

CULTURE OF ABSENTEEISM: AN INVESTIGATION INTO
THE CAUSES OF PERSISTENT STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN EDUCATION
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

September 2013

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Abstract

Persistent absenteeism in inner city secondary schools in Toronto is a worrying development that has profound implications not only for the Canadian educational system, but the country as a whole. Currently a disproportionate amount of disadvantaged adolescents are not completing secondary education, and absenteeism has been shown to be a precursor of this development. This critically orientated research employed a qualitative case study to investigate how absenteeism operates in an inner city secondary school in Toronto. The study utilized the opinions and experiences of three students and two educators in hope of delineating some possible solutions to the persistent absenteeism dilemma. The data highlights the importance of training and hiring culturally sensitive educators who can aid struggling students in graduating from high school. What is also needed is the creation of alternative schools that are designed to work with marginalized youths who may have life conditions that bar them from graduation.

Acknowledgements

To all who have made this possible

I hope you know who you are

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Persistent absenteeism has been a worrisome concern that I have been grappling with since my entry into graduate studies in the field of education at York University. Currently a troubling number of youths prematurely withdraw from formal education in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Often this disengagement is not a sporadic, or singular occurrence, but rather a slow process that typically manifests itself through irregular attendance patterns. Without official educational credentials the life aspirations of many youths may be curtailed as they are confronted with a new specialized labor economy. Thus investigating persistent absenteeism, and how it may be prevented, is an important subject of study.

As an individual who grew up in an economically depressed area, and who dropped out of high school at the age of 19 due to life circumstances, I have a vested interest in this topic. The aim of this research is to investigate the causes of persistent student absenteeism in an inner city high school in Toronto, and to propose some solutions aimed at mitigating the problem. Having gone through the process of dissatisfaction with the current educational model, and its lack of flexibility to accommodate students who may have adverse circumstances that prohibit regular attendance, I initially chose to withdraw from formal education. However, I was quickly exposed to the limited choices that are available to individuals with no official schooling credentials. I was lucky enough to meet educators and administrators who looked past the labels that I was assigned, and worked with me to achieve my educational aspirations.

Through my continued schooling at a post-secondary level, I became aware that a large segment of youths in my neighborhood often face insurmountable obstacles to their educational progress. Therefore, I find it imperative to bring to the forefront the issue of persistent student absenteeism in the hope of finding possible remedies to the problem and to ensure that all who wish to continue their education, regardless of class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, or religion, are able to do so without hindrance.

The basis for this research also originates out of the results of a pilot study that I conducted in 2012 titled 'Discovering the Causes of Persistent Student Absenteeism and What Can Be Done to Alleviate the Problem'. This pilot examined the perceptions of an urban secondary school teacher in Toronto as to why certain students were habitually absent; how persistent absenteeism shaped her teaching styles; how she coped with poor attendance; what was already being implemented in the school to curb absenteeism; and what she thought might be done to combat the lack of attendance. The pilot study was curtailed by its limited scope, and I was able to expand it during this thesis research to include the opinions of students as well as educators. By listening, comparing and contrasting the voices of youths, some of whom are experiencing difficulties attending class regularly, while others are not, I attempt to discern some themes that may have gone previously unexamined. The majority of the literature on the subject is situated in an institutional perspective that is concerned primarily with how absenteeism impacts schools. Through speaking with pupils and two teachers in an inner city secondary school in Toronto I hope to present conclusions that take into consideration the fact that persistent absentees are individuals who navigate a complex network of social relations

and power dynamics, and to highlight the need to inquire deeply into the societal structures that regulate the daily lives of the absentees.

Educational research must take into account the social contexts that shape a student's life and articulate the fact that some pupils are not able to be present at school due to their life circumstances. Researching persistent absenteeism, without analyzing the (in)visible power relations in our society, will lead to isolated results. We cannot change the patterns of attendance, and promote educational aspirations without consulting the clients of Toronto's secondary schooling. It is vital that as researchers we articulate the plight of disadvantaged students in an effort to promote positive social change. The youths who face the most hurdles in life are currently being neglected by educational professionals, and as a result, fail to complete secondary education at a disproportionate rate. This perpetuates an ongoing cycle of poverty and marginalization that has characterized the life conditions of disadvantaged groups.

Statement of Problem/Rationale

This study aims to enhance the current literature on the subject of persistent absenteeism and contribute to bridging the gap that is evident in the publications on the topic. Much of the past authorship has been primarily focused with how absenteeism affects schools and the possible solutions that can be employed to address this problem. Incorporating the views of the actual absentees along with educational professionals should broaden the scope of the present investigations, and will propose new pathways of inquiry that validate the students' knowledge and experiences. This is an attempt to create

more democratic lines of the information exchange process that is sensitive to the voices of disadvantaged students. I format my research to be inclusive, and a joint cooperative endeavor that fully incorporates the participants as knowledge creation agents, as opposed to a researcher writing *about* subjects. As academics, it is crucial that we concern ourselves with the lived realities of our respondents and credit their voices. The main investigative questions of this thesis concentrate on how the respondents conceptualize persistent absenteeism; and how they interpret the notions of equal and fair educational practices in relation to their perceived identities. The overarching goal is to present how a culture of absenteeism is established and perpetuated and to propose possible solutions to accommodate involuntary absentees while maintaining a high standard of attendance for the students who are able to be present in class on a consistent basis.

Chapter 2: Social Context of the Study

Before discussing the literature that is pertinent to this topic, it is of importance for me to explicate the social context of this study in order to situate the data, and to provide the reader with a comprehensive account of the location in which this the research was conducted. I will begin this section by describing the spatial arrangements in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and what the concept of ‘inner city’ means to this research; then I shall move to presenting the results of a pilot study that I have conducted, that served as the foundation to the present investigation; and I will end with a brief account of the school site where this inquiry took place.

Toronto Demographic

The GTA is an amalgamation of a number of smaller cities and towns into the larger city of Toronto, with a population of 4.5 million residents. Although this research is confronting issues that are relevant to the whole of the GTA, the primary focus is on the inner core of the city of Toronto (Appendix A). Toronto has slowly been expanding from its origins near the shore of Lake Ontario and over time, as the city has grown in size, the areas that were previously considered to be suburban have been incorporated into the city. The result of this evolution is the mix of both high and low-rise housing in the downtown area of Toronto. During the past ten years the downtown core of Toronto has been undergoing a drastic transformation precipitated by the influx of condominium construction, which has attracted many young professionals back into the city center. A rapid process of gentrification has accompanied this development that has significantly

altered the inner core of Toronto, and has had important repercussions for its members (Boudreau, Keil, & Young, 2009; MacDonnell, et al., 2004). The restructuring phenomenon has eradicated much of the rental market in the inner city, which has been replaced with high priced condominiums, and as result, the rental prices have risen considerably in a short period of time (Bunting, Walks, & Filion, 2004; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004). With an acute lack of affordable housing, individuals, families, and newcomers living in the lower end of the socioeconomic strata have been either thrust out of the downtown core into the outlying suburbs in search of adequate shelter, or relegated to living in the downtown public housing enclaves (Bunting, et al., 2004). The spatial rearrangement has substantial implications not only for those living in the inner city of Toronto, but for individuals and families who are living in poverty as well. Having to migrate into the suburbs has created numerous challenges for marginalized families, many of which revolve around inaccessibility and a lack of resources, while having to reside in 'inner city' governmental housing that are labeled as 'ghettos' presents its own set of difficulties. This process and its outcomes have been documented by two United Way Studies which posit that "Poverty" may be understood by postal code and decaying high-rises in the former suburbs of the original city of Toronto (Lewchuck, et al., 2013; MacDonnell, et al., 2004). I now turn to the elaboration of these two interconnected occurrences.

This new trend in inner city upward mobility displaced many families living in the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, as they had to disperse into the more remote areas of the city in search of affordable housing (Bunting, et al., 2004). This has had

profound consequences for those living on the margins. The areas that contain low priced rental units are generally characterized as clusters of high-rise towers which are often located in undesirable areas that are becoming deindustrialized, and are fairly inaccessible without a motorized vehicle (Moore, & Skuburskis, 2004; Teelucksingh, 2007). Residents who cannot afford a car or another mode of transportation, must rely on public transit in order to travel in and out of their neighborhoods. This is not only expensive, but can also be extremely time consuming, as the individual must spend countless hours waiting for public transit. By focusing on the car as the main mode of transportation a significant amount of people living in these neighborhoods are hindered in their access to work, community services, schools, and family. The influx of low-income families moving into these areas has put stress on the social services available, and has resulted in a lack of resources that are at the disposal of those most in need. This in turn has created a disparity in the amount of support services that are accessible in the remote sections of Toronto that are predominantly disadvantaged when compared to the more affluent areas of the city (Teelucksingh, 2007). The lack of community resources is also hindered by the formation of the high-rise towers which effectively compartmentalize individuals into their respective households. Lack of designated spaces that allow the community to come together and use the social capital that they possess further marginalizes low-income families (Yosso, 2005). These neighborhoods become segregated from the rest of the city based on income and race. Many of these areas have become labeled as 'dangerous' by reports in the popular media, which contain underlying stereotypes that racialize low-income neighborhoods, and portray them as undesirable

areas to reside in (Lawson, 2012; MacDonnell, et al., 2004). This perpetuates the stigmatic effects that further marginalize and ostracize its constituents, and the youths who live in these neighborhoods are labeled as delinquent and lacking social capital (Lawson, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Living in remote areas presents challenges to the adolescents' pathways to completing secondary school. Many students must choose to either commute for some time to their previous schools in the downtown core of the city, or must transfer to schools that are located closer to their dwellings. This is a tough decision to make as many suburban schools are inaccessible without a car, and reflect the stereotypes of the neighborhood that they are located in. High school students possess a greater sense of autonomy than children in primary schools and may choose to remain in their original inner city school to preserve their established relationships with peers and faculty (Terry, 2008). It can be quite traumatizing for a youth to have to adapt not only to a new home, but a new school as well. Thus some students must spend a considerable amount of time traveling to an inner city school, which can have negative consequences for their ability to be present at all times (Terry, 2008). These developments culminate in what Cheryl Teelucksingh (2007) has conceptualized as 'environmental racialization', a process that coerces disadvantaged individuals to reside in undesirable areas. What must be noted is that, much like Teelucksingh (2007) has argued, what is occurring in Toronto is not 'environmental racism', which requires direct racist intent, but is 'environmental racialization' that results in racist outcomes without any premeditated racist intent on the part of the decision makers. Urban planners and government officials are not transplanting marginalized families out of the downtown core intentionally, but the past

developments have resulted in the displacement of racialized people into underprivileged areas (Teelucksingh, 2007). Those families who were able to remain in the downtown core of Toronto were generally relegated to inhabiting governmental public housing, and were faced with their own set of challenges.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the present conditions within 'public housing' in Toronto, it is still a pertinent aspect of the persistent absenteeism dilemma, and I will allude to it briefly. Currently there are a few areas in and around the downtown core of Toronto that are reserved for public housing. The municipal government subsidizes the rent in these properties to assist those in poverty to find sustainable housing (Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004). Much like the low-income areas in the outskirts of the city, the public housing neighborhoods have undergone a process of racial stereotyping that negatively represents these communities (Lawson, 2012). Considering that much of Toronto's inner city is quite affluent, the disparities between public and private housing become pronounced by their proximity to each other (MacDonnell, et al., 2004). It must be quite discouraging for those living in poverty to be constantly reminded of the wealth that surrounds their neighborhoods. With the rise in land value in the inner city, there has not only been a halt in the production of public housing, but it has been slowly disappearing (Bunting, et al., 2004; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004).

Alongside these spatial rearrangements has been the proliferation of neoliberal ideology into Toronto's political discourse over the past twenty years. With the election of Mike Harris to the role of the premier of Ontario in the 1990's the province, and Toronto specifically, have witnessed drastic cuts to social support networks (Keil, 2002;

Seccombe, 2000). This has led not only to the reduction in the availability of subsidized housing, but also has restricted access to public services that many impoverished families had previously relied on to meet their basic daily needs (Keil, 2002). Thus many parents have encountered greater hurdles in providing life necessities for their children (Lewchuck, et al., 2013). The neoliberal mantra has dictated a discourse that applauds individual resourcefulness, and prides meritocracy, while obscuring the wider societal contexts that dictate people's access to certain resources (Seccombe, 2000). Individuals who cannot succeed in the present conditions are regarded as inadequate; through this thought process those living in poverty are considered to deserve their living circumstances, since they did not excel in an 'equal' system (Keil, 2002). This discourse veils the underlying social inequalities present in the GTA by presenting Toronto as a city of equal opportunity, thereby silencing a portion of its constituents. The advances in neoliberal tendencies have had considerable repercussions for inner city schools as they continue to serve underprivileged youths.

I now turn to describing the demographic in the inner city school that this research was carried out in, referred to as General High, and discussing how the above mentioned social trends have affected the school.

General High

Before providing an account of General High, I think it is useful to briefly explain the approaches to attendance management in the majority of "mainstream" schools in the GTA. I base this overview on my own past experiences of attending four separate

secondary schools in Toronto; the accounts of peers and acquaintances; and what I have found on the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) website (<http://www.tdsb.on.ca/>). Attendance is considered to be an essential component of a student's success at a school, and great efforts are made to ensure that all pupils are accounted for. Much of the TDSB mantra concerning attendance revolves around the indispensability of attendance to progression in education. What is lacking is a thorough documentation of the unequal access to schooling experienced by marginalized students. While the TDSB is quick to acknowledge that not all youths are able to attend on a consistent basis, and point out that there are trained 'Attendance Counselors' available to every city district, there is little mention of attempts to combat the discrepancies that coerce pupils to be absent, and the focus is on reintegrating them back into 'mainstream schools'. I turned to inquire how individual schools approached attendance, and through searching school websites was able to find some tentative articulations concerning absenteeism. Many of the attendance regulations were associated with punitive measures that used threats as an incentive to attend. Students were threatened with suspensions; not earning missed marks; and contacts home amongst other punishments. These threats reminded me of my own schooling experience in Toronto's high schools as a student who was habitually absent. I was continuously assigned detentions; suspended up to 5 days at a time throughout the school year; my parents were contacted about my attendance; I was not allowed to participate in sports teams and other extracurricular activities; and my grades experienced a considerable decline whenever I was taught by an instructor who took this rigid stance. I thought that perhaps my memories were affected by certain negative experiences in

secondary school, and I began to speak informally with friends and acquaintances about how they remember their school's approaches to attendance. Most of those I spoke to recalled many of the same punitive measures that I had experienced. I do not make the argument that *all* of the schools in the TDSB employ the hard-line stance, yet I would argue that the majority of them do. This is a troubling development as a growing segment of Toronto's youths are unable to attend consistently due to their life circumstances. There are quite a few causes for student absenteeism, such as: employment commitments; lack of transportation; housing and living arrangements; involvement in the criminal justice system; familial obligations, and some pupils may be parents themselves; psychological and/or physical health troubles that are related to living in marginalized and impoverished neighborhoods. Although this list is by no means comprehensive and will be taken up in detail in the Literature Review Chapter, it nonetheless highlights the often difficult nature of Toronto's students' lives that may be negating their attempts to come to school on a regular basis. General High is one of the schools that does not appear to adhere to the authoritarian mode of improving attendance, and in a sense, is an anomaly. As this work will document, the staff at General High did not envision regular attendance as a viable possibility for a portion of its students, and the regulations concerning attendance were made flexible enough to accommodate the varying needs of its constituents. This characteristic enticed me to investigate the operating structures of General High concerning persistent absenteeism, and I now turn to describe the particularities of the institution.

In order to depict the school as accurately as possible, and to provide the reader with an in-depth understanding of where the data has been gathered I blend my own perceptions of General High with those of two teachers who work within the institution. I personally attended General High for a half year when I had decided to return to secondary school following my dropping out at the age of 19. After graduating from General High I have been volunteering there for a number of years, and through this prolonged contact I feel that, to a degree, I understand the intricate processes and issues that permeate the building. To ensure that my depiction of General High was not distorted by my past experiences I approached two educators who have been working there for a number of years to describe the school.

General High is a small secondary school that is located in downtown Toronto. Over the years the enrollment numbers have seen a steady decline, and as result, a building that can accommodate nearly 1,500 students currently operates under a third of that capacity. This may point to the fact that young professionals, many of whom do not have children, have been increasingly migrating into the area, thereby eliminating the affordable rental housing market, and driving low-income families out of the area (Bunting, et al., 2004; MacDonnell, et al., 2004; Moore, & Skuburskis 2004). General High has about 400 students on roll, but only 300 of those youths attend on a semi-regular basis, coming to school between 3-4 days per week. There is also a large number of students who have special educational needs, with about 80-90 pupils receiving modified instruction. This is a point of distinction, and needs further explication. Evidence has shown that students who are living in the lower socioeconomic strata are

overrepresented in the 'Special Needs' or 'at-risk' categories (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). Although it is outside the scope of this paper to engage in a thorough discussion of 'Special Education' and its intricacies, this data suggests that not only is General High serving a disproportionate number of students who need differential instruction, but that a large segment of its population comes from marginalized and impoverished communities (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). These findings were reflected in the sentiments proposed by the two educators, both of whom spoke about the majority of their students coming from disadvantaged communities. The pupil demographic is rather diverse, and there is a high proportion of new immigrant students, many of whom are currently a part of the ESL programs being offered at General High. There are quite a few students who are over the age of 18, some of whom live independently. Many partake in some type of employment, and often pupils are expected to contribute to the family income. It appears that numerous students are exposed to high levels of stress that are associated with living in economically depressed areas (MacDonnell, et al., 2004; Porche, Fortuna, Lin, Alegria, 2011; Terry, 2008). I believe that General High demonstrates a fairly accurate sample of the types of adolescents that many inner city schools are currently serving. It must be noted that the teachers that took part in this research voiced the opinion that the way the school operated, and the issues that it was facing were unique, and that other urban secondary schools in Toronto may not be experiencing similar dilemmas. The following section will give an account of a pilot study that I have previously carried out in General High, and will provide further context for the analysis of the data in this work.

Piloted Background Study

For the pilot study I carried out an interview with a single teacher in General High. She had expressed a concern to me about the lackluster attendance patterns that were evident within her classes, and the absence of proactive solutions at her disposal to address the issue. As an educator of ten years, I thought that she would have valuable insight into what caused persistent absenteeism and what, if anything, could be done to curb it. In order to protect her confidentiality I will refer to the teacher in question as Jennifer. We engaged in a discussion during which I had asked Jennifer a few loosely based questions to allow our conversation to lead the way for further inquiry. Jennifer cited numerous causes for absenteeism, and it was her belief that the majority of the origins of poor attendance revolved around a youth's life circumstances outside of the school. I have termed this type of non-attendance as 'involuntary absenteeism' describing coerced absences, which contrasted with 'voluntary absenteeism' referring to a student's intentional and willful choice to miss class. Jennifer mentioned a plethora of causes for inconsistent attendance patterns, such as: a student's financial situation; employment commitments; involvement in criminal activities and neighborhood disputes; transportation; housing and living arrangements; and taking care of siblings or family members. When the dialogue turned to families, Jennifer expressed the belief that the majority of the parents did care quite a great deal about their children's schooling. However, a shortage of resources, and at times, a lack of familiarity with Ontario's educational system would prohibit a parent from fully participating in their child's education. Although she did express some possible causes inside General High for poor

attendance, such as a lack of resources, and a fairly slim course selection, Jennifer firmly believed that these causes paled in comparison to the influences outside of the school walls.

I began asking Jennifer questions about what the school was doing in order to combat poor attendance, and was quite surprised by her responses. General High contained numerous clubs and activities that attempted to incorporate everyone interested, and there was an overall ethos of inclusiveness. There was a free breakfast and lunch program in place to ensure that all students were adequately fed and ready to participate in class. A teacher mentor and a social worker were assigned to each pupil who began to display irregular attendance patterns, and would interact with the youth to determine the cause of the absences, possible remedies, and make accommodations to ensure that the student would be able to keep up with their cohort. Jennifer had adapted differential instruction methods for the students who might miss substantial portions of the lessons. She ensured that resources were available in the classroom and on-line, and made special arrangements for evaluations and assignments for absentees. However, beyond the proactive measures put forth by much of the faculty, punitive measures also became evident. For each class missed a pre-recorded phone call would be issued to the family; suspensions and detentions were regularly handed out for non-attendance; and sports teams were attendance based. Jennifer expressed feelings of exasperation and mentioned that there were no real consequences for students who had become accustomed to missing class. Many were content to receive a passing grade and there appeared to be no real incentive for them to come to school regularly. Considering the

efforts made by the school to curb absences I was confounded by the fact that the attendance patterns had been quite sporadic for a large number of students. As I dug deeper I came upon an intricate and interrelated occurrence that I have termed the 'culture of absenteeism'.

Culture of absenteeism refers to a linked (re)action that was operating in General High. The school had earned a reputation for being a safe haven for students who may have been struggling academically. It was known to make special arrangements and accommodate youths who may have difficulty attending school on a regular basis due to the circumstances of their lives. This status encouraged absentees to transfer to General High, and as a result, the percentage of students who were not attending increased rather dramatically. Many of the regular attendees began to be hostile to the absentees as they perceived it as unfair that they were not receiving the same treatment. The former group believed that they should be allowed to miss class like the absentees, and that there were no real consequences for doing so. This raised questions of fairness and equality within schooling, and what constitutes 'equal' access to education. An ethical dilemma also arose, where a faculty member could not disclose personal information of a student who may have been missing class involuntarily to a regular attendee to justify the differential treatment. This brought to a forefront the issues that are at the heart of this research. How do students perceive absenteeism? And how does a school accommodate students who miss class involuntarily, while maintaining a high standard of attendance for the youths who can attend consistently? I could not answer these questions due to the limited scope

of the pilot study, as the data available for analysis was only based out of my discussion with Jennifer. Thus the impetus for this thesis.

By interviewing students alongside educators I hope that I am able to present a balanced, in-depth account of how the culture of absenteeism operates. As a critically orientated researcher I aim to encourage youths to analyze their social context in a critical fashion in hope of provoking analytical thought, and to present new avenues for social change.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The students who are habitually absent from class in urban secondary schools in the Greater Toronto Area are a diverse demographic. As a result, the search for definitive causes of absenteeism, and remedies to the problem is quite difficult. Every adolescent that enters an educational institution is an individual, with a particular subjectivity and social position that must be addressed by educators and researchers alike, before presenting proposals for improving attendance. Research has been carried out in attempts to explore the issue of persistent absenteeism, but the consequential data does not appear to suggest causal links between any singular cause and a lack of attendance on the part of the student (Bridgeland, 2010; Opfer, 2011; Smyth, 2006). This highlights the complexity of the issue at hand and a need for a reconceptualization of the topic that will create a new ground for theoretical inquiry. It is necessary to develop a comprehensive account of the various interplays that cause students to be habitually absent from class. What is required is an investigation into both the school dynamics, as well as the wider social contexts that shape the society in which the schools operate. One major aspect, that I think has been missing from the current literature, is an in-depth account of how the actual students conceptualize absenteeism, and all of the intricacies that the topic contains. Without listening to the voices of the youths a disparity is created, and those for whom the research is designed to assist are effectively silenced from the discourse and the investigation embodies a top-down approach that is not in line with holistic research practices (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2010). What follows is an outline of the themes and

concepts that are pertinent to persistent absenteeism that has been compiled out of the review of literature.

Contextualizing Persistent Absenteeism

Absenteeism, and truancy, as it is commonly referred to, has been receiving a fair amount of academic attention over the past three decades. This trend is unsurprising considering that a poor attendance record has been linked with students' tendencies to withdraw prematurely from formal education (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Hess, & Copeland, 2001; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006; Reid, 2006b). This is a worrisome development, as without recognized educational credentials one would be hard pressed to find sustainable and engaging employment in the modern Canadian economy. This suggests that improving attendance patterns, especially in traditionally underprivileged urban areas, is a concern not only for secondary school professionals, but the general public as well, because persistent absenteeism can have lasting repercussions that penetrate deep into the societal fabric. Although various researchers have grappled with the lack of steady attendance that is evident in secondary schools, there seems to be little consensus in delineating particular causes and solutions to the issue. The diverging epistemological and ontological groundings of the authors can be credited for the many variances in the conclusions that they drew. Yet it must be noted that due to the intricate nature of human lives, it is often impossible to distinguish singular causes for poor attendance as they are often overlapping and interrelated. However, certain general themes can be discerned from past publications. The majority of the literature reviewed for this project was split

into two camps over the perceived sources of persistent absenteeism. One group argued that absenteeism's origins lay within the schools, and are manifested through poor peer relationships and irrelevant curriculum amongst others. These authors conceptualize absenteeism as an issue that revolves around the school building, and their proposals for mitigating the issue tend to focus on improving the actual schools rather than altering the social relations that can dictate how schools function (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Au, & Raphael, 2000; Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, Karioja, & Rye, 2010; Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2007; Smyth, 2006). The criticism of this line of theorizing is that the social contexts and the implicit power dynamics involved are obscured, and a comprehensive analysis of the multiple variables is lacking (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006). The argument suggests that by focusing solely on the interplays within the school, the discourse on absenteeism is constrained and narrowly defined, which closes off the expansive nature of the subject (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). Other authors conceptualize a lack of regular attendance is related to the life circumstances of a particular student (DiBara, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2009; Fuligni, 1997; Garcia-Garcia, 2008; Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Lawson, 2012; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006; Porche, et al., 2011; Standing, 1999; Syed, Azmita, & Cooper, 2011; Terry, 2008). These academics researched the numerous intricate aspects of a student's life with the hope of portraying how the power relationships evident in Canadian society influence the current formal educational paradigms. They were concerned with investigating specific themes, and their research was based on varying variables, including the role that families play in their children's schooling (Fuligni, 1997; Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Syed, et al., 2011; Terry, 2008); living in

economically depressed areas (Bunting, et al., 2004; DiBara; 2007, Garcia-Garcia, 2008; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004; Teelucksingh, 2007;) the effects of neoliberal policies in Ontario (Earl, 1995; Keil, 2002; O'Sullivan, 1999; Seccombe, 2000); the new economic trends and how they will impact the employment opportunities for recent graduates (Albo, 2010; Lewchuck, et al., 2004; Stinson, 2010); and the psychological issues many youths living in marginalized areas experience (Porche, et al., 2011). These authors hold the belief that a close examination of the social context of a student's life is a vital aspect to theorizing about absenteeism. Without analysis of the wider social factors the proposals for school reform are likely to fail. Strategies to alleviate persistent absenteeism should originate in adequately meeting the needs of the students before they enter the school building (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). What is important to note is that although many of these scholars held opposing views regarding the absenteeism issue, they were not split into strictly segregated schools of thought. A number of these works documented the complex interconnected web of relations that operated both within and outside of the school, and the majority of the authors did admit that persistent absenteeism was a convoluted topic, one that contained various social actors, all imbued with their own perceptions, ambitions, and goals (Dimitriadis, 2009; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989; Smyth, 2006). The problem is that the concept of absenteeism is so multifaceted that one is overwhelmed by the multitude of variables, and often certain investigative restrictions must be implemented to maintain coherence and focus. To write about absenteeism as a whole would be an extremely difficult endeavor, one that I am not attempting here. What I hope to contribute to the literature is a personal account

of how absenteeism is operating within a particular school at a certain period of time. By incorporating the voices of the students and educators who are on the frontlines, I attempt to discern some themes that may be useful in further research into the topic. I think a process of silencing has been occurring in past publications, where absentees are being written *about* and not written *with*, and it is quandary that I am endeavoring to alleviate. I will turn to discussing the opposing views within the literature, before describing some of the proposed measures to address the problem.

