are really good and I am just proud of myself. I never thought I would do this good. I figured that I would get an F or something and not accomplish what I wanted to do.

(Kim and Taylor 2008, p.214)

Participants particularly like the self-paced instruction offered by computers. They also commented that they could review work they didn’t understand or work they missed which prevented them from falling behind (Watson and Watson 2011).
While many comments about computer-based instruction were positive, participants also critiqued this approach. Some participants missed the personal connection with the teacher, while others sought more features on the help menu. “I get very frustrated when the teacher can’t help right away with it; it builds up” (Watson and Watson 2011, p.49). Participants commented on the drill-and-practice nature of the instruction which could lead to boredom (n=2). They could repeatedly skip tutorials and commence practice assessments instantly, then do tests without having a good grasp of the content. Participants could go back to the same question repeatedly until they knew the right answer (n=1); therefore, participants were not engaging in meaningful learning. Another participant commented about how tedious it was to go through all the instructional tasks. “I did all my math on Plato. It took forever” (Watson and Watson 2011, p.50).

Curriculum choices were seen as important by participants. One school’s alternative curriculum comprised of one afternoon of choices (e.g. cookery, craft, games) and a second afternoon of outdoor pursuits such as football which included approximately 4 hours of a 22.5 school week. Participants described these choices as one of the best things about the school. It was one of the main incentives to attend the school “because you get tae go oot and that eh?” (Macleod 2007, p.34). Achieving the right balance of structure and choice was highlighted. For instance, another school spent approximately 10 out of the 22.5 hours of the school week doing afternoons listed as activities. These participants did not show enthusiasm for these “options afternoons” and one participant used a dismissive tone when stating “but options is just like making friendship bracelets” (Macleod 2007, p.35). Participants viewed these activities as time-fillers rather than purposeful activity. Overall, participants appeared to support choice as long as it was balanced within a structure that promoted success.

Instructional choices were not a characteristic of all schools within this review. Some authors reported scarce evidence of rigorous curriculum or instruction. There appeared to be a reliance on traditional pedagogy in some schools as participants were observed engaging in individual seatwork (n=1), with limited group work and one-on-one instruction (n=2). This is worth mentioning as smaller classes, a characteristic of alternative schools, would have allowed for other learning arrangements. These approaches did not offer any evidence of an alternative way of learning, but instead in these examples the alternative schools like previous schools, failed to meet the learning needs of their students.
5.7 Fostering Caring Relations

Schools influence social relations and provide opportunities for students to refine social skills. Participants perceived that alternative schools cared about their present and future success. This caring went beyond acquiring academic skills to establishing the skills required to be successful in society.

*I think another thing you learn in high school is also relationships. You don’t like a teacher, you have to deal with it. Because in the real world, you don’t like a boss, you have to deal with it. It’s basically just preparing us for adulthood.....That seems like that’s the main focus here.*

*(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1476)*

In agreement, another participant described how schools taught ‘‘people skills’’ and ‘‘how to communicate with people’’ by being ‘‘respectful, but outspoken,’’ and as a result school was ‘‘preparing [her] for life’’ *(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1477).* Participants explained how school taught them core values of trust and respect:

*We are all close, and we all have trust for the teachers. In the classrooms they listen to our opinions and are supportive of our decisions....The most important thing that [alternative school] has contributed to my life is valuing an education and how to be respectful toward others.*

*(San Martin and Calabrese 2011, p.116)*

Participants did not articulate specific instructional strategies which taught social skills; rather, they described school structures and events which emphasised relationship development. This included group advisories, parties, mentoring, house systems, team competitions, homerooms, multicultural luncheons and summer camp activities where they learned to support and depend on one another *(n=5).* Schools provided participants with opportunities to develop and refine their social skills in a fun and safe environment. Schools fostered caring teacher-student relations and peer relations. Participants’ recognised this culture of care and reciprocated care for their school. These relationships will now be described.

5.7.1 Caring Teachers

Studies reported that positive relationships between students and school staff, particularly teachers, contributed to a positive learning environment *(n=4).* This may be particularly important for fostering student retention *(n=7)* as one participant remarked, “*I don’t want to leave because they [teachers] have been too good to me*” *(Kim and Taylor 2008, p.212).* Caring teachers were consistently reported *(n=24)* and were described as:
more personal, straight up, interactive......They care about my health. They care about my well-being, you know. They care about how I’m doing and stuff like that, and that’s what I like about it actually. They’re in it for us.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.90)

There was a remarkable consistency in participants’ perspectives regarding caring attributes possessed by teachers. Participants viewed teacher care in very practical ways and gave examples related to helping, listening, respecting, understanding, being flexible and setting high expectations for students. When asked what advice they would give a new teacher, one participant stated:

I’d tell them that [a good teacher] is someone that is caring and actually asks the students how their day was, and was a lot more personal with the students, more laid back and doesn’t force the students to do their work, but asks them and reminds them.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.94)

Demonstrating care appears to be an essential part of a teacher’s role. Participants wanted teachers to care about their academic success and their personal lives. The most frequently mentioned attributes a caring teacher possessed will now be described.

5.7.1.1 Balancing a Personal Connection with Authority

Participants appreciated the help they received from teachers (n=10). One participant remarked how a teacher assisted her to graduate:

When I wanted to come back to school he [teacher] was the most supportive person I have ever had around me. It was a real personal thing for me. He wanted me to come there personally. He wanted me to get my high school diploma. If it wasn’t for [him] I would not have done it, I would have never made it.

(Morrissette 2011, p.174)

This participant considered the individualised support from her teacher contributed to her success. Participants positively commented on the individualised help they received from teachers (n=10). They felt this support created a positive school experience and enabled them to graduate. Furthermore, connections with teachers were influential in personal changes (n=2).

I think it took me maybe 9 weeks or a semester to get into it, but once I reached that point where I started to accept the way that choices are, it made things so much easier. It made me do something that I haven’t done in a long time, and that’s enjoy going to school.....I really feel that the teachers are here to help me.

(Jones 2011, p.231)

Having personal connections with teachers helped this participant attain higher levels of engagement and enjoyment. It appears supportive relationships enticed
participants into the process of engagement and promoted their desire to participate in shaping their school experience.

Personal connections with teachers were mentioned across studies and encompassed both assistance with school work as demonstrated by the above quotes and support with their personal lives (n=12). Participants noted that personal relationships with teachers were starkly different from their relationships with previous teachers (n=2).

**Participant:** I think they [teachers] interact well with the students. They care about us and I think they have a bigger influence on me than the teachers I had at [traditional school].....I just feel like they’re more behind me more, like they actually care about me. And, I don’t know, they try to help you get your work done where at [traditional school], either you had it or you didn’t have it, you know. I don’t know. Just the atmosphere, I mean. Not necessarily even the teachers but the principal and everything. It’s more like a relationship than just acquaintances.

**Interviewer:** How do you know that? What do they do that’s different?

**Participant:** They talk to me.

**Interviewer:** About..?

**Participant:** Anything and everything really, from school work to what’s going on at my house to what’s happening at the weekends.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1473)

As suggested by Schussler and Collins (2006), this participant appreciated that his teachers knew him in a variety of ways, as they were concerned about his academic progress and his well-being. Teachers’ desires to know about the student made their care more visible. Participants appreciated when teachers listened to them regarding issues at school or at home (n=8).

Yeah, I used to hate school before. I just never wanted to go. I would go, but then I’d just wait for the other kids who didn’t go to classes and then we’d all leave together and do something else for the rest of the day. Here [alternative school] I care about what I’m learning. The teachers make it interesting. Other kids at school support you for coming to school and learning. We learn a lot about life, we can talk about anything in class and the teachers and other kids are willing to listen to you. They care about what’s going on in your life. I like coming to school now.

(Coyl et al. 2004, p.55)

Participants liked talking to teachers outside of the academic context. It appeared to be a highly valued teacher quality and one they hadn’t previously experienced. Additional evidence of personal connections with teachers was the language used by participants. In an earlier quote, the participant described his interaction with teachers as “more like a

97
relationship than just acquaintances” (Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1473). Furthermore, participants across a variety of studies used familial or friendship descriptors to define their relationships with teachers (n=10).

I see Mr. Grey and Mr. Elder as father figures. I’m closer to them than I am my father, so I really have those ties, very emotional and intimate. I guess I just like knowing my teachers and my teachers knowing me.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1474)

Participants could talk to teachers like friends or family members, a position which made them feel cared for and helped them develop personal relationships with teachers. Unconditional support and acceptance is associated with families; therefore, the metaphors used by participants demonstrated the strong sense of support, acceptance, safety and care they felt.

Staff accessibility also helped foster better teacher-student relationships (n=4).

You have a better relationship with the teachers because you always know where they are, they are either in their cubicle or teaching. And in other high schools, you just see a teacher for class, that’s it. They have a private lounge in other schools. Here we are allowed to go to their cubicles.

(Carter 2012, p.186)

An informal school environment where participants could call teachers by their first names (n=4) facilitated staff accessibility. “If you were to say Mr. Smith, you would not feel as close to your teacher” (Carter 2012, p.187).

Positive experiences were predominantly associated with personal connections with teachers; however, participants identified disadvantages. Personal connections could jeopardise engagement. One participant’s rationale for skipping class was that “there’s really no point in going unless it’s on that one day that we do something” (Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1475). Conversely, this same participant appreciated the support her teacher provided on days she or her peers were upset:

We sit down and we talk about it. She tries to help us. That’s why we don’t necessarily get work done. I’m glad that she does that cause when I have a problem I can go to her.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1475)

The participant appreciated both roles her teacher inhabited; therefore, she didn’t want her teacher to assume only one role. As noted by Schussler and Collins (2006), this indicated that teachers must achieve a balance between the role of friend and authority figure with expectations.
In this same study, another participant gave an example when the ‘friend’ and ‘teacher’ role conflicted, and where teachers needed to exercise their authority. This participant expressed concern about student drug use and the lack of concern staff appeared to have for this issue:

Maybe the whole friend-friend teacher-friend thing, it works to get us to do our work for school. But there are certain times where you just have to break that down and say, ‘If I can tell you’re high in my class I will get you kicked out of here.’ Or give them a zero. Because I’ve known a teacher to actually do that. But there are some who just don’t seem to care. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the whole summer thing coming up and it’s just like everyone wants to get out of here.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1474)

This participant acknowledged that the friendship role provided support for students’ school-related goals. Yet, by ignoring student drug use, teachers were not caring for the consequences drugs could have on students’ futures.

Participant perspectives indicated that positive experiences were predominantly associated with personal connections to teachers; however, the complexities of these dynamics were highlighted. It appears that teachers need to achieve a balance between the role of friend and authority figure to facilitate student success both during and after school.

5.7.1.2 Expecting Success

Teachers wanted students to succeed academically, including attaining good grades, graduating and achieving success after school (n=7). Most participants felt teachers pushed them to do their best.

The teachers tracked me and saw potential in me. They took an interest in my life, not just school. They got to know me. They provided direction regarding future opportunities and made me realise that I could do more. I am a reacher not a settler.

(Morrisette 2011, p.180)

Realising teachers’ expectations appeared to foster a greater sense of self-motivation and empowered participants through reinforcing their beliefs in their own abilities. Participants indicated that expectations created by caring teachers were a reason they wanted to stay in school and succeed. Most participants experienced academic failure; therefore, teachers knowing them and setting appropriate expectations was important (n=2). Teachers needed to understand students’ circumstances to set appropriate expectations, even when students’ behaviour conflicted with their level of academic capability.
The teachers at the school won’t lecture you. They’re into everything you do and they’ll tell you when they think you’ve half-assed on a test. I remember when I got a C on a test. The teacher told me that I could’ve done better, so he let me take the test again. I thought that was cool because it showed me that the teacher cared about me.

(Antrop-González 2006, p.289)

Care for this participant meant being held to higher expectations and being given additional opportunities to fare better on tests. The teacher’s personal interest in the student allowed individualised, flexible expectations.

In contrast, low expectations appeared to cause disengagement. Labelling was observed in alternative schools in terms of staffs’ low expectations for students (n=3). Participants explained how easy their work was and expressed concern about their options after school. It seems that some alternative schools attempted to re-engage marginalised participants by making it easier for them to succeed. This appeared to increase participants’ disengagement from school and seemed to perpetuate beliefs that participants held about being unworthy of a good quality education. Participants wanted “normal curriculum” so that they could reach their goals and succeed after school (Macleod 2007, p.34). The need to eliminate labels was described by a participant in one study. She commented how her previous teachers’ expectations changed depending on whether she was the “good student” in the gifted programme or an academically struggling and disruptive student in the “slow class” (Swaminathan 2004, p.48). This participant internalised labels and acted how others expected her to behave whether she was perceived as “smart” or “dumb” in her previous schools (Swaminathan 2004, p.48). She remarked that no labels within her alternative school enabled her to graduate and succeed:

I left and returned and left again until I came to [alternative school] where it was flexible and there were no labels like “gifted” or “special” – so I found I could catch up finally and graduate.

(Swaminathan 2004, p.47)

It appeared that participant success was shaped by their perceptions of how staff viewed them and what staff expected of them. These findings indicate the complex relationship between labelling, expectations and students’ perceptions of themselves.

5.7.1.3 Caring Teachers are Responsive

In order to be responsive, teachers needed to demonstrate a capacity for empathy. An unwillingness to consider individual circumstances appeared to be common in participants’ previous schools.
Other principals just judge me and my life.....The principal here, he understands. He knows what’s going on.....And the teachers here, they’re just funny, and they understand you more than anyone else does, and they actually talk to you about what’s going on, while other teachers are just like, “whatever, just do your work”.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.88)

Participants placed a strong value on being understood. In most of the alternative schools, teachers appeared to look after their students’ emotional health. Participants benefitted from talking to their teachers about their life and personal problems (n=2). “Some things just cloud my mind and I need to talk to someone and I just talk to them” (Morrissette 2011, p.181). Participants needed to discuss personal problems to regain focus on their educational tasks. Rather than ruminating, they were able to talk to teachers about issues, process their concerns and return to their school work. Participants appreciated staff’s non-judgemental attitudes which increased trust between students and teachers. Unfortunately, this was not the case in all alternative schools, as one participant explained:

They don’t know what happened that night. I mean, your parents could have been in a big fight, and you didn’t get any sleep, and you’re really tired. And they don’t even want to know why you are so tired. They just tell you to get up. I mean, if I was a teacher, I would ask the student, “Why are you tired?” or go see the counsellor or something like that, you know. And nowadays they are just yelling at you to get up, stand up, and splash water on your face and stuff like that.

(McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.423)

This participant described his teachers’ inability or unwillingness to understand his circumstances. Participants required responsive, caring teachers and flexible school procedures to accommodate the challenges they faced. Responsive teachers also ensured participants succeeded academically. Teachers cared if participants understood their course content and were flexible in achieving this goal (n=3).

Like some of the teachers [at previous schools] would come in, and they didn’t even know how to explain it. They explained it in a way that I didn’t understand, and he, [teacher] did it, like, he didn’t stop trying to teach me ’til I caught on, and then we’d figure out what I needed to learn, kind of thing. It was good.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.90)

In previous schools, this participant had difficulty understanding his coursework and his teachers did not adapt their instructional methods to meet his needs. His current teacher demonstrated care by trying different approaches until the participant understood his work. This responsive practice catered for participants’ different learning styles and was highly valued by participants. A participant in a different study commented, “if someone
tells me what to do, I won’t do it”, while another stated, “as long as you don’t pressure me I get the work done” (Morrissette 2011, p.182). These comments suggest that teachers need to meet individual learning styles and acknowledge participants’ need for independence. Teachers’ understanding also reduced pressure on participants.

They don’t pressure you much. I mean there’s some pressure, but it’s not as much. Whereas in other schools you have to have everything done and they won’t tell you if you have something due, in this school they’re nice and lenient and they’ll do that [tell you if you have work due], and once in a while they’ll give you free time so you can just take a break from everything ....

(Wilkins 2008, p.19)

Teachers were flexible in their instructional methods, were understanding about deadlines and provided breaks between assignments. These flexible practices were not observed in all schools within this review. An author of one study observed few teachers engaging in effective teaching practices, but instead using worksheets as their primary means of instruction and showing movies on Fridays (McNulty and Roseboro 2009). She also observed a teacher sleeping in class. A participant expressed his frustration:

I don’t like him ’cause he doesn’t teach us. Like, you’ve been in there. He just gives us work, and I don’t think that’s right. For him to just sit back there and sleep while we’re working and him not even teach us. He sits behind the file cabinet and falls asleep while we’re doing work...He doesn’t even know if we know how to do it or not.

(McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.419)

This participant felt an injustice as he was not provided with opportunities to succeed. It appears that ineffective teaching practices led to poor teacher-participant relationships. A consistent finding was that participants wanted teachers who gave them opportunities to succeed by responding to their academic needs. Participants appeared to dislike authoritarian teaching styles, but instead favoured an approach which empowered youth. A one-size-fits-all model did not meet the needs of all participants. It appears teachers who used ineffective practices promoted disengagement in classrooms. Conversely, there were numerous teachers who helped make school an exciting, interesting and welcoming place.