Formal Education in Canada

Before beginning to inquire into the causes of persistent absenteeism, it is of use to consider the issue in a broad, contextual sense. Irregular attendance patterns may originally appear as an enclosed dilemma, one that must be addressed within the school walls. However, persistent absenteeism is the catalyst for a chain reaction that has profound consequences for a multitude of people and Canadian society as a whole. Therefore, the gravity of the situation must be addressed before examining the particularities of the topic.

Formal Canadian education can be credited for serving multiple purposes. Numerous individuals envision the school as an important socializing agent that serves to inoculate adolescents with the accepted norms and moral codes of conduct that are held in esteem in Canada. Education is considered to have a significant influence on encouraging youths to engage actively in the capitalist and democratic society (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006). Schools are the platform where societal values are most explicitly

articulated, and an individual's success in school is often characterized as the ability to effectively integrate into the Canadian society. However, Canadian education is conformist in nature, and dictates a strict discourse on acceptable behavior that often ignores the varying circumstances of its constituents. Therefore, students who are not able to attend class on a regular basis, as is considered the norm, are often labeled as deviant truants; thus creating a stigmatizing process that can be extremely detrimental to youths and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (McIntyre-Bhatti, 2006; Smyth, 2006). Formal education is also tightly linked to national economic interests. The future success of Canada's economy can be speculated to depend on the qualities of character and skills that will be learned by the future generations. The past thirty years have seen drastic transformations in the Canadian economy that have had direct impact on secondary school students in Toronto (Albo, 2010; Stinson, 2010). With the eradication of previously lucrative jobs in the industrial sector, which are being slowly replaced by contract positions in the new knowledge economy, the need for a post-secondary degree is more crucial than ever (Albo, 2010; Lewchuck, et al., 2004; Stinson, 2010). As Brown and Parekh (2010) have shown, there is a growing expectation for youths to advance to post-secondary institutions, and this is becoming the norm, rather than the exception in the GTA. In this sense, schools can be characterized as institutions that feed the demand for labor in the modern economy (McIntyre-Bhatti, 2006), while concurrently the lack of employment opportunities that are available to new graduates can be a source of despair, one that discourages youths to progress with their education (Dimitriadis, 2009; Fine, 1991) With these immense responsibilities, it becomes evident that continual student

participation and engagement in schooling are vital to the maintenance of the current national character and economic prosperity. Voluntary absence from school can be framed as a withdrawal from interaction in democratic society, or as a rejection of the values that it proposes. Disengagement from education can be ultimately seen as a threat to both the democratic and economic prosperity of the state (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006). With an adolescent's withdrawal from formal education they run the risk of not gaining the preferred credentials to attain steady employment, and also miss out on the socializing process that is a fundamental part of schooling. Evidence links poor attendance to negative social outcomes for both the individual student involved, and the wider public body (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). By highlighting the consequences of school disengagement we can begin to frame the overarching implications that persistent student absenteeism can have on the Canadian society.

Impact of Persistent Absenteeism

Irregular attendance patterns have been documented to be a precursor for less favorable life circumstances at the conclusion of formal education (Attwood, & Croll, 2006). In a society such as Canada, where official education is held in high esteem, a premature disengagement with schooling can have severe repercussions for an individual. Students who do not attend school regularly often fall behind their peers in content comprehension, and can become estranged from the institution. When missing substantial amounts of class time, it is difficult to maintain strong social bonds with other pupils and the faculty, and as a result, adolescents who are frequently absent from class tend to drop

out of school at a disproportionately higher rate than regular attendees (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006; Reid, 2006b). The resultant lack of credentials creates great difficulty in finding sustainable employment, and high school dropouts tend to display high unemployment rates (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Hess, & Copeland, 2001; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006; Reid, 2006b). This is particularly troubling when considering the economic developments that have occurred in Ontario over the past twenty years. Alongside the economical restructuring that has been discussed in Chapter 2: Social Context of the Study (Albo, 2010; Stinson, 2010), Ontario has seen an influx of neoliberal ideology into its political discourse (Keil, 2002). Following the election of Mike Harris to the role of the province's premier in the 1990's, Ontario has witnessed its safety net and supportive systems virtually disappear (Keil, 2002; Secombe, 2000). There has been a trend to privatize public matters, and a process of blaming the victim has been operating in the media (Lawson, 2012). The issues that previously were considered to be of public concern have become individualized, and a framework of meritocracy has been diffused into the political discourse (Bunting, et al., 2004; Keil, 2002; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004; Secombe, 2000). These developments have had an immense impact on secondary schools which currently operate under the neoliberal paradigm that rewards students who can meet the individualistic expectations, while considering those who cannot as deficient and/or inadequate (Earl, 1995; O'Sullivan, 1999). The hierarchical ranking of youths ultimately culminates with creating winners and losers, and can produce feelings of marginalization and dissatisfaction with life when adolescents, through no fault of their own, cannot meet the

concept of the ‘ideal student’. These attitudes can quickly lead to deviant behavior, and youths who are often absent from class are more prone to engage in high-risk behavior, which can result in substance abuse and/or involvement in the criminal justice system (Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010). What is troubling is that once a student is labeled as having a ‘behavioral disorder’ their chances of graduating from a high school in Toronto are effectively cut in half (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). With these considerations in mind, it is imperative to ensure that all students are able to pursue education to their fullest aspirations. The repercussions discussed above are relevant to all within the Canadian society, as educational failures of a large segment of the population will put stresses on the economy and the social cohesion that is necessary for a stable state. By withdrawing from formal schooling a section of adolescents in the GTA are faced with poor life choices, and many will invariably become dependent on state allocations which are currently being scaled back, in their struggle to survive in poverty (Keil, 2002; Seccombe, 2000). By framing persistent absenteeism as a root pathological cause for decay in our society the urgency of the issue becomes apparent.

There is a wide body of literature concerning truancy and dropouts within secondary schools (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010; Garcia-Garcia, 2008; Hess, & Copeland, 2001; Porche, et al., 2011). Yet there is evidence that the overall absence rates have changed relatively little, despite the considerable efforts to implement change (Reid, 2006b). As mentioned earlier, what problematizes clear distinctions and conceptualizations of absenteeism is the diverse demographic of absentees. Some authors focus on the social relations and events within schools, while

others are more attentive to the wider societal impacts on a student's ability to attend class regularly. In the following section I will describe the varying theories on the potential causes of persistent student absenteeism and possible preventive steps proposed in the literature.

Atmosphere Within the School

The publications contending that the root causes of student absenteeism lie within the actual school tend to focus on distinct yet interconnected themes that can be generally combined under an umbrella concept of 'atmosphere within the school' (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Au, & Raphael, 2000; Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010; Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2007; Smyth, 2006). This category refers to the multiple dynamic relationships that are taking part within a particular school, referring to curriculum, peer relations, and a student's relationship with the faculty (Attwood, & Croll, 2006). These terms must be expounded in order to dwell deeper into how the atmosphere within Canadian secondary schools can influence youths not to attend.

The relevance of curriculum has been cited as an origin of adolescent discontent with schooling (Bridgeland, 2010; Giroux, 2005; Reid, 2007; Smyth, 2006). This argument presents a challenge to the notion that the current curriculum is engaging to all students. With the rapidly changing demographic in urban schools some authors have suggested that the content is not developing at an equal rate (Bridgeland, 2010; Giroux, 2004). As a result, some adolescents may feel disinterested in what they are expected to learn, and at times may not feel represented within the standardized curriculum

(Dimitriadis, 2009). This is a poignant concern as the Toronto District School Board encompasses students from more than a 175 countries, with over a quarter of the adolescents being born outside of Canada (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). There are proposals to alter the curriculum to reflect the heterogeneous make-up of the student body in inner city schools (Dimitriadis, 2009; Giroux, 2004). By articulating how the current educational content and delivery methods are unilateral and authoritarian, critical theorists point to the need to establish new conceptions of how schools should operate (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; Smyth, 2006). It appears as though schools in the GTA have adopted the “banking model” of education that Freire (1970) has theorized about, where an owner of knowledge (the instructor) disseminates an accumulated wealth of information into empty receptacles (the students). This model of schooling is insensitive to the lived experiences of the pupils, and serves to reaffirm the status quo (Freire, 1970). A more egalitarian approach to the knowledge creation process is being advocated; one that acknowledges the abundance of capital contained not only in the students, but their families and the wider communities as well (Dimitriadis, 2009; Giroux, 1989; Glass, & Wong, 2003; Yosso, 2005). A continuous silencing of disadvantaged youths can create feelings of alienation and hostility, which often result in disengagement with schooling (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010; Smyth, 2006). There is a need to move beyond a deficiency model that is preoccupied with the perceived lack of capital that marginalized adolescents bring with them to the school (Yosso, 2005), to embracing the distinct experiences and knowledge bases that are evident within the diverse demographic of GTA’s inner city schools.

Some authors have documented how peer relations impact a pupil's attendance patterns (Atwood, & Croll, 2006; De Wit, et al., 2010; Terry, 2008). As children enter adolescence, strong bonds with their classmates become an extremely important component in cultivating feelings of acceptance and encouraging pursuit of further educational aspirations (De Wit, et al., 2010). The building and preservation of positive social relations can develop a sense of belonging, and association with students who consider schooling a priority can instill constructive habits and attitudes (De Wit, et al., 2010). The breakdown of relationships, or their absence, can create feelings of isolation, and the adolescent may begin to perceive the school as a hostile environment, thereby choosing to spend less time within its boundaries. Some youths may be victims of bullying at some point in their secondary school career, an experience that can be extremely traumatizing, and one that often severs the social ties a particular student may have had with the school (Attwood, & Croll, 2006), although the issue of bullying and its implications is beyond the scope of this research.

Related to the notion of maintaining positive social bonds is the pupil-faculty relationship dynamic, which is considered vital to a student's success in school. Teachers in particular are extremely influential figures who can provide a safe space where students can engage in free thought and develop healthy relationships with their peers. Instructors are fundamental role models, and their involvement in their pupils' lives has been documented to have significant implications (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; De Wit, et al., 2010). Therefore, when youths perceive a lack of attention, or a hostile relationship with the faculty, they often employ an anti-authoritarian response to voice their discontent, and

as a result, are punished for their infractions; this further ostracizes them from the rest of the students (Hess, & Copeland, 2001; Reid, 2006b). Another reaction is for a youth to develop a pattern of detachment, where the student begins to shut down mentally, misses class, and eventually drops out of school (Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010).

Through the manifestation of alienation with the school, and dissatisfaction with the atmosphere, some students may choose to depart slowly from formal education, a pattern that often leads to permanent school withdrawal. Due to the particular focus that I have on urban schools in this work, I feel that is important to highlight the difficulties that many inner city school teachers and students face in meeting the demands that are placed on them by the administrative sphere of education.

Teaching and Learning in Inner City Schools

Working in inner city schools is a difficult task, especially in schools similar to General High that serve a significant number of disadvantaged students. Educators are often confronted with a lack of resources, unresponsive pupils, and having a high proportion of the student body classified as ‘high-needs’ or ‘at-risk’. As Brown and Parekh (2010) have documented, youths living in the most impoverished areas are disproportionately represented in categories of ‘Special Needs’ and ‘at-risk’ of premature withdrawal from schooling. This suggests that not only was the staff in General High working with students who have ‘Special Needs’, but that the overall demographic in the school was predominantly located in the lower end of the socioeconomic strata. However, the amount of monetary funds allocated to schools to aid these pupils is lacking, with an

average of just over \$400/per pupil being slated for secondary schools in the TDSB (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). These students, who already face the stigma of living in the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, must contend with the labeling process that often characterizes them as delinquent and/or deficient. Combined with these ostracizing labels are the imbued ethnic and racial prejudices within popular media that conceptualize many inner city youths as deviant criminals (Lawson, 2012; Yon, 2000). An educator's role within an urban secondary school reaches far beyond the standard model of a teacher's responsibilities. There is pressure on them not only to ensure the academic success of their pupils, but also to find ways to mitigate the often-difficult life conditions of their students. Many youths of the same age in inner city high schools may be at strikingly different levels of educational achievement. The resulting outcome is the need for an educator to accommodate the varying comprehension, writing, and reading abilities that are evident within a particular classroom (DiBara, 2007). The inner city student demographic is also extremely diverse, and teachers are often confronted with the varying lifestyles and cultures of the adolescents (Brown, & Parekh, 2010; Yon, 2000). Much of the literature suggests that inner city youths may be having difficulties at home; are disproportionately prone to health problems; are involved in the criminal justice system; are engaged in employment; or may face obstacles due to their economic condition (Fine, 1991; Porche, et al., 2011). This complicates the role of the teacher, as they cannot take for granted the assumption that all of their students are present, and ready to learn (DiBara, 2007; Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). Although this tendency is not limited to inner city schools, the nature of the demographic intensifies the disparities

between a school's expectation of a student's ability to commit to schooling and the actual capability of that youth to meet those demands (Griffith, & Smith, 2005). What exacerbates the pressure placed upon secondary school educators in disadvantaged areas is the lack of resources often apparent in these types of schools. The inner city core of Toronto has gone through a rapid process of gentrification that has pushed many disadvantaged people into suburban neighborhoods (see Ch. 2 Social Context of Study) which are often lacking in resources, and are inaccessible without a motorized vehicle, while the lower-income neighborhoods in the inner city have become stigmatized as 'ghettos' (Boudreau, et al., 2009; Keil, 2002; Teelucksingh, 2007). The geographical restructuring of income has had repercussions for impoverished students, who either reside in stereotyped enclaves or have to commute to an inner city school, since the majority of suburban institutions are unreachable without a car. Added to this consequence is the neoliberal reformation that has revoked the numerous social support networks that impoverished families had previously relied on, and many families living on the margins are experiencing difficulty in meeting their basic needs (Bunting, et al., 2004; Keil, 2002; Seccombe, 2000).

Currently there is little training, preparation and/or support that is given to educators who may be interested in working in, or who are placed in, an inner city school (Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006; Skinner, & Schultz, 2011). These teachers are tasked with developing their own lesson plans and styles of teaching, while being confronted with the multitude of responsibilities that are thrust upon them. They must tackle not only large class sizes (Fine, 1991), lack of personnel and resources, but must also navigate the

extremely complex lives of their students, a task that is insurmountable for some educators (Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006b). This trend is compounded by the lack of familiarity that some middle-class educators may have with the lifestyles of inner city students. When considering that a high number of youths living in impoverished conditions have limited access to postsecondary institutions, it is to be expected that there is a lack of professionals who are familiar with the issues revolving around inner city schools (Brown, & Parekh, 2010; Skinner, & Schultz, 2011). The outcome of these conditions is teacher burnout, the rates of which are considerably higher in schools that are characterized as serving a disadvantaged demographic (Opfer, 2011). Teachers attempt to meet the diverse needs of their students, but when faced with their own perceived lack of expertise with the issues, or with the training that they have received, feelings of inadequacy and frustration can quickly develop (Meadows, 2007). With the broadened set of obligations some educators have difficulty seeing where their responsibilities end. As a result, teachers, and new teachers in particular, are overwhelmed with their workload and discouraged by the lack of power to change the lives of their students; the unfortunate outcome is the high rate of teacher turnover in inner city schools (DiBara, 2007; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006b). When considering the importance of student-teacher relationships discussed earlier, this tendency becomes even more problematic, and creates a cycle of student disengagement that further exacerbates the difficulties of teaching in an urban school. Since a facet of this paper deals with the perceptions of two high school educators concerning

absenteeism I feel that is essential to discuss some literature concerned with investigating similar themes.

Perspectives of Urban Secondary School Teachers on Absenteeism

Teachers cited many of the same reasons outlined above as the main causes of persistent student absenteeism. Many felt that the time and resources provided to them to monitor attendance were inadequate, stating that managing attendance within an inner city school was simply too demanding and time consuming to be paid full attention to (Reid, 2006). When faced with a high-needs student body, educators were simply stretched too thin to ensure that all pupils were accounted for on a regular basis (Meadows, 2007). Some instructors mentioned outside influences negating their efforts to guarantee that all students attended class. Living in impoverished conditions, family obligations, and negative peer influences were cited as preventing certain youths from being present in class, and were seen to be outside of the school's boundary of control (Opfer, 2011). Some teachers mentioned that a lack of traditional parental involvement in their children's schooling was having an adverse impact on their attendance (Reid, 2007). These assertions bring to the forefront the school's inability to have control over a student's life outside of its parameters. The significance of this pattern is the fact that educational institutions are often helpless to address the life-needs of its members. This challenges the assumption that improving social bonds within schooling can alter attendance patterns, while asserting that the make-up of our society effectively bars certain individuals from fully participating in the pursuit of education.

Living In the Margins

An adolescent's attendance patterns have been documented to be related to the socio-economic characteristics of their families, where children living in impoverished households have a greater tendency to miss substantial amounts of class (Attwood, & Croll, 2006). Life circumstances can present insurmountable obstacles to a youth's ability to be present at school regularly for various reasons. Some authors argue that a minority of parents who attained low educational qualifications did not hold high aspirations for their children to succeed academically (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Reid, 2006b). However, conflicting results are evident, which state that many parents who are confronted with difficult life conditions do in fact care a great deal about their children's schooling, and see it as a way out of the cycle of poverty in which they are immersed (Fuligni, 1997). It must also be noted that many families living in the lower socio-economic strata are led by a single parent and the middle-class assumption of a nuclear family serves to veil the struggles of many single parents (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Lawson, 2012; MacDonnell, 2004; Standing, 1999). Often there is a lack of familiarity with educational institutions, which is exacerbated by the fact that many inner city schools in the GTA serve a diverse demographic, with a high percentage of immigrants (see Ch. 2 Social Context of Study). Although evidence suggests that immigrant parent(s) are actively, although indirectly involved with their children's schooling, and hold high aspirations for their success, they are nonetheless shut out from the formal interactions with the faculty, and are denied the opportunity to fight for the rights of their kids, which are widely available to White, middle-class parent(s) (Fuligni, 1997). Some parent(s) defer to

professionals to make sure their children are in school; many of them work multiple jobs with erratic schedules and have difficulty ensuring that their kids are present at school at all times. Simply providing the basic necessities for their children can be a monumental challenge when suffering from an acute lack of resources (Lareau, 2011). Within many schools there is also a White, middle-class assumption of a nuclear family, and the role that parents, particularly mothers, are expected to perform (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). The presumption is that mothers are obliged to be intimately involved with their children's schooling, and that all families possess the necessary resources, such as time and finances, to embody the image of the ideal parent. Whenever a parent fails to meet the criteria they are solely allocated the blame for their perceived disinterest and/or a lack of cultural capital (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999; Yosso, 2005).

Erecting a standard, reflecting White, middle-class parenting styles, against which all other parent(s) are judged, silences the voices of parent(s) living in poverty and further marginalizes and ostracizes them by characterizing them as deficient (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). Some parent(s), who have grown up and live in impoverished conditions, may exhibit personal dilemmas that prevent them from being fully involved in their children's schooling. Life in the margins is a hard one, and as a result, many individuals exhibit psychological and physical manifestations of their difficult circumstances (Lareau, 2011; Lewchuck, et al., 2013). Some youths may have parent(s) who suffer from health problems, substance abuse, or are involved in the criminal justice system. This can lead to an extremely turbulent lifestyle for some adolescents. Confronted with an unstable home life, it can be difficult for these youths to concentrate

on studies and attending school on a regular basis. Aggravating this is the fact that many marginalized families move frequently in search of adequate housing due to the societal trends described in Chapter 2 of this work (Bunting, et al., 2004; Keil, 2002; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004). This experience can be quite traumatizing for a youth, since being forced to change schools can strip a student from the social relationships established at a previous school that may be difficult to recreate at a different institution (Terry, 2005).

Much like their parents, marginalized adolescents face many similar challenges. Some youths have substantial employment obligations that are necessary to supplant family income. A lack of resources may adversely impact a youth's ability to be present in class for a variety of reasons, some as simple as a lack of clothing, food, or access to transportation (Smyth, 2006). Some adolescents are responsible to care for ailing family members and siblings. Certain students may be parents themselves, and their parental duties negate their attempts to attend school regularly. Living in areas that are characterized by high instances of crime, some students may become involved in illicit activity, which typically results with the involvement in the criminal justice system (DiBara, 2007). Inner-city areas are plagued by a lack of official community services, and youths living in these surroundings have difficulty attaining the resources such as: career guidance, health information, amongst others that may be easily available to middle-class adolescents (Teelucksingh, 2007). Psychological strain is also evident in young people who live in poverty (Porche, et al., 2011). They can hold low expectations for themselves and exhibit little optimism for the future. It is of note that psychological harm may also arise from stigmatic treatment that students who are labeled 'at-risk' (as many lower

income students are) receive from educational professionals (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). These feelings can develop into anti-social behavior and substance abuse problems (Garcia-Garcia, 2008). When faced with such huge obstacles and leading an unsatisfactory life, some adolescents become disillusioned with formal education in general.

Disillusion With Formal Education

Publications that are more critical of the current formal educational system present disillusionment with schooling as a reflection of dissent on the part of the students who feel marginalized and ostracized within secondary schools (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). These authors frame truancy as a resistance to oppression, a criticism of our schools, and a student's frustration at not being able to effect change (Fine, 1991; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006). Being confronted with a stimulus-response paradigm of schooling, one that rewards compliance to its rules and norms, while punishing those who stray outside of the acceptable boundaries, some adolescents turn to flight instead of fighting for their rights. As discussed previously, the current educational framework is chiefly orientated around meritocracy and individualism, which tends to obscure the underlying social inequalities present in Toronto (O'Sullivan, 1999; Keil, 2002). Assent to authority requires a trust and respect for the legitimacy of the authority figure. Without trusting the good intentions of those who exercise power, adolescents may refuse to comply with the rules that are forced on them (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2006; Smyth, 2006). If a student senses that what the school is advocating is contradictory to what they experience

in their daily lives, they will likely have difficulty accepting the mantra of formal education. The strict moral codes that are apparent in schooling imbue individuals with institutional identities, which are often quite contrary to the person's subjective identity. In order to succeed in school, some youths must suppress their own identities and act in institutionally defined ways that determine what constitutes a good student (Dimitriadis, 2009; Smyth, 2006). This rift between home identities and educational identities can serve to alienate certain adolescents who may not fit the mold of the ideal student, resulting in disillusionment with formal education.

Once a youth begins exhibiting patterns of poor attendance she/he may become caught in a cycle of truancy. As their participation in schooling diminishes, a rift develops between the student and the school. The pupil loses important social relationships and progressively disengages from education in greater increments, thereby exacerbating the problem (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; DiBara, 2007). Added to this pattern is the difficulty of reintegrating absentees back into the classroom dynamic. The youth may become isolated and at odds with the other students who may hold negative assumptions about them. The professional challenge for the teacher is accommodating the returning student's academic needs, while maintaining a sense of impartiality, in order to prevent negative backlash from the regular attendees (Garcia-Garcia, 2008).

Similar to the divisions on the perceived causes of persistent absenteeism, there is quite a variance in suggestions that are aimed at curbing this problem. They range from promoting a more inclusive pedagogy that incorporates the lived realities of the students (Dimitriadis, 2009; Glass, & Wong, 2003), to developing tighter social bonds within

schools (Bridgeland, 2010; DiBara, 2007; Smyth, 2006). Difficulties quickly arise when searching for plausible solutions to alleviate persistent absenteeism. As has been documented, the issue of absenteeism is complex, with interrelated variables operating concurrently. Thus, it does not appear that a single method aimed at easing irregular attendance patterns is likely to work. Many of the proposals evidenced in the literature are interrelated, but certain thematic approaches can be discerned.

Engaged Pedagogy

Critical theorists advocate for the creation of a more engaged pedagogy (Dimitriadis, 2009; Glass, & Wong, 2003). This stance promotes a pedagogy that embraces the fact that schools are social sites that operate within a wider contextual framework. In order to engage youths who may be missing substantial amounts of class, educators need to acknowledge the importance of the adolescents' lived realities, and how they shape their attitudes and ability to attend school. There is a need to include the lives, experiences, family backgrounds, fears, aspirations and hopes of the young people in order to make education more relevant (DiBara, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2009; Glass, & Wong, 2003; Smyth, 2006). By elevating the students' voices to the status of the curriculum, the adolescents are imbued with a sense of agency and power that they are currently lacking in formal education (Dimitriadis, 2009; Giroux, 2004; Glass, & Wong, 2003). By instilling critical agency within the pupils, educators can attempt to address the disparities that are evident within our society. This, in turn, will project to the youths a sense of importance, and of having power to transform their social conditions. An

inclusive pedagogical approach rebukes the unilateral information dissemination process currently practiced in most of Toronto's secondary schools (Freire, 1970; Glass, & Wong, 2003). It attempts to incorporate students' voices as a source of knowledge, one that can be positively and creatively used in progressing educational inquiries, while simultaneously embracing cooperative learning, multiple intelligences, and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Glass, & Wong, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Youths should be made aware that their teachers appreciate them as individuals, with their own set of convictions and opinions, and not merely as faces in a crowd (DiBara, 2007). However, accomplishing this task requires quite a bit of work on the part of the educator. They must continuously confront their own subjectivities and their social positions (Heron, 2005). Certain educational workers may find it difficult to admit that certain biases continue to play a significant role within their practice. Teachers need to frequently examine and evaluate their roles as educators in order to be reminded of their subjective nature and (un)conscious predispositions (Heron, 2005). It is through this critical self-reflection that educators can problematize the inescapable operations of dominant ideologies to their students. Creating a safe space for dialogue and examination of the social world allows disempowered students to attain a sense of agency that will instill in them an urge to fight for positive social change (Giroux, 1989). There is a need to move beyond stigmatizing students who may come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds as pathological agents who are challenging and eradicating the standards of the current Canadian educational system, to a culture of appreciation and acceptance.

Proposals to Reduce Absence Rates

Alongside these more radical transformations that would require quite a drastic overhaul of the educational framework currently operating in Toronto are more traditional, and in a sense, practical solutions that would be easier to implement. One proposal is to create smaller classes, where individual students would receive more attention from their teachers. By reducing the number of pupils within a class, educators would have the much needed time to address the particular concerns of every student, while also creating activities that encourage closer peer relationships (De Wit, et al., 2010; Hess, & Copeland, 2001).

Promotion of intimate interpersonal relations between students and the faculty could be achieved by allocating professional development time to educators, where they could engage in a dialogue about the impact of their interactions with the pupils. This, in turn, would improve teacher responsiveness to the youths' personal difficulties, and increase teacher sensitivity to students' opinions and beliefs (De Wit, et al., 2010). Although this is a sound proposal, I believe what is crucial is the training and certification of new teachers who have resided in, or are intimately involved in communities that are similar to the neighborhoods in which they wish to teach (Schultz, Gilette, & Hill, 2011). This is particularly relevant to inner city schools, where there is a need for culturally sensitive and supportive educators.