5.7.1.4 Caring Teachers are Respectful

The need for respect was reported in eleven studies as a key ingredient in caring relationships and participants stated respect was essential to their success in school (n=4) and retention (n=1). A participant commented, “I finally made that choice to stay [in
alternative school] because I realised that teachers gave you respect here” (Swaminathan 2004, p.54). At previous schools, respect was something participants had to show and was not always reciprocated.

Because at other schools...you’re forced to respect the teacher. If she’s mean to you, you still have to respect her. But here you gain the respect of those people, and people here, they gain the respect of you. So it’s a two-way thing, and not a one-way.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.88)

Participants welcomed the respect they received from teachers, “the teachers treat everyone the same, there are no favourites here” (Morrissette 2011, p.178). Respect was given unconditionally and was not based on good behaviour or compliance. Participants also connected respect with not being forced to do work. One participant explained:

Like at other schools, I tend not to want to listen to authority ’cause it’s the whole respect thing. Being forced to do something I don’t want to do.....Here I’m not forced to do anything.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.89)

Participants did not see teachers as authoritative figures, but sometimes as co-learners.

The teachers don’t have that aura of being superior because they belong to the faculty or administration. For me, the teachers acted like co-students. They cared because they were there to work with you and learn with you. It was a different feeling than what I got at the public school.

(Antrop-González 2006, p.289)

Co-learning empowered participants by enabling symmetrical power relationships. Co-learning moved teachers and participants to a more participatory engagement which made teachers’ care more visible to participants. These positive teacher-student relationships encouraged reciprocal respect. One participant explained this dynamic:

A lot of the reasons why I do better are because of my relationship with the teachers. When you’re friends with a teacher and on close terms with a teacher, you want to do well.....If I’m in a class and I fail a class or if I’m incomplete, it’s almost a little bit disrespectful to the teacher that I’m not working as hard as I should.

(Jones 2011, p.228)

This participant responded to his teachers’ care by engaging in his work and trying to meet expectations. Participants acknowledged the need to be reciprocal; however, one participant reflected on the disconnect between her words and behaviour:
I don’t like how, including myself, how it’s abused, how sometimes we take the teachers for granted and allow them to bend over backwards and we’re not bending the same. I mean, that’s my situation right now.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1484)

While some participants reciprocated care through their work, other participants did so through their attitudes and behaviours.

He’s [principal] given so much to me and the rest of us here that it’s only right to obey, I guess. I don’t want to say obey like, ‘yes master,’ but like to listen to him, to respect him and respect his authority. Because he doesn’t have to go out on a limb. He never had to, you know; he didn’t have to start this school and give us this opportunity, so it’s the least I can do.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1484)

This participant demonstrated his care for his principal through being respectful and cooperative. It appears respect is important in obtaining both successful academic outcomes and positive behavioural outcomes.

5.7.1.5 Caring Teachers can Self-Regulate

Participants reported that teachers knew how to “deal with kids like us” and when a problem occurred, teachers reacted calmly (n=2) and made “everything small” (Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.88).

Participant: At regular schools I’d get my teachers pissed off so easily, but here the teachers don’t get mad. They know how to control their anger.

Interviewer: So what effect does that have on you?

Participant: It makes us a little bit more mellow.

(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.92)

Participants used the word “mellow” to describe how they were more relaxed. Participants attributed these changes to the calm, non-reactive manner of staff. With regard to enforcing rules, participants explained how teachers were willing to listen to participants’ reasons for acting in certain ways and talked to them without “that crazy yelling and stuff” (Wilkins 2008, p.20). Listening to participants and respecting their opinion made participants feel cared for while enforcing rules.
5.7.2 Caring Peers

The care between students was mentioned in half of the studies in this review (n=12). When asked what the best thing about their school was, one participant responded:

> It would probably just be the family here. Like I said, the students are a family. Well, the teachers are included in that.....At our prom, all the teachers are out, joking and dancing with the students......It's just this unit. I actually think [alternative school] produces a lot of relationships that will last a lot longer than most high school relationships.

*(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1468)*

Furthermore, when asked to describe a meaningful and relevant learning environment, one participant described an environment where:

> The students are getting along and completing their contracts [work assignments] on time. They are attending classes. They are actually staying in the classroom and doing their work. Students are doing hands-on work and having fun doing their work, like making a card [thank you cards].

*(San Martin and Calabrese 2011, p.117)*

It is apparent that caring peer relationships played a role in creating positive learning environments. A contrast in aggression experienced by participants in traditional and alternative schools was described in four studies. Participants referred to the fighting they witnessed or were involved in at their previous schools. Some experienced anxiety as a result. Most of the peer cultures in this review were characterised by positive peer relations.

> There were no groups here of students that were like....cliques. We were out in the community doing our own work most of the time and so when we met at school, it was like meeting your friends and there was no time to fight or anything. Nobody here took up the school space as if it was theirs and not yours. It was everyone’s place. There could not be a fight here – no teacher would tolerate it. The students would not tolerate it. No one here ever carried a weapon. No one needs it here. No one is threatening you here. It makes a big difference. At my earlier school, I used to carry a small knife – for protection, I was never caught with it but I used to have it with me in case...

*(Swaminathan 2004, p.53)*

Participants described a sense of safety and care among peers as their alternative school did not tolerate fighting. Disagreements were resolved before violence occurred.

> Here, it’s like a big family. At my other Chicago public school everybody was fighting or getting stabbed. I was tired of that. At this school, we work things out before they get out of hand.

*(Antrop-González 2006, p.290)*

This participant indicated that negative peer dynamics influenced her decision to leave school. In contrast, descriptors such as ‘big family’ (n=4) emphasised the sense of
safety and acceptance participants felt among their peers. One participant captured this well:

*Here you don’t have to worry about [bullying]. You’ve got your thugs, you’ve got your Goths, and you’ve got every kind of clique here. It really doesn’t matter because once you get to know somebody you sort of look over that and that’s what we do here.....We look at what kind of personality you have in your being.*

*(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1478)*

While participants still labelled their peers as if they belonged to a particular clique, they explained to the interviewer that the label was a superficial criterion and did not cause division in their school. Participants did not have to fight stereotypes and judgements due to the allegiance they showed to a particular clique. This acceptance was demonstrated by the acknowledgment that these differences were respected. Unfortunately, acceptance was not the norm in their previous schools. A participant in one study found it difficult at first to adapt to the caring and accepting peer culture:

*It was hard, I mean coming from a school where I had to be hard, because it takes a lot of getting used to. You are really defensive, don’t want nobody to get in your face; like if you mess with me, I’m going to mess back. But the first week I came, nobody teased me, or made fun of me......Then it kept happening, I became a bully to some people; why beat them, join them. But I straightened up. I went to some mediations and talked to some people, and I found out that I was doing what people were doing to me.*

*(Jones 2011, p.231)*

Her bullying was not accepted in the alternative school and was dealt with in a manner where she was not excluded or rejected by her peers. She was given the opportunity to talk to people and as a result changed her behaviour and she became highly involved in the school. The social environment described by this participant highlights the acceptance within the school. Most participants recognised that their peer relations were strong and that there were opportunities throughout the school day to engage with peers. One participant described how he gradually came to know his peers:

*From my other classes, walking through the hallways, seeing them at lunch and at the end of the day when we’re going home, and from just being here a long time.*

*(Wilkins 2008, p.17)*

Having opportunities to engage with peers made it possible to establish positive peer dynamics. Yet simply being near other students was not enough to foster positive relations, as demonstrated by the conflict and stigmatisation participants experienced in their previous school environments.
Similarity was identified as particularly important in establishing positive peer relations (n=4). Participants talked about understanding each other because they were all viewed as ‘different’ within typical school norms. They had not succeeded in traditional schools and some chose to attend the alternative schools. There was a sense of relief among participants having met ‘similar’ students. One participant stated:

*There’s no discrimination, no racism here, everybody gets along with each other. Everybody keeps to each other in one building, everybody looks out for each other in the building basically, like they only got each other... no matter what the disability or special need or anything, everybody still tries to stay together.*

*(Wilkins 2008, p.17)*

Another participant stated:

*It’s just, the way that it’s just a bunch of kids who didn’t like high school. Everybody has that in common so it’s like, we get together and can make it a better high school.*

*(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1478)*

Sharing a diagnosis or the experience of failure in traditional schools served as the initial bond; however, maintaining positive relations required commitment over time. Participants demonstrated this commitment by providing support to one another.

Support was given and received by participants (n=6). Participants described scenarios where they helped settle new students, assisted each other with school work and listened to each other’s worries. Students supported each other to attend school and to graduate. This personal and academic support was not reserved for close friends, but was available to all students in the school.

*Everyone cares for you... When you’re new, they’re not like, ‘Oh, that’s the new girl. We’re not going to talk to her.’ They come up to you and they introduce themselves. They’re extremely friendly.*

*(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1479)*

A participant explained how she liked being a mentor, a role assigned to senior students at her school:

*I like being a mentor. I like helping the new student out. I want to help them stay in this school because if they want it, they deserve a chance.*

*(San Martin and Calabrese 2011, p.116)*

Not only did participants value the support they received, but they reciprocated it within a school which provided the structural environment to do so. It appeared that peer
support was not the norm in their previous schools. Participants described how they were initially surprised at the support they received.

I’ve never had anyone come up to me and be like, ‘Hey, I’ll take time out of my day to... help you on your math’ which they did here.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1479)

Caring peer relationships had positive implications for participants’ attitudes toward school and their academic achievements (n=4). A number of participants commented that positive peer relations fostered a better learning environment. ‘Now that everyone gets along and everyone’s really friendly, it’s a lot easier to learn” (Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1480). Teachers could dedicate their time to teaching instead of breaking up fights which consumed a lot of teaching time in their previous schools. Participants claimed that their academics improved as a result of their social environment. ‘Last year was incredible for me. I came, I was accepted, brought into the family, and my grades soared and I really enjoyed it’” (Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1480). It is evident that a family type atmosphere created conditions for participants to feel accepted, safe and supported which resulted in increased grades and enjoyment at school.

5.7.3 Reciprocal Care
The sections above described the reciprocal respect and care participants demonstrated towards their teachers and their peers. The reciprocal care participants showed for their schools will now be described (n=2). Participants in one study wanted to ensure their school had a good reputation (Schussler and Collins 2006). Furthermore, they wanted to protect their school from those whose behaviours and attitudes opposed the school’s philosophy. Given that these were marginalised students, many of whom were at-risk of early school leaving, it is noteworthy that they expressed care for their schools both verbally and through their actions.

Participants expressed a desire to protect the school’s reputation and to help the school succeed. As acknowledged by Schussler and Collins (2006), care for their school linked in with care for their peers as the school affected their ability to succeed. A few participants argued that some students should be excluded from the school. When asked why, one participant responded:
Just because there might be 10 other people here who would take it seriously and come here and they would actually put it to use, and they're not. They're wasting somebody else’s chance. They’re wasting their own, too.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1482)

Another participant referring to the “slackers” stated:

Those aren’t the people we need here. And that kind of gives the school a bad name.....because people think that this is a school for slackers.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1483)

Participants expressed their desire to protect their school through their actions. A participant described what she would do if her school was closing:

If they were to decide to take away funding and send everyone back to their base school, I would be in the front of the crowd protesting. This school is going to make a lot of good people and I’m determined to be one of them.

(Jones 2011, p.227)

Some participants wanted to sit in on entrance interviews to identify “slackers” and prevent them from entering the school (n=1). These findings do contrast with the participant perspectives above which described their peers as welcoming and emphasises that participants did not have a unified voice. Another participant described the action he took to protect his school:

Somebody comes in here and they start disrupting things, they’re not about our business. I don’t know if that’s a good way, but if they’re not here to do what they need to be doing, kick them out. That’s what happened the first year is this dude came here. He wasn’t doing nothing but causing a ruckus, you know. We kicked him out, you know, made sure he didn’t come back.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1483)

This participant along with other students put pressure on a student who was not abiding by the school’s philosophy to either conform to the school’s values or to leave. The authors noted there was no formal structure in place to allow students to exercise this authority but they cared enough about the school to do it. This action could also be considered a form of bullying and contrasts with the positive peer dynamics described in the above section. A participant explained their actions:

Here you don’t have to be with us. When you go to that interview it’s like you’re pretty much saying I’m going to be kind to everybody and act like a part of the family.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1487)
The authors Schussler and Collins (2006) proposed that when care was viewed as a central belief in a school, students were more likely to exhibit care. It appears a culture of care was essential in establishing a safe school. Nonetheless, this culture of care appeared to exclude some students. These students may have benefitted from additional support to ensure they were welcomed within the school.

5.8 Establishing School Structures

Within this section, school structures which fostered a culture of care and academic success will be described. Participants’ perspectives regarding the physical environment will first be described followed by school supports and policies. Participants’ perspectives regarding their school’s structure were only captured in a few studies, while some authors gave detailed descriptions of the school. Lack of student voice regarding school structures may be a consequence of the aims of included studies. More than half of the studies in this review had aims relating to schools social and/or cultural contexts (n=15), while others addressed these contextual domains in their findings (n=6). No study aimed to specifically address the physical environment.

5.8.1 Physical Environment

The size of the school (n=7) and the size of the classes (n=6) were identified as the most consistent reasons for how teachers could develop personal relationships with students and provide academic support. One participant described how classes felt easier in his alternative school compared to his previous school due to size:

They [classes] felt easier because they’re so much smaller......It’s a lot more personal and it’s a lot easier to ask a question and have it answered and you get the attention you need to learn.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1485)

Due to the small size, students had the opportunity to ask for help and to receive more individualised attention (n=4). Class size was not reported in all studies; however, in one study 10 students was the average class size (McNulty and Roseboro 2009), while another reported an average size of 12 students (Antrop-González 2006). A participant explained how the size of the school created a caring environment:

I don’t necessarily know if that’s a big deal, that there’s less kids. I guess it’s more personal relationships with the teachers. They seem to display the attitude that they actually care. You’re not just a number. You actually have a face at this school because I guess, that has to do with there’s not as many kids.

(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1485)
When describing how the school environment was different from his previous school, this participant began by talking about the school size. He then considered that it was the personal relationships with the teachers and their caring attitude rather than the size. Finally, he concluded the personal teacher-student relationships were due to the size of the school. School sizes when reported, ranged from 55 to 500 students.

Furthermore, the school size may have contributed to the family atmosphere as one participant stated the small size of the school gave them ‘‘no other choice [than to] spend time with someone and....truly figure out who they are’’ (Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1485). Therefore, not only did smaller schools establish caring teacher-student relationships, but they helped establish positive peer relations (n=4). While these results do not ensure caring relationships in smaller schools, they indicate that smaller schools and smaller classes create conditions which are conducive to caring relationships.

Six alternative schools were described by authors as pleasant and well resourced. One school was described as an upscale urban coffee shop or a ‘hip’ modern office and the author noted no graffiti or evidence of vandalism (Cassidy and Bates 2005). This indicates the respect students had for their environment. Resources for teaching included adequate classrooms such as science rooms, art rooms and computer labs. Classroom layouts tended to vary when described. In one setting, students sat at workstations around the perimeter of the classrooms. Each workstation had a lamp and computer (n=1). Other classrooms were more traditional and had desks, chairs and chalk boards (n=1), while others had circular desks for group work (n=3). Computer access was common (n=6). In some cases the internet played the role of text books as the school had no access to textbooks (n=2). Participants reported that computers were a great resource as they “could find anything” (Watson and Watson 2011, p.47).

In contrast, inadequately funded schools were perceived negatively by participants. An author described one school as “dark, drab and unkempt, the building itself indicated a lack of adequate funding” (McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.419). Participants commented on the school’s poor appearance:

*It’s a piece of crap. This whole school. It looks like a dumpster in here. The library is the only part of the whole school that looks halfway decent. Someone should build a new one. Somebody should burn it down. It is just ugly.*

(McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.419)
The physical deterioration of the building sent messages that these students were unworthy of quality schools and potentially reinforced the implicit message that these students were the “bad kids” (McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.418). Participants did not feel valued and in return they showed little respect for their school environment, “somebody should burn it down” (McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.419). The school was plagued with lack of resources and worksheets were the primary means of instruction. This strongly contrasts to the schools with nice decor and resources, where the researcher did not observe vandalism indicating the respect students had for their building. Conversely, modern well-resourced schools were not necessarily perceived positively by students. Participants in one school resisted their fresh new school environment. The researcher described this recently constructed building as modern, well lit, and spacious. Each classroom had a sink, storage cupboards, five computers for students and a video camera which documented any disruption by a student in class. Resources available in the school were a Smart Board, LCD projector, cafeteria, lockers, a computer lab and a classroom for after-school curriculum. Despite the top of the range equipment and modern style, participants consistently conveyed negative feelings about the school.

_“I don’t like this new building because it is like a school. Our old school building was smaller and we were comfortable. This is like an actual school building. I feel like they have put me back in the high school. It is more open, and too much space. I liked it when it was smaller.”_ (Kim and Taylor 2008, p.214)

The design of the new learning environment had unintended consequences of creating discomfort for participants instead of facilitating engagement. It appeared that the planning of the new building did not involve key-stakeholders such as the students in the decision-making process. Furthermore, not only did participants have the challenge of adapting to their new building, but they also shared it with middle school students who were behind in their credits for graduation. Participants disliked that the school catered for many types of programmes.

_“This is like an actual school setting. Now, we’ve got the middle schoolers and second chance people. We have too many different people. I liked it when it was smaller and didn’t have the middle schoolers in it. They cause more trouble and they are in the hall and I don’t like that part. It’s like they ask for trouble.”_ (Kim and Taylor 2008, p.215)
It is apparent that the school environment can send symbolic messages to students which affect their comfort with their school and their school pride. Participants were more likely to demonstrate pride when their school environment was bright, modern and well kept. Yet, this was not always the case, as participants in one study felt alienated by their modern learning environment. These findings indicate that how students perceive their environment affects their pride and respect for their school environment and also their engagement.

Furthermore, participants respected a school environment which acknowledged their culture. One study described how the school environment used art as a medium to connect with students’ culture (Antrop-González 2006). The exterior of the school building was covered in a series of painted murals depicting faces of former and current Puerto Rican political prisoners and nationalist slogans. Within the school building, the walls of classrooms and surrounding spaces were covered with posters and pictures of Puerto Rican, Mexican and African-American historical figures, while a row of student lockers were painted in the likeness of the Puerto Rican flag. This artwork contributed to the schools Puerto Rican history while also encouraging other non-Puerto Rican students to celebrate their historical heroes. This not only increased student’s pride in their school environment, but also demonstrated the care the school had for its students.

Furthermore, school environments played a role in fostering student self-esteem and motivation to graduate. In one school there was a wall which displayed the names of graduates. Participants commented on the wall, stating it reminded them of their goal and provided motivation to graduate. “Seeing others graduate and succeed- I wanted that” (Morrissette 2011, p.184). Two schools had graffiti-style words of encouragement painted on their walls, while another had art dotting walls which reflected themes of hope, courage, serenity and teamwork (n=3). An observation made by authors in six studies was that students’ work, artwork and photographs covered the corridor and classroom walls which may have contributed to students’ sense of belonging and ownership within the school environment.

5.8.2 Supports
The concept of ‘family’ surfaced in many ways in these alternative schools. Familial descriptors highlighted positive social relations and a sense of community. The comparison to family represented the unconditional safety, support and acceptance participants experienced. Within this section, the concept of ‘family’ becomes a
foundation for how people and places were organised. Structural factors which fostered a sense of community included casual atmospheres and use of first names (n=4), homerooms (n=1) and house systems (n=1). These supports helped establish a strong sense of connection with teachers and other students. House systems involved dividing the school into small clusters, which had a house teacher, guidance counsellor and a house parent. Students remained in a house for three years. This consistency fostered positive relationships and enabled the house teacher to monitor attendance and provide support. Another school had homerooms where students checked in when they arrived at school and after lunch each day. These structures provided students with one to one and small group support. A mentorship programme was used in one school to help new students (n=1). Forums such as group advisories and service classes provided support to students and ensured student voices were heard in the school (n=4).

*During Advisory, we are in charge. It is our time and we raise issues that are important to us. We can discuss issues like homework, test panic ...like a support group. It kept me grounded. If there was a problem with the placement or with a class, I could ask for help.*

*(Swaminathan 2004, p.57)*

Support systems which listened to student voices helped participants embrace their new learning environment.

*Then we got into service projects and I really liked it, unlike [previous school]. We really got the chance to mold the school, like work and change things for the better....*

*(Jones 2011, p.231)*

It appears that positive social supports enticed students into the process of engagement and promoted their desire to participate in shaping their school experience. Accessing supports through these formal structures created a safety net for students both personally and academically. Participants acknowledged how late afternoon and evening tutorials and homework sessions helped them complete their work and contributed to their learning and skill development (n=1). Services aligning with student needs were also part of the support structures. For example, some schools had support services on site including drug and alcohol counselling, anger management classes, parenting groups, childcare services, homeless services, job placement, formal job training and counselling services (n=2).
5.8.3 Policies

Flexible attendance policies were mentioned in four studies (n=4). These policies accommodated students’ lives given that they could choose their own school hours. This demonstrated the school’s recognition that students had to “tackle other important things in life first” (Watson 2011, p.1510) as most participants in these four studies had family or work commitments. This flexibility and choice increased participants’ motivation and engagement in their learning process. These positive outcomes could also be observed in schools where participants perceived the disciplinary policies as fair.

Resolving conflict through discussion was used in some of the alternative schools; therefore, few punitive measures were used (n=3). Limited or no suspensions and expulsions characterised some (n=4) alternative schools. While this is viewed as a positive attribute, one author commented that a no expulsion policy might explain the extreme behaviours witnessed (e.g. swearing, fighting, disrespect towards staff) (Atkins et al. 2005). As discussed above, some participants advocated for particular students to be excluded from their school. Their rationale closely aligned with the behaviours observed by Atkins et al. (2005). Peers felt these misbehaving students gave the school a bad name and made people think that the school was for “ slackers ” (Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1483). Their perspectives were not shared by all participants.

Where suspension and expulsion policies existed, they were questioned by participants. Confusion was expressed by participants as schools wanted to retain them, yet students were excluded for misbehaviour. Participants became resistant towards school when they could not see a clear justification for suspension.

Sometimes I don’t think they give like, an education. I mean they preach to us about getting an education, and then they’re gonna go and suspend us for stupid little things ......I mean, we’re gonna come back with an attitude ’cause we’re gonna think it’s so stupid what they suspended us for. Like......[the principal] was threatening to suspend me because I play around too much. I mean, that is like the most stupid reason I’ve ever heard to suspend someone.

(McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.423)

This participant felt that unjustifiable suspensions caused students to be resistant towards school and also denied students access to education. From participants’ perspectives, suspension appeared to be an ineffective punishment. Instead of improving student behaviour, suspensions perceived as unfair by students caused resistance; therefore, the school inadvertently contributed to undesirable behaviour.
Furthermore, removing students from school sent conflicting messages. One participant explained:

> There is one thing I hate about school. They always tell you that you shouldn’t come if you are not going to do something, but if you don’t come to school, then you get in trouble. It’s like damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

*(McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.423)*

Participant perspectives indicate the complexity around exclusionary practices. Some participants advocated for exclusion of particular students, while others stated exclusion denied students opportunities to succeed. Furthermore, suspensions perceived as unfair increased students’ resistance. One participant described how he was expelled from his previous school not because of the incident but because of his reputation:

> Like I have a violent history right? If I fought in public school, you know, I was gone that year, not even a second thinking about it. “Bye, see you later,” just because of my history. Where at this place they don’t judge you by your history, they judge you on your act, how you react to things, and how much you take responsibility for it.

*(Cassidy and Bates 2005, p.91)*

This participant perceived his alternative school as fair because they did not judge him on past behaviours. The alternative school provided opportunities for this participant to succeed. Participants responded well when their voice was heard. A participant described how he got sent to the principal’s office after refusing to do his work:

> I got sent down to the office and I told her [the principal] all my reasons and she said, ‘well, I understand’ and she said, ‘well, you don’t have to do it now but maybe if you could just do it later in your homeroom or something’ and I said ‘ok, I’ll do it then ’…..and it was very nice of her.

*(Wilkins 2008, p.20)*

The participant felt he was respected and because he perceived the situation as fair, he agreed to do the work later. Within this study, the author noted that because staff listened to students’ reasons for acting in certain ways, students tended to conform to expected behaviours. As a result there was little need for overt discipline. In contrast, some teachers relied too heavily on rules where minor incidents led to severe punishments. This is particularly true for participants who felt their suspension was unfair. McNulty and Roseboro (2009), authors of an included study, stated alternative schools adopted stringent policies due to their role as a last chance school. Participants perceived that too many rules and petty rules helped them get into trouble. “Too many rules. Like your clothes, about the pants, and you can’t hug on girls” *(McNulty and*
Participants also felt rules should be flexible to accommodate each individual student instead of punishing all students because of another student’s behaviour.

\[\text{Oh, yea, like having to stay in the class all period. They just changed it to where we don’t get to go to the library or the bathroom. There’s only one teacher that lets us go to the bathroom. Staying in class an hour and 45 minutes is too long. ’Cause, I mean, I really had to go [to the bathroom] today, and they would not let me go, and I thought that was stupid. I think they should let us go, but if you see someone out [in the hall] you should check their agenda. And if they get caught roaming the halls, they should put a mark in their agenda. And then they won’t get to go somewhere, and not everyone gets punished.}\]

\[\text{(McNulty and Roseboro 2009, p.422)}\]

Blanket punishments were perceived as unfair by participants. This participant was frustrated by inflexible rules. No discussion appeared to have taken place between teacher and student and it appears that students were not involved in decision-making processes. While this example details students arguing for more flexible interpretations of policies, participants in another school favoured greater discipline. In this particular school, the use of restraint by staff members was considered necessary by participants for the protection of staff and students and for the protection of the school building.

\[\text{If it wasn’t people restraining, the school wouldn’t be here...It’d be smashed up and everything, there’d be people in hospital.}\]

\[\text{(Sellman 2009, p.39)}\]

The fact that participants felt restraint was necessary may indicate that they held a deeply entrenched belief that they and their peers were so different that restraint was normal and expected. Participants felt some staff relied on restraint and/or used it inconsistently:

\[\text{I would make a comment about some teachers were inappropriate with their use of restraints. That is extremely true.....sometimes they go overboard. I have had one time when I was being restrained and they were shouting at me, screaming at me and started tightening up the restraint even when I was shouting cos I was hurting. That’s why I felt that they sometimes go overboard with their restraints.}\]

\[\text{(Sellman 2009, p.39)}\]

Participants accepted teachers’ powers to restrain them, with the caveat that restraint should be implemented fairly and consistently.

A reward system to promote positive behaviour was used in one school. A token economy existed where students had to earn enough points to enjoy a period of reward (e.g. structured play) at the end of the day. Participants stated it was effective as most
students behaved most of the time; despite this, it was a source of frustration as participants could not identify an alternative system. Participants felt that the rewards were only motivating in terms of what they substituted (e.g. class work) and not what they actually offered. The issue of consistency was raised again. Participants stated that they disliked this system as it could be abused if the relationship between student and teacher was poor.

*It doesn’t really matter what’s used, if things are not good between the teacher and that person, it can be abused.....it’s the relationship that really matters.*

*(Sellman 2009, p.41)*

Participants concluded that both systems of rewards and restraints could be influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. This comment highlights the importance of reciprocal care in teacher-student relationships. It appeared that participants were more likely to perceive disciplinary procedures as fair and consistent if they sensed their teacher cared about them.

Participants’ perspectives regarding discipline policies were complex with some participants favouring greater discipline and exclusion, while others argued for more flexible interpretations of policies. It appears most participants agreed on the need for consistent and fair rules.

**5.9 Schools as Sanctuaries**

A participant in one study described his school as a “sanctuary” *(Antrop-González 2006, p.89)*. The concept of sanctuary broadly captured the perspectives of participants regarding their school’s care towards them. Many participants acknowledged that their alternative school gave them a second chance. Participants understood the school’s care for them as its main function. According to a participant, the school existed:

*to help kids who want to graduate, who want to get through school and move on and succeed.... It’s like they actually want you to do good.*

*(Schussler and Collins 2006, p.1481)*

Participants felt the school existed to enable them to realise their potential. Participants acknowledged that their new school environment provided a better match to their needs.
My environment has changed, and due to that, I feel more positive about myself. I’m starting to finally experience success, which is something that I haven’t had in a long time. I guess I’m a little more positive now, and my work ethic has definitely improved a lot...I’m trying to turn stuff in on time and really not be ashamed of what I’m turning in. Hopefully that will carry over to my real world experiences.

(Jones 2011, p.229)

This participant explained his positive change in relation to his new learning environment. He linked his change in environment to his improved work ethic and capability. Unlike previous schools, participants described a culture of care that provided a sanctuary for participants to succeed and achieve their goals. A school is a sanctuary when it provides a physical, emotional and psychological safe school space through (1) creating a sense of acceptance; (2) promoting academic success using responsive curricula; (3) supporting caring relationships and (4) having structures which foster a culture of care and which maintains student integrity. The concept of sanctuary will be described in more detail in the discussion chapter.

5.10 Chapter Summary
This chapter presented the demographic details of included studies, such as their context, participants and methodological quality of the paper. Findings from the thematic analysis were also described. The overall theme of schools as safe spaces encompassed the following four themes: (1) creating a sense of acceptance through fostering a sense of community and embedding student culture with the school; (2) providing responsive curricula; (3) fostering caring relations including caring teachers, caring peers and reciprocal care; and finally (4) establishing school structures which encompassed the physical environment, supports and policies. The concept of schools as sanctuaries was introduced and will be described in more detail in the next chapter. The voices within the findings were not always in agreement. These conflicting voices added depth to the reviews findings. Furthermore, minority voices were presented to ensure a fair representation of marginalised student voices. The perspectives and experiences identified in this chapter will be discussed in light of existing literature in the next chapter.
Chapter 6  Discussion

6.1  Introduction
This synthesis of mixed-methods studies suggested complex ways in which the school context may shape student retention. This research illuminated how the school context was understood by students from different backgrounds and explored to what extent the immediate school context supported their engagement. This chapter carries forward key aspects of the findings, establishing connections with existing literature. The key findings included establishing schools as safe spaces through creating a sense of acceptance, developing responsive curricula, fostering caring relationships and establishing school structures (figure 6.1). Limitations of the current project will be acknowledged and implications for practice and policy will then be discussed under creating schools as sanctuaries and establishing learner-centred schools. Future directions for research will follow.

Figure 6.1 Thematic Map with Philosophy of Alternative Education
Before delving into this chapter, it is important to note the complexity of discussing the findings in relation to the Irish context. Whilst comparisons are made between the findings and the Irish educational system, it is acknowledged that educational systems vary on a sub-national and cross-national level (Bray et al. 2007). Nonetheless, all these systems have a common goal which is to enable students to learn. This complexity is acknowledged as this review did not attempt to provide definite solutions for increasing student retention. Rather, without eliminating studies based on geographical location or educational systems, this project identified potential factors which (a) marginalised students perceived to be important contextual factors in keeping them in school and (b) kept recurring in association with student retention regardless of the educational system.

This project aimed to broaden our understanding of educational difficulties and solutions beyond the boundaries of Ireland. It seemed appropriate to consider practices in alternative educational settings to identify contextual factors which contribute to student retention as these settings cater for students who were rejected by other schools and who had a history of school failure and personal difficulties (Aron 2006). This review provides a pragmatic framework, in that real educational practices were explored, to increase our understanding of what contextual factors contribute to student retention. This pragmatic framework can inform any educational system which aims to provide a sanctuary for students and a learner-centred culture.

6.2 Creating Schools as Sanctuaries

The studies within this review suggested that alternative schools which provided a sanctuary for students, increased student engagement. Schools were like sanctuaries when they included caring relations; had family-like atmospheres; provided physical, emotional and psychological safe spaces; enabled students to affirm their racial/ethnic pride; provided responsive curricula and supportive school structures. Establishing sanctuaries within schools is not a novel concept. Various educational scholars described ways to develop sanctuaries for students (Bloom 1995, Goldfarb 1998, Stanwood and Doolittle 2004). Bloom and Sreedhar (2008) stated that the concept of sanctuary represented a structured approach to changing an organisational culture. The overarching goal of the sanctuary model is to create a context where students can maximise their potential for learning and growth with as little exposure to trauma as possible (Bloom and Sreedhar 2008). Bloom (1995) suggested that schools achieved this when they provided psychological, social and moral safety.
Schools as safe spaces was an over-arching concept in this project. Participants spoke of physical, psychological and emotional safety. Participants reported feeling safe when their school accommodated their culture by providing cultural content in the curriculum. Consistent, fair and flexible behaviour management also established a safe environment. Furthermore, a sense of community and the school’s physical environment created a sense of safety for participants as they felt accepted and wanted. As these key findings were identified, it became clear that the concept of schools as safe spaces closely aligned with the notion of school as a sanctuary and with cultural safety. Both these concepts, school as a sanctuary, and cultural safety, involve system changes to provide a safe space, rather than blaming individuals for creating unsafe spaces (MacFarlane et al. 2007, Stanwood and Doolittle 2004). Within this section, cultural safety will first be defined followed by specific examples from the analysis which are then directly linked to literature and examples in the Irish context.

Cultural safety is a relatively new concept that was developed to promote biculturalism within New Zealand’s nursing programmes (Papps and Ramsden 1996). A central belief of cultural safety is that those people who receive the service decide what is experienced as culturally safe or unsafe (Papps and Ramsden 1996). This shifts the power from providers to consumers of education. The underlying principle of biculturalism has frequently been criticised as failing to address the needs of a multicultural society (Richardson 2004). In response, culture has been extended beyond Maori and other ethnic groups to become a more inclusive definition addressing, but not restricted to age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, occupation, ethnic origin, religious beliefs and disability (Nursing Council of New Zealand 2011).