There is advocacy for tighter relations between the school and the family, which can be accomplished by creating closer personal communication between educators, students, families and the wider community. Action of this type would demonstrate the

school's desire to make genuine and equitable connections to the community, and would highlight an authentic attempt to bridge the gap between the school and family. While acknowledging that there is an abundance of social capital imbedded in disadvantaged areas that is not being currently recognized by formal education (Yosso, 2005), the increased interactions could also serve to shrink the gap between the school's assumptions and expectations and the familial lived realities (Glass, & Wong, 2003). As discussed earlier, there is currently a divide between the demands that the school places on parent(s), and their ability to meet those requirements (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). Reconceptualizing the role of parent(s) to be more sensitive to the realities of families living in disadvantaged communities will shed the parent(s) of the stigma that they have been so far subjected to.

Related to many of these suggestions is the dire need to allocate greater resources to schools that serve the most underprivileged areas. Within the current paradigm, it is unfeasible for teachers and supportive staff to take a large role and responsibility in ensuring that the needs of all students are adequately met. In order to succeed academically, certain youths must have their non-academic needs met before they enter the classroom. This could include affordable or free transportation for students who have difficulty reaching the school; installing nutrition plans that ensure that all pupils are fed and can concentrate fully on their studies; providing supplemental employment opportunities that do not compete with schooling; allocating support staff that have the time and expertise to discuss and give advice on numerous personal issues (Lawson, 2012); creating spaces for childcare within schools that will accommodate students'

children and/or young family members; organizing life skills workshops; and opportunities for youths to attend and participate in various cultural experiences (Bridgeland, 2010; DiBara, 2007). However, as noble as these ideas may be, without a large sum of additional funding from the various branches of government towards equitable schooling practices it is unlikely that many of these reforms will take place.

Having documented the publications that are pertinent to the issue of persistent absenteeism, I now move on to ‘unpack’ my conceptual framework, and elucidate the theory and paradigms that informed the present investigation.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The following section will outline the conceptual frameworks that I will be using to conduct this research. I will be blending two distinct lines of theorizing, one is interactive, and is focused on gathering meaning and perceptions from the respondents. The second is aligned with the critical model, and attempts to problematize some of the participants' conceptions in order to engage them in reflective critical thought.

Interactive Paradigm

By utilizing the interactive paradigm, I express the stance that knowledge is obtained by participating subjectively in a world of symbols that are created by individuals. Meaning and reality are constructed through personal narratives and can be discerned through dialogical processes. Objective knowledge is unattainable; I focus on subjective knowledge, which is based on the perceptions and interpretations of individuals (Hitchcock, & Hughes, 1995; Kirby, et al., 2010). Embracing the interactive paradigm represents my commitment to documenting the ways in which individuals and groups define, perceive, and comprehend their worlds. Identity formation occurs within a social context, and through dialogue I hope to investigate the fluid or static nature of how the respondents create and maintain certain identities (Dimitriadis, 2009; Norquay, 2008; Wright, 2003; Yon, 2000) By adapting the interactive paradigm I strive to investigate not only the perceived reality of my participants, but also to maintain an ongoing dialogue with my own subjectivity. The goal of my inquiry is to frame how particular students and teachers conceptualize absenteeism, and to delve into their notions concerning equality

and fairness. Situating the analysis within the discourse of the participants creates a channel of investigation into the subjective nature of the respondents, through which I hope to discern some underlying themes that may go unnoticed in a more distanced approach. This framework has led me to analyze each interview individually, as opposed to writing thematically; through this process the voices of the respondents are given particular attention, and the result is to credit their distinctive narratives. Having listened to the participants' stands on the culture of absenteeism, I gently problematized their preconceived notions by introducing critical thought to their responses. I use the word 'gently' to imply my belief that critical awareness must not be forced or done *for* someone, but must originate out of a bilateral dialectical exercise. This reflects my orientation as a critical researcher, and I turn to explicating what it is that I mean by 'critical theory'.

Critical Paradigm

For the conceptualization of the critical paradigm I rely on Kirby, Greaves, & Reid (2010), Henry Giroux (1989), Paulo Freire (1970) and Tara Yosso's (2005) theorizations on the subject. Critical theory examines the societal structures and power relations that are evident in our society, and how they promote inequalities that are veiled under the hegemonic mantra of the status quo. Critical theorists attempt to uncover the hierarchal system of social relations and the contradictions that underlie social tensions and conflict (Kirby, et al., 2010). Through this process an analytical critical awareness is aroused, and one begins to examine the world thoroughly (Freire, 1970). There is an

awakened suspicion and skepticism of the normalizing social agents that are administered and governed by the dominant elite. Individuals begin to perceive themselves and their social situation in a new way, and through this self-awareness the push for positive social change begins. Those who have been previously silenced, marginalized, oppressed and disempowered gain a voice, one that refuses to be subordinated and suffocated by the dominant authoritative discourses (Freire, 1970). The theory suggests that without awakening to the social inequalities and the strife that underlies the composition of society, those who are oppressed will remain passive pawns, at the mercy of the hegemonic forces that rule their lives (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). Since much of this work pertains to the issues of race and class I believe that is useful to infuse critical race theory (Yosso, 2005) into the discourse. I lean on Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of 'social capital' since it goes beyond the deficit model, and actively acknowledges the various types of capital that are present within disadvantaged communities (for detailed theorization on social capital see also Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1977; Putman, 2000). Yosso (2005) articulates six separate types of capital that are evident in communities of color: *aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hope for the future, even in the face of oppression; *linguistic capital* is the intellectual and social skills developed by speaking more than one language; *familial capital* is espoused by utilizing an extended family network; *social capital* relates to being able to employ the various resources available within the wider community; *navigational capital* refers to the skills of maneuvering through institutions that were not designed with people of color in mind; and lastly *resistant capital*, which is the knowledges and skills learned through challenging

oppression. By focusing on what youths, their families, and the communities have to offer, rather than concentrating on their perceived 'lack' of capital, creates an egalitarian framework that is sensitive to the diversity of the research subjects (Yosso, 2005). This theorization also refutes the White, middle class standard against which all others are judged against, and instead is concerned with the abundant capital that is already present within marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). This theoretical stance grounds much of this study, as it is my contention that disadvantaged youths need to become critical agents who will eventually begin to press for social change. In addition to problematizing the perceptions of the respondents, I hope to instill a sense of agency to question their daily lives. I think researchers need to become actively engaged in their projects, and move beyond mere description to a more activist orientated approach. I believe the critical paradigm works well in this research, as I aim to investigate the social relations that are at work beyond the boundaries of the school. With a critical lens I attempt to discern some underlying systems of oppression, and to interact with the respondents on how they perceive these disparities. I am aware that the critical stance does have some ethical concerns, mainly revolving around the missionary connotations that often accompany the theory. The point will be taken up in detail in the ethics section (Ch. 5), but I believe that if one aims to do research *with* the participants, as opposed to *for* the participants, the ethical dilemma can be avoided. If the researcher is continuously examining their own positionality and role within the study, warning signals should become evident once the author finds her/himself speaking *for* the respondents.

By listening to the perceptions of the respondents I gained a sense of their subjectivity and how they conceptualize absenteeism. Through this process researchers can begin to frame their theorizations on the actual lived experiences of the participants, and approach the topic more holistically. This research design will open a new avenue of investigation into absenteeism that considers the lived realities of the subjects. This approach confronts the subjective nature of social research, and challenges the notions of an objective reality. I now turn to discuss the application of qualitative methodology in this research, and the conceptual tools that were used throughout this inquiry.

Qualitative Research

To begin this section I think it is important for me to articulate my epistemological stance. I believe knowledge is subjective, and must be situated contextually in order for it to have any valid meaning. Learning does not take place in a vacuum, and as researchers, we must be aware not only of the participant's context, but of our own subjective nature. The meanings and symbolisms that are expressed by the respondents should be analyzed critically, yet the voice of the participant must never be distorted or suppressed. Through dialogue researchers can gain insight into the subjectivity of their respondents, and using this perspective allows the reality of that individual to be effectively represented (Kirby, et al., 2010). However, the validity of the perceived reality of a person must be approached with close examination. Positioning myself in a critical paradigm, I believe that our subjective reality is imbued with, and socialized into unconscious responses and perceptions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989).

Without problematizing our own conception of the social world and our place in it, we run the risk of glossing over oppressive social relations that are evident within our society (Absolon, & Willett, 2005). Yet, I maintain my belief that a critical examination of reality must be dialectic in nature. Therefore, this research is conceptually informed by a qualitative methodology.

The qualitative approach is well suited for research in education, as it is conducted by and about, thinking and feeling human beings. The researcher takes on a more interactive profile, which provokes self-reflection and critical awareness. It is important for research to be contextualized, as it is conducted within a wider framework of social relations. To strive for objectivity in such a subjective research area is fraught with difficulty, and to discern impartial data is impossible, most notably due to the preconceived notions that the researcher brings into the field and the analysis of the data (Hitchcock, & Hughes, 1995; Kirby, et al., 2010).

Researcher Positionality

A researcher's subjectivity and positionality must be addressed before engaging in social science research. I conceptualize positionality as recognition of an individual's position in relation to the hierarchical social structures they are immersed in. This social location can effectively broaden or limit one's understanding of others and the circumstances they navigate. Members of a dominant group may hold viewpoints that are partial or misinformed in contrast to those of the subordinate groups, who have a more comprehensive knowledge of their own reality (Kirby, et al., 2010). Additionally, a

researcher must make an explicit statement of who they are, where they come from, their investment in the research, and the goals of the inquiry. Much depends on the personal baggage that the researcher brings into the field, as it will significantly influence every stage of the research process (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Behar, 1996; Hitchcock, & Hughes, 1995). Presenting a personal narrative that describes what has brought the researcher to the study at hand creates an opportunity for the respondent to question the motives of the researcher, while researcher transparency simultaneously creates tighter bonds between them. The distinction between the two roles becomes less polarized, and the relationship becomes more egalitarian and balanced. Putting forward personal information can also serve as an analytical tool, where the connection between the observer and the observed can be scrutinized. If the researcher is transparent, the reader of the research connects not only to the participants, but with the author as well, and as a result, the three actors become interconnected (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Behar, 1996). This process enriches the data, and progresses inquiry into new directions.

Through awareness of positionality the researcher can come to evaluate her/his relationship with the participants. This is particularly useful as most research in the social sciences involves a researcher entering a group of which they are not an immediate member. Although there is much acclaim to research being conducted by insiders, this is simply not feasible for all types of social research, as it narrowly confines researchers to study areas that they are intimately involved in. By paying attention to social location, a researcher can analyze their fluid or static role of insider/outsider, and the implications that this status has on the data collection process. It also serves to ground the research in a

specific timeframe and location, and acts as a reminder that the data is rooted in a timed locality (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Behar, 1996; Kirby, et al., 2010).

Collaborative Research

Related to the proactive aspects of critical theory is collaborative research, which I employed to establish democratic lines of the knowledge exchange process. I articulated to my participants my hope that they would take on a collaborative researcher status. This process acknowledges their stake within the research, and the value of the knowledge that they bring to the data formation process. In line with the broader frameworks presented, collaborative research is consciously value driven, and attempts to integrate the subjective nature of the respondents into a scientific inquiry (Kirby, et al., 2010).

Collaborative research generally incorporates action into the research process; the aim is to promote social change within the community that the research is being carried out in, and its focus is often on dominated, exploited or otherwise disadvantaged groups (Kirby, et al., 2010, Sumara, & Carson, 1997). I think adopting this research method imbued the respondents with a sense of authority within the research process. Valuing their opinions and encouraging them to act on their newfound realizations will hopefully empower the participants to make a positive contribution to their community. The collaborative method takes into consideration the ethical concern of presenting other people's voices. By engaging in collaborative research I attempted to establish more equitable relationships through the continuous checking of my own position of power and privilege, and made systematic efforts to portray the lived experiences of my subjects

honestly and authentically (Kirby, et al., 2010). There is power in words, and the author wields a great deal of it when presenting individuals' private comments to the wider world of academia. One must constantly reevaluate the portrayal, analysis, and representation of opinions expressed by the participants, especially when working with disadvantaged groups (Shakespeare, 1994).

The above sections have outlined the general theoretical and methodological frameworks that will be guiding this study. I now turn to a discussion of the methods used, and the rationale behind the decisions.

Chapter 5: Methods

The school from which the participants were recruited from has been described in ‘Chapter 2. Social Context of the Study’. I had a previous relationship with the institution, as I was a student there, and have been volunteering there for a number of years. It was also the site of my pilot study discussed in Chapter 2, and which, in part, has facilitated the present inquiry. I know and work with two of the teachers in General High who took part in this research. Through various discussions with these two educators about my curiosity concerning issues relating to persistent absenteeism, the foundation of this research began to take shape. I had expressed an interest in speaking to some of the students in order to gather insight into their perspectives regarding education in general, and absenteeism in particular. Several youths were approached by the teachers and asked if they were interested in participating in the study. The students recruited by the two educators were chosen based on their age; the respondents had to be over the age of 18 for ethical considerations, and their availability to participate. Although I am familiar with General High through my volunteering, my commitments at the university limited the time that I have been able to spend there recently, and as a result, I did not know the student participants personally. Unfortunately I was unable to interview a wider sample of youths due to the scope of this research. However, the three participants represented a diverse demographic, with varying patterns of attendance, and I believe that they were in a position, both in life and academically, that was similar to many of the other students in General High.

I carried out two separate interviews with most of the respondents, which took place about a month apart. I was unable to have a follow-up interview with one of the respondents due to his surprising and rapid drop in attendance, an issue that will be taken up fully in the following sections. The location and the date of the interviews were made flexible enough to accommodate the erratic schedules of both the participants and the researcher. Most of our conversations took place in cafés and parks, in an attempt to set a neutral backdrop to the interviews, which consisted of a few loosely based questions regarding education, the school and attendance patterns. Although I did have a set list of questions for the students (Appendix B), I often found the conversation taking unexpected detours, as the respondents' answers aroused unforeseen lines of inquiry. This development prompted me not to employ preconceived questions when speaking with the two instructors. The first interview sessions took place in early April 2013, and inquired into the participants' views on absenteeism. Through this dialogue I attempted to interpret the subjective nature of the respondents, and to problematize their conceptualizations by incorporating a critical line of thought that questioned the power relations that are evident in the respondents' lives. After analyzing the data I spoke to the participants once again near the end of April 2013 to ensure that their views were represented accurately, and to follow-up reflectively on their responses. Through the dialectic nature of the study I hoped to instill a sense of critical agency in the respondents, and encourage them to question their lived experiences. The case study approach is used here due to the limited scope of the research, but also because it allows for a thicker description and analysis of the participant's responses. By focusing on five individuals, I was able concentrate my

attention on thoroughly examining the data that I have gathered (Kirby, et al., 2010).

Creating generalizing comments is not one of the goals of this study, as the investigation into 'culture of absenteeism' must originate from the lived realities of the students, before the scope can be expanded in size.

Life History Interviews

The main method used was life history interviews (Hitchcock, & Hughes, 1995; Norquay, 2008). By using the life history interview method I attempted to get close to the participants' perceptions of the world. We engaged in conversations about how the respondents envision education and persistent absenteeism, and their place in this framework. Through this dialogue I gained insight into how the students and the educators conceptualize the reasons why certain pupils are absent, and their suggestions to alleviate the problem. This approach enabled me to ascertain the subjective nature of the respondents, and how their social positions and the socialization processes that they have undergone shape their conceptions of reality. My participants were a diverse group that reflected the school's demographic, and I probed into how they perceived their own, and others' identities in relation to persistent absenteeism. I think this is relevant, since a part of this research is concerned with what the respondents consider to be fair and equal. By presenting views that were contrary to those of the participants, I tried to gently stir the pot and ask provocative questions about education. I would frame education as being conformist, and articulate the sentiment that its major purpose was to provide an unquestioning labor force for the Canadian economy. The aim was to illuminate the

invisible social structures, and hopefully encourage the respondents to analyze the wider power relations that control and organize their lives. Through the dual approach I hoped to firstly gain an insight into the perceptions of the participants, and second, to progress the discourse to a more abstract theorization about the coercive forces within schooling and society.

In order to stay connected with the data, and to reflect on the research process, I took detailed field notes over the course of the study. In the notes I recorded my struggles with representing the voices of others, contemplated the data gathering process, and attempted to ensure that my voice did not dominate the research, but took an appropriate place (Kirby, et al., 2010). As I have previously mentioned, I believe that is extremely important for the researcher to continuously self-reflect, in order to be aware of how their positionality impacts the research. By being reflexive I hope to ensure that the data gathering process, analysis, and publication will be placed within a dialogue that will strive to challenge my own assumptions and perceptions (Kirby, et al., 2010). This not only credits the results with an enhanced sense of honesty, but hopefully also represents the voices of the respondents authentically and accurately.

I triangulated the research by approaching three students from different backgrounds and attendance patterns, and two secondary school teachers. Through the diverging views I hope to assemble differing outlooks on the topic. The aim was to have various opinions to inform the conclusions that I drew from the data. By presenting individualized responses I hope to elucidate how the concept of a culture of absenteeism is created and enacted within the subjective nature of individuals who may hold

contradictory stands on the issue. This process will allow for a thicker and deeper analysis into the topic than would otherwise be possible (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

As the above sections have outlined, the intention of this study is to proceed from the familiar and particular to more abstracted concepts. The research participants were asked general questions about absenteeism (Appendix B) in an attempt to discover how these individuals conceptualize the issue, and perhaps gain an insider's look into their subjectivity. Elaborating on the responses I probed deeper, pursuing a line of inquiry about what they consider being fair and equal, and attempted to tie this discussion into the formation and maintenance of identities. At this point, the conversation became slightly abstracted, as I began to ask questions about Canadian education as a whole, and the respondent's opinions on its validity and purpose. I pursued a line of questioning that challenged some preconceived notions of the participants by introducing a critical line of thought that delved into social structures and forces. Through this process I moved the conversation from the particulars of the respondent's life, into contemplation of invisible processes that dictate their lives. I hope that this dialectic exercise not only yielded rich data, but will support critical investigation on the part of the respondents to begin to question not only their lives, but the wider societal power dynamics as well.

Ethics

Whenever approaching research that involves human participants one must reflect thoroughly on all of the implied ethical considerations. The researcher must be fully aware of their own positionality, and the relationship they have with the respondents. The

issue of representation becomes quite crucial, as there is a great responsibility in the recording and presentation of other people's voices, particularly when working with marginalized groups (Shakespeare, 1994). In the following review I outline some ethical dilemmas that I had to navigate, and my plans on ensuring that the research was carried out with a high ethical standard.

Researcher Subjectivity

The importance of researcher positionality has been described earlier in the methodology section, but I will turn to it briefly to discuss the ethical considerations that are implicated in positioning oneself. In order to carry out ethical research one must have an invested interest in the topic that they are investigating, and have a commitment to the research subjects (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Behar, 1996). One must remain wary of the fact that hegemonic forces are evident within academia, and to closely examine the relationship with her/his respondents (Abu-Lughod, 1998). Through my interactions with the participants I strove to become as transparent as possible. To achieve this I explained my background, both as a high school dropout and as a university based researcher. The participants were made aware of my interest in the subject and what I hoped to discern from the inquiry. I was thorough about expressing my belief that there was no right or wrong answer, and that I was not seeking certain responses. Through this practice I endeavored that the respondents felt free and comfortable to express their unadulterated beliefs without fear of negative backlash or of having their views misconstrued. The aim was to shift my role from a researcher to a peer who had the participant's best interests in

mind. Although I could never gain an insider's role when speaking to the respondents, particularly the students, I hoped that by making my position explicit I could, to some extent, shed the label of an outsider. This process required me to reflect on my own subjectivity, and how the research process was being shaped by the surrounding context, and this exercise allowed me to take a step back and consider the ethical implications that were involved. I am aware that I am biased in favor of students who may be having difficulty attending class, as I was one of those youths when attending secondary school. I had to continuously remind myself that although I sympathize and share many of their opinions, I must not ignore or invalidate contrary ones. This concern is related to my role and position within the research process. I hope that the respondents saw me as a peer, and once I related my educational story they would perceive me as an ally, and not as a critic. However, as close to the participants as I was able to get, I was always in a position of power as a White male university based researcher. By using their words to my advantage, I am endowed with great responsibility and authority (Behar, 1996). It was an ongoing challenge to reevaluate my relationship with the respondents, while keeping myself ethically accountable for the interactions, assertions, and conclusions that I drew from the data.

Presenting Respondents' Voices

The portrayal of the respondents' voices created additional ethical concerns. The issue of representation primarily revolves around the fieldworker's ability to enter the mind of those being studied, whilst attempting to articulate their opinions and beliefs. In a

sense, the only subject you can write with absolute authority about is yourself (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Clifford, 1988). The researcher must constantly scrutinize their interpretations of what is being said, and to be aware of how their positionality can distort the representations (Kirby, et al., 2010). When working with groups who have previously been silenced and ostracized from the dominant discourses, the accurate portrayal of the participant's opinions becomes vital. While aiming for the precise articulation of voices the author must be attentive to the fact that it is only the respondent's beliefs being expressed, and not those of the group that a particular individual is a member of (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Clifford, 1988; Shakespeare, 1994). The person being interviewed is an individual with her/his own set of assumptions, beliefs, and opinions that cannot be generalized onto others who may exhibit similar characteristics or patterns of behavior. Making wide assumptions about groups of people can have dire consequences, and one must be wary to address the fact that the respondent's voice is theirs alone, and does not represent anyone else. Using generalizations without properly considering all of the facts can lead to stereotyping individuals who have previously been negatively labeled and stigmatized. This may lead to undue psychological harm on groups that are already fraught with difficult living conditions.

Critical Paradigm

When using a critical paradigm the researcher must be attentive not to fall into a colonizing stance, where the fieldworker is sent to 'enlighten' the oppressed masses, in order to lead them to salvation. Raising critical awareness is a fundamental aspect of this

study, but I had to tread carefully when challenging some of the respondents' assertions. Research must be done *with* the participants, and not *for* the participants. Using critical theory without reflecting on the process can create a colonizing tone, where the researcher, who is already positioned as a figure of authority and privilege, disseminates knowledge to the less informed (Sumara, & Carson, 1997). Analytical thought needs to be encouraged and guided, but it must be a bilateral process. Assuming that the fieldworker is the sole owner of knowledge and information creates a hierarchical system that relegates the participants to a submissive position. This ranking is not only contradictory to the ethos of the critical paradigm, but reestablishes the power relations that it aims to eliminate (Freire, 1970). Since my research involves individuals from disadvantaged groups this dilemma is extremely important, as I may fall into the same condescending patterns of behavior that I am attempting to eradicate. As a White male I am involuntarily endowed with certain privileges, and as a university based researcher I am imbued with professional authority. I was concerned that without reflective practices to inform and orient myself to my relation and role with my participants, I might unconsciously take on an oppressive presence that would not only alienate my respondents, but also perpetuate the skewed power dynamics that are at work within secondary schools, and the wider society in general.

Informed Consent

Over the course of the actual interviews I encountered some unforeseen concerns that I imagine many new social researchers must confront. I was unsure of how much

information to divulge about the research in question. Although I wanted to ensure that my participants were well aware of how this inquiry came to be, and my investment in it, there was a fine line that I feared to cross. I was worried that fully explaining my theoretical stance and personal opinions would sway the participants to alter their responses to fit my views. By simply introducing myself into the study as a subjective individual I was concerned about diluting the honesty of the answers to my questions. I attempted to mitigate this issue by continually reminding the participants that that I was not seeking any certain responses, and that they were free to say what they felt, without fear of disappointing or contradicting me, and were free to abstain from answering questions that they felt uncomfortable with. I also framed the questions as neutrally as possible, in an attempt to allow the interviewee space to contemplate a reply that was free from my interference. Although I acknowledge that we are all subjective creatures, I still strove not to influence the responses of my participants.

Use of Jargon

As member of post-secondary institutions I am aware that the language that I have grown accustomed to using is inaccessible for those outside of academia. During my first interview session with a student, I realized that many of the questions I was posing used jargon and an academic language unfamiliar to the respondent. Even though many of the questions were meant to be abstract in nature, as to allow for the greatest room for the respondent to ponder an answer, I had to modify much of the language, or explain in detail the concepts I was proposing. I was embarrassed to admit in my field notes that I

had made the naïve mistake of assuming that all used educational jargon, and I came to realize that without a remedy this presumption could have dire repercussions for this study.

I believe that these were the most pertinent ethical considerations concerning this research. I fully described and explained the research to the participants, and did not use any deceptive techniques that could raise further ethical conundrums. There were no monetary exchanges, or any material incentives provided to the participants. The completed work will be made available for those who wish to read it. Some of the participants may find, after critically thinking about their preconceived assumptions, that they may have held some oppressive views. This is a difficult issue, and relates to the accurateness of my representation of their opinions. Upon completion of the first set of interviews, and after having time to go over the data, I spoke to most of the respondents to clarify what they had meant, to ensure that their statements were being interpreted correctly. However, I simultaneously attempted to distinguish between what they thought and felt, and what the participants wished to share with me. When dealing with sensitive issues individuals may shy away from their true feelings in fear of being labeled as insensitive or prejudiced. I hope that by building our relationship we created a sense of trust, and that this enabled the interviewees to express their unadulterated beliefs.

I now turn to presenting the data that has originated out of this research, along with an analysis that blends my own interpretations with those found in the literature.

Chapter 6: Results

As I began to receive confirmations from the students expressing an interest in participating in the research study, I was given their contact information from one of the teachers who assisted me in facilitating this inquiry, and generally met with the youths after school in order to fully introduce the research and myself. If the prospective respondent wished to continue with the project, we discussed a potential location and date for the interview. I was as flexible as possible in order to make the process convenient for the participants. In the end, three youths were chosen for the project, along with two faculty members, and were interviewed by the researcher. The pupils in the study represented a diverse demographic, consisting of two males and a female of similar age. The students varied in educational achievements, and their attendance patterns displayed some disparity. In the following section I will describe each of the respondent's answers, the general themes that arose during the discussions, and engage in an ongoing conversation with the literature in order to analyze the thematic content that has been deduced from the data.

Since I have used the same set of questions for each of the student participants I have created subheadings of the themes covered in the interviews. This is meant to give the reader the opportunity to deduct the commonalities and/or variations in the participants' answers. My interactions with the two educators were unstructured, I did have some general inquiries that I wished to broach, but I did not generate a list of questions, as the interviews were of a conversational nature. Therefore to replicate the

dialectic nature of the discussion the educators' interviews are presented as a continuous section.

Joel

A reminder: Due to the scope of the study I was unable to observe and write about how the students behaved within the school's boundaries.