Cultural safety concerns students feeling comfortable to express themselves individually and collectively (Cavanagh 2008, MacFarlane et al. 2007). Williams (1999) defined cultural safety as an environment where respect, knowledge and experiences of learning were shared. Culturally safe environments allow students to be themselves while experiencing no assault on their identity (Williams 1999). Participants within this review commented that when they felt secure in their school context, they were able to focus on their academic tasks. Watego (2005) contended that safety, identity and empowerment while interconnected were very different from each other. Watego (2005) argued that they were prerequisites for each other (e.g. safety was necessary for identity which was needed for empowerment) but the direction of the relationships were
unknown. Bin-Sallik (2003) asserted that cultural safety could empower individuals and enable them to achieve positive outcomes. Similarly, Bevan-Brown (2005) found students who felt secure were more motivated to learn and were able to concentrate, without distraction, on their academic work.

Some participants reported feeling marginalised both in previous schools and their alternative schools as they did not see their histories present in the curriculum. An alternative school within this review listened to student voices and responded by making efforts to fulfil the cultural needs of its Puerto Rican, Mexican and African-American students (Antrop-González 2006). In another study the author observed the principal not allowing teachers to devalue the students’ culture (Khalifa 2010). There is a need for multicultural schools which can fulfil students’ curricular needs and prepare them for entry into postsecondary education and employment, while also respecting their racial and ethnic realities. International research identified the significance of cultural content in school curriculum for improving academic success and interest in school (Bevan-Brown 2005, Brayboy and Castagno 2009, Brayboy and Castagno 2008a, Brayboy and Castagno 2008b, Kanu 2007, MacFarlane et al. 2007, Watego 2005). The PEO model acknowledges the person has cultural beliefs and that a good fit between the person-environment-occupation creates optimal performance (Law et al. 1996). MacFarlane et al. (2007) discussed creating a culture of care for learners, whereby teachers explored cultural concepts and perspectives and infused this knowledge into their classroom practices and interactions with students. Culturally responsive pedagogy may present challenges to teachers, as they may need to learn about values and practices which may be different from their own. It is important teachers overcome these challenges as MacFarlane et al. (2007) noted when classroom curriculum and structures reflected cultural perspectives, participants appeared to progress well educationally and socially. The leadership from the principal in the study by Khalifa (2010) assisted teachers to overcome this challenge and to create positive school experiences for students. The PEO model supports this process as it acknowledges that while a person’s cultural roots cannot be changed, their cultural views and practices can be modified; thus teachers can learn to provide culturally responsive pedagogy (Law et al. 1996).

Within the Irish context, The Yellow Flag Programme was developed to promote inclusive education (Irish Traveller Movement 2014). The programme has 8 steps that
bring issues of interculturalism, equality and diversity into the everyday practices of schools (ibid.). The programme aids teachers to overcome challenges in providing culturally responsive pedagogy through providing anti-racism and intercultural awareness training for staff (ibid.). Furthermore, direct links are made with local Traveller/Minority/Migrant organisations to provide learning opportunities for staff and students (ibid.). Participants within this review reported feeling marginalised when they did not see their culture present in the school curriculum. The Yellow Flag Programme involves teaching diversity in the classroom through covering race and ethnicity in the curriculum and requires the establishment of a diversity committee to ensure the programme meets the needs of everyone (ibid.). The committee consists of students, teachers, parents, other school staff and management of the school. The school produces a diversity code that is primarily developed by the students and states what the school is trying to achieve on a daily basis. The school also produces an official anti-racism policy to formalise their practice. As previously stated, the principal in one study provided leadership to support teachers to adopt culturally safe practices (Khalifa 2010). The diversity code and anti-racism policy not only provides leadership but allows students and other stakeholders take on a leadership role, ensuring they have ownership and a meaningful voice to play in shaping their schools’ values in relation to interculturalism. Both documents are publicised widely throughout the school building and are included in various school publications (Irish Traveller Movement 2014). This ensures the school community is aware of the documents and adhere to their ideals.

The Yellow Flag Programme was successfully piloted in 4 schools, including 2 post-primary schools (Titley 2009). In an email to the Yellow Flag Programme it was reported that 37 schools are currently participating in the programme. Fifteen schools are working towards their Yellow Flag, of which 6 are post-primary schools. Twenty-two schools have successfully achieved their Yellow Flag, including 7 post-primary schools. Overall, it appears that the Yellow Flag Programme provides practical steps to build a community where everyone can feel safe to be themselves in a school environment where diversity is valued.

Cultural safety aligned with the conceptual framework of this review as it recognised that students’ problematic behaviour may result from poor alignment within the school context (MacFarlane et al. 2007). Sociocultural theories of human development, such as Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory, recognise that learning and cognition are
influenced by the context. From a sociocultural perspective, how teachers and the school system understand and respond to students’ challenging behaviour and learning difficulties is critical (MacFarlane et al. 2007). The Irish education system recognises the influence the school context has on students. The National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) promotes and supports behaviour for learning (NBSS 2009). A key principle guiding the NBSS is that schools can make a difference in the lives of youth by creating and sustaining positive learning environments. The NBSS uses a three tiered prevention model to address behaviour challenges in post-primary schools (NBSS 2009). While levels 2 and 3, involve behaviour support interventions, level 1 adopts a whole-school approach to address behavioural challenges and considers the physical, social and cultural school contexts which align with the contextual domains recognised in the PEO and EHP models (Dunn et al. 1994, Law et al. 1996, NBSS 2008). Positive teaching and learning behaviours rely on the nature of the overall organisation (NBSS 2009). In response to the demanding post-primary school context, the NBSS multidisciplinary team has made recommendations regarding routines, expectations, classroom layout, lighting, acoustic modifications and rules (NBSS 2009, NBSS 2008). Research regarding the behaviour support classrooms and the ‘FRIENDS’ programme provided by the NBSS reported success (Henefer and Rodgers 2013, Henefer 2010). The findings of this review support the whole-school approaches adopted by the NBSS. Findings indicate that through creating the right school conditions, behavioural challenges can be reduced; thus, creating a positive learning environment. Learning does not take place in controlling school contexts, as evident in the findings of this review. Findings regarding discipline in alternative schools will now be discussed in relation to existing literature.

Consistency and fairness are alleged to be important foundations of any disciplinary strategy as they help maintain positive behaviour (Hamill and Boyd 2002, Jahnukainen 2001, Wise and Upton 1998). Studies found students responded well to clear rules and boundaries (Jahnukainen 2001, Wise and Upton 1998). Clear and fair discipline expectations were associated with higher levels of school connectedness and positive educational outcomes (Waters et al. 2009). Consistent with existing research, some participants within this project felt discipline was unjust when implemented inconsistently (Hamill and Boyd 2002, Lumby and Morrison 2009). Other participants expressed concerns about being labelled based on past reputations, which reflected previous research (Hamill and Boyd 2002, Jahnukainen 2001). Similar to previous
research, discipline which was too authoritarian and aggressive, led to poor behavioural outcomes due to conflict with staff (Hamill and Boyd 2002, Wise and Upton 1998).

Participants in this review perceived disciplinary procedures as fair and consistent if they recognised their teacher cared about them. MacFarlane et al. (2007) observed that teacher interactions were critical in establishing cooperation with Indigenous students. Participants in this project acknowledged that it didn’t matter what behaviour management technique was used as it could be influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. They perceived that if the relationship was poor, behaviour management could be abused. Findings of the current study are closely aligned with those of Hamill and Boyd (2002) as participants reported that flexible discipline strategies encouraged positive behaviour more successfully than rigid policies which did not take into account individual differences. Wise and Upton (1998) found students considered sanctions as impersonal when teachers did not listen to them or did not attempt to understand the underlying issues, a finding that was present in the current study. Participants wanted staff to use a more personal approach such as listening and talking to them when they got into trouble. Participants resisted when discipline was perceived as unfair. Previous research suggested that students may escalate their misbehaviour if they perceived their views were discounted or that rules and policies were unjust (Milbourne 2009, Skiba and Knesting 2002). The EHP and PEO models recognise the importance of understanding a person’s experience of their environment as it influences their performance (Dunn et al. 1994, Polatajko et al. 2007a). This was observed in previous research as Milbourne (2009) noted that if students’ voices were heard and an action agreed, negative trends could be reversed. Similarly, participants in this review complied when they perceived their voice was attended to. This indicates the need to listen to students, to value them as individuals and highlights the importance of relationships.

Within the findings of the current review, there were conflicting voices regarding exclusionary practices. While some participants argued that exclusionary practices, such as, suspension and expulsion protected the school’s reputation, others opposed these views. They argued that such practices caused students to become resistant toward school, especially when they perceived the punishment as unjust, and also denied them access to education. Skiba and Knesting (2002) suggested that students viewed exclusionary practices as rejection which could cause resistance. For at-risk students,
the most consistent documented outcome of suspension and expulsion appeared to be further suspension and expulsion, and perhaps early school leaving (Skiba and Knesting 2002). Researchers argued that time out of school had negative effects on achievement and school adjustment (Brown 2007, Christle et al. 2004, Skiba and Knesting 2002). Exclusionary policies and practices could not with any certainty be correlated with greater school safety or improved student behaviour (Skiba and Knesting 2002). It appears that listening to student voices is an effective alternative to exclusion.

The sense of community within these alternative schools also contributed to establishing culturally safe schools. The findings demonstrated that the concept of community meant there was a place for everyone. This acceptance is an important aspect of culturally-safe schools which enable students be who and what they are (Cavanagh 2008, MacFarlane et al. 2007). Familial descriptors emphasised a strong sense of belonging and identification to the school community, while emphasising the unconditional safety, support and acceptance students experienced. Ozer et al. (2008) noted safety was related to connectedness. Various strategies were used by schools in this review to establish a sense of community, which will be discussed in section 6.3.1.

Participants in this study expressed a desire for educational contexts appropriate for purpose; for example, buildings which facilitated learning. Participants wanted their schools to demonstrate the value they had for their students through their appearance and available resources. Sixsmith et al. (2005) proposed that students in poorly resourced schools felt they were a reflection of their schools: undervalued, worthless, dirty and uncared for. It is possible that the participants in this review felt their educational settings’ presentation and resources communicated something about them. Yet, within the results, well-resourced schools were not necessarily favoured. Participants in one study stated they did not like their recently constructed school building, even though it was described by the author as modern and spacious (Kim and Taylor 2008). One explanation could be that students were more familiar and comfortable with their original surroundings (Preiser 1983). They may have had difficulty interacting with their new school environment (McEwen et al. 2010). Yet, explanations based solely on the physical context do not fully explain students’ negative perceptions. It appeared that sharing their new building with other student groups influenced their perceptions, as was found in previous research (McEwen et al. 2010).
To conclude, students appeared to experience satisfaction when schools provided safe spaces. The educational benefits among the students who attended culturally supportive schools, non-authoritarian schools and schools with a sense of community were apparent. This was demonstrated through their regular attendance, positive schooling attitudes and motivation, expression of enjoyment and strong desire to graduate.

6.3 Establishing Learner-Centred Schools
Within this review, there were many practices which aligned with a learner-centred paradigm. Characteristics reflecting this paradigm included teachers who engaged as co-learners, flexibility in structure such that students had more choice and control, responsive curricula and class and school size. Caring relations also facilitated a learner-centred paradigm and are discussed later in this section. These characteristics are consistent with existing literature which found student-centred curricula, flexibility in structure, opportunities for students to engage in decision-making, and one-on-one interaction between teachers and students as common characteristics of alternative schools (Aron 2006, Lehr et al. 2009a). This section will first discuss the learner-centred paradigm, followed by examples from the current review which will be supported by relevant literature and examples from the Irish context.

With high rates of failure in schools, there are calls for a paradigm shift to a learner-centred educational system that focuses more on meeting individual learner needs (McCombs and Whisler 1997, Watson and Reigeluth 2008). The traditional approach of the Irish and international educational systems often compartmentalise knowledge, require students to learn the same way and standardise the content that students should learn, within rigid time-frames (Healy-Eames et al. 2010, Reigeluth 1994). Teacher-centred approaches put responsibility for classroom activity, energy and involvement on teachers, encouraging students to be passive recipients in the learning process (Reigeluth 1994). The current system was designed to meet the needs of an Industrial-Age society and there is a consensus that change is needed to accommodate the Information-Age (Reigeluth 1994, Watson and Reigeluth 2008). The current paradigm alienates students by putting content, curriculum and assessment, not students, at the centre (McCombs 2001). Furthermore, students are subjected to punitive consequences if they do not meet achievement standards (e.g. repeat school year) (McCombs 2001).

In contrast, learner-centred instruction acknowledges the limitations of the current paradigm of education in addressing the diverse needs of learners. A learner-centred
model recognises the learning needs of each student (McCombs and Whisler 1997, Watson and Reigeluth 2008). It focuses on individual learners and their backgrounds, talents and needs, while attending to the best knowledge about learning and instructional methods (McCombs and Whisler 1997). This model includes learners as co-creators of the educational process who are responsible for their learning and are key decision-makers in that process (Cornelius-White 2007, McCombs and Whisler 1997, Reigeluth 1994, Watson 2011). A learner-centred paradigm provides personalised instruction through the use of technology resources, and changes the role of teachers from knowledge providers to facilitators of the learning process whilst promoting reflective, self-directed learning (Watson 2011, Watson and Reigeluth 2008).

Within this review, participants understood teachers as co-learners. Co-learning moved teachers and participants into a more participatory space which made teachers care more visible to participants. Co-learning enabled power to be shared. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own learning by making learning choices. Participants appreciated that they could explore ways of learning that accommodated their own learning style. Flexibility, choice and control in the instructional approach appeared to motivate participants. They reported that interactive approaches were enjoyable and increased engagement. These findings supported the research on learner-centred psychological principles which emphasised the importance of motivation, affective and individual differences in students’ learning process (American Psychological Association 1997, Bransford et al. 2004, McCombs and Whisler 1997).

Flexibility is important when catering for students with diverse needs. Participants within the review spoke of self-paced learning, setting their own learning goals, choosing instructional approaches for content delivery and choosing school hours which fitted around other demands in their lives. They reported that flexibility increased perceptions of personal control and motivated them to reach their own expectations. Flexible learning is difficult to define, although some authors consider this a strength of the concept as it enables interpretation (Bridgland and Blanchard 2001). There is a consensus that flexibility is fundamental to a learner-centred approach as it involves resources being adapted to meet the needs of the learner and gives learners choice and control (Bridgland and Blanchard 2001, Collis and Moonen 2002). Bridgland and Blanchard (2001) acknowledged that flexible learning developed autonomous learners and changed the role of teachers from knowledge providers to knowledge facilitators.
Similar to findings in this review, Collis and Moonen (2002) identified five dimensions of flexibility related to time, content, entry requirements, instructional approach and resources, and course delivery and logistics.

Within Ireland there are alternatives to traditional education such as The Life Centres and Youthreach. The Life Centres are closely aligned with the review’s definition of alternative education and inclusion criteria, in that their focus is to provide a mainstream post-primary curriculum to enable students achieve the Junior and Leaving Certificates (Healy 2012). In comparison, Youthreach is targeted at early school leavers aged between 15 and 20 and places a strong focus on literacy, numeracy, personal development/health promotion, sports and vocational subjects but there is an opportunity to progress to the LCAP (DES 2007). Similar to the alternative schools in this review, both of these alternative settings use flexible and learner-centred curriculum (DES 2007, Healy 2012). The Life Centres are discussed in more detail below in relation to findings of this review.

A noteworthy finding was how some alternative schools attempted to re-engage marginalised students through making courses easier for them to succeed. This appeared to increase students’ disengagement from schools and to perpetuate beliefs that students held about being unworthy of a good quality education. Students wanted normal curriculum. The need to eliminate labels was described by a participant in one study (Swaminathan 2004). This participant internalised labels and acted how others expected her to behave whether she was perceived as the good student or the struggling and disruptive student in the slow class. This participant remarked how no labels within her alternative school enabled her to graduate and succeed. Noddings (2003a) questioned the tracking system if the aim of education was to educate each student to a standard suited with his or her capabilities and purpose. She argued those students who required different knowledge and skills from the standard academic material were not given a chance; for example, students interested in trades and with no interest in attending college. Noddings (2003a) concluded if the aim of education was to meet the needs of students; the solution involved the provision of a variety of school subjects. She warned that a variety of curricula did not mean putting together a set of courses labelled easy, standard and difficult and then equating difficult with best, which appears to have been the case in some alternative schools (ibid.). Instead, Noddings (2003a) argued that to provide learner-centred curriculum was to develop rigorous curriculum and interesting
courses centred on student interests and talents. College and non-college bound courses should provide enriching curriculum where students are encouraged to engage in problem-solving and critical thinking (ibid.). It appears holding students to high expectations is key. Within this review, it appeared that participant success was shaped by participants’ perceptions of how staff viewed them and what staff expected of them.

Education policy in Ireland has focused on participation in school and reducing educational inequalities through curriculum reform targeted at marginalised students (Barnardos 2009). Curriculum reform has included introducing the JCSP, LCAP and LCVP to cater for students needs and abilities (Byrne and Smyth 2010). While the JSCP has not undergone evaluation, reviews of the LCAP have suggested that many students attributed remaining in school to the LCAP (Byrne and Smyth 2010). A study by Banks et al. (2010) found students within the LCAP were positive about the active teaching methods and student-centred approach to learning. Similar to findings in this review, group and project work, smaller class sizes and greater individual attention from teachers emerged as positive aspects of the programme (Banks et al. 2010). Students reported issues around lack of challenge within the curriculum, stating that it contributed to their disengagement from school (Banks et al. 2010). Therefore, similar to some alternative schools in this review, the LCAP did not foster each students’ potential. This is reflected in the PEO model which assumes that through maintaining a good fit between the person-environment-occupation, optimal occupational performance is achieved (Law et al. 1996). It appears that the LCAP and some alternative schools within the review provided a poor fit between the person and the occupation (e.g. the curriculum) which resulted in unsatisfactory occupational performance (e.g. disengagement from school).

A new Framework for the Junior Cycle will be phased in from September 2014 (DES 2012b). The framework will facilitate schools to improve learning outcomes for all students through providing quality, inclusive and relevant education (DES 2012b). This framework provides a paradigm shift as students rather than examinations will be at the centre of the approach (DES 2012b). Choice and flexibility underpin the new framework which will enable schools to facilitate learning through catering for students with diverse needs and a broad range of talents. Schools will have flexibility to decide what combination of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences they will provide in their three-year programme. This flexibility will give schools opportunities to
involve students in the discussion about which programmes will meet their needs, enabling students to be co-creators of the education process. This will be particularly beneficial as participants within this review appreciated how they could explore methods of learning that accommodated their own learning style, their talents and their curiosity. Participants reported that a personalised, diverse curriculum increased their engagement indicating that a good fit between the person and occupation was achieved in some alternative schools within this review. Creativity and participation are other principles underpinning the framework. These principles aim to support students to develop greater independence in learning to enable them to meet challenges beyond life in school, in further education and in their working life. Considering the findings of this review and previous literature, this aim can be achieved (Bridgland and Blanchard 2001). Furthermore, the new framework includes the promotion of technology in the curriculum which will give students more flexibility and choice about subjects and their learning (Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources 2013).

The findings of the review demonstrated the supportive role that computer-based instruction had in learner-centred school cultures. Students expressed how important technology was to them and how it provided resources for learning. Computer-based instruction was important in providing learner-centred instruction as it provided choices and allowed students work at their own pace. Nevertheless, students noted that computer-based instruction needed to provide more user control and flexibility; for example, students wanted more features on the help menu (Watson and Watson 2011). In accordance with these findings, educational researchers have stressed that technology and computer-based instruction are essential in shifting toward a learner-centred paradigm (Bush and Mott 2009, Reigeluth et al. 2008). It appears that the Irish educational system recognises this as the new Framework for Junior Cycle includes the promotion of technology in curricula (Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources 2013). In addition, the senior cycle, which is currently undergoing review, will have technology integrated into the curricula to provide more flexibility and choice, varied assessment, greater support for learning, and more student motivation and success (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2013).

Collis and Moonen (2002) acknowledged that flexible learning placed more demands on the teacher and that there were costs attached. It was recognised that transforming school culture and structure and the educational system was complex (Collis and
Moonen 2002, Watson and Reigeluth 2008). Despite these challenges, the need to respond to diverse learners was advocated (Collis and Moonen 2002). As observed from the participants in this review, learners represent diversity on many levels including age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational backgrounds, disabilities and personal experiences. By shifting the educational paradigm to a learner-centred approach, education can create a better place for all students.

Personal relationships with teachers were noted as a key principle in providing a learner-centred culture (American Psychological Association 1997). Learner-centred teaching refers to those aspects of teacher actions and behaviours which affect students on a personal level: listening, caring, respecting and understanding (Thomas et al. 2008). Participants within this review commented on the need for teachers to demonstrate these qualities. Learner-centred relationships between teachers and students were the focus of a review of 119 studies (Cornelius-White 2007). The meta-analysis by Cornelius-White (2007) found that learner-centred approaches, which involved human relationships rather than the quality or style of instruction, improved student outcomes. Variables included empathy, honouring students’ voices, respect, positive relationships and learner-centred beliefs. Learner-centred education was associated with large increases in participation ($r = .55$), satisfaction ($r = .44$) and motivation to learn ($r = .32$) indicating that students became very engaged in learner-centred classrooms (ibid.). Other research suggested that learner-centred practices improved retention where students felt they belonged, where they experienced good quality teaching and support for their learning, and where their diverse learning preferences were catered for (Cornelius-White 2007, Yorke and Thomas 2003, Zepke et al. 2006). Learner-centred cultures that were flexible to each individual student’s need were identified as crucial to effective alternative education provision (Aron 2006, Brown-Ruzzi and Kraemer 2006, Kendell et al. 2007, Kendell et al. 2003, Lange and Sletten 2002, van Poortvliet et al. 2010). To gain a deeper understanding of the need for and aspects of caring teacher-student relationships, findings will now be discussed in relation to ethic of care literature.

6.3.1 Fostering Reciprocal Care within Schools

Within the current review, one key aspect of participants’ comments on the difference between their previous and alternative school was that they felt welcome and cared for in school. Caring teachers were described as supportive, responsive and respectful.
Participants noted that caring teachers expected success and were able to self-regulate. Some participants reported having personal connections with teachers. Participants recognised their teachers’ cared and some had a desire to reciprocate. Participants also commented on their caring peers and the care their alternative school provided. These findings, with existing literature, will now be discussed.

The need for caring schools is well known (Beck and Cassidy 2009, Noddings 2005, Noddings 1995). There is an agreement that schools should be caring places which provide foundations for teaching practice (Beck and Cassidy 2009, Noddings 2005). Following this line of analysis, the concept of an ethic of care was identified as a relevant theoretical foundation for discussing care in alternative schools (Beck and Cassidy 2009). Ethic of care emphasises the importance of relationships (McKenzie and Blenkinsop 2006, Noddings 2003b, Noddings 1988). The theory recognises the interdependence of all individuals for achieving their goals (Noddings 1988). It acknowledges that care is fundamentally human and is situational in that care differs depending on the particulars of the context (McKenzie and Blenkinsop 2006, Tronto 1993).

The literature on caring and its importance to healthy development is extensive (Beck 1992, Chaskin and Rauner 1995, Noddings 2003b, Noddings 1995, Noddings 1992, Tronto 1993). According to Noddings (2003b) two essential elements of caring were understanding the reality of another and being committed to act on the other’s behalf. For the caring relationship to be completed, care must be offered and received, such that the recipient of care recognises and responds to the care provided (Noddings 2003b). In the school context, it is important that care is visible to students. In the review, it was noted that if participants did not perceive care, or they claimed their teachers didn’t care, this indicated to them that the caring process had derailed (Noddings 2005, Noddings 1992). Noddings (2003b, 1992) described two types of caring relationships that can take place between teachers and students. The first involved authentic caring, which emphasised reciprocal personal teacher-student relationships. The second addressed aesthetic caring and described the emphasis a teacher may put on things or ideas such as academics.

Fisher and Tronto (1990, p.40) defined caring as:

\[ \textit{a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies.} \]
ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.

This definition did not restrict caring to human interaction with others, but suggested that caring could be directed toward objects and the environment (Fisher and Tronto 1990). The above conceptions of caring emphasise the need for care within the educational process to foster the healthy development of students. Noddings (2003b) and Fisher and Tronto (1991) agree that care needs to be perceived both by the givers and receivers, that attention needs to be paid to the needs of care receivers and that care is to be enacted with flexibility.

Care can be conveyed in various ways. At an individual level, teachers can demonstrate care to students by listening and respecting them and through providing for their developmental needs (Noddings 1995). Participants within this review perceived caring teachers as being supportive, responsive and respectful. They believed teachers had high expectations for their work and a desire to help them reach these expectations. Participants reported that staff took time to listen to students and didn’t overreact when students’ behaviour was challenging. Staff’s high regard for each student and absence of judgemental attitudes were appreciated by participants.

Cavanagh (2005) noted that caring for and about others and responding appropriately to care was fundamental to building and maintaining relationships. Cavanagh (2005) observed healing as important when conflict occurred. He believed that labels should be removed since individuals were not the problem. He argued that if a person engaged in wrongdoing or conflict, they must be held accountable, the harm to relationships repaired, followed by restoration of the person’s dignity in the school community. This aspect of care was observed in the alternative schools; for instance, one participant in the study by Jones (2011) described how she initially found it difficult to adapt to the caring, accepting peer culture. She described how she became a bully within the alternative school. Staff intervened and dealt with the bullying in a manner where the participant was not excluded or rejected by her peers. The participant was given the opportunity to talk to people and as a result changed her behaviour and became a highly involved member of the school community. This finding reflected Noddings (2003b) suggestion that caring teachers may not be comfortable enforcing rules or punishments in this case. She remarked that caring teachers may want to establish reasons for a student’s behaviour and to offer help if the issue could be remedied. In this case, the teachers provided the participant with an opportunity to take part in mediations.
Noddings (2003b) argued that what mattered was how students approached an ethical problem, that is whether they referred their ethical decision to rules and the possibility of punishment or to an ethic of caring. If the student took an ethical approach, they may ask what their act meant in terms of feelings, requirements and plans of others (ibid.). It appears this participant took an ethical approach as she stated:

*I went to some mediations and talked to some people, and I found out that I was doing what people were doing to me.*

(Jones 2011, p.231)

Within this review, participants commented how staff accessibility helped foster better teacher-student relationships. Participants noted that the informal environment and use of first names helped establish personal relationships with teachers. Tronto (1993) observed that caregivers needed to be in close proximity to care receivers in order for care to be genuine, effective and received. Extending this, Noddings (2003b) argued caring in education relied on strong relations of trust which require time and continuity to build. Strong relationships were identified within the review as participants trusted staff and spoke to them about matters outside of the academic context. Furthermore, participants referred to teachers as friends or family members, indicating the safety and sense of belonging they felt. Some participants questioned the balance between teachers being authority figures and being friends, querying whether personal relationships with teachers could jeopardise students’ academic success. Shuffelton (2012) recognised two key challenges in relation to friendships between teachers and students: first, that teachers must be impartial and this objectivity was impeded by friendship and second, that friendship interfered with the pedagogical relationship.

Yet, Shuffelton (2012) contended that friendship between teachers and students had benefits, noting that friendship alleviated some of the harm caused by schools as institutions and that it provided foundations for students to learn important social skills, such as how, to establish and maintain social connections (Shuffelton 2012). On the other hand, Sibii (2010) proposed the use of the metaphor of companionship. He proposed that a companion is friendly, but is not a friend. In contrast to Shuffelton (2012) who suggested that friendship involved levelling power relationships between teachers and students, the companion model proposed by Sibii (2010) makes use of the power dynamics in a classroom to foster academic excellence. The companion model assumes teachers have something that students need (e.g. knowledge, guidance) and the companion-teacher uses the already existing inequality between themselves and the
students. For example, the companion-teacher uses their authority and maintains their authority by showing reasons why he or she deserves his or her superior status. The companion-teacher is obliged to manage challenges to his or her authority in a non-dictatorial manner (Sibii 2010). Although Sibii’s (2010) study focused on third-level education, he acknowledged the companion model may apply to all kinds of pedagogy. The companion model may provide a good understanding of how to balance the role of companion while also being authoritative in second-level education. The friendship model may pose challenges to the social order which maintains education under control and also challenges teachers’ own authority which may disrupt the educational process (Shuffelton 2012).

Having personal connections and good quality relationships with teachers encouraged some participants within the current project to reciprocate care by engaging in their work and trying to meet teachers’ expectations. These participants felt it would be disrespectful to fail a class. The companion model recognises how it creates an extra motivation for students to perform as the penalty for misbehaviour involves subjecting students to their companion’s evident disappointment (Sibii 2010). Noddings (2003b, 1992) argued that caring was only complete if recipients recognised that they were being cared for and responded in some way to that care. Noddings did not claim that care must be reciprocated; yet, findings from this project suggested that some participants had a desire to respond with care. Of these participants, some only articulated their desire and did not act on it. Noddings (2003b, 1992) stated one role of teachers was to enable their students to develop the ability to care which was reflected by participants within this review who spoke of reciprocating care.

Similar findings were identified in the Irish context. The Life Centres provide an holistic approach to education whereby they recognise the importance of personal development as well as academic achievement (Edmund Rice International 2011, Healy 2012). Healy (2012) reported on research with the Sunday’s Well Life Centre. Students within Healy’s study commended the positive teacher-student relationships and their experience of support in the Life Centre. Healy (2012) noted that the friend-like view of teachers did not compromise staffs’ roles as authority figures. Students reported that they were more inclined to do their work and obey rules as they respected staff more than in their previous school. It appears that the companion model described by Sibii (2010) was reflected in the dynamics within this Life Centre.
A significant finding in the current review was the ability of these marginalised students to develop caring relationships despite their troubled histories. Several participants noted they never felt cared for by previous school staff and peers, with some even commenting that they were closer to staff than their own parents. Noddings (2003b, 1992) contended that students recognised caring when it occurred and responded to it appreciatively. Further, it was found that caring appeared to impact the lives of students and their perceptions of self and others (McGrath and Noble 2010). Aligning with Noddings (2003b), the findings in this study suggested that caring was fundamental as participants could recognise and participate in caring without prior experience.

Caring peer relations was another theme in the current study. Participants commented on positive peer dynamics and the family atmosphere, which contributed to their sense of belonging and sense of safety. Participants reported that personal and academic support was given and received among peers. Caring peer relationships had positive implications for academic outcomes. This was consistent with previous research which indicated an association between positive peer relationships and positive school outcomes such as higher levels of attendance, student engagement and reduction in likelihood of early school leaving (McGrath and Noble 2010, McLaughlin and Clarke 2010, Waters et al. 2009). Research indicated that feeling connected to an educational setting and having a sense of belonging impacted on school success and improved educational outcomes (Blum and Libbey 2004, McLaughlin and Clarke 2010). In contrast, negative peer relations have a significant harmful impact on student’s engagement in school, attendance, learning outcomes, behaviour, sense of well-being and overall adjustment (Ladd 1999, McGrath and Noble 2010). The PEO and EHP models support these findings as they recognise that the social context can be a support or a barrier to performance (Dunn et al. 1994, Law et al. 1996). Participants within this review reported that they could not tolerate the fighting in their previous schools, and that the positive peer culture in their alternative schools was a welcomed change. Peer acceptance appeared to be a common characteristic of alternative schools (De La Ossa 2005), although within this review there was evidence in one alternative school of students excluding ‘slackers’ (Schussler and Collins 2006).

Although it is individuals who care, Noddings (2003b, 1992) argued that schools can and should be organised in ways that support the efforts of staff to care for students. Noddings (2003b) argued the primary aim of education should be the maintenance and
enhancement of caring. An education with caring at the core enabled students to become caring individuals; thus, making education more than an academic pursuit (Noddings 1988).

At an institutional level, schools can be organised to foster a sense of community and caring relations (Noddings 2003b). For example, the curriculum can be selected with caring in mind (Noddings 1995). The schools within this review were established to meet the needs of marginalised students. A variety of strategies were used to address community development within the schools in this review including smaller schools, house systems and mentoring programmes. All of these structures extended the time that students remained with the same peers and teachers which provided opportunities to develop more personal relationships (Osterman 2000, Noddings 2003b, Tronto 1993). These systems enabled teachers and peers to provide support to students. Noddings (2003b) noted that the care-giver should take time to model and practice care with the care-receiver, to make care central to their dialogue and to confirm caring practices when observed. These support structures provided a forum for both students and teachers to mentor others in their social context regarding how to care. The PEO model recognises how the environment influences behaviour; for example, how the teachers promoted care among students and how the school structures created a sense of community (Law et al. 1996). Moreover, the PEO model acknowledges how the school environment was influenced by the behaviour of its students because as students learned to care the school’s sense of community developed (ibid.).

Supportive structures can be supported by the school’s mission, vision and value statements. Two schools within this review had care at the centre of their values (Cassidy and Bates 2005; Schussler and Collins 2006). The school in the study by Cassidy and Bates (2005) catered for students who were referred by the courts for offenses including attempted murder, arson, assault, breaking and entering, theft and possession of illegal drugs. The school’s vision statement was:

_We are a safe, respectful and nurturing community, sensitive to each person and his or her uniqueness. Within this community individuals have the opportunity to build their resources and develop new skills. These experiences encourage self-reflective behaviour and a strengthened relationship to family and the wider community. Living these principles inspire hope and promising futures._

*(Cassidy and Bates, p. 77)*
Although care was not used in the vision statement, the founder of the school stated it could be re-labelled as their vision of caring. The authors, Cassidy and Bates (2005) reported that the vision statement was used as the guide to practice. It was frequently discussed with students and was prominently displayed throughout the school. Rather than being dogmatic, the vision statement was lived out by staff members and interpreted in the context of each day. As care was central to the practices of the school, there was no need for rules to regulate student behaviour. This indicated that students were aware what was expected of them, leaving no room for interpretation.