"Coming to school is a really fun part of my life because I know that there's people there and even if they don't care like. They're just happy and seeing them happy just makes me happy"

Background Information

The first student recruited for the study will be referred to by the pseudonym of Joel. The interview took place mid-day in April 2013, in a café near General High, during one of Joel's spare periods, and lasted for about 40 minutes. Joel is a 20-year-old male, who identified as Hispanic when asked about his ethnicity. He expressed a sentiment that he saw himself as a Honduran first, but still related to a Canadian identity as well. Judging by his "Canadian" accent, I presume that Joel has either resided in Canada for a number of years, or has received North American styled English education elsewhere. Joel currently resided with his mother and stepfather, and described his social class standing as lower-middle class. Joel was in grade 12, and supposed to be graduating, although when I asked him about his plans for the following year, Joel seemed unsure. He stated that he wanted to come back to General High for one more year, as he quite enjoyed attending the school. However, he felt too old to be returning to high school, and

Joel mentioned that some of the students were somewhat hostile to him due to his age. Although Joel saw university as an eventual possibility, the prospect of having to borrow large quantities of money to finance his aspirations for higher education did not seem particularly inviting. When asked if he was working, Joel stated that he was not currently employed.

In an attempt to gain an in-depth perception of the respondents I asked two of their teachers, also part of this research, to describe briefly each of the participants. The instructors framed Joel as quite philosophical, and possessing the ability to think on an abstract level. He appeared to have a great interest in learning and discovering new knowledge, although that did not always manifest itself in his assignment completion. Joel is also very critical of the established order and large institutions, a sentiment I also observed during my interactions with him. As of late, Joel's attendance was improving greatly when compared to his other years at General High. However, it was still fairly spotty, and Joel was known to miss classes on a weekly basis. One of the instructors mentioned a previous history of drug use, and of a somewhat turbulent home life. The last two characterizations were expressed to me after I had conducted my interview with Joel, and due to his unofficial withdrawal from the school shortly after the first round of interviews was complete, I was unable to contact him to probe deeper into these issues. After speaking to Joel about his general background information, I began to ask questions about how he perceived his attendance patterns to gain an idea of how he conceptualized his absenteeism rates.

Attendance Patterns

When asked about how often he attended school Joel answered that he felt like he was present in class regularly (4-5 days per week), although Joel did mention that in the past his attendance was poor (2-3 days per week). He characterized it as either sporadic, where Joel would miss a portion of his classes, to non-existent, where he would not be present in the building for days at a time. I asked Joel to describe some of the causes in the past or the present that cause him to miss school.

Causes for Absences

Joel cited numerous reasons of quite a variance. He expressed feelings of guilt and shame, where he would feel uncomfortable coming to class late, and would choose to miss the lesson instead. What was particularly interesting is that Joel had made such a strong bond with his instructors that he felt that it was a personal insult to arrive to their class late, and thought it less disrespectful to abstain from the lesson, and speak to the teacher after class to find out what he had missed. I was not expecting this type of response, as much of the literature in education stresses the need for educators to make meaningful and lasting relationships with their pupils (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; De Wit, et al., 2010; Smyth, 2006). These authors advocate that the faculty become fully immersed in the lives of their students, their families, and the surrounding neighborhoods. Through establishing close relations the instructor acknowledges the individuality of the particular student, and thus creates a safe space in which the youth feels comfortable to articulate their inner thoughts, thereby encouraging closer personal

ties between the pupil and the school (Giroux, 1989). In this situation it appears that Joel took such a liking to his teachers that he chose to miss school to preemptively avoid the possibility of a confrontation. This highlights the intricate position that students and educators are often put in. While wishing to be attentive and receptive to the pupils' needs, educators must still maintain a level of homogeneity in how they operate their classes. It is difficult for teachers to treat some students deferentially and not others. This is due to the current dominant educational model, one that necessitates a sense of impartiality from the instructors, and orders them to maintain an objective stance when interacting with the pupils (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). This approach ignores the varying life circumstances of the students, and serves to veil the underlying inequalities that permeate the lives of the youths. This is an essential point considering General High served a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged adolescents. As a result, although Joel did feel a positive relationship with certain instructors, their authoritarian duties became a hindrance to developing a deeper relationship. Joel was aware that his behavior was considered inappropriate by the school's standards, and might upset a particular teacher. This displays the dilemma that some of the instructors in General High were experiencing, where they wished to accommodate students who were absent on a regular basis, but were still expected to maintain steady attendance patterns for all the pupils in their charge.

As the conversation continued Joel mentioned peer influences as negating his being present in class consistently. He spoke about social events that would encourage him to skip and spend time with his friends instead of being present in school. Joel stated

that at times he would chose his friends over schooling, and socializing with peers had a higher importance than going to class. Although this developrment could be seen as Joel associating himself with youths who do not hold high educational aspirations (De Wit, et al., 2010), I felt that this was a more natural occurrence, where young people choose recreational activities over going to classes. I think it is to be expected that secondary school students will miss some lessons to participate in social activities that they perceive to be more interesting than schooling. However, one must be wary of this pattern, as it can develop into a cycle of non-attendance where the pupil begins to disassociate her/himself from the educational institution (Atwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010).

Joel stated that at times his personal mood would dissuade him from going to class. If he exhibited feelings of anger, frustration, or a lack of concentration, Joel would often skip. He mentioned that, on occasion, he felt that he could not endure sitting quietly in a class and to follow a certain lesson. These feelings may point to the current educational system's inability to stimulate effectively a portion of its students (Bridgeland, 2010; Freire; 1970; Giroux, 1989). The formal model typically requires pupils to discover knowledge in a fairly uniform way, one that does not leave much room for accommodating the different learning styles of its constituents, nor the types of knowledge and experiences they bring into the class. Freire's (1970) concept of the "banking" model of education is useful here, where information is unilaterally dispensed from the experts (instructors) to the empty receptacles (students). Although there is a growing trend within schools in the Greater Toronto Area to alter their content delivery methods, there is still a dependence on this outdated model of knowledge reception that is

linear and authoritative. The design of the classes in General High did contain a space for discussion and critical inquiry that more radical pedagogues promote (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989), but there is nonetheless a system of ‘downloading’ currently operating in the classrooms. If a particular youth is unable to attain a certain level of comprehension within the present instructional paradigm there are relatively few alternatives for them to process their inquiries, and they are considered as deficient (Fine, 1991; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). Joel’s statement about his inability to concentrate and emulate the perfect student model due to his personal feelings signifies the school’s inadequacy to either address those emotions, or use them in a proactive fashion and thus make Joel feel a part of a learning process. The “banking model” does not permit space for disengaged students to re-engage (Freire, 1970). Therefore, whenever Joel felt like he could not meet the institutional expectations, he chose to voluntarily miss class.

Involvement of Family in Schooling

After Joel listed the reasons for his lack of attendance, I asked a few questions regarding the involvement of his family in his schooling. I asked Joel who in his family was the most engaged in his education; what role they took in assisting him with his schooling; and whether they considered it important. This line of questioning attempted to uncover Joel’s perceptions of the importance of schooling that have been passed down to him from his family, and to gain a general sense of how much significance is placed on furthering his education. Considering the value that numerous scholars place on the role of families in the academic achievement of youths (Fuligni, 1997; Griffith, & Smith,

2001; Lareau, 2011; Lawson, 2012; Standing, 1999; Terry, 2008) I thought dialoguing with Joel directly would shed light on the topic, and provide thematic content grounded in the lived experience of this participant (Kirby, et al., 2010). Joel informed me that his mother was primarily concerned with his education as opposed to his stepfather, thereby confirming Griffith & Smith's (2005) assertion that much of the work relating to school is carried out by mothers. Joel stated that his mother was aware he was not attending regularly, and that at times he would stay at home instead of going to school. I asked Joel whether his family cared about his schooling, and their involvement in it. He responded that since an early age he was given the responsibility to manage his educational affairs, and that it was his duty to ensure that he succeeded at school. There did not appear to be a strong push for Joel to excel academically, but he did mention that his mother believed that education would make his life easier in the years to come. This sentiment is similar to the conceptualization that Lareau (2011) has proposed in her book 'Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life', where the parent(s) of youths living in the lower socioeconomic strata relegated the duties of their children's education to professionals, and did not feel that they were obliged to continually monitor their kids' attendance patterns, as opposed to the intimate involvement of middle-class parents in their children's schooling. This is not to argue that Joel's mother did not care about his educational progress, but that often marginalized individuals defer to the school to ensure that their children are there regularly, and trust the institution to guarantee that their kids are in school during the designated hours. Combined with the added challenges that many disadvantaged parent(s) have to navigate, monitoring attendance is often beyond the

capacity of the particular parent, especially when they bear sole responsibility (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Standing, 1999). There are also varying notions of what the role of the parent is, and what constitutes “caring” for a child. Much of the discourse surrounding parenting within Toronto’s schools takes a White middle-class assumption of what constitutes a “good” parent, an assumption that is imbued with certain connotations and expectations. The assumption is of a nuclear family, where the mother is presumed to work with her children to build up capital that will be useful to them in navigating large institutions. What is implied in this theorization is the availability of time and resources by the mother to carry out this mothering work (Standing, 1999). Whenever a parent fails to embody this ideal image, they are considered deficient, and the responsibility for the perceived failure of their children is thrust onto them (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999).

General High

After speaking to Joel about his family, I asked questions about General High in an effort to understand his feelings toward the institution. We began to discuss the curriculum, and his feelings toward it. I was expecting a rather poor review, as during my pilot study (See Ch. 2), an educator I interviewed had stated that some students felt that the course selection was extremely narrow due to the small size of the school, and some literature suggests that the current curriculum content carries racist undertones that ignores the past histories of disadvantaged groups, while validating the oppressive structures that operate to disenfranchise marginalized peoples (Bridgeland, 2010;

Dimitriadis, 2009; Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2007; Smyth, 2006). I was surprised to hear Joel's optimism for the curriculum, having only positive things to say; he stated that it was interesting, engaging, varied and relevant. He did not find himself dissatisfied in any way, or ever bored with the lessons, although he did express the sentiment that some compulsory classes had to be taken regardless of desirability. From this dialogue it did not appear that the curriculum was one of the causes for Joel's intermittent poor attendance patterns, which is in contradiction with the above-mentioned literature. However, it can be speculated that Joel, through his numerous years spent in Canadian schools, has become inoculated with the hegemonic mantra that much of the dominant educational discourse reaffirms, where it is implied that what is worth learning is carried by the curriculum (Freire, 1970).

Relationship With the Faculty

I began to speak with Joel about his relationship with the faculty and the administrative staff at General High. Joel felt supported by the instructors in his learning, and thought that the majority of them seemed to have a genuine interest in him and his schooling. Joel stated that the teachers seemed happy to be in the school, and this feeling transmitted itself to him, and encouraged him to come to class more regularly. Given that Joel makes this case during a period of intense labour unrest among Ontario's teachers during the spring 2013 academic term, Joel's understanding of teachers enjoying their work reflects the fact that, as mentioned in 'Chapter 2: Social Context of the Study', General High focuses on "at risk" students, and that educators who work there have a

particular commitment to finding ways in which “at risk” students can be guided to graduate (Brown, & Parekh, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010; DiBara, 2007; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011). Joel mentioned that he would not be nearly as close to graduating as he was, if not for the supportive nature of the faculty. He stated, “Coming to school is a really fun part of my life” which exemplifies Joel’s feelings of a positive connection to the school, and suggests that strong bonds with teachers can promote regular attendance (Au, & Raphael, 2000; DiBara, 2007; Glass, & Wong, 2003).

Relationship With Peers

After conversing about his relationships with the faculty I asked similar questions regarding Joel’s interactions with his peers, and the overall atmosphere within General High. Joel believed that, for the most part, the student body maintained a harmonious existence. At times, certain individuals would have conflicts with others, but those were isolated incidents that were fairly infrequent. Joel also stated that he did not have any problems with other youths at General High. Although it must be noted that he had previously mentioned that certain students had issues with him due to his age, Joel’s responses suggested that peer turmoil and/or safety were not a significant concern, and did not interfere with his coming to school. This is an interesting finding, as some of the critical literature of urban schooling is often focused on the poor conditions of inner city schools (DiBara, 2007; Fine, 1991), yet it appears as though, to Joel, the ambiance in General High was one that promoted stability and harmony. This suggests that some intellectuals hold an overly pessimistic conception of urban schools, without giving credit

to the positive interactions that take place within them. These institutions may be fraught with a lack of resources, and students with unmet needs (DiBara, 2007; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006), yet Joel's characterization of General High highlights the nurturing and supportive environment that dedicated faculty and administrative staff can create in underprivileged schools. It also points to the difference between the American paradigm of "inner city" and the Greater Toronto Area reality, where inner city areas are actually located in the old suburbs of the original city of Toronto and there have been conscious attempts, especially by the Toronto District School Board, to mediate the effects of the relationship between socio-economic status and school success by saturating these schools with resources and innovative programming (Brown, & Parekh, 2010; Teelucksingh, 2007).

Identity

Next I broached issues of Joel's identity, asking him whether his conception of his identity was being confined by the school's set of norms and stance on acceptable behavior. Much like Yon (2000) has theorized, I believe that at times educational institutions prescribe a fixed set of identifying categories onto its students. I was interested in whether Joel held a more fluid perception of identity in relation to being an 'ideal student', one that is obedient and submissive. Joel felt that he could still be himself while in school, but that he had to modify some patterns of his behavior in order to fit the school's model of the ideal student. Joel spoke of self-restraint, by which he meant sitting quietly in a class and not disturbing others. He thought the school was accepting, and he

was not being forced to change his identity, but that he simply had to abide by the rules that were placed on him. This suggests that Joel did not perceive the school as a hostile or oppressive institution, and was quite willing to slightly alter his behavior to fit in and not be a cause of disturbance. Joel did not relay concerns about having to conform to the rigid structure, which may be interpreted as evidence of him internalizing the official code of conduct and becoming unaware of it (Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Ehatty, 2008). As Freire (1970) proposes, people who are oppressed for extended amounts of time begin to slowly relate to, and embody the oppressor, while adapting to the structures of oppression that are being used against them. Through this process Joel has identified with the dominant discourse on 'proper' behavior in school, and is unconsciously mirroring the concept of the model student that he has been socialized into accepting.

Perception of Attendance Patterns of Peers in General High

Having spoken about Joel's interactions within, and opinions about the school, I moved on to ask questions about how he perceived the attendance patterns of the other students in General High. The goal was to probe into Joel's conceptions of fairness and equality within education. I began by asking him to name some of the reasons why other youths were absent in General High. Joel described a plethora of causes of irregular attendance. He mentioned that poor living situations, whether it meant that a particular youth was having problems at home, or was engaged in employment, could negatively affect a student's ability to be present in school. Other pupils may be faced with falling behind their cohort, which could overwhelm an individual, due to the sheer amount of

work that they must catch-up on. Feelings of inadequacy could also develop when a youth found themselves to be at a lower level of comprehension of the material than their classmates. Joel cited emotional problems as reasons for a lack of attendance, which may point to the high levels of stress that adolescents living in the margins are exposed to (Porche, et al., 2011). In somewhat of a contradictory answer, Joel stated that not the entire faculty took the time to ask individual students what troubles they may be experiencing in their daily lives. Although he expressed a sincere connection to many of his teachers, Joel maintained that some instructors did not take a profound interest in the lives of their students. When I asked him whether there were certain occurrences within the building that would encourage students to miss class, Joel responded that for the most part individual students chose to skip for personal reasons. He had heard of complaints regarding certain instructors, but he was of the opinion that these criticisms were on an individual basis, and if someone truly needed or wanted a course credit they should “grit their teeth, and just get through it”. This suggests that Joel considered it to be an individual student’s responsibility to excel academically, even if confronted with adverse conditions; a person should rise above them. This in turn exemplifies the stringent individualistic motto in current schooling that merits a person on their ability to overcome obstacles in their path to success. By focusing on meritocracy, the system effectively blurs the distinctions between people’s lives, and thrusts the blame onto the victim, framing them as an inadequate individual, rather than paying attention to the social contexts that construct inequality (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). I turned to discuss two terms that I have created during my pilot study

(Ch. 2), I asked Joel about the proportion of students who fall into the voluntary (missing class for no particular reason) vs. involuntary absenteeism (an outside cause for an absence) categories. Joel felt that there was a mixture of the two, and that even absences which on the surface would appear to be voluntary, would often hide underlying factors in a youth's life. Joel described a hypothetical example of a student who would often miss class, and could be artificially and inaccurately labeled as lazy. But underneath that label the student's life could be quite difficult, and skipping class was a way out. Joel mentioned that skipping school is one of the only avenues of control that certain disadvantaged students may have. Faced with a life where they feel dominated by their surroundings, a youth may choose not to attend as a way of being free, that is, without being controlled from above. I was intrigued by Joel's notion of skipping as an escape route, and a way for a youth to feel a sense of agency in an otherwise powerless life. Joel's hypothetical example is aligned with McIntyre-Bhatty's (2008) theorization around the issue of absenteeism as a form of resistance to the oppressive forces apparent in a marginalized youth's life. The premise suggests that adolescents who are confronted with unequal life opportunities and feel that they hold no control over their lives may use absenteeism as a method of resistance. They express their dissatisfaction with the educational system by abstaining from participation in it. Having few choices, an adolescent may use the only action available to them, even if it means missing school. Although Joel did not as explicitly articulate this intent on the part of the student as McIntyre-Bhatty (2008), a similar action process may be taking place.

Joel also briefly explained that some pupils miss school in order to help their families, but he felt that there were not many youths in that position at General High. Through this dialogue it became apparent that much like the literature and my own past observations have documented, persistent absentees comprise an extremely diverse demographic, one that is full of variance, which defies simple categories of classification.

Culture of Absenteeism

Having established the general causes for non-attendance I explained an occurrence that I thought might be happening in General High, and asked Joel his thoughts on it. Culture of absenteeism has been described in detail in the discussion of the pilot study (See Ch. 2), and will only be briefly explained here. The concept refers to a school's inability to accommodate students who miss class involuntarily, while eradicating voluntary absenteeism (For a detailed description of voluntary vs. involuntary absenteeism see Ch. 2). Joel and I discussed the general atmosphere in General High, and came to an agreement that the school had a fairly relaxed attitude towards attendance. I asked Joel whether this pattern might encourage certain students to miss class voluntarily, since they perceive regular attendance as not being given high importance. Joel felt that the majority of the teachers did care a great deal about attendance, and encouraged all students to come to class as often as possible. Since General High is a small school, most of the educators know almost the entire student body, and as a result, can keep a closer track of their progress. Joel mentioned that the instructors recognized the abilities that students brought to the class, and knew that certain youths could keep up with their

cohort, even if they were missing portions of their classes. A big aspect of his thinking rested on an individual's ability to catch-up with the rest of the class, and placed that responsibility on the shoulders of the particular student, thereby once again reaffirming Joel's strong inclination to relate to the individualistic stance being promoted by educational institutions (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; Smyth, 2006). This highlights the degree to which Joel has been indoctrinated with the ideological grounding of the dominant educational model being practiced in Toronto. It may indicate that critical awareness needs to be developed through a different curriculum and must be implemented at an earlier age, before the mantra has been fully accepted by the youth as a universal standard. It appeared that there was a more distanced approach to schooling being carried out in General High. The students were treated more as adults, and were given options in how they wished to pursue their education. Although the teachers did wish for their pupils to be present consistently, they seemed aware that this was not a possibility for all of their students, and were inclined to be flexible enough to accommodate the varying attendance patterns that were prevalent in their classes. With this in mind I began to ask questions concerning the reintegration process that students who have missed substantial amounts of lessons had to go through.

Reintegration of Absentees

Joel felt that the teachers often had mixed reactions to the return of often-absent students to their classrooms. Joel mentioned that at times instructors would become frustrated at the spotty attendance patterns of some of their pupils, and that this irritation

could be projected onto the regular attendees. A large part in this attitude was determined by the conduct of the absentee. Joel explained that if a non-attendee came back into the class and was disruptive, or wished to be caught up on significant quantities of missed work immediately, a teacher would become upset at the interruption of their daily lesson plan. However, if a pupil was willing to seek help outside of the class time, most of the faculty would be glad to provide additional opportunities for catching up. Again Joel mentioned that the vast majority of the teachers at General High wished for their students to succeed, and were adaptable in their approaches to evaluation.

When asked about how other students treated returning pupils Joel expressed mixed feelings. While he personally did not have any issues with these youths, others, whom he characterized as taking their education seriously, at times did feel upset at an individual taking up a significant portion of the teacher's time. Yet for the most part, Joel did not think that there were serious tensions underlying the relationships between the regular and irregular attendees. Since General High has been going through the issues related to non-attendance for quite some time, I think that perhaps many of the students who have been attending the institution for a few years, have grown accustomed to the daily disruptions. The culture of absenteeism had become so ingrained into the fabric of General High, that it evolved to become a part of the overall culture of schooling for many of these youths (Giroux, 1989). Interviewing Joel, who was a mature student, and near the end of his high school experience, meant that he had been exposed to irregular patterns of attendance for a considerable amount of time. As a result, his relaxed attitude towards non-attendees can be characterized as Joel internalizing the norm of non-

attendance that is held at General High. This implies that this (dys)functional state had become the standard in the school, and the youths were expected to accept this purported inevitability, thereby reestablishing the authority of the institution to dictate the standing order, even in the face of a contradiction of its own creation (Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Smyth, 2006). In addition, the fact that Joel personally has exhibited irregular attendance patterns would encourage him to be more empathetic to others going through a similar process.

Fair and Equal

With Joel's opinions in mind I asked questions concerning the fairness of the differential treatment that was practiced in General High. I was interested in seeing how Joel conceptualized fairness and equality in relation to education, and the rationale behind his thoughts. By gathering his views I hoped to gently prod and problematize some of them by infusing critical theory (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; Yosso, 2005) into the discussion. When asked whether it was fair for certain students to be treated differently Joel stated that it was, because in his eyes most pupils received the same opportunities. Joel believed that in the majority of cases the instructors would accommodate non-attendees without differentiating them from regular attendees. However, when an absentee displayed 'disruptive' patterns this specialized treatment might be revoked. Joel conceptualized a disruptive student as one who is not serious about their education, a person who misses substantial portions of their classes, and expected to be given differential treatment without displaying the reasons why they should be accommodated.

Joel believed that an absentee should show the instructor their commitment to school; willingness to work hard and catch-up; and justify their absence. It is through these actions one merits themselves to be worthy of different arrangements. These responses highlight an underlying rationalization process that Joel was performing, where it was up to the individual student to approach the teachers in order to catch up. This line of thinking carries imbued neoliberal connotations that pride personal achievement, while ignoring the social contexts that are the backdrop for social interactions (Earl, 1995; Keil, 2002; O'Sullivan, 1999; Seccombe, 2000). Through this process a student is evaluated based on their ability to abide by the school's regulations, and to succeed within the ideological confines of the institution. The pupil is rewarded for their 'perseverance', while a youth who cannot fit the ideal student mold is classified as inadequate, and a failure (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). Although Joel felt it fair for everyone to be treated differently, he nonetheless portrayed a sentiment that the student was to be responsible for ensuring that his or her education moved forward. Since there were routes of reintegration available to the youths, it was their duty to capitalize on them. The onus was on the pupil, and not the faculty to maintain the same level of educational achievement as the rest of the cohort, and if one did not partake in this obligation, they were unworthy of modified treatment. In this interesting blend of individualism and a need for a support network, Joel had constructed an educational system based both on student need, and an individual's commitment to schooling. Although Joel expected the instructors to accommodate the youths who were falling behind, he nonetheless believed that the desire to succeed must emanate from the

particular student. He did not mention the importance of educators to motivate youths to attend regularly, and it appeared as though in Joel's opinion, the faculty's role ended at implementing strategies that would allow absentees to reintegrate quickly and without disruption. Yet again Joel seems to have fallen into the grasp of individualism, which has become so entrenched in his conceptualization of reality that it has developed into a fundamental aspect of his thought process regarding fairness and equality.

With the particulars answered I began to push the conversation to a more abstract level. Through this dialogue I aimed at building on what Joel had already revealed to me about his opinions of schooling in the day-to-day interactions, to discover what he thought about education as a whole.

Validity of Formal Education

When asked about why he was in school Joel was perplexed at the question. He began by articulating the importance of the social aspect that formal education provides. Joel expressed a belief that it was vital for pupils to engage in conversations with both peers and faculty alike. Combined with learning certain subjects, and earning credentials to "move on with your life, so you can go to college or university" were the social interactions that took place within the school walls. Joel mentioned meeting different types of people; exposure to varying ways of thinking and opinions; and being placed into situations that were unavailable in isolation. The dialogical nature of education ranked highly in Joel's opinion, in agreement with the line of thought that advocates for more bilinear teaching practices which encourage students to engage in conversations,

rather than write down facts that are administered by an instructor (DiBara, 2007; Glass, & Wong, 2003). Joel appears to be aware that formal education goes far beyond the mere ingestion of facts, and acts as an important socializing tool. Yet, he still held to the common belief that educational credentials are a major, if not the only way of moving forward in life, and that to a degree, the point of schooling is to attain diplomas. This steadfast assumption would become an underlying theme that was voiced by all of the students who took part in this study. It displays the promise of a better life that is presently being promoted by educational institutions (Giroux, 1989), an aspiration that is veiled in obscurity, without any reified steps to attain this higher standard of living being explicitly articulated (Syed, et al., 2011). This reward structure gives formal education much of its power, especially over marginalized youths who are often desperate to improve their living conditions. The paradigm proposes that if a particular student abides by the established code of conduct, buys into dominant ideological assumptions, and performs at an acceptable level, they will be given a chance at a “new” life, one that is free from discrimination and want (Fine, 1991; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). This framework is a potent component when discussing the absenteeism issue. General High served a large number of students who are consider “at risk” of premature school withdrawal. As Brown and Parekh (2010) have documented there is a gross overrepresentation of youths being labeled as “at-risk” who are living in the lower socio-econornic strata. The expectations for these adolescents are often lowered once the label of ‘Special Needs’ is applied, specifically when a particular student is considered to have behavioral problems. As a result, nearly half of all pupils who are labeled as “at-risk” will not apply for post-

secondary schooling in the Greater Toronto Area, and thereby highlights the fallacious nature of the reward paradigm (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). Even when confronted by a slight challenge, when I asked if education was relevant in the new digital age, Joel still held fast to his belief in the importance and validity of formal schooling, as it now exists.

Control of Personal Future

I spoke with Joel about his future, and whether he felt in control of it, or if it was dictated from above and he was merely reacting to his circumstances. Joel felt that he was in control, but he characterized this agency as developing through his years in school. Being 20 gave him the added time to consider what he wanted to do in the future; Joel mentioned maturing as a person as being a major catalyst in his heightened sense of power and control within his life. This points to a need for supportive role models to be present within secondary schools, much like the ones being advocated for by Syed, Azmita, & Cooper (2011). There is a need for individuals who can give their time and attention to a youth, and mentor them in how to navigate the complex social relations that many young adults will find themselves in, and to shrug off the oppressive forces that are currently dominating their lives. These mentors do not necessarily have to originate out of the school, but may be sourced from the community. This would allow the community to use its informal capital and a multitude of knowledge bases, presently being ignored by the dominant educational paradigm, to foster a sense of power, and exercise it in a proactive manner. Although there are guidance counselors working in General High, perhaps assistance could be given to provide a safe space for youths to voice concerns

about their future, and to receive advice and information about the possibilities and opportunities that await them upon either completion or withdrawal from formal education.