Other school structures which demonstrated a caring school context included flexible scheduling policies described in four included studies (Atkins et al. 2005, Coyl et al. 2004, Watson 2011, Watson and Watson 2011). These policies demonstrated awareness that students had other life demands such as work or caring for family members (Jeffries et al. 2004). Service projects, where students and teachers were involved in making decisions, were another vital component in school bonding and were shown to increase the effectiveness of alternative schools (Quinn et al. 2006). Participants also recognised that their small school size contributed to creating a caring school. They commented on how individualised support helped develop more positive relationships with teachers. Smaller class and school sizes established better social relations and conditions more conducive to learning as they enabled individualised support and increased communication (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007, De La Ossa 2005). In contrast, large class sizes negatively affected students’ academic and behavioural outcomes due to conflict with peers, negative peer behaviour and less teacher attention (Wise and Upton 1998). An average class size reported in an included study by Antrop-González (2006) was 12 students. Similarly, the Life Centre in the study by Healy (2012) had small classes with a student teacher ratio of one to one at Junior Certificate level, and two to one at Leaving Certificate level. This compares to Ireland’s Association of Secondary Teachers policy on class size of a maximum of 20-30 students depending on the subject (ASTI 2009). The organisation considers that modern syllabi which include practical work demand smaller class sizes and notes that large class sizes affect the ability of teachers to meet the needs of all students (ibid.). These comments are supported by the results of this review and existing literature.

To conclude, participants within the current study commented on how caring made a difference to their social, personal and academic development. Participants viewed care
as embedded in their school relationships and noted that care needed to be individually focused and responsive to students’ needs as whole beings. As Noddings (1992) remarked, caring involved listening and responding differentially to students. Beck and Cassidy (2009) acknowledged this was one of the most important elements in ethical caring but noted the challenges teachers faced such as classrooms with large numbers of students and curricular demands. Teachers can find it difficult to focus on the personal development of students given that academic achievement is prioritised (Noddings 2003b, 1995). Nonetheless, care is found to encourage positive development and protect youth from negative outcomes (Chaskin and Rauner 1995). As a result, many educators are calling for care to be recognised within education policies and demonstrated through smaller schools and more family-like groupings (Beck and Cassidy 2009, Chaskin and Rauner 1995, Noddings 1995).

Within this section, the findings of the review were discussed under the headings of establishing schools as sanctuaries and creating learner-centred schools. Connections were made to relevant literature and concepts to make sense of the findings. The concepts of sanctuary and cultural safety provided a means to understand system changes in order to provide safe spaces for students. These system changes involved providing culturally responsive schools, non-authoritarian schools and schools with a sense of community. The literature surrounding the learner-centred paradigm enabled a discussion on teachers as co-learners, responsive curricula and flexibility to facilitate student choice. The ethic of care literature guided a discussion on how care was displayed at both an individual and institutional level. Connections were made to the Irish context. The limitations of the review will now be presented.

6.4 Critiquing the Project
A set of questions were presented in Chapter 4 to guide the reader in terms of evaluating the value of this study. The questions aimed to consider the extent to which the research process was rigorous in identifying trends presented in the findings and discussion. The sub-questions raised in section 4.13 are now addressed.

6.4.1 The Results
A thematic map was designed using an iterative process and focused on the key findings. Initially findings were categorised under contextual headings, ensuring that each aspect of the context was considered. As the analysis deepened the map shifted in response. This then directed the student researcher to new readings and further data
analysis that continually modified the map. Given that knowledge is socially constructed (Mizruchi and Fein 1999, Quatman and Chelladurai 2008), this iterative process was shaped through the student researcher’s perspective, discussions with supervisors and prolonged engagement with relevant literature. It is recognised that these factors combine to create a unique interpretation of the findings. The process is clearly documented in the methodology chapter, enabling readers to critically review the analytical process employed to synthesise the literature included in this systematic review.

There was a commitment to centralise the voices of marginalised youth. The findings are deeply connected to the participants’ voices. There is substantial use of excerpts from participants to support the claims made within this thesis. Throughout the analytical process the question of whose voices were most prominent was constantly questioned. A conscious effort was made to ensure data excerpts used did not rely heavily on one or two studies but came from all the studies. A commitment was made to incorporate a range of perspectives. Participants’ voices often contradicted one another, demonstrating how each individual has unique experiences. For example, some participants questioned the use of suspension, while others advocated for the exclusion of particular students. There was room within this project for multiple perspectives to co-exist.

6.4.2 Contribution to the Field
Participants in the included studies differed in many ways through age, ethnicity, geographic location, and types of challenges they faced in their lives. Yet, there was a remarkable consistency regarding their descriptions of contextual factors which contributed to their retention in alternative education. Furthermore, similarities between the findings and existing literature were established, illustrating that the findings represent marginalised youth who were not involved in this project. The transferability of findings may be difficult, a limitation that is discussed in more detail in section 6.5. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that alternative school contexts can promote retention for some students. This allows reasonable recommendations to be made which are explored in section 6.6.

Consideration was given to whether the findings would harm marginalised youth. The findings regarding the use of restraint could be misinterpreted as an argument in favour of restraint in alternative schools. This is not the position taken by this author. Some
marginalised youth felt restraint was necessary which may indicate that they held a deeply entrenched belief that they and their peers were so different that restraint was normal and accepted.

Whilst the findings of this project recognise that alternative schools can promote retention for some students, it is not the intention of this project to promote the use of alternative schools for marginalised students. Rather, this project demonstrated the need to take on the challenge of countering early school leaving through addressing the school context, rather than blaming students and sending them to alternative schools. This project recognises that segregation is not the only option; rather, traditional schools can adopt the contextual factors practiced in alternative schools to support student retention.

6.5 Limitations

Overall, this systematic review accomplished its aims. The first aim of this review was to systematically gather marginalised students’ perceptions concerning contextual factors which contribute and interfere with their decision to stay in alternative education. Findings suggested that a sense of belonging, personal relationships with teachers and a sense of safety among other contextual factors created positive experiences in alternative schools compared to their previous schools. Amongst other factors, low teacher expectations and inconsistent discipline were associated with negative experiences in alternative schools. The second aim of this review was to identify which contextual factors were best supported by current evidence. This was completed through critically appraising included articles and excluding those with poor methodology. The number of times a theme appeared across the data set was recorded and noted in the results chapter. The final aim of this review was to facilitate stakeholders to learn from disciplines with parallel person-environment interests. The conceptual framework of this review integrated psychological and occupational therapy perspectives. The findings of this review will be of interest to practitioners who attend to the influences of contextual factors on students’ experiences of school. The student researcher sought to design and implement a rigorous and trustworthy review process. To promote trustworthiness, the review’s methodology will now be considered.

Reviewers can be vulnerable to criticism from the original authors for misrepresenting or excluding essential aspects of their work (McCormick et al. 2003). Data extraction is susceptible to error. In one study, a high proportion of Cochrane reviews (20 out of 34)
were found to have errors in their data extraction which affected the summary results but not the overall review conclusions (Jones et al. 2005). Therefore, the student researcher engaged in an iterative approach as described above. In addition, an inclusive approach during data extraction helped minimise this bias as it included the authors’ interpretations (Noyes and Lewin 2011). This protected from more selective approaches which may lead to an under-representation of findings from papers in which the authors did not validate their findings with direct quotations (Briggs and Flemming 2007). The student researcher identified only one previous systematic review where there was an attempt to validate findings with the original authors; however, in that instance no suggested changes were returned (Clarke et al. 2006). Furthermore, this practice was not suggested in guidelines for conducting systematic reviews (EPPI-Centre 2010, Higgins and Green 2011). Morse et al. (2002) argued that as findings are derived from a synthesis of perspectives of a number of participants, it is inappropriate to expect that individual participants will have the ability to validate the findings of the research study as a whole. Morse et al. (2002) argued that member checks may invalidate the work of the researcher and keep the level of analysis appropriately close to the data. Given the concerns expressed by Morse et al. (2002), original authors were not contacted to validate the findings of the review.

Publication bias occurs when authors or editors decide not to publish studies which have a negative stance, produce inconclusive findings or were journals have a tendency to promote a certain approach (Jesson et al. 2011). As a result it is recommended that systematic reviews include both published and unpublished studies to minimise publication bias (Higgins and Green 2011). Reviews which include only published studies risk having misleading results (Kraemer et al. 1998). Given the language skills of the researcher, limited financial resources available and capacity to manage the volume of literature included in this review, only peer-reviewed articles published in English were included.

Finally, while the current review has a number of implications for promoting positive outcomes in alternative schools, it must be acknowledged that transferability of findings may be difficult. The conclusions of this review are precise to alternative schools. Yet, one could question how precise when considering how diverse the classrooms were and how the staff ratios differed. Student demographics and experiences also varied. Given the extent of connections made between the findings and existing literature, it can be
argued that the findings are trustworthy. With certainty, one can say this research provided support for contextual factors identified in previous research and expanded on these by drawing a greater breadth of student views. This review demonstrated that alternative school contexts can promote retention for some students. This allows reasonable recommendations for policy, practice and future research to be made.

6.6 Recommendations
Authors argue that simply listening to youth is insufficient and that their views should inform action plans (Doherty 1997, Hamill and Boyd 2002, Rudduck and Flutter 2000). Consulting with young people is required to improve student outcomes and ensure successful school reform (Darling and Price 2004, Mitra 2004, Munn and Lloyd 2005, Ryan 2009). Through understanding students’ experiences, one can determine whether students support or refute claims made by current research (Daniels 2005). This review examined studies investigating contextual factors which contributed to student retention from marginalised students’ perspectives. It was anticipated that this review would inform policy and practice in educational settings to better meet the needs of marginalised youth. In Ireland, there are guidelines about how to involve youth (The National Children's Office et al. 2005). These guidelines recognise that youth should be facilitated to contribute to the development of national policy in areas such as education which directly affect them.

Traditional post-primary schools may benefit from modelling alternative schools’ approaches to meeting the needs of marginalised students. Alternative schools are the clearest example of restructured schools and the reforms currently pursued within traditional schools are practices that were pioneered by alternative schools (Aron 2009, Loflin 2003, Raywid 1994). It is understood from the school reform movement that struggling schools do not automatically improve by implementing new programmes on unsteady structural and cultural foundations (Rowan et al. 2004). This review described contextual factors which could provide the foundations for these programmes. One could question whether these approaches to education are feasible for traditional schools. Certainly, the alternative schools within this review had some advantages, such as lower teacher-student ratio and smaller student populations. This allowed greater flexibility in catering for students’ individual needs and planning community-based activities. Yet, these schools faced challenges of engaging students who were rejected by other schools and who had a history of school failure and personal difficulties.
It must be noted, that given this project’s broad conceptual framework, there were potentially many things this review could have addressed to inform early school leaving, including contextual factors within the exosystem, mesosystem and macrosystem. Out of necessity, this review focused only on the school’s microsystem. Implications for policy and practice will be considered under two broad headings: creating schools as sanctuaries and establishing learner-centred schools. Recommendations for future research will then be discussed. The recommendations apply to both alternative and traditional schools.

6.7 Creating Schools as Sanctuaries

6.7.1 Implications for Policy
It would be worthwhile for policy to critically engage with the implications of class size. Budgetary cuts pose a barrier to this development. Nonetheless, when considering the long-term costs of early school leaving as discussed in the literature review, it would be cost-effective in the longer term.

6.7.2 Implications for Practice

Creating Culturally Safe Schools
It is recommended that teachers create a culture of care for learners, whereby they explore culturally relevant concepts and perspectives and infuse this knowledge into their classroom practices and interactions with students. Students need to be able to express themselves individually and collectively. McCall (2003) argued that traditional schools needed to adopt the culturally safe practices observed in alternative schools. This can be seen in the Irish context through the Yellow Flag Programme (Irish Traveller Movement 2014). Under this programme, a diversity code is primarily written by the students. Schools use the diversity code to develop an anti-racist policy. As part of the Intercultural Education Strategy (DES 2010), the DES should ensure all schools are being supported and resourced to implement the Yellow Flag Programme and to develop an anti-racist policy.

Ensuring Fair Discipline
Educational settings may benefit from support to update behaviour management policies to ensure their approach is moderate rather than authoritarian, and is implemented fairly and consistently. A key finding in this study was that behaviour management should be flexible in order to consider the individual needs of students.
Participants valued communication with staff and a personal approach regarding their sanctions. Rather than unilaterally enforcing rules, students appear to benefit from an opportunity to explain their circumstances and work out agreements with staff regarding consequences. This may encourage the development of positive teacher-student relationships. Giving students input regarding disciplinary actions may contribute to the perception that discipline is implemented equitably.

School personnel can review their behaviour management policies whilst considering these findings. Although revising policies is important, it is crucial that this be done in conjunction with a plan to translate the policy into practice. School staff could benefit from developing specific skills to disengage from conflict and instead connect with reluctant students. Multidisciplinary collaboration was proposed to provide effective support for marginalised students both in traditional and special schools (Daniels 2006, Mooij and Smeets 2009). This was implemented in Ireland through the NBSS which has a multidisciplinary team comprising Co-ordinators, Regional Development Officers, Literacy Development Officer, Research and Development Officer, Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy (NBSS 2013). A multidisciplinary approach to behaviour management in schools could be employed more broadly in Ireland.

6.8 Establishing Learner-Centred Schools

6.8.1 Implications for Practice

Care within School Policies

Most schools have clearly articulated mission and value statements. Reviewing these texts to embed caring is recommended. These statements could then be prominently displayed within the school context. Students can benefit from facilitated discussion about what the statement means and will learn how to enact the schools core values by observing how staff enact these values in their daily interactions. Centralising care within the school could affect a number of areas including the overall ethos, the delivery of curricula, the choice of educational materials and resources, the provision of in-service training for teachers, teaching methodologies, classroom management, school planning and school management.
Establishing Caring Teacher-Student Relationships

Increased emphasis on caring teacher-student relationships is recommended. It is imperative that educational settings support staff to understand the importance of their relationships with students and how this enables positive educational outcomes including fostering student retention. Models such as the companion model (Sibii 2010) could be a topic in pre- and in-service training as they provide practical tools for educators to develop positive teacher-student relationships. Educators can promote caring in the absence of structural change by integrating themes of caring into the curriculum and daily interactions with students (Noddings 1995). For example, teachers may use an interest in architecture, music or machinery to teach mathematics (ibid.). This would demonstrate teachers caring by sharing interests that go beyond the textbook but it would also help students to learn how to care (ibid.). Another method to introduce themes of caring into classrooms is to be prepared to respond to events that occur in the school or in the community (ibid.).

Understanding that behaviour is a mechanism for communication is essential for supporting students who are struggling. Whenever possible, it is recommended that educators refrain from labelling students as ‘difficult’ or as ‘troublemakers’ and instead be non-judgemental and responsive to students’ needs. Educators can help students overcome personal problems through talking to students when they appear upset or exhibit behavioural changes. This focus on the whole person is supported by the ethic of care literature (Noddings 2003b, Noddings 1992). This can be enacted in many ways; for instance, teachers can take an interest in students’ lives outside of school to visibly demonstrate care. Multidisciplinary support could facilitate schools to develop caring school contexts. Educators could work with school counsellors, social workers, occupational therapists and other professionals when they need assistance to positively engage with particular students (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011).

Fostering Positive Peer Relations

An implication from this review is that schools need to foster safety and acceptance among peers by adopting whole-school approaches. Within this review, peer mentoring, group advisories, house systems, team competitions, and summer camp activities were among supports used to develop positive relations and to create a caring community which in turn taught social skills. Within the Irish context, the NBSS uses strategies such as peer mentoring, co-operative learning, circle skills and drama therapy to support
positive behaviour in post-primary schools (Henefer 2010). Routines, support systems and rituals can be established to create a culture of care within schools. Multidisciplinary professionals could provide support to educators; for example, occupational therapists are skilled in using meaningful, purposeful occupations to address occupational performance issues, in this case, students’ difficulties with social interactions (NBSS 2008).

**Providing a Responsive Curricula**

While many schools effectively adopt flexible, relevant and engaging curricula, there needs to be an increased emphasis on responsive curricula across alternative and traditional schools. Participants in this review attributed their academic success to the individualised, self-paced, flexible and relevant curriculum. A learner-centred approach prompts educators to listen to students’ needs and to provide responsive curricula.

Students have different strengths, needs, interests, talents, cultural backgrounds and personal lives which affect their abilities to learn. Recognising and responding to this complexity is likely to promote greater student retention. Plans are currently being prepared to implement the new Framework for Junior Cycle in September 2014 to better meet the needs of students in Ireland. The Framework is flexible and offers greater choice for students (DES 2012b). The Senior Cycle programme including curriculum and assessment methods are currently being revised. These are welcome developments that have the potential to promote greater student retention when careful consideration is given to students’ daily lives, cultural background, language and learning styles.