Critical Theory

At this point I began to infuse critical theory into our dialogue (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; Yosso, 2005). I was interested to see whether Joel would relate to the concepts, as being a determinant of poor attendance patterns, or reject them as being too radical. Since he was critical of establishments and institutions in general, but still supportive of schooling, I was curious to see his responses. Joel was of the opinion that formal education instilled certain habits that were advantageous in life. The skills of showing up on time, staying focused on tasks, and working in teams are all tools that one needs in order to succeed in life. While Joel did not totally agree with textbook learning, he stated that going to school regularly did instill good habits. I expanded the conversation by proposing that certain theorists (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989) might classify formal Canadian education as being overly conformist in nature, one that rewards compliance, while punishing disobedience. To add a touch of provocative thought, I mentioned that it could be argued that organized schooling was meant to provide an obedient labor force that could be exploited by society's elites (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). Although Joel did agree with some of my proposals, he felt that one could navigate around the rigid structure of schools. The chief method he personally utilized was disobedience. Joel framed disobedience not as something that was aimed to annoy or

disrupt, but a tool he would use in order to achieve what he wanted. He provided an example of a person who was conditioned not to ask questions forcing themselves to ask questions regardless of their previous socialization. Through this process an individual can exercise agency, and not simply comply with the dominant system that they are navigating. Joel mentioned that General High's teachers presented opportunities to engage in critical discussions, and to question not only the outside world, but also what constituted knowledge, and how it was created. Joel felt that as long as he was not insulting someone, or their beliefs, there was a safe space to voice his views without fear of backlash. Joel thought that the critical model was overly pessimistic in its perception of education; he could see its merits, yet believed that General High did not exhibit these patterns. In his view it was up to an individual school and/or administrator to determine how a school is run, and there was no overarching hegemonic forces at play. Joel was also aware of the current trend in Ontario's educational policy toward more egalitarian practices and ways of teaching. He believed that instructors were genuinely interested in ensuring that their pupils enjoyed their education, and were not simply cogs in the machine. Joel's responses left an impression on me. On the one hand I could assume that Joel has not been sufficiently made aware of the disparities that are apparent in society as proposed by Freire (1970), and that he is still relatively uninformed about the interconnected web of oppressing processes that operate under the veil of the hegemonic mantra. Many of Joel's answers still resounded with the belief that an individual was the chief actor in ensuring personal success. This represents the lingering effect of the socializing process that he has undergone throughout his life, and is much in line with the

critical theoretical model (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). Even though Joel was described as being weary of large institutions, he had become so immersed in them that he was unaware of how they were shaping his unconscious thought processes. Yet, I think that this is too cynical a stance. As university based researchers, we can forget that developing critical awareness takes a considerable amount of time, and is not a single awakening moment (Freire, 1970). What is required is the implementation of critical inquiry in earlier grades to erect a foundation of critical awareness prior to entry into secondary school. Thus, for us to presently expect secondary school students to be fully conscious of their social contexts is naïve and unrealistic. Joel had described some burgeoning elements of critical awareness being practiced within General High. By giving a safe space to explore ideas and, importantly, *to question* what the youths were learning, the instructors were beginning the process of locating one's position to and in the world (Heron, 2005).

Proposals to Improve Attendance

To end the interview I asked Joel about the possible steps that schools could take in order to ensure that all students were present in class. Joel offered an intricate insight into the condition of General High. Although he felt that the course selection could be widened to attract more prospective students, and to engage the enrolled pupils, Joel was acutely aware of the dire situation of General High in regards to the dropping enrollment numbers. Joel knew that due to the limited number of pupils, the school was in a fiscally precarious situation, and that providing additional courses was simply not feasible.

Beside this suggestion he felt that the staff was doing their utmost to maintain steady attendance patterns for all of the students.

Joel had described many profound and interesting notions in his interview. He appeared to be an individual, who, while being somewhat aware of the larger unseen forces that were at play in his life, was still being manipulated by them (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). Joel seemed to have a deep understanding of the social actors that were influencing his life, and I thought that he had great potential for higher education. It was these conclusions that made his sudden withdrawal from General High so troubling. Shortly after the completion of the first interview session Joel's attendance dropped off significantly. When volunteering I no longer saw him in class, and when I approached some of his teachers to inquire into why he was absent, they were as perplexed about the occurrence as I was. I am confounded how a student who had been slowly improving his attendance patterns, and who expressed such positive sentimental feelings towards General High, would chose to so unexpectedly abstain from attending. What compounded the issue was the fact that Joel was missing the period of the semester that was crucial for the successful completion of his courses. When I spoke to Joel's teachers many mentioned that he was in grave danger of not earning the credits for classes he was currently enrolled in. I attempted to contact him myself, but was unable to do so, as his phone was permanently turned off. Joel was spotted by one of his instructors near the school and was visibly intoxicated under the influence of marijuana. Although whether this was recreational use, or perhaps abuse he had a previous history of, is unclear.

Themes Originating Out of the Interview

Having reflected on Joel's unexpected departure, I have developed some possible explanations on the issue. The first explores the conceptualizations of Lareau (2011) and her discussion of the role of family in a youth's educational aspirations. A second theory rests on the dubious nature of the label 'dropout' that is being applied by some academics in their description of persistent absenteeism.

A key theme that originated in my interaction with Joel was the importance of family involvement in school, in relation to a student's educational achievements. Joel had distinctly articulated that he was solely responsible for how well he did in school, and that his mother contributed little in assisting and monitoring Joel's studies. It can be speculated that Joel's sudden withdrawal from General High could be related to the socializing processes that he had undergone at home. To aid in this theorizing I will rely on a concept proposed by Lareau (2011) in her work 'Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life'. Lareau (2011) introduced a conceptual framework titled 'concerted cultivation', which compares the varying child rearing practices being exercised by parents located on the opposite ends of the socioeconomic scale. Parents living at the higher end of the scale tended to micromanage the lives of their children, and were actively involved in their kids' schooling, whereas the parents struggling in poverty often deferred the educational responsibility to trained professionals within the school. Joel's approach to his studies may indicate a development that was inadvertently precipitated by his mother's attitude to Joel's schooling. As Lareau (2011) has documented, many parents who are having difficulty supporting their children's basic needs may be juggling

numerous commitments such as employment, securing food and shelter, and attending to health problems. As a result, ensuring that their kids are in school regularly may be an obligation that some parents cannot fulfill. Although many of these parents do care a great deal about their children's educational progress, they may revert to the advice of trained professionals within the school to fulfill that responsibility (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Standing, 1999). It appears as this had been occurring in Joel's household, as his mother's main goal was to secure a living wage to provide for her son. This may have given Joel the message that school was not a priority, as it did not attract much of his mother's attention. Through this conceived lack of parental involvement Joel may have slowly begun to conceptualize his schooling as unimportant, and developed a lackadaisical approach to his attendance, which finally culminated in his premature withdrawal from General High. This points to the added disadvantages and responsibilities that some educational institutions thrust on families living in the margins. As Lareau (2011), Griffith & Smith (2005), and Standing (1999) have pointed out, many schools hold certain expectations of parental involvement in their children's schooling, ones that may be impossible for some parents to fulfill. Joel, having perceived a lack of attention paid by his mother to his schoolwork, would have greatly benefited from encouragement by the faculty and/or a mentor (Syed, et al., 2011) in his progress in school, and the importance of gaining an education. My inability to have a second discussion with Joel has prohibited this from being more than speculation, as I was unable to probe deeper into his perception of the relationship his mother had with his schooling.

As I have previously stated, Joel's unofficial departure from General High came as quite a shock. Having contemplated what his actions might imply not only for Joel, but for this research as well, I began to consider what his status as a student was. Since Joel did not officially withdraw or 'drop-out' of school he could not be classified as a dropout, but having missed a few weeks of classes, to a degree that he would likely fail his courses, Joel could not be categorized as a 'student' either. This theorization brought me into conflict with some of the literature concerned with writing about high school dropouts. I focus on Bridgeland's (2010) work, as the word 'dropout' is explicitly stated in its title, and appears multiple times throughout the article. It appears as though to Bridgeland (2010) the concept of 'dropout' is definite and static, with the polarity of 'student' vs. 'dropout' being a straightforward assumption. I leaned on Dei's (1997) theorization on the topic to ground my analysis of the inadequacy of the term 'dropout', where often students are systematically 'pushed out' of school, rather than 'dropping out'. Joel's status challenges the fixed definition and application of the label 'dropout', suggesting that a much murkier conceptualization of a 'dropout' can be discerned from the data, and perhaps the need for the eradication of the label as a whole. Much like Yon (2000) has exemplified in his book, 'Elusive Culture', writing about culture and identity, establishing rigid groupings based on static categories is fraught with difficulties, as the lives and identities of inner city students are extremely complex. Creating essentialist labels produces the assumption that these groups are imbued with absolute characteristics that can be employed to place individuals into these categories, and as Yon (2000) has documented, often youths traverse in and out of certain groups, and may defy simple

organizational classification. A more fluid conception of dropout is useful here, one that is mindful of the convoluted nature of the topic. Academics cannot rely on specific and homogenous categories to group a distinctly heterogeneous demographic. By using a sweeping term, especially one intersected by so many unspoken premises, is an unethical research methodology, one that ignores the convoluted educational pathways that numerous adolescents embark on. Joel was in a state of limbo, caught between the two imposed roles (Bridgeland, 2010; Fine, 1991). By acknowledging the intricate routes that youths traverse in search of schooling, the research validates the experiences of those whom it is written about, and does not lump together unique individuals into an ambiguous grouping.

To this date I am unsure of what exactly happened to Joel, and what motivated him to immediately withdraw from General High. This development highlighted the dire situation that non-attendance can create. I personally witnessed a student falling through the cracks; it is my hope that he will be encouraged to return to school and will pursue his education to his furthest aspirations.

Mateen

"Short [term] goals...get done with high school. I want to finish it as soon as possible, and I really need money, but I am still struggling between these two decisions. I'm stuck in a dilemma. Whether I want to work, or whether I want to pursue my education. College or university. So I'm still struggling between those two you know. Because based on my background I can't get education because I need money and I don't have family so I was thinking if I want to work or quit college. But from the other side I really love to study, I love education. And if I

live, if I continue my education it would be very hard, umm, very hard life. I've had that experience before"

Background Information

The second participant that took part in this study will be referred to as Mateen. Mateen and I held a 25-minute interview in a park that was located near General High. Mateen identified as a 20-year-old Middle Eastern male, and had been attending the school for two and a half years. He had fled from Afghanistan five years ago as a refugee, and has been living in Canada for the past three, having previously resided in the United States of America for two years. When asked about what he thought his social class standing was, Mateen seemed unsure of how to answer, and asked me to clarify what I had meant by the term. This brought to the forefront the ambiguous nature of the concept that many people use so freely and interchangeably to give meaning and clarification to the numerous convoluted aspects of an individual's life. I explained the concept to mean a variety of dimensions, mainly being associated with his housing and financial situation. Mateen explained that he migrated to Canada alone, had no family in the country, and currently resided by himself. I realized that when previously speaking to youths, and even reading research concerning them (Atwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010; De Wit, et al., 2010), there appears to be an assumption that when a young person is asked about their social class standing it is implied that the question is inquiring about their family's financial situation, and not of the individual respondent. Mateen's answer greatly problematized this premise, as he was the sole financial earner, and did not have a support network to supplement his needs. Mateen was currently unemployed, and he was

receiving governmental funding to aid him in furthering his education. When I spoke to two of his teachers about Mateen they had positive things to say. Mateen was described as an interesting person, one who is grateful to have education in his life, which quickly became obvious through my discussion with him. In the beginning of his career at General High Mateen's attendance patterns were sporadic, but once he had built his confidence Mateen developed a renewed motivation to attend regularly and work towards graduation.

After a cursory familiarization with Mateen's life situation I began to ask him questions concerning his plans and goals for the next couple of years of his life. Mateen described his short-term goals as completing high school and earning a diploma, which he wished to finish as quickly as possible. Being the same age as Joel, Mateen felt the need to graduate, as he was feeling a bit too old to be in high school. Intertwined with this sentiment is the fact that students who turn 21 during a school year in Toronto cannot return the following year to a regular secondary school, and must attend either adult learning facilities, or do course work online. For his long-term goals Mateen expressed that he was stuck in a dilemma that did not have a definitive solution. His financial position was precarious, and monetary matters weighed heavily on Mateen's mind. Although he expressed a profound love of learning and education, Mateen was unsure whether he would be able to pursue it at a post-secondary level. His statement "based on my background I can't get education because I need money and I don't have family...but from the other side I really love to study, I love education" signified how financial troubles can dissuade certain students from continuing their education. When someone

who has lived on the margins for a number of years is faced with the prospect of living in poverty for an extended amount of time, they may choose employment over schooling. Much like the literature has suggested (Bridgeland, 2010; Fine, 1991; Griffith, 2001; Smyth, 2006) youths living in poverty have, at times, insurmountable obstacles in their pathways to education. The basic necessities of survival must take precedence over education. Mateen was grappling with deciding between work and school at the time of the interview, although he did mention to me later that he had decided to apply for a Police Foundations program.

Attendance Patterns/Causes for Absences

We moved on to discuss Mateen's description of his attendance patterns. Mateen informed me that he was present in school four out of five days a week, which was a significant improvement over his past attendance records. When asked to list some of the reasons why he did not attend Mateen mentioned personal struggles with coming to school, with a lack of motivation being the biggest hurdle that he had to overcome. When Mateen first began attending General High he had relatively few course credits that are needed in order to graduate. He spoke about being in his late teens, and the possibility of being in high school for three or four years was extremely discouraging to him. After attending for two years, Mateen began to notice progress, which motivated him to attend more regularly. Although I cannot argue this point definitively, as I did not discuss this subject directly with Mateen, through my own perceptions of him, combined with those of his teachers I felt that perhaps Mateen was struggling with personal issues, and

psychological problems. Mateen's sentiments reflected the conceptualizations of some authors (DiBara, 2007; Garcia-Garcia, 2008; Porche, et al., 2011; Terry, 2008) regarding the mental health of youths living in precarious conditions. The adolescents that reside in the margins are faced with high stress levels, and without being taught coping strategies, may choose avoidance tactics, where an individual shuts out the outside world, and the oppressive structures that are evident within it (Porche, et al., 2011). As indicated in the previous interview with Joel concerning students exercising control of their lives through absence began to manifest itself through Mateen's narrative. Mateen told me that "Sometimes I'd rather stay at home and forget about everything", which corresponds to a marginalized youth's frustration about their current situation. Going to school and the obligations that it demands can be strenuous for a person who is already faced with numerous obstacles to enjoying their life. It may become easier to simply abstain from attending (Porche, et al., 2011), and to forget a part of your troubles by either sitting dormant at home, or to engage in other, more rewarding types of activities. Aware that Mateen had no family in the country, I chose to skip over the questions regarding the involvement of his family in his schooling.

General High

With his attendance patterns in mind I began to speak to Mateen about General High and his feelings toward the institution. When asked about the curriculum Mateen stated that it was "amusing", which I took to mean interesting. However, Mateen quickly changed the subject, and began to tell me about an educator who had helped him to earn

some course credits, and how that assistance had motivated him to attend on a regular basis. Once again, the importance of faculty-peer relationships was brought to the forefront, and I was reminded of how crucial committed and caring educators are in motivating students to stay connected with the school (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Au, & Raphael, 2000; De Wit, et al., 2010; Hess, & Copeland, 2001; Reid, 2006b). Mateen proceeded to make remarks about how he appreciated schooling in Canada, as opposed to his native country. This was quite a humbling revelation, as I am quite critical of the current educational model being practiced in Ontario. I was reminded that although we must continually strive for improvements in our education, we should still be grateful for the relatively easy access the majority of youths have to schooling. In Mateen's eyes Ontario's educational system was a vast improvement over what he had witnessed in Afghanistan. He visualized simply going to school as an opportunity that he may not have had back home. In this dialogue I began to truly sense Mateen's appreciation for learning, and being able to participate in formal education.

Relationship With the Faculty

We turned the conversation to speak about Mateen's relationship with the faculty. He described the staff as being extremely helpful and approachable. Mateen felt that the teachers sought out struggling students in an attempt to assist them in meeting their educational goals. He even went as so far as to say that "Teachers actually moved me to come down from [the area in which he resided in, which was a significant distance away from General High]". This comment highlighted the extent that some of the faculty went

to try and accommodate students who may have difficulty attending. Mateen had been living quite far away from the school, and due to his financial condition was often forced to ride a bicycle for some distance. This reiterates Teelucksingh (2007) and Boudreau, Keil, and Young's (2009) conceptualizations of the new urban Toronto. Toronto's inner city has largely gone through a process of gentrification, with young working professionals moving into the city, and eradicating the affordable rental market in the city's core (Bunting, et al., 2004; MacDonnell, et al., 2004). With the lack of affordable housing within the inner city, individuals like Mateen are forced to reside in marginalized areas on the outskirts of the city. These neighborhoods are lacking in resources, and are stereotyped as dangerous through the use of racialized undertones present within the media's discourse on these areas (Brown, & Parekh, 2010; Bunting, et al., 2004; Keil, 2002; Lawson, 2012; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004), which are characterized as large block towers that leave little room for communal interaction and bonding, and are inaccessible without a motorized vehicle. Due to Mateen's financial situation he was compelled to live in this fairly undesirable area, as it was the only one that he could afford (Bunting, et al., 2004; Keil, 2002; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004). As a result, lacking the monetary capability to own a car, Mateen had to travel for some time to attend school, which is a considerable barrier to education that is deemed to be equally accessible to all (Fine, 1991). This highlights how the relationship that he had built with some of the faculty was so strong that it, in itself, was a motivating factor to attend. As we were discussing his connection with the instructors, Mateen described a story that I found quite moving and relevant to the present discussion. Mateen explained that upon his arrival in Canada

he could not speak the language very well, and his past educational credentials were not recognized by the formal educational system in Toronto. Mateen, already being in his mid-teens, and having to start his schooling with zero course credits was extremely discouraged, and felt like he would never finish school. The following excerpt from the interview presents the challenges that Mateen had to confront even before beginning his schooling in Toronto "...even if I did some home schooling with my mom back home and I brought it to this country, but they, it was not worth while, I couldn't get any credits, so I started with, you start with zero, which was really hard". This story is profound on many levels. It represented how Canadian schooling can choose to disregard previous knowledge that many immigrants bring to this country, and past schooling is invalidated if it does not comply with the Canadian standards. This theme mirrors Yosso's (2005) assertion that many current educational systems use a deficit model, one that focuses solely on the lack of social and/or cultural capital that disadvantaged students bring with them into the classroom, whilst ignoring the past experiences and knowledge that they have accumulated throughout their life. There is a distinct lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of the multitude of useful skills that Mateen had brought to this country. His knowledge of a second language, one that is not recognized by Canadian authorities as a legitimate advantage, was sidelined, and the focus was on his lack of English language proficiency. The school did not recognize his previous intellectual and practical acquisitions of important lessons, and Mateen was considered to be literally lacking *any* experience and knowledge that is deemed valid in Canada. Similar to the probelmatization that Mateen presented to the notion of social class as pertaining to a

family's income level, rather than an individual's youth's financial situation, there is a focus on the discrediting of internationally educated adult professionals, while the conversation about youths in comparable situations of having few opportunities to have their educational credentials recognized is marginalized. What I found extremely frustrating in this case is the fact that there is a possibility that Mateen's educational aspirations in Afghanistan may have been quashed due to the war that Canada was a chief member of. Although discussing the current war in Afghanistan is outside the bounds of this paper, it nonetheless made me stop to contemplate the immense repercussions that our actions can have thousands of miles away. It appears that the Canadian educational system was not concerned about the lack of instructional facilities that were developed in Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban and/or other "terrorist" organizations. This youth, who was dislodged from his home, and went to live in the country of the invaders, was told that his previous studies, even if done in the home, were worthless and were not legitimate in this nation. This points to the fact that although racism is currently being veiled under the mantra of the status quo, it nonetheless can manifest itself physically (Yosso, 2005). The Toronto District School Board discredited Mateen's past, ignoring his memories, considering them invalid in the current educational paradigm, and most of all, a hindrance to his academic pursuits (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). What Mateen had exhibited was an immense amount of resistance capital (Yosso, 2005), although in his position this capital came internally, and was not precipitated by outlying factors as Yosso (2005) has theorized. Mateen was lucky enough to find an educator who was committed to ensuring that all who wished an education could get one without

hindrance. With her support, and her familiarity with the administrative structure of Toronto's secondary schools, she was able to make sure that Mateen was granted nearly a year's worth of course credits in acknowledgement of his past schooling. Mateen had emphatically noted that this was the catalyst for his growing motivation to progress in his studies. This brief interchange between us was an intense, and at times, uncomfortable awakening process for myself. Although I consider myself to be fairly aware of the current issues in education, this personal narrative truly brought it home. I had been reading and writing about causes of absences, and the hurdles that many students faced in their educational aspirations, yet Mateen's story was a stark example of how difficult it can be for a marginalized youth to attend school regularly.

Relationship With Peers

We moved on to speak about how he got along with his peers in General High. Mateen described the majority of the students as being pretty reserved. When I asked him to explain what he meant, Mateen told me that in the two years he had been attending General High he had not made any close friends. He contextualized this by saying that he knew people in the school, and was on friendly terms with many of them, but that he had not made a deep connection with any of his peers. Mateen was unsure of whether he found it difficult to open up to the other students, or whether it was hard for them, but he did not seem upset or bitter about this situation, although I would imagine it could be quite isolating to be in a school with only acquaintances. I am unsure of why this was happening, as I was not able to personally observe the classroom dynamics. Although

English was not Mateen's first language he could still communicate effectively, and in a school that has a large proportion of ESL students I do not think that this could be the cause for his lack of personal connections. It may have something to do with his personal nature, which I found to be quiet and somewhat shy, but I cannot make further assumptions, as I do not know him well enough. Through his perceived lack of familiarity with the other pupils in General High Mateen could not comment on the attendance patterns of the other pupils. I endeavored Mateen to speak about his identity, but he seemed resistant to this line of questioning, and I chose to move to a topic that he may be more comfortable with.

Reintegration of Absentees

Having spoken about his relationships with other individuals, I began to ask questions concerning how important coming to school was considered in General High, and whether there were chances for students to catch up on missed work. Mateen explained that he was an independent person, and felt in charge of his education. The days that he was absent, Mateen would not hear anything from the school, and that in itself signifies the relaxed attitude held in General High toward absentees. Mateen mentioned that after missing two or three days he would develop a sense of guilt for being absent, although he felt that he could easily catch up on his studies. This notion represents not only Mateen's growing confidence in his academic skills, but also highlights the flexible nature of General High, where students can feel comfortable returning after a prolonged absence, knowing that there are steps in place that will allow

them to quickly catch up to their cohort. It appears as though the faculty in General High, has grown accustomed to serving students with variant needs, and established a system that would not punish the individual youth for their absence (Au, & Raphael, 2000; DiBara, 2007). From his responses it appears that the culture within General High is so used to persistent absenteeism that it has become a norm, and the faculty tries to work around it, in an attempt to assist as many students as possible in their educational journey.

Fair and Equal/Culture of Absenteeism

The conversation turned to issues of fairness and equality in the differential treatment that students receive from their faculty. Mateen explicitly felt that certain pupils needed to have special accommodation to assist them in moving forward with their education. He spoke about having to live alone and the stresses that it can put on a youth trying to go to school. Mateen mentioned a lack of resources, particularly monetary issues, as weighing heavily on his mind. Although he was receiving aid from the Ontario Works program, he was still constantly concerned about his financial situation. Added to the strain of living alone was the lack of parental guidance that Mateen felt. He spoke about not having a family to encourage him to go to school, or if he missed classes, to be motivated to catch up. When living in a difficult situation it can be challenging for a student to overcome the obstacles to regular attendance, and Mateen's narrative confirmed the importance of having familial support in a youth's educational journey (Bridgeland, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Syed, et al., 2011; Terry, 2008). Living alone can have numerous psychological and socio-economic disadvantages, and the adolescents that

currently reside by themselves face great hurdles in coming to school regularly. Through this rationalization process Mateen felt that differential treatment should be allowed, and that a student's life circumstances must play a role in determining how they are evaluated. This line of reasoning is quite progressive, and reflects many of the propositions made by some of the more critically orientated academics (DiBara, 2007; Glass, & Wong, 2003; Smyth, 2006). Mateen recommended teachers be aware of the conditions that their students live in, and the disadvantages they may have in coming to school. It appears as though Mateen, through his own tribulations, has come to grasp the underlying contextual layers that influence the success of an individual pupil in school (Smyth, 2006). Although we did speak briefly about 'culture of absenteeism', Mateen did not think this occurrence was happening, but expressed a feeling that he was unsure of what exactly I was asking. I attempted to thoroughly explain the concept, but did not wish to pressure Mateen to answer a question he did not feel comfortable with.

Validity of Formal Education

We moved on to speak about the more abstract notion of education, and I pursued a line of questioning that sought Mateen's perceptions about the importance and validity of formal Canadian education. I began by asking Mateen why he was in school and what he wished to gain from education. Mateen began his reply by speaking of his home country. He explained that the majority of the population in Afghanistan was deprived of formal schooling. This was one of the reasons why he was so committed to going to school; this points to the fact that many immigrants (particularly immigrant parents) hold

high academic aspirations (Fuligni, 1997). In lieu of familial support, Mateen has created this aspirational and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) out of the strength of his own character, which is exemplified by his unrelenting persistence in education. When one comes from a background where many are denied access to learning, simply being able to go to school can be seen as a privilege and a motivating factor to attend regularly. Mateen expressed the wish of attaining credentials in order to go back to Afghanistan and show his family and friends that he was an educated man. The second line of reasoning that Mateen portrayed was one that saw education as the path toward more fulfilling employment opportunities (the fallacy of this rationale has been discussed in the analysis of Joel's interview). Mateen felt so strongly about education as to remark "if I live my life as a worker or have no education...I would miss the whole point of you know, the whole meaning of life". This comment highlights not only Mateen's belief that furthering his academic career could lead to an elevated level of sophistication, but that he perceived being a 'worker' as somehow unfulfilling. I believe that this has been a growing trend near the end of the 20th century, and one that is definitely gaining momentum in the 21st. Youths no longer envision working in manual labor, or in employment options that may not require extensive schooling as a viable option. The type of work that was so popular in the boom decades following World War II has largely disappeared, or has lost the prestige that it once held. Currently the majority of adolescents envision post-secondary degrees as the path towards meaningful and sustainable employment, which is somewhat of a fallacious belief (Albo, 2010; Moore, & Skaburskis, 2004; Stinson, 2010). This is a worrying development, as there are increasing numbers of young adults with advanced

degrees who cannot find work in their field, and are forced to engage in precarious contract positions (Albo, 2010; Bunting, et al., 2004; Kiel, 2002; Seccombe, 2000; Stinson, 2010). It appears the majority of secondary school students still hold the conviction that by attaining proper credentials they will be able to gain employment in their desired field.