Findings indicated that flexible curriculum can be constrained by the physical, virtual, cultural and social contexts. Consequently, it is important that the DES ensures that teachers receive appropriate training and that schools receive appropriate funding to implement these curriculum changes. It will be necessary for schools to use learning resources as well as human and financial resources efficiently to maximise learning opportunities for students. For instance, the new Framework promotes the use of technology; however, there may not be a computer for each student. Schools could have carts on wheels that contain laptops and are available for teachers to use. Peer mentorship would provide support for staff. Exemplary teachers could provide valuable support and resources to newly hired teachers or struggling teachers. Having house systems would not only increase students’ sense of belonging, but would facilitate teacher conversation about whether students were meeting expectations and to take quick action when students struggled. The new Framework will offer choice and
flexibility to meet the needs of students. For example, potential short courses include cultural studies, personal finance and web design (NCCA 2011). This flexibility presents schools with an opportunity to involve students in a discussion about curricula choices (DES 2012b).

**Student Voice**

The recommendations listed under *establishing schools as sanctuaries* and *creating learner-centred schools* have a common thread: centralising student voice. Participants appreciated when schools acknowledged their needs. In order for the school to be relevant as our culture continually progresses, the school must adapt to changes in student cohorts, technology and pedagogy. Current students can help schools achieve this. Participants within this review commented on shared power they had with teachers. Some participants chose particular instructional approaches and school hours, while others resolved conflict through discussion with staff. Embedding culture within the school curriculum was the focus of other participants. When participants had power and perceived their voice to be heard, they tended to work towards deadlines they created and abided by consequences they helped establish. Some studies within this review suggested that neither asymmetrical power relations nor imposition of rules were necessary for safety. Where rules were in place in alternative schools, those which students perceived as fair were supportive of learning and conducive to positive educational experiences. Traditional schools can learn from how alternative schools infuse what is valued by students into all dimensions of the environment. Relatively simple steps such as using first names for students and teachers can symbolise a major cultural change to reduce inequality. Schools can also embrace the opportunity within the new Framework for the Junior Certificate to promote student choice. Ensuring each school has a student council offers students an opportunity to create positive educational experiences. Enabling students to decorate the school context with murals or contribute artwork and content to websites and newsletters demonstrates that the schools staff are responsive to current students.

### 6.9 Implications for Research

A unique aspect of the teacher-student relationships uncovered in this review was the desire for students to reciprocate care. This desire was mentioned in three included studies (Cassidy and Bates 2005, Jones 2011, Schussler and Collins 2006). Future research would benefit from examining the reciprocal nature of the relationship between...
care giving and care receiving, focusing on students’ perspectives across various school settings.

The influence of the school principal on staff practices was described by the author of one study (Khalifa 2010). It would be useful to examine the relationship between managerial practices and retention rates from the perspectives of students. An in-depth examination about how leadership affects the implementation of the new Framework for the Junior Certificate would make a valuable contribution to the evidence base. Identifying facilitators of and barriers to leadership could provide crucial information as the Framework is implemented in Irish schools.

Most studies in this review focused on the social and cultural contexts. Future research could attend more closely to physical and virtual contextual factors, which students in alternative schools perceive to contribute to their decision to stay in school. Employing more transparent reporting of research methodologies would strengthen this body of educational literature.

Explicitly mapping aspects of the research process—recruitment, selection of participants, data collection strategies, ethical procedures, analytical process—would create greater credibility in this body of work. Population demographics need to be reported in publications, given that certain populations are considered at higher risk of early school leaving. This would facilitate assessment of transferability of findings.

Participants in the study by Khalifa (2010) discussed how the school staff interacted with their families and wider community, while another author described the practical help the school gave to families (Cassidy and Bates 2005). As the review’s focus was on the school microsystem, this data was excluded. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the relationship between the school, family and community is important. Within the literature review, research identified characteristics of the family and community in relation to early school leaving. Characteristics included disadvantaged areas, unemployed parent(s) and minority communities. Future research guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory could examine how the school context interacted with the family and community to promote student retention.

It is understood at the time of writing these implications that the post-primary online database is being introduced in 2014/2015. As per email correspondence with the DES, only State-aided post-primary schools will be required to access the new database.
Therefore figures will not consider educational pathways taken by students outside of the State-aided schooling system. While the database will have the ability to identify early leavers on a more real time basis, it is dependent on whether schools maintain student data on a daily basis. Data will only be as accurate as recorded by schools and this is dependent on the early leaver identifying their destination accurately. The introduction of a primary database is to occur shortly. These databases could be used in research to determine the progress of subgroups of students who have higher rates of early school leaving than the general population (e.g. students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, males, students with disabilities and students from ethnic groups). This data will determine what happens to students at primary and post-primary schools to identify where additional supports are required. While these databases are welcomed, a more comprehensive tracking system would enable (1) a clear and nuanced reflection of Ireland’s retention rates and (2) to determine the immediate and longer term costs of early school leaving for individuals, communities and Irish society.

Due to the attention early school leaving receives both nationally and internationally and with so many disciplines and groups interested in the area, there is an abundance of literature. It is recognised that synthesising this literature is difficult considering that disciplines define the phenomenon in different ways and use different conceptual frameworks. Yet, given the complexity of early school leaving and the education system in which students are embedded, thinking more inclusively about how we can develop knowledge and whose voices can contribute is necessary. Future research in this area could draw from disciplines with parallel person-environment interests and interests in student retention, including anthropology, psychology, sociology, occupational therapy, and architecture.

Finally, given the valuable insights provided by participants in this review, it is recommended that research continues to centralise student voice in the area of early school leaving. This research would provide a means through which student voices could be heard and different aims of research could be realised. Those most affected by early school leaving need to have a voice in the research and development of interventions to address their retention. It is recommended that more studies are conducted to obtain marginalised student voices, especially within the Irish context to ensure Ireland meets its education goal relating to student retention by 2020.
6.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter established connections and contrasts between the findings and existing literature. The findings of the review were discussed under two headings: establishing schools as sanctuaries and creating learner-centred schools. The key findings included an over-arching concept of schools as safe spaces which was founded through creating a sense of acceptance, developing responsive curricula, fostering caring relationships and establishing school structures. Marginalised students demonstrated their ability to provide valuable insights through describing contextual factors that supported or interfered with graduation. Connections were made with broader concepts which underpinned the philosophy of alternative education: schools as sanctuaries, cultural safety, learner-centred culture and caring within schools. These concepts provided a means to understand student voices which were often divided. The connections between findings and concepts were supported by relevant literature and examples from the Irish context. Limitations of the current project were then considered. Implications for policy and practice within alternative and traditional education were discussed. Findings from this review suggested practical ways to strengthen school-based interventions to ensure the EU achieves its education goal. Having identified gaps in current knowledge, future directions for research followed. Overall, this review provided a number of valuable recommendations and having adopted an interdisciplinary approach, these recommendations are readily transferred across stakeholders.
Chapter 7 Conclusion

Early school leaving is a long standing issue and a concern both nationally and internationally. The causes, correlates and cost of early school leaving were studied and discussed in the literature. Additionally, many interventions were described and several authors made recommendations for best practices. Despite all that is known about early school leaving and the numerous descriptions of interventions, early school leaving remains a significant problem. The literature on early school leaving extends across multiple disciplines. This makes it challenging to access and synthesise the literature. It prohibits educators, policy makers and other stakeholders from using research to make evidence-based decisions. To address this issue and better understand what works in order to more effectively inform practice and policy specifically in relation to school context, an interdisciplinary approach was used within this project. The body of literature across disciplines was reviewed using a systematic review methodology. The purpose of this review was to examine student perspectives regarding contextual factors which contribute and interfere with their decision to stay in alternative education.

A comprehensive search for studies which met the inclusion criteria yielded 18 qualitative studies, 5 mixed-methods studies and 1 quantitative study. To organise the review, a broad conceptual framework allowed the student researcher to correlate data across disciplines in a meaningful manner. It is acknowledged that this review did not fully address the range of possibilities central to Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory and many studies examining other determinants of student retention, such as relationships with family and community, were excluded. Rather, through focusing solely on the school microsystem, an in-depth understanding of the school context’s role in student retention was gained. This review provided a holistic view of the school context as it was not limited to one contextual domain, but considered the physical, social, cultural and virtual contexts. This is noteworthy, as it became apparent in the early stages of analysis that contextual domains were interconnected, as recognised by the project’s conceptual framework. Through thematic analysis this project identified the over-arching concept of schools as safe spaces where schools created a sense of acceptance, provided responsive curricula, fostered caring relations and established supportive school structures.

A number of insights were gained through this review. First, the school context affects student retention. The findings identified factors within the school’s physical, social,
cultural and virtual contexts that contributed to students’ decisions to stay in school. These included access not only to technology and learning materials, but also social resources in the form of supportive relationships within the school. This review does not provide substantiated evidence that specific contextual factors resulted in more significant gains in graduation rates. Rather, the findings indicate some ways that stakeholders could work towards improving their school context, including school policies and practices.

Second, the perspectives of marginalised students are important. Students considered by some as ‘troublemakers’ demonstrated their ability to engage in the research process and to provide important insights. Students were able to describe contextual factors that helped or interfered with graduation. Findings were sometimes surprising, challenging and even contradictory. For example, some participants’ supported exclusionary practices while others objected to these practices. What became apparent was that students did not have a unified voice. This is not surprising considering the participants differed in many ways through age, ethnicity, geographic location and the types of challenges they faced in their lives. What is certain is that student voices, and particularly marginalised student voices, matter.

Third, considering the work and theories of other disciplines enabled this review to examine the school context in-depth. The broad conceptual framework adopted by this review enabled the inclusion and synthesis of data across disciplines. While identifying literature across disciplines was not without its challenges, it was a useful approach. This review provides an important synthesis which can be transferred across stakeholders with parallel person-environment interests.

Fourth, this review provides a useful framework to understand the practices and philosophy of alternative education. The philosophy of alternative education produced sanctuary-like schools, culturally safe schools, learner-centred schools and caring school contexts. Practices within this philosophy involved creating a sense of acceptance, providing responsive curricula, fostering caring relations and establish school structures. These findings were supported by existing literature, and some practices and philosophies were identified in the Irish context within traditional schools and The Life Centres. The findings provided useful and practical recommendations that could be implemented both in alternative and traditional schools.
This systematic review provides a significant contribution to the body of literature surrounding early school leaving. It offers a means to systematically uncover gaps in the current body of evidence, while also supporting findings within existing literature. It further endorses current reforms within the Irish context. The findings of this review can be used to initiate a conversation among stakeholders that is necessary to more effectively address early school leaving as we move towards achieving Ireland’s education goal by 2020.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Academic Search Complete (EBSCO)

Date of Search: 15th March 2013

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<td>S7 OR S8</td>
<td>Search modes - Boolean/Phrase</td>
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size" OR DE "SMALL schools" OR DE "INSTITUTIONAL characteristics" OR DE "SCHOOL size") OR (DE "SCHOOL decoration") OR (DE "EDUCATIONAL technology" OR DE "COMPUTER assisted instruction" OR DE "COMPUTERS in education" OR DE "HIGH technology & education" OR DE "INSTRUCTIONAL innovations" OR DE "TEACHING aids & devices" OR DE "VIRTUAL classrooms") OR (DE "INTERNET in education") OR (DE "TEACHER-student relationships" OR DE "CLASSROOM environment" OR DE "STUDENT evaluation of teachers" OR DE "STUDENT participation in curriculum planning" OR DE "TEACHER-student relationships in literature" OR DE "MENTORING in education") OR (DE "TEACHER-student relationships -- Research")

S7
SU "Classroom Environment*" OR "Education* Environment*" OR "Teaching Condition*" OR "Culture" OR "Organization* Culture" OR "School Culture" OR "Education* Facilit* Design" OR "school design" OR "School Building*" OR "Education* Facilit*" OR "School Space*" OR "Classroom*" OR "Virtual Classroom*" OR "Computer Use* in Education" OR "Teacher Student Relationship*" OR "social environment*" OR "physical environment*" OR "virtual environment*" OR "cultur* environment*" OR "education* practice*" OR "school attitude*" OR "class size*" OR "teacher student ratio" OR "educational practice*" OR "computer-based instruction" OR "learner-centered instruction" OR "learning method*" OR "teaching method*" OR "school dropout* prevention" OR "education* technology" OR "peer relation*" OR "inclusive school*" OR "school effectiveness" OR "blended learning" OR "effective school* research" OR "conventional instruction" OR "electronic learning" OR "technology integration" OR "instructional
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</tr>
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<td>absen*&quot; OR &quot;school failure&quot; OR &quot;school nonattendance&quot; OR &quot;at risk student*&quot; OR &quot;drop out&quot; OR &quot;marginalis*&quot; OR &quot;disadvantage* student*&quot; OR &quot;disadvantage* youth&quot; OR &quot;student attrition&quot; OR &quot;disadvantage*&quot; OR &quot;at-risk student*&quot; OR &quot;retention rate*&quot; OR &quot;graduation rate*&quot; OR &quot;academic achievement&quot; OR &quot;education* attainment&quot; OR &quot;diploma&quot; OR &quot;school graduation&quot; OR &quot;school expulsion&quot; OR &quot;dropout rate*&quot; OR &quot;school retention&quot; OR &quot;truan*&quot; OR &quot;persistence&quot; OR &quot;GED&quot; OR &quot;outcomes of education&quot; OR &quot;school completion&quot; OR &quot;graduat*&quot; OR &quot;attendance&quot; OR &quot;dropout attitude*&quot; OR &quot;student retention&quot; OR &quot;dropout prevention&quot; OR &quot;school experience*&quot; OR &quot;enrol*&quot; OR &quot;retention&quot; OR &quot;secondary school completion&quot; OR &quot;student attitude*&quot; OR &quot;teacher attitude*&quot; OR &quot;student experience*&quot; OR &quot;teacher experience*&quot; OR &quot;teaching experience*&quot; OR &quot;learning experience*&quot;</td>
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### Appendix B: Reviews Searched for Relevant References

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reviews in which references were checked for relevant studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abramı et al. (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glassett (2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henrich (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Klima et al. (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lehr and Lange (2003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilson et al. (2011)</td>
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## Appendix C: Articles Searched for Relevant References

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<th>Articles in which references were checked for relevant studies</th>
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Appendix D: Screening Headings in Excel

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<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>aim of study</th>
<th>what kind of paper is this?</th>
<th>description of participants</th>
<th>Strengths of methodology</th>
<th>Weaknesses of methodology</th>
<th>indicates perspectives of students</th>
<th>highlights environmental factors that may contribute to student retention</th>
<th>physical context</th>
<th>social context</th>
<th>cultural context</th>
<th>virtual context</th>
<th>is this study eligible for the review?</th>
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193
### Appendix E: Articles Excluded based on Inclusion Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Number Excluded</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population:</strong> Study directed toward school-aged youth (aged approximately 11-18 years old) or recent early school leavers between the ages of 18-25 were included if the programme under study led to certification equivalent to the Leaving Certificate. The perceptions of graduates from alternative schools were also considered.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population:</strong> General population samples of students not at-risk of early school leaving were excluded.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong> In keeping with Raywid’s (1998) typology, level 1 alternative schools were excluded. Level 2 and level 3 alternative schools were included.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong> The alternative school must have led to certification equivalent to the Leaving Certificate. For the purpose of this review, alternative education fell outside of traditional education, special education or pure vocational programmes. Schools not identified as an alternative school were excluded.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study Type:</strong> All empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals were included. Articles not empirical or primary in nature were excluded (e.g. a discussion, school description, opinion piece or review).</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes:</strong> Student perspectives must be obtained. Studies which did not obtain student perspectives were excluded.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes:</strong> Student perspectives on the school context must be obtained. Studies which did not address the school context were excluded.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Revised Time Frame:</strong> Data collection must have occurred in 2000 or after this year.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access:</strong> Following request for inter-library loan and contacting relevant parties (e.g. author, relevant institution), the student researcher did not have access to the article.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Addressing context outside School Microsystem:</strong> In keeping with Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory, only studies addressing the school’s microsystem were included in the current review.</td>
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Appendix F: Qualitative Critical Appraisal Tool
Cesario et al. (2002, p.711)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions for Evaluating Qualitative Literature</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read the qualitative study and score each of the categories listed using the quality rating scale of 0 through 3 described below.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Descriptive Vividness
2. Methodological Congruence
   A. Rigor in Documentation
   B. Procedural Rigor
   C. Ethical Rigor
   D. Confirmability
3. Analytical Preciseness
4. Theoretical Connectedness
5. Heuristic Relevance
   A. Intuitive Recognition
   B. Relationship to Existing Body of Knowledge
   C. Applicability

SCORING SCALE
3 = Good = 75%–100% criteria met
2 = Fair = 50%–74% criteria met
1 = Poor = 25%–49% criteria met
0 = No evidence that criteria met = < 25% criteria met