Realizing that Mateen considered education to be extremely important, I asked him what skills schooling would provide him in future life. Mateen mentioned that it was essential for youths to learn the basic foundations that were taught in secondary school. By this he meant the core courses that most Toronto high schools offer; math, language, sciences and liberal arts. Combined with the more traditional book learning, Mateen thought that school instilled good habits in its students. He mentioned learning to be organized and self-regulated, both skills Mateen considered essential to being a successful person. Mateen also spoke about gaining the ability to decide things for himself. I found this to be an intriguing concept and asked him to explain what he meant by the term. Mateen described teachers instilling critical skills (Glass, & Wong, 2003) in their students, and spoke about learning how to be in control of his future, not merely reacting to the occurrences of his life. It appears as though General High's educators are focusing on teaching their pupils critical agency, which is so crucial to an individual's life aspirations (Giroux, 2004). If one becomes an active participant in their life, rather than a reactionary figure, they can strive to positively alter their life conditions, and push for social change. Considering the high value Mateen ascribed to Canadian schooling my attempts to critically challenge some of his beliefs were disregarded, and he was adamant

about the positive nature of formal education. I was also of the opinion that we had thoroughly discussed Mateen's sense of self-agency in controlling his life, and I chose to bypass this line of questioning.

Proposals to Improve Attendance

To wrap up the interview I asked Mateen whether he thought that there was something that could be done to alleviate the absence rates in General High, or to ensure that those who are missing classes are able to keep up with their cohort. Mateen suggested that teachers could be more flexible in their evaluation of students whom they know have difficult life circumstances. This would require the instructors to become actively engaged in their pupils' lives, and to determine the validity of the absence. Mateen pointed out that the majority of the instructors at General High were already quite accommodating, but that more adjustability could be introduced. Alongside this idea Mateen spoke about an absentee having a second chance to complete the assignments that were missed. Here too Mateen did mention that numerous teachers already perform this task, but that there could still be more room for non-attendees to catch up on missed assignments. Mateen thought that even if he were able to earn half of a mark for doing an assignment that he had missed it would be very beneficial to him. In these sentiments I was reminded of Joel's assumptions that an individual student should approach teachers personally and be willing to make up the missed work, even if it meant receiving a partial grade. It appears as though Mateen is the living manifestation of that concept. There was no mention about any overarching steps to eradicate the economic disparity that Mateen

had found himself in, and he was solely focused on the daily activities within the school. This may point to Mateen feeling powerless to push for drastic social change, and being resigned to make the best of an unequal situation. The oppressive factors evident in life can be so complex and overwhelming that often an individual is intimidated from striving to alter their world on a large scale, and are confined to struggle for their daily existence (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989)

Mateen's story had a profound effect on me. He is an inspirational person, one who has been confronted with innumerable obstacles to furthering his education. What struck me about Mateen was his quiet perseverance and commitment to school. Having personally dropped out of high school, I was of the belief that I had managed to overcome hurdles to my schooling, even if they were at times self-imposed. However, listening to Mateen's narrative I began to appreciate the opportunities that I had taken for granted. I do not know whether I would have the personal strength to fight for my educational rights as Mateen has. His responses shed light onto the rigid structure of Toronto's schools, and how they can effectively shut out certain individuals from completing secondary school. Yet, Mateen was able to stay positive, and was resilient to the oppressive forces that perhaps without intent, were marginalizing him.

Rashmee

"To be honest, I don't even really like school...knowing that in order for me to get a good job I need to go through high school, and then go through university and then get my degree and then get a good job, that's really why, like I, plus because my parents too, like I could not drop out, I could not not go to school, like they

push me to go school, but then also I push myself, because how am I really going to get a good job here, I'm not trying to work minimum wage all my life you know"

Background Information

The third and last student that I interviewed will be referred to as Rashmee. We spoke together twice over the course of a month. After the initial interview we met briefly to discuss some of her answers, and for me to have an opportunity to make some further inquiries. Rashmee identified as a South East Asian woman who at the time of the interview was 19. When asked about her nationality she answered that she was Pakistani. Rashmee told me that she lived in a middle-class household with her parents and five siblings. I found it intriguing that she considered herself to be in the middle-class socioeconomic stratum, even though her family lived in government subsidized housing. This may display a trend where people automatically identify as middle-class without being totally aware of what the label might imply. Rashmee was employed at a community center, where she was part of an after school program working with kids. Her employment commitments required her to work two times a week, for a total of six hours. I asked Rashmee about her plans and/or goals for the following school year and she informed me that she had received a conditional offer of admission from a major Ontario university, although she was still waiting to hear back from a different program she was interested in. I inquired whether she was graduating at the end of the current school year, but Rashmee informed me that she had already graduated from a different secondary school in Toronto. Rashmee had graduated with marks that were not high enough to

allow her to pursue post-secondary education, and she had decided to take an extra year at General High to upgrade her grades. When I spoke to Rashmee's teachers about her they informed me that she was exhibiting excellent attendance patterns, although she had a chronic problem of being late. She was described as eager to learn and understand the material that she was presented with. Although in the second semester of her extra year Rashmee's attendance was stellar, one instructor mentioned that during the previous term she had stopped attending in the middle of the semester. The cause for this was somewhat unclear, but it may have had something to do with the health of Rashmee's mother. In the end, although Rashmee had originally intended to enroll for one semester at General High, she ended up staying for two.

Attendance Patterns/Causes for Absence

Having established her background I began to speak to Rashmee about her attendance patterns. She stated that during the current semester she had been attending regularly, being usually present the entire school week, but would at times miss either a part of, or a whole period. This would occur either in the first or third period as she would be outside the building, and would come considerably late to a class, or miss the entire period. This pattern was so severe that Rashmee mentioned that she was late almost every single school day. I asked her whether she lived far from the school, but contrary to what I expected Rashmee informed me that she lived about twenty minutes away on public transit. I probed into her past attendance patterns to see if some sort of continuance or pattern would emerge. Rashmee stated that up until the middle of her third year in high

school she was a steady attendee; however, for reasons she was unsure of, her attendance drastically declined in the latter part of Grade 11, and up until last semester she was still coming infrequently. Rashmee told me that once she had received a letter of admission into university she found a new motivating factor to attend regularly, if late. We continued to speak about the causes for her absences and the conversation turned to her family obligations. Being one of the older siblings in a family of six, Rashmee was responsible for taking care of some of her younger siblings. She spoke about babysitting, making sure they were fed, and being in charge of them getting ready in the mornings to go to school. Rashmee mentioned that every morning she would assist her mother in ensuring that her younger siblings were prepared for their day, and that often she would take one of them to school, before going to her own classes. She felt that this did interfere with her ability to attend regularly and punctually. Rashmee also told me that her mother has been having health problems, and would be unable to monitor all of her children, as she often had to leave early in the morning for a doctor's appointment. Rashmee would frequently accompany her mother to the doctor's office, and would act as a translator, and as a result, miss parts of, or entire classes. This points to the fact that Rashmee was obliged not only to perform tasks that are typically regarded as 'mothering' by schools (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999), but to also to assist her mother in her interactions with a medical system that is currently uninviting to individuals who do not have command of the English language (Porche, et al., 2011; Terry, 2008). Like many youths living in the lower socioeconomic scale, Rashmee had familial commitments that were essential to the functioning of her household. However, it does not appear that the

staff at General High took this into consideration, and Rashmee was simply labeled as a student who was habitually late. The lack of knowledge about individual youths created a gap, whereby the lived experiences of the adolescents were ignored, and a doctrine of assumed student uniformity was disseminated (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). It is clear that Rashmee's added responsibilities at home were having an adverse effect on her attendance patterns; however, she did not display any type of resentment at this situation, but merely took it as a part of life, and appeared to be happy to be involved in the rearing of her siblings.

Involvement of Family in Schooling

I had the feeling that Rashmee's family was a considerable influence in her life and was encouraged to ask her some more questions about it. We began to speak about the involvement of her parents and family in her schooling. Rashmee told me that her parents were immigrants, who did not have a total command of the English language. This prohibited them from being fully involved with Rashmee's schooling, as she would often have to act as a translator, thereby highlighting how uninviting schools can be to immigrant parents who are not proficient in English (Fuligni, 1997; Terry, 2008). There is an assumption that all who reside in Toronto have acquired the language, even though the GTA is renowned as being one of the most diverse on the planet, a feature that is often used in marketing the city (Boudreau, et al., 2009). If one cannot speak English at an "acceptable" level they are conceptualized as lacking certain capital, and their ability to speak multiple languages is not credited (Yosso, 2005). Although her parents did not

attain any post-secondary degrees, they nonetheless held high aspirations for their children's education. Rashmee mentioned that her mother often "nags" her; gives her reminders about making sure that her homework is done; and checks her grades to monitor Rashmee's progress. Much like Fuligni (1997) has documented, immigrant parents are quite ambitious for the outcomes of their children's schooling, and often are inclined to push their kids to attain the highest academic credentials possible, as they perceive it to be the most effective way out of poverty. The language barrier that Rashmee's parents were facing not only made the school itself inaccessible, but would also hinder their efforts to assist Rashmee with her studies. She noted that she would generally ask one of her older siblings for help as opposed to her parents. Yet, Rashmee felt a strong push to excel in academics and attend a post-secondary institution. Rashmee mentioned that when she took an extra year to upgrade her marks her parents were quite uncomfortable with the idea. Having two older siblings who had already completed university and found employment, the notion of one of their children not entering a post-secondary institution immediately after graduating high school was a foreign one. They perceived it as a problem, and it was a definite concern, and it took Rashmee some time to assure them that there was no issue. It is clear that Rashmee was able to draw on varying types of capital from her family as discussed by Yosso (2005). Not only could she model herself after her siblings and seek their advice (navigational capital), but she could also utilize the resources provided by her parents (linguistic, aspirational, familial, and resistant capitals), and through this interplay Rashmee took it for granted that she had to exceed academically (Lawson, 2012; Yosso, 2005) When I asked Rashmee if her

parents were aware that she was at times absent, and frequently late, she described two coping strategies that she used to circumvent this problem. When a student is absent for a particular class in General High a prerecorded automated telephone message is sent to the family's home to inform the guardian that a child had missed a class. However, when a student turns 18 and gains the power that is associated with being recognized as an adult in the eyes of the law, that number can be changed to the student's personal phone. This is what Rashmee had done, as she was over the age of 18 when she enrolled in General High. Therefore, the message was sent to her cell phone, and her parents were not made aware that she had missed any classes. When it came to being late, Rashmee told me that she would tell her mother that school was starting later, or used some other mildly deceptive technique. Since her mother did not have a copy of the school schedule she would have to assume that Rashmee was telling the truth. Her parents were largely unaware of her attendance patterns, although Rashmee mentioned that they knew that she did well in her studies. I thought that perhaps establishing closer ties to the school might allow her parents to become more active in Rashmee's schooling, but she was quick to inform me that she did not want a tighter relationship between her parents and the school. This is unsurprising, as it is doubtful many teenagers would wish for that type of connection. However, it must be noted that Rashmee did concede that bridging the gap between her parents and the school might help improve her attendance.

General High

Having spoken about her attendance patterns, and the significance of her family in her life, the conversation turned to the dynamics at play in General High. I began by asking Rashmee about her thoughts regarding the curriculum. She stated that she found some of her classes extremely stimulating and engaging. The majority of those courses she had a personal interest in, and a few of them were directly related to her future field of study in university. Rashmee mentioned that it was the instructors who made certain classes intriguing and entertaining. If Rashmee perceived a teacher as being dull or boring, she would have difficulty staying focused during the lesson. Compounded to the issue of courses that she found unstimulating were ones that Rashmee felt were irrelevant to her life. She spoke about courses that are “just there”. She did not perceive them as having any real value, and she was simply forced to endure them for no apparent gain. These responses seem to agree with some of the literature (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010; Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2007; Smyth, 2006) that contends that much of the current curriculum is not attracting the attention of the students. By being bored with the courses, and not holding them as valuable tools, students may choose to skip class, which can quickly develop into a cycle of non-attendance (Bridgeland, 2010). Rashmee’s comments highlight the need for not only new methods of knowledge delivery and dissemination, but points to the necessity of updating the curriculum content to reflect the 21st century’s student body in the GTA (Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2007). The issue is who is to determine which classes are relevant, and so necessary to daily life that they should be deemed compulsory. I think many of us would agree that we do not use the knowledge

that we have learned in many of our high school courses, yet I do not think it right to allow students to choose all of their classes without requiring them to enroll in some that are esteemed of essential value. Rashmee's sentiments may point to a need for instructors to alter their pedagogic approaches to teaching, in order to engage all of their students (Glass, & Wong, 2003).

Relationship With the Faculty

While on the subject of instructors, I began to ask Rashmee about her relationship with the faculty in General High. She told me that although she found everyone who worked at the school nice and approachable, there were two categories of teachers that she had encountered. The first type she described as caring and approachable, but more hands off. Rashmee portrayed these instructors as speaking to her about not completing her assignments when the issue became somewhat critical. Rashmee would have to be really struggling in order for them to intervene; otherwise the instructor would not become involved unless it was brought to their attention. These educators were characterized as reactionary, rather than proactive. The second type that Rashmee spoke about was the more emphatic and personal instructor who took a genuine interest in her and her life. Rashmee described their support as "They nag me. In a good way though. Or they'll...be like did you get this, you should go online, do you need help with anything and like yeah they are supportive". Rashmee went so far as to say that she felt comfortable to speak to them on a personal level, and if she had a personal problem she felt that she could turn to an educator for guidance and advice. This highlights how some

of General High's instructors were able to nurture close knit bonds with their pupils, and how important this relationship is to the students (Au, & Raphael, 2000).

Relationship With Peers

We turned to speak about peer relations in General High. We discussed Rashmee's personal friendships, and the general school atmosphere. Rashmee told me that she was a social person, thus she had never encountered problems of meeting new people. Still she did explain that compared to her old high school, everyone in General High was friendly, and that the majority of the people got along comfortably. She said that the school was too small to have defined and rigid groups or cliques, and that people were friends with various types of individuals. This is an interesting development as Dan Yon's book 'Elusive Culture' (2000) that dealt with student interactions in a Toronto inner city school evidenced social stratification, where youths would identify and associate with particular groups of students. It appears as though the staff in General High was able to instill a sense of belonging and community within the school. Rashmee did mention that she perceived some students as anti-social and quiet, but did not think ill of them, or assume that their reclusiveness was anything more than a personal trait. From the discussion it appeared as though there was a harmonious aura within General High with no significant underlying tensions dissuading students from attending regularly. This is in line with Joel's perceptions, contrary to some of the literature on the subject (DiBara, 2007; Fine, 1991; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006).

Identity

I briefly spoke to Rashmee about her identity, and whether she felt that she had to alter it in order to fit the exemplary student model being held up by the school. Rashmee noted that she did not feel pressure to change who she was, or how she behaved. She described herself as a strong-willed person who did not change who she was in any scenario, other than altering the way that she spoke, by which she meant not swearing or using slang. I find this notion a bit humorous, since Rashmee felt pressure from her teachers to communicate politely, and in a sense ‘White’, while behind closed doors they were quite prone to use language that would be considered vulgar in certain circles. Yet, this did not imply that Rashmee’s identity was constrained or confined to narrow definitions, and it appears that she felt comfortable being herself within the school. Clearly Rashmee possessed a considerable amount of resistance capital as theorized by Yosso (2005), and was still able to maintain her sense of individuality, without succumbing to the numbing and conformist apparatuses currently being operated in schools in the GTA (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008).

Importance of Regular Attendance

I turned my inquiry to ask questions about Rashmee’s views on the importance of coming to school regularly. She thought that attending classes was essential and felt that “people should find ways to come to school”. Her rationalization was that once someone began to miss classes it could turn into a dangerous cycle. Rashmee spoke about work beginning to pile up and falling behind her peers. Gaps in her learning would emerge

where she missed some of the material covered, and even though she would generally catch up, she still felt that she was not on the same page as the rest of the class. This led to added stress, which could make continuing coming to school difficult. Although she perceived attendance as a vital aspect of a successful career in academics, Rashmee nonetheless held the belief that as long as a student was able to complete the work they should have some freedom to decide when they would attend, or how often. Rashmee's views reflect some of the propositions found in the literature on the subject (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; DiBara, 2007; Garcia-Garcia, 2008), in exemplifying how absenteeism is often a slippery slope, one that can quickly lead to permanent school withdrawal.

With Rashmee's opinions in mind I began to ask questions about the general ethos concerning attendance held in General High. Rashmee stated that attendance did matter, and that the faculty encouraged students to come to school as often as possible. However, there appeared to be flexibility in the school's approach to monitoring attendance. Rashmee mentioned that "the classes will be so full at the beginning and then like every time I come to class less and less students are in class"; this exemplifies a worrying trend that is apparent in General High. As the term progresses, a large number of students stop attending regularly, and the classes often shrink to half their original size. This emphasizes the numerous commitments disadvantaged youths have outside of the school (employment, familial obligations, involvement in the criminal justice system, etc) and the barriers they face in coming to school on a regular basis (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; DiBara, 2007; Reid, 2006b; Smyth, 2006).

Culture of Absenteeism

Intrigued by her responses, I introduced the concept of ‘culture of absenteeism’ and asked her whether she thought that this cycle might be occurring. Rashmee did think that some students who could be in class were taking advantage of a system that was designed to be flexible enough to accommodate students who could not be present due to circumstances largely outside of their own control. Rashmee spoke about her old secondary school, and mentioned that when she was often late or absent, she would receive letters home that would threaten her with suspension and possible expulsion. At General High this did not appear to be happening, as Rashmee explained, “I basically missed almost all of last semester...and I never got any letters home”. I began to have a sense that there were almost no real repercussions for absenteeism in General High, and I asked Rashmee if she could think of any consequences for missing class. After having considered the question Rashmee told me that she never had fear of any backlash for her spotty attendance record, and that at most she would get a phone call from the school, which was redirected to her own phone. Although some of the faculty were not aware of Rashmee’s familial obligations, she felt that her instructors knew that she would be able to catch up quickly, and the fact that she had a high mark was a redeeming factor in her eyes for not coming to class regularly or punctually, thereby reflecting her identification with meritocracy (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). I asked Rashmee whether she thought she was receiving differential treatment due to her maintenance of a high academic standard, but she responded that all of the students in General High were regarded in the same way as her. Without perceiving that there were any real repercussions for absenteeism in

General High, I began to inquire whether more structure and a rigid stance on attendance would compel more students to come to school regularly. Rashmee did not think so, and liked that the school was not as strict as the one that she had previously attended. Rashmee expressed that she preferred the relaxed attitude held by the administrative staff in General High, as it allowed her the freedom to alter her education as how she saw fit. There was also the sentiment that there was nothing the school could really do to frighten the pupils into attending. Rashmee personally feared punitive measures, but did not think that many persistent absentees would feel the same way. There was an apparent lack of general concern on the part of the non-attendees about being suspended or having letters sent home. The only threat that Rashmee saw acting as a real deterrent was the possibility of being expelled. However, there is a large segment of General High that has been removed from their old schools in the past, and I do not think the possibility of expulsion would persuade many of them to alter their attendance patterns. It does not appear that the punishment-reward system was operating effectively in General High. What is of interest is the fact that some of these students were marginalized to such an extent that the faculty lost their power of threats, since these youths were already in such a low social position that no real intimidation tactics could be used against them (Fine, 1991). What Rashmee's responses allude to is that a culture of absenteeism is taking place within General High, but in a different context than I had originally envisioned. Faced with so many students who are unable to attend, it is challenging to enforce hard, definite rules concerning attendance. Once special arrangements begin to be made they must be made available to all the pupils within the building, and the process of evaluating the legitimacy

of the absences needs to take place. This is an arduous task, which often falls on the shoulders of the teachers, who neither have the time or the resources to keep track of the lives of all of their pupils (DiBara, 2007; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006). Combined with this is the issue that there is no real deterrent to missing class for many of the students, as there appear to be no punitive measures that the school can enforce in order to make sure that the youths comply to the regular attendance expectations. This development is quite problematic as the two interrelated patterns are prohibiting the faculty from knowing how to navigate persistent absenteeism.

Perception of Attendance Patterns of Peers in General High

Having spoken about attendance in general terms, and how the school copes with absenteeism, I began to ask Rashmee about other youth's absence patterns in General High. I introduced the concept of voluntary vs. involuntary absences to Rashmee and asked her about the proportion of non-attendees in General High that would fall into either category. She believed that most of the students voluntarily missed classes, with the majority simply not wishing to go, or "not feeling up to it". Rashmee could not name what would cause an individual to take this stance, but she did think that a fair number of pupils in General High did not attend out of their own desires. Rashmee did mention some reasons such as: employment commitments, health issues, personal dilemmas, and involvement in the criminal justice system as being some of the involuntary factors that forced a portion of students into non-attendance. However, it must be noted that Rashmee conceptualized employment as being somewhat voluntary, and believed that the youths

who had to work during the school year should find employment that did not interfere with their ability to come to school regularly. This points to Rashmee's conceptualization of outside commitments as an individual's concern, and not as exhibiting the economic disparities that are evident in the GTA. Framing the issue as a private matter, rather than a public one, resonates with the growing neoliberal tendency to privatize public issues (Giroux, 2004; Keil, 2002; Seccombe, 2000). Considering Rashmee's opinion that the bulk of absences in General High were voluntary, I thought that there was a possibility that Rashmee held a negative view of persistent absentees, or that she felt tension within the classroom dynamic when a non-attendee would return. When asked, she did not display any feeling of hostility, and remarked, "it won't really affect me" when someone was absent. Rashmee felt that most of the students in her classes felt the same way, and did not perceive any underlying animosity between the regular attendees and the absentees.

Reintegration of Absentees

I moved on to speak about opportunities to catch-up with missed schoolwork before turning to the issues of fairness and equality in the treatment of students in secondary schools. Rashmee explained that there were many chances to find out what one had missed, and there were contingency plans in place to ensure that those who wished to catch-up were able to do so. Rashmee described approaching an instructor and inquiring into what content she had missed, and being given the possibility of earning partial marks for missed assignments. This flexibility was provided to all students, but the onus was on

the individual to approach the instructor with an intent to learn the missed content.

Rashmee felt that many of the absentees did not have this personal drive to catch-up, and would merely float in and out of class with a lackadaisical attitude. She viewed internal motivating factors as imperative to a student being given the chance to earn missed marks. We started speaking about individualism, and on whom the responsibility to do well in school fell, and through this we began to broach the topic of fairness and equality in secondary schools.

Fair and Equal/Critical Theory

When asked whether students should be treated differently based on their life circumstances, Rashmee presented an interesting answer that highlights the complexity of the issue. Rashmee thought that everyone should be treated the same, but if an individual had a valid reason for being absent, measures should be put in place to allow them to catch-up to the rest of the cohort. In her eyes, if a person was away voluntarily and did not have a legitimate cause for their absence, they did not deserve to be treated differently than the regular attendees, since it is “their fault for not coming in”. Rashmee found it unfair that some absentees who, in her opinion, did not have a genuine cause for their spotty attendance were able to have more one-on-one time with an instructor than the rest of the class. She explained that usually a teacher would explain a lesson to the whole class, and if one were struggling they would have to either seek help outside of the class hours, or receive assistance from a classmate. Rashmee perceived the added personal time an absentee had with a teacher as being unfair to the rest of the pupils. I asked her

whether the individual student should be held responsible for how well they did in school and she answered with a definitive “Yes”. Although teachers and the administrative staff did have an effect, the accountability rested with the student. Her rationale behind this line of reasoning was that all the youths in General High had different circumstances, and it was unrealistic to expect the school to accommodate every single student based on their life situations. If one chose to go to school, it should be their priority, and they must find ways to cope with the expectations that were placed on them by the school. Rashmee found it unfair to burden the school with mitigating the life conditions of its students, and to be flexible enough to adjust its treatment for each individual pupil. She thought that it would cause too many problems, and in the end, would not alter the lived circumstances of the youths. Rashmee mentioned the employment aspect once again, and made the example that if one student was allowed to work during the day, and still be enrolled in General High through special treatment, it might encourage others to seek employment during the same hours, since they would expect their education to be altered in a similar fashion. I proposed that some youths may have easier circumstances, or may be preferentially treated due to their racial, ethnic, sexual, ability, religious, and economic reasons (Giroux, 1989). Rashmee did not think that this was occurring, and seemed quite shocked by the presupposition. She saw the concept in polar terms, where one either did or did not have a valid reason for being accommodated. As I have documented (DiBara, 2007; Fine, 1991; Garcia-Garcia, 2008; Smyth, 2006) this is often not a simple, cut and dried formula, as the lives of individual students are extremely complex and unique. Much like Joel, and in a sense more so, Rashmee reflected ingrained notions of

individualism and meritocracy that she has been socialized into accepting as an undeniable truth (Giroux, 2004). She has accepted the presumption that a person was liable for the outcomes of their lives, and discounted the overlapping social conditions that shape Toronto's society (Keil, 2002). Rashmee's focus is in line with the conservative, neoliberal trends that thrust the onus of success onto the individual by framing the issue into a privatized sphere, one that silences the discrepancies that challenge the assumption that all are given an equal opportunity to excel not only in academics, but in life as well (Giroux, 2004; Keil, 2002). This is where the difficulty of accommodation comes to the forefront, as it is extremely challenging to guarantee that all students are able to keep up with their studies, while still ensuring that there is no backlash against the non-attendees from their peers or faculty.

Validity of Formal Education

For the last segment of our interview I abstracted the conversation to speak about education as a whole in Ontario, and asked Rashmee a variety of questions concerning her views on the importance of schooling. Rashmee stated that she was not fond of going to school. When asked why, she informed me that it was exacting to spend so much time at an institution she did not find particularly interesting or "fun". Rashmee mentioned that she disliked completing the countless assignments and having to prepare for multiple exams, which I think is a sentiment felt by the majority of students. For Rashmee school was something that someone simply had to endure. She conceptualized it as paying your dues, framing education as a step ladder on her way to finding meaningful and successful

employment. Her comment, “knowing that in order for me to get a good job I need to go through high school, and then through university and then get my degree and then get a good job”, signifies the linear model of achievement that Rashmee held. It is currently being promoted by the dominant hegemonic forces, and emphasizes her acceptance of the reward paradigm that is being used by schools in the GTA (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Smyth, 2006). I do not dispute that educational credentials are vital for certain professions, but that this should be considered the end goal of education is quite troubling. Unlike the other two respondents, Rashmee saw going to school only as a means to an end, and did not validate the other useful tools and experiences that one gains by taking part in schooling. She saw what she was learning as a cursory familiarization with the basics that would be built upon in university. Beside the courses that she found relevant and/or interesting Rashmee thought much of what she had learned would not be useful in her daily life. As I have mentioned earlier, due to the economic transformations that have been occurring over the past twenty years much of the employment that Rashmee envisions on attaining upon completion of university has largely eradicated. Thus, conceptualizing education as serving the sole purpose of assisting in finding sustainable employment is fraught with shortcomings (Albo, 2010; Giroux, 2004; Keil, 2002; Stinson, 2010).

I thought that perhaps Rashmee might be dissatisfied with current paradigms under which Ontario’s secondary schools operate, and I began to ask whether she thought the present model was outdated. Rashmee said that she had become so used to learning in this fashion that she could not envision it in any other way. Although she did admit that

she found school boring and outdated, where the instructors taught “the same old thing every single year”, she could not picture herself learning by different methods. I gave the example of a new program that had been introduced in General High that resembles the computer software used by most universities, where much of the content is available online, and students can drop off assignments and partake in discussions via the Internet. I thought that Rashmee would be receptive to this new technological advancement, as it gives students flexibility in how they wish to interact with their learning. Contrary to my assumptions Rashmee did not think highly of the program. She remarked that not many people were using it, and that if left to her own devices, with no external accountability, she would likely postpone doing the work in favor of doing something else that she found more exciting. Having to go to school, and being in class, meant that she had to be responsible, and was held accountable for her progress. It appeared as though she needed to be confronted with regulations and rules in order to continue to progress her education, a worrying attitude, since there are not nearly as many of these stringent regulations in university, which Rashmee will soon be attending.

Control of Personal Future

I asked Rashmee if she felt in control of her future, or whether she was reacting to the occurrences of her life. She responded that it was a mixture of both. Rashmee did feel agency, and the power to determine what she wanted to do with her life. She gave the example of not following the direction that her parents had envisioned for her, and setting her own path for the future. Rashmee accented this line of thought by mentioning that she

could not predict the future, and that certain things were outside of her control. Rashmee spoke about having to take an extra year of secondary school at General High, which she had not originally intended to do. While it was in her control, and she made the decision, she felt that it was something that was chosen for her. If Rashmee wanted to attend university, she would have to improve her grades, and there were no other real alternatives. Her responses exemplify not only the strong character traits that Rashmee possesses, but also the agency that she feels in life.

Proposals to Improve Attendance

To conclude the interview, I asked Rashmee to think of some improvements that could be made in the current educational model to entice more students to attend regularly. Rashmee thought that General High was doing an adequate job, and that the faculty was “doing a lot”. Her suggestions were concerned with making the classes, and the material being presented, more interesting. In Rashmee’s eyes, the dreary nature of some of her courses was the leading cause for her absences, and that if the classes were modified enough, she would be more likely to attend regularly. When asked what could be done to make the courses more attractive, Rashmee spoke about making the content and delivery methods more hands on, with more activities, rather than the traditional book learning model that she perceived as being the dominant approach. Rashmee did admit that there was a possibility that she was biased due to her preference in learning styles. This seems to suggest that it is not the curriculum that is failing to attract the students, or capture their attention, but the delivery methods being used by the instructors

(Au, & Raphael, 2000; Glass, & Wong, 2003). What must be noted is that as in the other student interviews there was no mention of altering the social conditions of the absentees, and Rashmee's suggestions rotated around the traditional schooling paradigm.

The conversations that I held with Rashmee contained many similar themes and opinions that surfaced during Joel and Mateen's interviews, the only main divergence being Rashmee's conceptualization of fairness and equality. Whereas Joel and Mateen thought that evaluation should be differentiated based on the ability of a student to attend class, Rashmee was much more conservative in her evaluation of the issue. She had a narrow definition of excusable causes for absence, the majority of which revolved around health issues, possibly due to her experiences with her mother, and her overall attitude was harsher towards the non-attendees. What might be occurring is that Rashmee evaluated her own situation, and adopted the individualistic assumption of 'if I can do it, so can everyone else'. Characterized by her strong will and determination, her stance on absenteeism could be classified as more traditionalist compared to the other two respondents.

Jessica

"I think there is value in learning social behavior, I think there's value in questioning what they're here for...and questioning those...different theoretical approaches to schooling and learning and all of that. But do I think it's important for students to sort of like have an appreciation for and learn how authority and obedience in society and that sort of stuff works, yeah. Do I think they need to subscribe to it and buy into it, not necessarily. Should they be, should the goal be critical and question things? Absolutely. I think that's the whole point of school"

Having spoken to the three students in General High about how they perceive education, and their attendance patterns, I turned to converse with two of their teachers about similar themes. The aim of this inquiry was to compare/contrast the views of the pupils with those of their instructors in order to gain a more comprehensive image of the intricate power dynamics that were at play in General High. I made contact with one instructor, referred to as Jessica, who was familiar with the students in this study, and who had been working at General High for seven years. She had split her time between working as a classroom teacher, where she taught senior business courses, and as a guidance counselor, which gave her a unique insight into the lives of her students. As Jessica had been an instructor of mine in the past, and we were familiar with one another, I hoped she would be candid in her responses.

I will give a brief account of Jessica's philosophy on teaching, as I believe it will contextualize many of her responses, and elucidate the general approaches that Jessica takes to her profession. Jessica stressed the importance of getting to know her students and their families. In her eyes, the role of an educator went outside the classroom, and she was actively engaged in the lives of many of her students. Jessica admitted that it took up an incredible amount of her time, and was, at times, almost too much to bear. However, she felt that "students, when they have someone, an adult in this school that they feel is kind of looking out for them and supporting them, that they will be more likely to attend" and this sentiment justified the added work that Jessica had to manage. Through this dialogue I believe that Jessica can be characterized as being an "engaged pedagogue" (Glass, & Wong, 2003), one that is committed to critical education, and is aware of the

social circumstances of the students (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). Jessica remarked that she was not fond of removing youths from school either via suspension or expulsion, as she worried about “where do they go then”, a definite concern revolving around using punitive punishments on persistent absentees (Reid, 2006). Jessica would much rather work with the student to establish positive attendance patterns and strive towards meeting their educational goals.

We began our discussion with Jessica’s description of the school, which has been documented in the ‘Social Context of the Study’ chapter. It became apparent that Jessica was of the opinion that General High served a large number of youths who faced certain disadvantages, often tied to their new immigrant status, or their location on the socio-economic scale. With that in mind, I started to ask Jessica questions concerning attendance patterns she had observed during her career at General High. Jessica described a pattern that Rashmee had also noticed, where a class that had 25 students at the beginning of the term, would shrink considerably as the semester progressed. Jessica spoke about having 15 pupils attending on a semi-regular basis, which was just over half the students enrolled in her course. Out of the ten non-attendeess, Jessica had never met three youths who had not stepped foot inside her classroom. She described not being able to track them down in order to take them out of her class, and as a result, they were just names on a sheet of paper. This development suggested that the administrative staff in General High was either disorganized, and therefore not able to keep track of its students, or more likely, that due to the low enrollment numbers the staff was inclined to keep as many students on their statistics, even if these youths did not attend school whatsoever.

With governmental cutbacks to education, schools in the GTA presently compete for funding, and are often allocated resources based on the number of students that are currently “enrolled” (Earl, 1995; O’Sullivan, 1999). Jessica continued to speak about attendance patterns and mentioned that she believed that there were few students who were skipping class in the common conception of the term, that is, students who were in, and around, the building during class time (Reid, 2007). Jessica believed that most pupils were simply not coming to school, whether it was because of their life circumstances, or just not seeing education as a priority. This led me to inquire about voluntary vs. involuntary absences, and the proportion of the students that fell into each category.

Jessica’s response to the distinction was quite intriguing. She felt that often students would convince themselves that their absences were involuntary when in reality they were voluntary. Jessica elaborated on her analysis/position by speaking about youths who felt that their lives were so arduous and complex that they did not have the energy to go to school on a regular basis and to meet expectations. These feelings were often a byproduct of stress and depression, which originated from living in the margins (Porche, et al., 2011). The youths become so overwhelmed by living their day-to-day lives that the prospect of having to meet the school’s criteria of a model student was outside of their capacity. Therefore, students who theoretically could be in school on a consistent basis chose to abstain for personal reasons. Alongside this pattern, Jessica mentioned that a fair number of her pupils were unable to attend involuntarily, and that certain demands of their life prohibited them from coming to school on a regular basis. Jessica’s comments point to the difficulty of a secondary school in accommodating the varying needs of its

constituents (DiBara, 2007; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006b). Although Jessica had framed certain absences as voluntary this point is debatable. If a particular youth has to cope with various disadvantages to such an extent that they are unwilling to go to school, there is a definite problem occurring. What is troubling, is the lack of resources at a school's disposal to meet some of the needs of its students.

I moved on to describe the pattern of 'culture of absenteeism' that I thought was taking place at General High, and to examine Jessica's thoughts on the issue. Jessica commented that she did not think many students were taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere at General High regarding attendance. The concern was that a group of youths who were facing similar life conditions as the absentees, but who persevered and managed to get to school consistently, were feeling upset at the extra chances to catch up that the non-attendees were receiving. Jessica put forth a hypothetical scenario where a regular attendee did not prepare for a test and received a poor grade, whereas another youth skipped a test for a valid reason, and was given the opportunity to rewrite the test and would earn a higher grade. The regular attendee could develop feelings of frustration and hostility directed not only at the absentee, but the school in general, as they perceived differential treatment as unfair. Jessica felt exasperated by this, and was at a loss on how to approach the conundrum. What problematized the dilemma was the fact that she could not disclose personal information of students to other pupils in the class in order to justify the differential treatment. Jessica attempted to have conversations with her students, and would reiterate that she had to approach each youth on a case-by-case basis; what was right for one person was not necessarily right for another. Through this tactic Jessica

strived to “move the students to becoming at peace with that as best they can” and try to maintain a harmonious atmosphere within her classes. Her struggles are what, I think, lies at the root of the issue of how to maintain a high standard of attendance in a school that serves a demographic that is confronted with a plethora of obstacles to their education. I think by making the students aware of the inequalities that they are facing, educators can begin to raise empathy within their classes, and lower the underlying tensions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; Glass, & Wong, 2003). With the issue of the ‘culture of absenteeism’ covered, I inquired about how the administration approached the issue of students habitually missing class.

I thought that perhaps I had missed the mark when initially conceptualizing ‘culture of absenteeism’ and that the atmosphere within the school was a more relevant indicator of attendance patterns in General High. When asked if coming to school regularly in General High was considered important, Jessica simply replied “No”. I entreated her to elaborate on this stark response. Jessica spoke about the “culture of the school” as being “a little bit more alternative in nature where it’s sort of understood that if you get here let’s say three or four days a week then...you’re doing good”. Although Jessica pushed for steady attendance from the entire student body, it was understood that this was not feasible for some. Jessica warned her pupils that “not showing up can become a slippery slope”, especially in a school where there were no definite repercussions for repeated absences. Another factor setting an apathetic attitude towards attendance was continual classroom disruptions, which would generally consist of multiple assemblies, and large school trips. Jessica explained that assemblies or field trips

would throw off the flow of her lessons, and would provide the students with an incentive to skip, since they did not think they would learn anything of value. In a school population as small as General High, a large field trip would nearly empty out the building, and a relaxed ambiance would materialize. Pupils felt that since not everyone was learning the lessons during the field trip, they were not obliged to either, and that they could find a better way to spend their time. Although Jessica is adamant that regular attendees still learn more, and generally receive higher grades than the absentees, which is reflected in the literature (Bridgeland, 2010; Hess, & Copeland, 2001), this message seems to be lost on the youths. I thought that this alternative culture might be encouraging students to be absent more often than usual, and asked Jessica whether she thought a stricter regime would promote regular attendance patterns. She commented that some students had stated they would prefer a more rigid structure and that it would work better for them. However, Jessica saw the issue as a polarity, with being understanding and flexible on the one side, and being more authoritarian on the other. It appears that she is struggling between the two defined roles; she was concerned about caring and supporting so much that she would inadvertently enable youths to miss more classes than they would otherwise. While the more punitive stance used threats as an incentive and was completely insensitive to the life conditions of the particular youths. Jessica preferred the former option, as she found it more constructive, especially in a school that served an underprivileged demographic. It must be noted that Jessica did admit that “making a lot of rules and...threats, doesn’t really work well as an approach for me because I have a hard time following through on that”, which may signal that being a strict educator did

not align to her sensibilities and identity as a teacher. This alludes to the confined role of an educator in the current educational paradigm, where one must choose to either be a source of power, or a supportive individual who must relinquish some control. Authority in this sense is wielded by a single individual (instructor) over a multitude of people (students) and thus creates unequal power relations that prohibit the teacher from becoming a committed ally of the students (Skinner, & Shultz, 2011). What must be created is a more holistic notion of the role of a teacher, one that incorporates an ethos of understanding and being considerate to the circumstances of the students (Au, & Raphael, 2000; Giroux, 1989, Freire, 1970).

It was evident that persistent absenteeism weighed heavily on Jessica's mind. I asked her about how she coped with the dilemma, and the conversation turned to reintegrating students back into the classroom dynamic. Jessica was quite candid and replied, "It really depends on where the student's at [and] how quickly they can pick things up". Jessica spoke about feeling frustrated with students who were already considerably behind, had gaps in their learning, and still continued to miss classes on a regular basis. Feelings of resentment could surface when Jessica felt obliged to do quite a bit of extra work to get these students caught up to the rest of the cohort, thus pointing to the stringent requirement that all pupils in a single class must maintain the same level of content comprehension, which in an inner city school is unrealistic due to the varying educational achievement levels present within a single classroom (DiBara, 2007). Jessica preferred the pupil to have a proactive role in their schooling, and not expect differential treatment. She spoke about some youths who would consult the binder kept by Jessica

that contained all of the previous lessons to find out what they had missed, and would contact a friend for missed content. This was the ideal situation, but one that was not guaranteed to occur. Jessica's exasperation is indicative of the difficulties that arise in working in schools that serve a predominantly marginalized demographic. It can be arduous to define the role of the teacher, and to draw the boundary of where Jessica's obligations should stop. Interacting with youths who had vast disadvantages took its toll emotionally, as Jessica felt powerless to alter the lived realities of her students (DiBara, 2007; Griffith, & Smith, 2005).

Intrigued by the binder that Jessica had maintained, I asked her to tell me more about it. Jessica responded that she gave her students a calendar that contained the lesson plan for each particular class over the course of the whole semester, along with school events and important dates for her pupils. Jessica also kept a binder in the classroom that was comprised of all the handouts that were given to the students during a particular lesson, and printouts of Power Point presentations that Jessica had created to serve as teaching aids. This allowed a particular student to look at what they had missed and narrow the gaps in their content comprehension. I found this to be a brilliant idea, one that creates the opportunity for a youth to catch-up on their work, while not demanding a significant amount of time from Jessica's already hectic schedule. Since we were on the topic of strategies to get students caught up in their lessons I asked Jessica to list some other ways that she attempted to keep her pupils on the same track.

Jessica said that she did her best to monitor the attendance patterns of her students, and to be aware of why they had missed particular classes. She believed that

“when students have to be kind of accountable and say why they’re missing and have a conversation about it, it becomes a little bit more of a big deal than to kind of miss consistently over time”. However, Jessica admitted that this process took an incredible amount of time, of which she had little to spare after grading, lesson preparation, and providing extra help to struggling students. As a result, Jessica said that as the year progressed she had greater difficulty keeping track of all the absences that took place in her classes, pointing to the demanding nature of working in inner city schools (Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011). Jessica also mentioned that she often phoned home to inquire about a student’s absence and to determine whether it was short or long-term. If it was the latter, Jessica sought out a school friend to bring the work home to the absentee in an attempt to keep them engaged with their schooling. Jessica considered herself to be approachable, and had “real conversations” with the absentees where she stressed the importance of regular attendance, and that schooling was a social experience, rather than one that is solely concerned with academic pursuits. Jessica was involved in ongoing discussions with her coworkers concerning certain students, and she described having good relationships with the rest of the faculty, and that it was a useful tool to monitor attendance. I was slightly uncomfortable with the last approach Jessica mentioned. She would inform the students a day in advance when she would be absent, and would provide the pupils with the individual bookwork assignment that they were expected to complete during the period under the supervision of a substitute teacher. The rationale behind this decision was that the youths could choose when to do the work, and use the period to attend to other matters such as doctor’s appointments or job interviews,

provided that they were over the age of 18. It may also point to the distrust held by Jessica towards substitute teachers. I found this tactic to be ambiguous and somewhat dangerous, as it could perpetuate the culture of absence that Jessica had previously described. I could see the good natured intent behind Jessica's decision, as it would allow some students to take care of some of their needs while not missing any content. However, it struck me as biased, in that only the students over the age of 18 were technically allowed to miss the class. It must be noted that adolescents under the age of 18 legally have to be in school during its operating hours, but to give the option of a period off to some of the senior students seemed unethical as it differentiated opportunities based on age. I imagine that the younger pupils might develop feelings of hostility to this exclusion, and would miss the class regardless. Being allowed to skip a period might also encourage a student to miss the entire day, which hinders the other instructors in progressing their lessons. Lastly, by depleting the number of youths who are in the building exacerbates the "relaxed vibe" that Jessica had spoken about. Having listened to Jessica's methods for navigating absenteeism I turned to ask her questions about what the school in general was doing to curb persistent absenteeism.

Jessica spoke about a past vice-principal who would personally hand out late slips to students, and would lecture the youths on the importance of coming to school regularly, and on time, although it must be noted that he has since moved on to a different institution. The administration would often use threats of punitive punishments to coerce youths to attend consistently. After a pupil had missed 15 days they would be sent a letter home informing them that they would be taken off the attendance roll unless they came in

to speak to the vice-principal. Jessica thought that this strategy worked, as it appeared to be more serious and official in the eyes of the students, yet it perpetuates the reward-punishment paradigm that has been discussed earlier in this paper (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). Pupils who displayed irregular attendance patterns would be placed on tracking sheets that monitored their attendance, and if they continued to skip, they would be prohibited from engaging in extracurricular activities such as sports. Jessica thought that this strategy worked to a degree, where some youths liked to have the extra attention, and would have an excuse to go to class. The latter tactic concerned me, as it could inadvertently punish students who missed class for valid reasons, thereby erasing the social contexts of the individual youths (Dimitriadis, 2009; Giroux, 1989). As we were speaking, I began to get the impression that attendance enforcement was done on a piecemeal basis, and was not overly standardized. Knowing that the school had low enrollment numbers, and was in fact in jeopardy of closing, I asked Jessica whether this aspect had a role to play in the way General High's administration approached absenteeism.

Jessica felt comfortable with line of questioning, as she had previously carried out Grade 8 recruitment on the behalf of General High for a number of years. She framed my question differently than I had anticipated, and described how General High had "missed our mark in terms of getting a specialized program" and how this had placed the school in a dire situation. The other secondary schools near General High, which could be chosen over General High, all had some type of distinction, whether being a technical school, having a unique program, or a distinction for academic excellence. There are not enough

students living in the surrounding neighborhoods and “one school has got to give and we’re the one”. The result has been that General High receives the students that did not fit into the other schools in the area. These youths typically have exhibited some problems in other institutions, and often carry patterns of behavior that are deemed unacceptable for a successful pupil. This exemplifies the use of the deficit model of cultural capital that Yosso (2005) discusses in her work, where the youth is framed only as lacking certain capital, without acknowledgement of the other “unofficial” sources of capital they possess. This creates a cycle where General High is labeled and stereotyped as a violent school, one that is full of criminal and deviant youths; this in turn dissuades potential students from enrolling in General High. Along these stigmatic effects there lies an undertone of racialization, as General High is conceptualized as a school that works with a large segment of minority students, although these notions are rarely explicitly articulated (Lawson, 2012; Yon, 2000). The culmination of these developments is the pressure the administration of General High feels to keep as many students on their attendance roll as possible, and their willingness to be more flexible in their treatment of youths than other institutions. I asked Jessica whether some of the labels applied to General High were warranted, and she responded that they did have delinquent students, but that similar occurrences were taking place in other schools, but that it was not the sole defining feature of those institutions as it was in General High.

Serving a disadvantaged demographic carried certain negative connotations as well. Jessica felt that the accommodations made for the student’s life circumstances were misinterpreted by outsiders as not being rigorous, or of a high academic standard, which

Jessica thought was contrary to the truth. When I asked her whether her students were receiving a lower quality of education Jessica did not think so. She commented that this was a misconception, and that her content was of the same standard, if not of a higher one, than the other schools in the area.

Near the end of the interview I began to abstract the conversation and ask questions about Jessica's perceptions about education in general. I described the highly critical model of education, one that interprets modern schools as providing an unquestioning labor force (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Smyth, 2006). Jessica did not agree with the presupposition, as it was opposed to her notions of the meaning of schooling. Jessica envisioned education as a process where an individual becomes critical and begins to question the world around them. Jessica felt that it was vital for her students to learn to inquire about the society they are a part of, and to confront authoritarian practices that have a dramatic impact on their daily lives. She strived for her pupils to "think about who created the knowledge that they're learning, and I try to show them that they are kind of the creators of their own knowledge", which is a sentiment that reflects Jessica's critical theoretical foundation (Glass, & Wong, 2003). She envisioned a teacher as a curator, a person who engaged in "picking out things that might fit well together, and adapting it based on where students kind of want to go", which is quite a progressive stance, one that has been advocated for by a number of educational scholars (Giroux, 1989; Glass, & Wong, 2003). Jessica found that some of her pupils still wanted "to come to school and to some degree have some stuff downloaded to them"; this signifies the amount of thought, and in a sense, work that must

be carried out on the part of the student when engaging in a critical discussion (Freire, 1970), and Jessica did remark that it was, at times, difficult to get her pupils to this stage without forcing them to think in a particular way, exemplifying that critical consciousness or 'conscientizacao' (Freire, 1970) must originate out of a dialectical process, and cannot be done *for* the people.

Jessica mentioned that there was a push from the TDSB to reform secondary schools to meet the demands of the new knowledge economy. However, she perceived the way that the school board was organized, managed, and run was extremely hierarchical, and that it was hypocritical of the board to advocate something that it did not practice. Staying on the theme of the relevance of the current educational model, I began to ask questions around whether formal education was becoming outdated.

Jessica said she felt the formal model was still relevant and useful, although she did admit that she might be clinging to it because it was all she was familiar with. To Jessica, the dialectical aspect of the classroom experience was a fundamental cornerstone of education. She found it invaluable for students to engage in conversations with their peers, and to be exposed to varying opinions and knowledge. Through this process Jessica recognized that a number of her pupils brought a wealth of cultural capital that is not being recognized by formal schooling in the GTA (Yosso, 2005). Alongside this service, the school could function as a "center where everyone comes to in the community" and Jessica framed the school as being a place where people could gather and engage in creating knowledge. She thought that a school should promote unity and cooperation, as well as bringing individuals together. Lastly, it also facilitated co-

curricular activities such as sports and the arts. It did not appear that Jessica was extremely committed to the textbook learning aspect of current educational paradigms (Fine, 1991), but was more focused on maintaining the actual school building as a source of knowledge and useful experiences.

To end our discussion I asked Jessica if she had any proposals that could help improve the attendance patterns, or at least, ensure that the students who could be in school were present on a consistent basis. Jessica thought that General High needed to have a “more strategic plan in place”, one that would listen to the students and the faculty, in an attempt to create a clearer definition of the school’s expectations regarding attendance. Jessica perceived a lack of consistency when it came to attendance regulations, and thought that much of the monitoring was done on an ad hoc level. Jessica thought articulation of general attendance guidelines had to come from the upper levels of the administration at General High, since it was ultimately the principal who could impose these measures, reflecting the hierarchical structuring of schools in the GTA (Fine, 1991; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011). I asked Jessica whether establishing closer ties to the families of the absentees could improve their attendance patterns. Jessica informed me that she was already in close contact with a fair number of parent(s), who would frequently speak to her about their children’s schooling. However, Jessica did not think that it was a realistic expectation for her or the school to maintain close contact with all of the families due to the acute lack of resources, but did feel strongly that all should receive some interaction with the school. This may point to the need of an infusion of funding into public education that would create relationship building possibilities with

the community (Shultz, et al., 2011) We spoke about alternative schools and if students who have difficulty attending a “regular school” would benefit from being part of an alternative model. Jessica prefixed her response by stating that she was not familiar enough with the alternative school system to be a judge, but she felt that having a “more accommodating and compassionate” climate could elevate the students’ self-esteem. The alternative model would be better suited to adapt its instruction to match the needs of its members, while not being constrained by the demand of regular attendance. Jessica thought that the possibility of a stigmatizing effect of being a part of an alternative school might be less damaging than being perceived as inadequate in a ‘regular’ school (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Porche, et al., 2011; Yosso, 2005). The proposals put forth by Jessica highlight the assumption held in General High that students would be absent regardless of the school’s actions. Jessica framed the response to absenteeism as having clearer structure in place to monitor attendance, yet I do not think that it strikes at the root of absenteeism itself. Granted, clear guidelines are beneficial both to the faculty and the students, but I doubt that this approach would significantly eradicate the spotty attendance patterns that are evident in General High.

Jessica’s responses portray the complexity of the situation in General High. There is no doubt that Jessica is an exemplary educator, and her commitment to the students was strikingly clear. Yet, Jessica found herself having to navigate a system that she had little control over, and often she was relegated to mitigating the issues on a personal level with individual pupils. Being a part of a large and well-entrenched institution can

eradicate the agency that some individuals would like to use, and Jessica had to cope as best she could with the current conditions at General High.

Jennifer

"It's pretty lax, here, it's pretty lax, I know some other schools might be different, but those would be schools that don't for example have a shortage of students, they have lineups waiting to get in. we don't, we're the opposite end of that spectrum, so we try and maintain every kid that we can keep and if that means you know literally phoning their home, their parents, their aunts, their uncles, getting their friends to call them and ask them if they're going to come back. And if we get 2 or 3 back then we do it and even if they've missed you know 30-40 classes our goal then becomes not to get them an 80, but to get them what we call credit accumulation, can they get the credit, a 50"

For the last interview used in this thesis I approached a past instructor of mine at General High, whom I will refer to as Jennifer. Jennifer has taught at General High for ten years, and primarily teaches senior social science classes, although she has recently become involved in a new program that gives the students an option of doing a part of their course work online, as has been described in Rashmee's interview. I have had a lot of personal contact with Jennifer, as I often volunteer in her classroom, and she took part in the pilot study that was the original grounding for this research. Having worked at General High for an extended amount of time, and knowing that she is struggling with how to deal with absenteeism, I thought Jennifer could provide valuable insight into the issue.

We began the conversation by speaking about the attendance patterns that Jennifer had observed over the past couple of years at General High. Jennifer comments were similar to Jessica's; at the beginning of term attendance starts off relatively well, and as the term progressed "you lose probably a third to a half of your class on a daily basis", which Jennifer attributed mostly to the complex lives of the pupils that are enrolled in General High, reflecting the disadvantaged position many youths find themselves in (DiBara, 2007; Garcia-Garcia, 2008; Smyth, 2006). Jennifer mentioned that a lot of her students do not attend regularly, although they do come to school at least a couple of times a week. She stated that on average "the kids that do miss classes, they do miss 20 to 40 classes per semester", considering that there are roughly 96 classes per semester this becomes a troubling development, as at least a third of the cohort is missing between 20 to 40 percent of all the content that they are expected to learn. Seeing that persistent absenteeism was quite prevalent in Jennifer's classes I began to ask questions about the causes of the absences.