FINAL QUALITY OF EVIDENCE RATING
The quality of evidence rating was based on the total scores for each of the five categories described above. A quality of evidence rating for each qualitative study was assigned using the legend below:
QI: Total score of 22.5–30 indicates that 75% to 100% of the total criteria were met.
QII: Total score of 15–22.4 indicates that 50% to 74% of the total criteria were met.
QIII: Total score of less than 15 indicates that less than 50% of the total criteria were met.
Qualitative Critical Appraisal Tool (Cesario et al. 2002, p.711) (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category I: Descriptive Vividness</th>
<th>Category II: Methodologic Congruence</th>
<th>Category III: Analytical Preciseness</th>
<th>Category IV: Theoretical Connectedness</th>
<th>Category V: Heuristic Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Is essential descriptive information included?</td>
<td>A. Rigour in documentation</td>
<td>• Did the interpretation/theory statements correspond with the findings?</td>
<td>A. Intuitive recognition</td>
<td>• Is the phenomenon described well?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there clarity in the description of the study?</td>
<td>• Phenomenon is identified</td>
<td>• Did the set of themes, categories, or theoretical statements depict or describe a whole picture?</td>
<td>• Would other researchers recognize or be familiar with the phenomenon?</td>
<td>• Were other researchers recognize or be familiar with the phenomenon?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there credibility in the description of the study?</td>
<td>• Philosophical base of study is made explicit</td>
<td>• Can the hypotheses or propositions developed during the study be verified by data?</td>
<td>• Is the description of the phenomenon consistent with common meanings or experiences?</td>
<td>• Is the description of the phenomenon consistent with common meanings or experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there adequate length of time spent at the site to gain the familiarity necessary for vivid description?</td>
<td>• Purpose and type of qualitative study is stated</td>
<td>• Were the hypotheses or propositions presented in the research report?</td>
<td>• Did the researcher examine the existing body of knowledge?</td>
<td>• Were the hypotheses or propositions presented in the research report?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the researcher validate findings with the study participants?</td>
<td>• Study questions or aims are identified</td>
<td>• Are the study conclusions based on the data gathered?</td>
<td>• Was the process studied related to nursing and health? (do we need this?)</td>
<td>• Was the process studied related to nursing and health? (do we need this?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the descriptive narrative written clearly? (vividly?)</td>
<td>• Assumptions are identified</td>
<td>• Are the findings relevant to nursing practice?</td>
<td>• Applicability</td>
<td>• Were the findings important for the discipline of nursing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**D. Confirmability (auditability)**

- Was the description of the data collection process adequate?
- Were the records of the raw data sufficient to allow judgments to be made?
- Did the researcher describe the decision rules for arriving at ratings or judgments?
- Could other researchers arrive at similar conclusions after applying the decision rules to the data?
- Did the researcher record the nature of the decisions, the data on which they were based, and the reasoning that entered into the decisions?

**Category III: Analytical Preciseness**

- Did the interpretive theoretical statements correspond with the findings?
- Did the set of themes, categories, or theoretical statements depict or describe a whole picture?
- Can the hypotheses or propositions developed during the study be verified by data?
- Were the hypotheses or propositions presented in the research report?
- Are the study conclusions based on the data gathered?

**Category IV: Theoretical Connectedness**

- Are the theoretical concepts adequately defined and/or validated by data?
- Are the relationships among the concepts clearly expressed?
- Are the proposed relationships among the concepts validated by data?
- Does the theory developed during the study yield a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study?
- Is a conceptual framework or map derived from the data?
- Is there a clear connection made between the data and the frameworks?

**Category V: Heuristic Relevance**

- Is the phenomenon described well?
- Would other researchers recognize or be familiar with the phenomenon?
- Is the description of the phenomenon consistent with common meanings or experiences?
- Did the researcher examine the existing body of knowledge?
- Was the process studied related to nursing and health? (do we need this?)
- Were the findings important for the discipline of nursing?
### Appendix G: Critical Appraisal of a Survey

Centre of Evidence-Based Management (2010)

<table>
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<th>Appraisal questions</th>
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<th>Can’t tell</th>
<th>No</th>
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<td>1. Did the study address a clearly focused question/issue?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Is the research method (study design) appropriate for answering the research question?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is the method of selection of the subjects (employees, teams, divisions, organizations) clearly described?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Could the way the sample was obtained introduce (selection) bias?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Was the sample of subjects representative with regard to the population to which the findings will be referred?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Was the sample size based on pre-study considerations of statistical power?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Was a satisfactory response rate achieved?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Are the measurements (questionnaires) likely to be valid and reliable?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Was the statistical significance assessed?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Are confidence intervals given for the main results?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Could there be confounding factors that haven’t been accounted for?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Can the results be applied to your organization?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H: Critical Review Form for Quantitative Studies

Law et al. (1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CITATION</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STUDY PURPOSE</td>
<td>Outline the purpose of the study. How does the study apply to your research question?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the purpose stated clearly?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LITERATURE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was relevant background literature reviewed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DESIGN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Randomized (RCT)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ cohort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ single case design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ before and after</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ case-control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ cross-sectional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ case study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the study design. Was the design appropriate for the study question? (e.g., for knowledge level about this issue, outcomes, ethical issues, etc.):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specify any biases that may have been operating and the direction of their influence on the results:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N =</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the sample described in detail?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was sample size justified?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling (who; characteristics; how many; how was sampling done?) If more than one group, was there similarity between the groups?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe ethics procedures. Was informed consent obtained?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were the outcome measures reliable?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the outcome measures valid?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specify the frequency of outcome measurement (i.e., pre, post, follow-up):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome areas:</td>
<td>List measures used:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVENTION</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention was described</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide a short description of the intervention (focus, who delivered it, how often, setting). Could the intervention be replicated in practice?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Response Options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contamination was avoided?</td>
<td>Yes, No, N/A, Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cointervention was avoided?</td>
<td>Yes, No, N/A, Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESULTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results were reported in terms of statistical significance?</td>
<td>Yes, No, N/A, Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the analysis method(s) appropriate?</td>
<td>Yes, No, Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical importance was reported?</td>
<td>Yes, No, Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-outs were reported?</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONATIONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions were appropriate given study methods and results</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix I: Articles Excluded based on Quality Appraisal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Articles Excluded based on Quality Appraisal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairbrother (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGregor and Mills (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De La Ossa (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nairn and Higgins (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy (2011b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J: Initial Thematic Map

**Philosophy**

**Learner-Centred Culture**
- Cultural Safety
- Equity / Reciprocal Respect

**Practice**

**Place and Space**
- Physical space (n=11)
- Size (n=8)
- Structure (n=9)
- Location (n=1)

**Caring School Culture:**
- Teacher care for students (n=24)
- Student care for teachers (n=3)
- Student care for students (n=12)
- Student care for school (n=2)
- School care for students (n=24)
## Appendix K: Sample of Supervision Record

### Research Supervision Record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Research Student:</th>
<th>Eva O’Gorman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors:</td>
<td>Nancy Salmon and Carol-Anne Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date/Time of Meeting:</td>
<td>28/8/13 at 10am in HS2-046</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Summary of activities since last meeting: (to be completed prior to supervision)

- 28 articles included following quality appraisal. Of the final 28 included articles, there are 16 Q1 articles and 12 Q2 articles. 22 articles are qualitative, 5 are mixed methods and 1 is quantitative.
- Nancy and Carol-Anne reviewed articles for quality appraisal.
- Eva quality assessed quantitative and mixed-methods studies.
- Eva took photos of analysis.
- Eva worked on methodology chapter.

### Areas/Questions for Discussion: (to be completed prior to supervision)

- To discuss analysis and findings so far.
- To discuss layout of methodology chapter and PRISMA (2009) checklist.

### Summary of discussion:

- Discussed inclusion criteria: some studies excluded as data collected in 1990s; however, some studies don’t specify when their data was collected.
- Discussed layout and appendices of methodology chapter. PRISMA guidelines to be used.
- Eva must present research in November, a requirement for all post-graduate students. Eva to present preliminary findings at cluster meeting.
- Looked at analysis. Changed how findings presented from types of environments (e.g. physical, social, cultural, virtual) as there was a lot of overlap between the environments. Decision made to make a table in Excel using following headings: (1) expectations: students’ aspirations and teachers’ beliefs and attitudes; (2) philosophy of alternative education including peer relationships, reciprocal respect, learner-centred/person-centred culture, cultural safety; (3a) Practice, for example, behaviour management, peer support, caring relationships between peers, teacher care for students and student care for teachers; (3b) spaces; (3c) structures (e.g. size of school and leadership); (3d) curriculum: process/delivery, content and resources; (4) outcomes. In this table Eva is to document how many articles mentioned a particular concept and to put their ID number beside each concept.
### Agreed plans for period before the next meeting:

- Eva to contact authors of studies in which date of data collection is not specified. Based on their responses, changes will be made to the inclusion criteria; for example, (1) include studies from 1995 or (2) only include studies where data collection occurred from 2000.
- Eva to present research at cluster meeting on October 1st and in November (a requirement for postgraduate students).
- Eva to make new table for analysis and to note more traditional alternative schools from more innovative ones.
- Eva to continue with methodology chapter.

### Ongoing

- Eva to summarise columns on either research design or population.

### Proposed date/time of next meeting:

- October 1st. Time: 2-3.
## Appendix L: Articles in which Concepts Appeared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schools as Safe Spaces</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants felt safe</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006); Wilkins (2008); Antrop-González (2006); Swaminathan (2004); Morrissette (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm atmosphere where issues were resolved quickly</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt safe to admit lack of knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Kennedy (2011a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants could relax and enjoy learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Wilkins (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of safety contributed to student retention</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Antrop-González (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fostering a Sense of Community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School as “my place”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Swaminathan (2004); Jones (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of community important in participants’ decisions to stay in school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Jones (2011); Swaminathan (2004); Wilkins (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff spent time cultivating sense of community</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Wilkins (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Embedding student culture within the school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodating student culture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Khalifa (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room to explore own perspectives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School acknowledged youth culture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Khalifa (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsive Curriculum</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative instructional choices</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Watson (2011); Watson and Watson (2011); Atkins et al. (2005); Jones (2011); Macleod (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice impacted learning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Morrissette (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology used to promote learner-centred culture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Kim and Taylor (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional methods caused boredom and disengagement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>San Martin and Calabrese (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill-and-practice with computer-based instruction could lead to boredom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants could repeat question until they knew the right answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kim and Taylor (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual seatwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>McDonald et al. (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited group work and one-on-one instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kim and Taylor (2008); McNulty and Roseboro (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heading</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring relations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School events/structures that emphasised</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fenzel and Domingues (2009); Wilkins (2008); Atkins et al. (2005); San</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship development</td>
<td></td>
<td>Martin and Calabrese (2011); Carter (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive teacher-student relationships are</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Schussler and Collins (2006); Jones (2011); Watson and Watson (2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likely to be crucial in creating a</td>
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<td>Watson (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive learning environment</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive teacher-student relationships</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Coyl et al. (2004); Morrissette (2011); Kim and Taylor (2008); Carter</td>
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<tr>
<td>important for fostering student retention</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2012); Jones (2011); Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Balancing a personal connection with</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring teachers are helpful</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Sinha (2007); Kennedy (2011a); Watson (2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Carter (2012); Morrissette (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Fenzel and Monteith (2008); Fenzel and Domingues (2009)</td>
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<td>Participants appreciated</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Watson (2011); Swaminathan (2004); Sinha (2007);</td>
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<tr>
<td>individualised help</td>
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<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Fenzel and Monteith (2008); Wilkins (2008);</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fenzel and Domingues (2009); Fenzel and Monteith (2008); Wilkins (2008);</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kennedy (2011a); Carter (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Coyl et al. (2004); Jones (2011)</td>
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<td>influential in personal changes</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Personnel connections with teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Antrop-González (2006); Carter and Osler (2000);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jones (2011); Sinha (2007); Khalifa (2010); Coyl et al. (2004); Fenzel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and Monteith (2008); San Martin and Calabrese (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships different with alternative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers and previous teachers</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers listen</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Schussler and Collins (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Sinha (2007); Coyl et al. (2004); Fenzel and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Monteith (2008); Fenzel and Domingues (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial or friendship descriptors used to</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Schussler and Collins (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>describe relationship with teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Morrissette (2011); Antrop-González (2006); Jones (2011); Khalifa (2010);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fenzel and Monteith (2008); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Coyl et</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff accessibility helped foster better</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Carter and Osler (2000); Fenzel and Monteith (2008);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher-student relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers called by first</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Morrissette (2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heading</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>name</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Carter and Osler (2000); Coyl et al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expecting success</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers have high expectations and want participants to succeed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Schussler and Collins (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Morissette (2011); Antrop-González (2006); Fenzel and Monteith (2008); Swaminathan (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting appropriate expectations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Schussler and Collins (2006); Kim and Taylor (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low expectations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kim and Taylor (2008); Macleod (2007); Atkins et al. (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring teachers are responsive</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants benefitted from talking about their problems</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jones (2011); Morissette (2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers cared if participants understood coursework</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Schussler and Collins (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring teachers are respectful</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect essential in caring relations</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Coyl et al. (2004); Jones (2011); Kennedy (2011); Khalifa (2010); Macleod (2007); McDonald et al. (2007); Morissette (2011); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006); Swaminathan (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect essential for participant success</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Swaminathan (2004); Morissette (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect essential for participant retention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Swaminathan (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring teachers can self-regulate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers react calmly to problems</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Wilkins (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring Peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care between students</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sinha (2007); Schussler and Collins (2006); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Wilkins (2008); Coyl et al. (2004); Swaminathan (2004); Antrop-González (2006); Watson and Watson (2011); Fenzel and Domingues (2009); Fenzel and Monteith (2008); Jones (2011); McDonald et al. (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of fighting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Sinha (2007); Antrop-González (2006); Swaminathan (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Big Family”</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Coyl et al. (2004); Antrop-González (2006); Jones (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity between peers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Sinha (2007); Watson and Watson (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive peers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wilkins (2008); Sinha (2007); Coyl et al. (2004); Antrop-González (2006); Schussler and Collins (2006); San Martin and Calabrese (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring peer relationships had positive implications for participants’ attitudes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Coyl et al. (2004); Jones (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006); Morissette (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heading</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>toward school and their academic achievements</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocal Care</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student care for school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jones (2011); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants wanted to prevent “slackers” from entering school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants described actions they would take if school was closing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jones (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School structures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study aims related to social/cultural contexts</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Atkins et al. (2005); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Coyl et al. (2004); Fenzel and Domingues (2009); Fenzel and Monteith (2008); Kennedy (2011); Khalifa (2010); Macleod (2007); McDonald et al. (2007); Sellman (2009); Schussler and Collins (2006); Sinha (2007); Swaminathan (2004); Watson (2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Studies addressing social/cultural contexts in their findings only</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Carter (2012); Jones (2011); Kim and Taylor (2008); Morrissette (2011); San Martin and Calabrese (2011); Wilkins (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Physical environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Size of school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Coyl et al. (2004); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Sinha (2007); Swaminathan (2004); Carter (2012); Fenzel and Domingues (2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size of class</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Carter (2012); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Sinha (2007); Fenzel and Domingues (2009); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individualised attention due to size</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Sinha (2007); Fenzel and Domingues (2009); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everyone knew each other due to small size</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Sinha (2007); Swaminathan (2004); Schussler and Collins (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pleasant and resourceful environment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Kim and Taylor (2008); Swaminathan (2004); Watson (2011); Watson and Watson (2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workstations with computers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional classrooms</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Coyl et al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desks for group work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011); Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer access</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011); Antrop-González (2006); Kim and Taylor (2008); Sinha (2007); Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet played role of textbooks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011)</td>
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<td>Exterior walls painted to acknowledge student culture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006)</td>
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<td>Walls had motivational</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heading</td>
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<td>Studies</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>decor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student artwork, work and photographs on walls</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Coyl et al. (2004); Swaminathan (2004); Antrop-González (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Supports</strong></td>
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<td>Casual atmosphere and use of first names</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Coyl et al. (2004); Morrissette (2011); Carter (2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homerooms</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Atkins et al. (2005)</td>
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<td>House systems</td>
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<td>Carter (2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentorship programme</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>San Martin and Calabrese (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late afternoon and evening tutorials, homework sessions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fenzel and Domingues (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Atkins et al. (2005); Coyl et al. (2004)</td>
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<td><strong>Policies</strong></td>
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<td>Flexible attendance policies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Watson and Watson (2011); Watson (2011); Atkins et al. (2005); Coyl et al. (2004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Few punitive measures used</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Swaminathan (2004); Cassidy and Bates (2005); Wilkins (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited or no suspensions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cassidy and Bates (2005); Swaminathan (2004); Khalifa (2010); Atkins et al. (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Schools as Sanctuaries</strong></td>
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<td>School as a sanctuary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Antrop-González (2006)</td>
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