Jennifer gave quite a detailed account of the various reasons that prevented youths from coming to school on a regular basis. Jennifer framed the absence problem as stemming from both the life circumstances of the students, and of the conditions within the school. When asked about the voluntary vs. involuntary absences Jennifer remarked that it was close to a 50-50 split, with some youths being a part of both groups. For outside reasons it appeared that the financial situation of some students was the determinant for their absence. Many were involved in some type of employment, and this would prohibit them from coming to school regularly. Jennifer noted that General High

had a disproportionate number of pupils who were currently residing alone. Others have substantial familial commitments that take precedence over their schooling. Many of the themes that Jennifer had stated were reflected in much of the literature as being the dominant causes for absence (Attwood, & Croll, 2006; Bridgeland, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Reid, 2006b; Terry, 2008). Alongside these influences, factors inside the school were also provoking youths to miss classes. Jennifer cited the curriculum selection as being fairly slim in a school as small as General High, and mentioned that they could not offer the same types of courses as other schools in the nearby area. As a result, some students may feel dissatisfied with their choices, or are compelled to enroll into classes that they do not find interesting, and in turn, stop attending (Giroux, 2004). Pupils who are struggling in some of their courses may also feel inclined to abstain from attending, as it is easier to skip than to admit that they do not understand the content, although Jennifer thought that this was a small number, and that the faculty did their best to encourage students to come to speak to them if they were struggling. By combining factors both inside and outside of General High as precipitating attendance patterns, Jennifer provided a comprehensive description which was in line with the literature on the topic (De Wit, et al., 2010; Hess, & Copeland, 2001; Reid, 2007). There was no typical type of absentee, and they varied in their educational achievements and goals. It was not uncommon for pupils who had previously maintained steady attendance patterns to stop coming regularly once they received a conditional offer from a university. What Jennifer's comments highlight is the diversity of the absentee demographic, and the difficulties that educators and researchers have with delineating viable solutions to the problem.

Having situated the absenteeism issue, I began to speak with Jennifer about the ways that she mitigates the pattern, and how she reintegrates non-attendees back into the classroom dynamic. Jennifer described the complications and the frustration involved in teaching in a school with a high rate of absenteeism. Jennifer mentioned that she has been teaching at General High for some time, and has grown accustomed and comfortable with dealing with the irregular attendance patterns many of her students exhibit. However, she noted that it must be a hard situation to become accustomed to, especially for new teachers, or for the instructors who are unused to dealing with this type of demographic, and these ideas were reflected in the literature regarding teaching in inner city schools (DiBara, 2007; Meadows, 2007; Opfer, 2011; Reid, 2006b). Jennifer spoke about having youths who were at four different stages in their content comprehension in a single classroom, and of attempting to maintain a sense of continuance in her lessons. Group work assignments, which she found to be a key part of schooling, as they created room for discussion, were hindered by the non-attendees, and would generally not last more than one class, since it could not be taken for granted that the same youths would be present the following day. Jennifer strove to find ways to reintegrate the absentees back into the classroom without causing too much disturbance to the other students. She spoke about making the classroom environment an inviting place, and thought that through building a supportive atmosphere more pupils would be encouraged to attend regularly, while not feeling intimidated about returning, or fearing some type of backlash following a prolonged absence. Adaptability was one of the main coping tools that Jennifer employed in the management of her classroom. She would install flexible deadlines,

alternative assignments, and would generally try to get the absentees caught up to the rest of the cohort as quickly as possible. Often this meant sacrificing her spare time, and taking on added work to assist the non-attendees in their educational progress, which is often an obligation that numerous educators in inner city schools are expected to perform (DiBara, 2007). Jennifer felt that it was unfair to the regular attendees to take up class time to get the absentees caught up, and would usually help them before and after school, or during lunch. Jennifer had to spend considerably more time working with absentees than regular attendees in terms of extra help, and felt that this was an obligation that she could not abstain from. Jennifer spoke about feelings of frustration at having to spend time during the school day that could be used in other beneficial ways in the building, and of having to use her own time outside of the school in working with the absentees. Jennifer contextualized this response by noting that these somewhat hostile feelings were not directed at all non-attendees, but at the students who missed class voluntarily, and did not have valid reasons for the absence. As was evidenced in my conversation with Jessica, there appears to be little that teachers can do to curb absenteeism (Meadows, 2008; Opfer, 2011). At best, they can try to manage their classrooms as fluidly as possible, as to not arrest the educational progress of the regular attendees. Having a mix of absentees and youths who came to class regularly unavoidably creates tensions within the classroom, and this is where we turned the conversation.

Jennifer noted that for the most part the students got along fairly well, and often regular attendees would be close friends with youths who came in haphazard fashion. This was partly due to the small size of General High, which allowed the students to

become familiar with peers in the same grade as theirs, and in turn, develop a mutual understanding between the various students. The fact that General High had a large number of disadvantaged youths actually worked in its favor in this particular scenario, since a lot of the students were at this specific institution for similar reasons. Many were coming from different schools and needed extra chances to either upgrade their marks, or earn credits to graduate. Being in a comparable situation as their peers, the majority of the youths were tolerant about persistent absenteeism, and these feelings allowed the development of a comradeship, one that originated from many of the students having to struggle in the margins (Giroux, 1989; Yosso, 2005). The feelings of hostility typically arose when regular attendees would perceive differential treatment of absentees as unfair to them. Pupils would often voice displeasure at absentees being able to hand in a large portion of missed work in bulk, and being given the chance to earn grades that were comparable to the regular attendees. The lack of repercussions for missing classes was seen as unfair to the attendees, as they perceived it unjust for someone to miss a large portion of their classes, and still have high grades, while they were expected to attend on a regular basis. However, Jennifer was quick to bring context into this rationale, describing that “the word fair doesn’t always mean equal” for some of the students. In her eyes accommodation was an integral part of working in General High, without which a large segment of the student body would not be able to complete secondary school. It appears that much like Rashmee, students who perceived themselves as “working hard” for their success resented differential treatment that they framed as preferential, and thus unjust. The issues of individualism and meritocracy are once again brought to the

forefront, and it appears as though the competitive nature of Toronto's secondary schooling is driving a wedge between the students, who embody the assumption that education is equal to all, and focus on the particular classroom dynamics, rather than the social contexts that dictate them (O'Sullivan, 1999). I asked Jennifer how she navigated these tensions, and her attempts at mitigating them.

Jennifer noted that there was "not a lot that you can do" to relieve the underlying friction between students. The reality of the situation dictated that absentees and regular attendees had to be in the same class, and that feelings of hostility were unavoidable. Jennifer made sure never to disclose the personal information of a particular student to the rest of the class, even if it meant not being able to justify the differential treatment that someone was receiving. However, she noted that in a school as small as General High the youths would generally know, or have an idea, of why a particular student was away, and would determine who was absent for legitimate reasons, or who was simply skipping because of personal choice. This allowed Jennifer to be flexible whenever a group assignment had to be implemented, and she often allowed the students to pick with whom they wished to work with. Through these approaches Jennifer was able to push for an eradication of the individualistic stance that many of the students held, which has been documented in my data, as well as in the literature (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). The online aspect that has recently been introduced in General High gave the pupils an opportunity to contact one another outside of the physical building, and it was another tool that Jennifer employed in managing the conflict that would arise in her classes. I sensed that there was a lack of clear repercussions for missing substantial

amounts of class, and asked Jennifer questions regarding, if and how, the administrative staff in General High reprimanded absentees.

Jennifer explained that due to General High's demographic, and how the administration has chosen to approach the issue, it was tricky to have standardized rules in place regarding attendance. What compounded the problem was the lack of real consequences for the absentees, many of whom were content to merely receive a passing grade, thereby eradicating the academic punishments that could be used by the faculty. Punitive measures did not appear to have any significant meaning to pupils who were already used to missing large portions of their classes. Detentions, when assigned, were usually skipped, whereas suspensions were taken as legitimate reasons for being absent. Jennifer's comments contained a similar theme that arose in Rashmee's discussion of a lack of real or perceived repercussions for marginalized students, and indicates that the issue is understood and rationalized by both the faculty and the students in a comparable fashion (Fine, 1991). The administration was hesitant to go to the extreme of threatening expulsion, as they could ill afford to lose any more pupils. Once again the ethos of General High pertaining to attendance became a vital signifier of the ills that the school found itself in. The faculty felt confined due to the life circumstances of their students, and could not enforce any meaningful repercussions, which in turn, exacerbated the absenteeism problem. I turned to speak to Jennifer about how the administration approached attendance patterns with the intent of introducing the concept of 'culture of absenteeism'.

Jennifer thought it was important to outline the unique qualities that had placed General High into a precarious position that other schools may not be facing. Once again the issue of low enrollment numbers quickly surfaced, and Jennifer explained that other schools in the area had waiting lists to enroll, while General High was unable to attract many new students. This led to General High quickly earning a label of a deficient school, with implied racialized undertones (Yosso, 2005), one that was renowned for giving multiple chances to students who have struggled in other schools, thereby intensifying the cycle. This quandary necessitated that the administration excuse persistent absenteeism as one of the characteristics of its students. Serving a disproportionate number of disadvantaged students, or youths who have had problems in other secondary schools, General High's staff had to cope with the often intricate and troublesome lives of their pupils (DiBara, 2007). Support networks were created that strove to aid struggling youths in their educational journey. Jennifer said that the administration would welcome back a pupil who had missed nearly half of the course, the goal being for the student to earn the credit, while the actual mark became a secondary concern. As noble as the intentions of this tactic may be, it still perpetuates a cycle of racialization and marginalization, as the youth in this position would not earn high enough grades to pursue any type of schooling at a post secondary level (Smyth, 2006). This in turn generated a relaxed atmosphere with no real repercussions for habitual absences, and Jennifer felt that "we harbor the idea that you can miss 40 classes and still get a credit". This attitude was quickly picked up on by the students, who then felt entitled to a course credit regardless of their attendance patterns. Youths began to "see

absenteeism as normal...so even the kids who don't have the same struggles take on, as it's ok, you can miss class, that sort of pattern" as Jennifer described. This is where the culture of absenteeism as I have originally envisioned manifests itself. Jennifer did not think that many students were intentionally taking advantage of a system that was developed to assist youths to overcome the obstacles in their lives, but they nonetheless held the opinion that it was excusable for them to miss either portions of, or whole classes. A further ethical dilemma arose alongside this development, where Jennifer found it difficult to give an absentee a passing grade, while failing a student who was in class regularly. Jennifer framed the issue as a hypothetical example, where "it's very difficult to warrant...giving a kid a credit if they've missed 56 classes and then you have kids who've been here for the whole time and they fail legitimately". The rationale here is that it seemed unfair for a student to gather together enough missed work at the end of the semester to pass, while another, who tried to the best of their ability, is denied the credit. This dilemma is partly created by the educational paradigm that is intent on a continuous cycle of evaluation, that ranks individual students against each other, and is an intricate socializing aspect which conditions youths to frame the world as a site of struggle and competition, in some quasi social-Darwinian fight for survival (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). Although most of the students in General High were disadvantaged in some way, they nonetheless carried out a ranking system of oppression, one that served to assign certain oppressions as being of a higher significance (Heron, 2005). Jennifer strove to emphasize to her pupils that their life conditions were similar, in

hope of attaining a sense of unity; yet, it appears as though the youths were resistant to this more holistic line of thinking.

I asked Jennifer whether she thought that a more rigid and strict structure would work more effectively than the current model. Jennifer did not think it was feasible to maintain a hard line with all of the students, because it would gloss over the varying hindrances that they experience in their attempts to graduate from secondary school. What Jennifer advocated for mirrored Jessica's proposal for a more consistent message from the administration regarding the expectations about attendance. Jennifer believed that developing a standardized structure would be the first step in solidifying the school's stance on absenteeism, and this would eradicate some of the ambiguity that is prevalent right now in General High, which is one of the causes of the 'culture of absenteeism' phenomena.

Before turning the conversation to a more abstract note Jennifer and I briefly spoke about the quality of education that the students at General High were receiving as compared to the other schools in the vicinity. Contrary to what some outsiders may assume, Jennifer felt that the regular attendees in General High were actually benefiting from the absence rate. It must be noted that Jennifer did not think that this was a positive feature of the school, but one that she nonetheless had to cope with. With the low number of students regularly attending, the class sizes in General High were considerably smaller than the other schools in the area. The youths who were present were able to establish a strong connection between themselves and Jennifer, allowing her to give extra support to the students who were in class consistently. The only real drawback that Jennifer saw was

the slower progression of her classes due to the constant disruptions. Although she attempted to engage the regular attendees, she felt that the lackluster pace was frustrating for some of the youths.

Having spoken at length about General High and all of its intricacies we began to discuss education in broad terms, and whether formal education was still a valid aspect of schooling. Jennifer reiterated Jessica's notions of the value of learning social skills in the classroom that could not be replicated online or through correspondence. Jennifer noted, "These kids are plugged into their technology all the time. They need to learn how to actually be social with real life human beings", which would be a useful tool when Jennifer's students would eventually find employment that would require them to interact with coworkers. Although Jennifer, who was quite involved in introducing the online aspect to General High, believed that the way in which educators teach will transform in the next decade, but felt that the classroom component still held validity.

I was intrigued by her theorization on the way teaching would change in the near future and asked her to elaborate further on what she envisioned. Jennifer was of the opinion that "we're on the cusp of seeing education change significantly", and that digital media would continue to further infiltrate public schools. She seemed unsure of exactly which direction this new evolution would turn, and admitted that there was a chance of failure on the part of the school board to adapt to these changes. Jennifer gave a poignant example when describing the metamorphosis that schooling was undergoing. She spoke about teaching a summer school course that was to be carried out completely online. Jennifer would meet the students once, and for the rest of the course never come into

physical contact with them again. Although this may suggest that classroom learning is being eradicated, it must be pointed out that a summer school course in the GTA generally lasts between 1 and 2 months, thus the interactive aspect may be overlooked for the sake of efficiency. There were also less drastic, yet monumental changes taking part in elementary schools in Ontario. Jennifer explained that the online component that has been introduced to secondary schools would be implemented all the way down to the lower grades. Therefore, in roughly nine or ten years she will have students who have grown up with the technological component of their schooling, which will become the norm, and not be perceived as a foreign tool by the pupils. The nature of the learner will, in a sense, evolve and become closer aligned to the digital age, and this without a doubt will require the schooling model to actively align itself to this new type of student. This conceptualization is beyond the scope of this paper, but points to an exciting new avenue of investigation in educational research.

I brought in a critical line of thinking about education (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989; Yosso, 2005), and asked Jennifer to comment on whether she agreed with it, or if it held a much too pessimistic outlook on current educational models. Jennifer did not all together agree with the critical model, although she did find some of the arguments compelling. Jennifer believed that the schooling system in Ontario was changing, but that this process took a considerable amount of time due to the well established, and entrenched nature of schooling in our society. Jennifer cited varying alternative programs, and school options that were available to youths who did not wish to attend 'regular' schools. Alongside these developments was the changing nature of the role of the teacher.

There was a movement towards eradicating the notion of the instructor as the person who imparts knowledge, and learning was beginning to be conceived in more egalitarian terms, where the teacher facilitated the knowledge discovery process, in line with the proposals of some of the more critically orientated authors (Au, & Raphael, 2000; Giroux, 1989; Smyth, 2006). However, Jennifer did not think that the 'regular' school model would disappear any time soon, as parent(s) or guardian(s) relied on the system to watch over their children during the day while they were at work. Jennifer's comment "you can't leave a 14 year old at home all day and just hope they're going to do their school work when they feel like it...I think the parents also rely on the system like this to maintain...some semblance of normality in their lives", elucidated this conundrum, which became so obvious that I was amazed that I had not considered it previously.

To end our discussion I asked Jennifer whether there was anything else that instructors, the school, or the board could do to curb absenteeism, or at least find viable solutions to the culture of absenteeism that is currently operating in General High. Jennifer's proposals rotated around having General High adapt to the digital technology that has saturated our society. She described her students as "very digital and media savvy" and that the school should attempt to "[have] things that they can relate to in the classroom" by which Jennifer envisioned more access to technology. Inserting Wi-Fi into classrooms would enable the students to use their technological devices as research tools, and would not cost their parents mobile phone data usage. This proposal had two shortcomings, one was that it is expensive to implement, and there is a doubt whether a school board that is continually trying to find new ways to cut their budget would be

willing to take on the added cost (O'Sullivan, 1999). The other is that it is based on the assumption that all students have access to these types of technological apparatuses, which I find fallacious. I cannot speak with authority, as I do not know the proportion of youths in secondary schools who possess some type of advanced technological device, but whenever making wide assumptions one must tread carefully. Excluding students based on their lack of access to online capable devices can ostracize youths who may be the most disadvantaged.

Many of Jennifer's responses resembled those given by Jessica. Notably both educators perceived a lack of consistency when approaching absenteeism in General High, and the awkward situation that the school found itself in. Jennifer had to maneuver around the circumstances of her students, and seemed at a loss as to what significant implementations could be introduced to diminish the rates of absences. Jennifer saw the future of education as becoming intertwined with technology, and hoped that this would make schooling more accessible and flexible enough to accommodate the varying life conditions of the youths that partake in it.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Many different themes arose out of this study, many of which warrant further inquiry, highlighting the breadth of the topic,. However, I believe that three themes were of particular significance, and I turn my focus to explicating these concepts in hope of progressing our conceptualization of persistent absenteeism. The three areas that will be further discussed are: the role of the family in a student's attendance patterns; the notion of social identity and the goals of education; and the importance of culturally sensitive educators in Toronto's inner city schools. Having covered these three themes I will redefine what I mean by the 'culture of absenteeism' term, and how this research has shaped that conceptualization. By accentuating the commonalities and the discrepancies that are evident in the responses of the participants I hope to elucidate the current situation at General High, and articulate a coherent analysis of the developments, before suggesting possible solutions that will be aimed at eradicating the 'culture of absenteeism'.

Family

The significance of family in influencing a youth's attendance patterns cannot be underestimated. I will document the literature that was used in conceptualizing the role of the family in a youth's schooling, before presenting the themes pertinent to family that arose in the data, and how they relate to what has been found in the literature.

Having reviewed some of the literature concerned with documenting how families shape student attitudes towards schooling (Fuligni, 1997; Terry, 2008), and how the

expectations of schools are often unrealistic for parent(s) living in low end of the socioeconomic scale (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Lawson, 2012; Standing, 1999), has brought to the forefront the issue of family involvement in secondary students' attendance patterns. What the literature seems to suggest is that many schools make a White middle class assumption that all of their pupils live in a typical nuclear family, where the mother has the necessary time and resources to be intimately involved in her children's schooling (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Standing, 1999). The presumption of an 'ideal' parent creates a standard, against which all other parent(s) are judged (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). If a parent is not able to emulate this 'ideal' parent they are perceived as inadequate, or deficient, and as a result, the parent is allocated total responsibility and blame for their children's supposed 'failures' (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). The focus is on a parent's lack of social capital, and through a deficit framework the parent(s) who do not reflect the White middle class ideological model of the parent are characterized as being 'unable' to provide resources to their children (Yosso, 2005). This conceptualization leads to veiling the social conditions apparent in Toronto, and further marginalizes families that are already stigmatized. What is proposed is the need to acknowledge the various ways that disadvantaged parents participate in their children's schooling, and embrace the numerous resources that are at their disposal (Fuligni, 1997; Terry, 2008; Yosso, 2005). There is also a push to eradicate the conception of the 'ideal' parent and to become more sensitive to both the living conditions, and cultural differences that are evident in families (Lareau, 2011; Standing, 1999). Through this process these parent(s) will shed the burden

of blame, and can become positive agents in their children's schooling. This issue is relevant to all schools, but more so in inner city schools that often serve a disproportionate number of disadvantaged youths. The three students that took part in this study spoke about the various influences of their families in their academic careers, although the involvement fluctuated drastically between the individual respondents. I now turn to speaking about how each pupil conceptualized the impact that their family had on their schooling, and how these insights can progress our knowledge on the subject.

When asked about the role of his family in his schooling, Joel quickly identified as being solely responsible for his educational progress. He felt that the onus to succeed rested on his shoulders, and that he alone was to ensure that his schooling moved forward. This may point to the fact that Joel did not think that his mother was involved in his studies, and he generally characterized her participation as comments about the need to have an education. It is difficult for me to propose any reified suggestions, as I was unable to speak to Joel for a second time, or to his mother. I am leery of making assumptions, and what follows is theoretical speculation. What can be inferred from Joel's comments is that he perceived his mother as not being particularly interested in his education. This may have led Joel to frame school as not a priority, and to approach it lackadaisically. This in turn could have resulted in his withdrawal from General High near the end of the 2013 school year. Some literature has suggested that whenever students perceived a lack of parental concern regarding their education they tended to render their schooling as being of secondary importance (Atwood, & Croll, 2006; Reid,

2006b). This may have occurred with Joel, and could be one of the causes for his unofficial departure from General High, although without being able to speak to him I cannot argue this point with certainty. What this development points to is the need for supportive role models in, and outside, of the school that can inform youths about their life opportunities with and without formal education, and to encourage them to make strides in their schooling (Syed, et al., 2011). Joel may not have been receiving the desired attention from his mother in regards to his schooling, but Mateen's narrative displayed how difficult it is for a young adult to consistently attend school without any parental encouragement.

As was documented earlier Mateen has been living alone for a few years, and confronting the challenges that are associated with the total lack of parental support in his life. Mateen noted that one of the challenges he felt in progressing his schooling was an acute lack of assistance from his family. Whenever Mateen felt discouraged to be present in school he could not rely on his parent(s) to motivate him to attend. In addition to the lack of guidance that he received it must have been quite emotionally challenging for a young person to live in isolation without his parents. The strain Mateen felt was also exacerbated by his financial situation, which was quite precarious, since Mateen could not rely on his parents to supplement an income, and he was in charge of his finances (Porche, et al., 2011). This points not only to the shortcomings of the 'ideal' parent model described in the literature (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1998), but is indicative of the emotional and monetary importance of having a family in a student's life (Terry, 2008). Mateen's life was fraught with additional difficulties due to his independent living

status, and displays the incredible amount of resilience Mateen possessed to continue on with his education. Rashmee's living situation was almost completely opposite of Mateen's, as she was living with quite a large family, and through her comments the influence of family in a youth's schooling becomes evident.

Out of the three students interviewed for this research Rashmee appeared to receive the greatest amount of support from her family in her schooling. Rashmee was able to employ not only her parents' capital, but also utilized her siblings as sources of guidance and assistance (Yosso, 2005). Her conception of family was in contrast to the 'ideal' parent notion expressed in some of the literature (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999), as Rashmee's parents were indirectly involved in her education, while her older siblings had more of a 'traditional' role in assisting her with her studies. Rashmee spoke about her parents facing a language barrier whenever they wished to become formally involved in her schooling. This points to the inaccessibility of many inner city schools in Toronto, which is a worrying pattern, as over a quarter of students in the TDSB were born outside of Canada (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). Although Rashmee's parents could not personally interact with her teachers, or to assist her with her studies, they nonetheless instilled certain beliefs about education into Rashmee and the rest of their children. They held high aspirations, and believed that education could be a way out of poverty for their children (Fuligni, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Rashmee's relationship with her family challenges the overemphasis on the involvement of *parents* in school as being too confining, and suggests that the term *family* is more suited for this discourse. Rashmee took advantage of having siblings that had completed postsecondary education,

and relied on them in directly assisting her with her studies. This development highlights the need of a broader conception of *family*, one that recognizes the multiplicity of the term, rather than confining it to mean parents. To Rashmee the term *family* went beyond her parents, and added the role of her siblings into the dynamic. Although it could be argued that Rashmee's responsibilities in rearing her younger siblings were having an adverse impact on her ability to be present at school regularly, I firmly believe that she received an immense amount of support from her family, which was an invaluable resource.

As the above discussion demonstrates, there is a need for inner city schools in Toronto to revamp their expectations for the role of the parent(s) in their children's schooling. While I am speaking about one school in particular, and do not aim to make generalizing comments, I believe that many other urban secondary schools in Toronto may benefit from adapting the new conceptualization of the parent or family (in the case of Mateen). The data from the respondents has shown that the ideological notion of the 'ideal' parent is not only archaic in the new urban spaces, but is also imbued with racist, sexist and classist connotations (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). None of the participants exhibited a family dynamic that resembled the White middle class nuclear family. All exemplified drastic variations of parental and familial involvement in their schooling, ranging from none (Mateen) to quite a fair amount (Rashmee). Much like what some of the literature has suggested, there is a need to develop a more holistic and enveloping conception of the family (Griffith, & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999; Yosso, 2005), one that moves beyond concentrating on what the family is lacking, to

acknowledging the various sources of capital at its disposal. With the influx of immigrant students into Toronto's inner city schools there is a need to alter the concept of parent, in order to be culturally and economically sensitive to the life circumstances of both the individual students and their families.

Social Identity and the Goal of Education

I now turn to discuss the notion of social identity that was exhibited by the participants, and how the students envisioned high school as a way to move forward in life. I believe that the two themes are interrelated, and are founded on the neoliberal ideological framework of meritocracy (Keil, 2002). I will attempt to describe how each participant envisioned their social identity; the role of the individual student in relation to their success in school; how they conceptualized the overarching goals of formal education; and the implications that these attitudes have on secondary schools. I think this issue is extremely important, as it informs the conceptions of 'fair' and 'equal' within the respondents, which was a fundamental finding of this research.

The three student respondents displayed a scaled framework regarding individualism. With Rashmee identifying with meritocracy the most, Joel envisioning a need for a support network that is based on individualism, and Mateen expressing the least amount of approval for the idea. What is of particular interest is the fact that the more supports that a student had in their life, the more likely they were to identify with the individualistic model, thus pointing to their apparent alignment to the middle-class social location. I do not wish to imply that I am ranking the life conditions of the

particular participants, or that I believe some of them were more disadvantaged than others, but I maintain the belief that there was a link between the embodiment of neoliberal ideology in a respondent, and the amount of support they perceived to be receiving in their schooling from outside sources. It appears that once a student began to self-identify as 'middle-class' they embodied the stereotypically imbued ideological assumptions and beliefs of that social class. I will briefly mention the literature reviewed concerning this topic, before presenting the positions of the participants.

Neoliberal ideology has been permeating educational and political discourses in Toronto over the past twenty years (Keil, 2002; Seccombe, 2000), and has had a direct impact on the conceptualization of 'fair' and 'equal' within schools. What has been proposed by neoliberalism is the 'fact' that Toronto has a fair educational system that is accessible to all. Through this framework it is assumed that all have equal opportunities to succeed academically, and individuals are ranked by their *personal* attainment of academic credentials, while characterizing those who could not thrive in the current paradigm as being deficient (Keil, 2002; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Seccombe, 2000). This process obscures the disparities in living conditions that are evident in Toronto, and is concerned with meritocracy as the standard unit of achievement. This hegemonic mantra has become ingrained in educational discourses in Toronto, and manifests itself in the narratives of the respondents. The more a student perceived their social identity to be in line with 'middle-class' values, their caricature of these values dramatically increased.

Mateen, who arguably had the least amount of familial assistance in his schooling was also the student who did not identify with the individualistic model. Mateen's

perception of his social identity was one that recognized the unequal nature of his life, when compared to those espousing middle-class values. Being constantly reminded of the disadvantages that he faced in life Mateen appears to have been the most sensitive to the various obstacles that students experienced in their educational pathways, and was a strong proponent of differential treatment of youths based on life circumstances. He was particularly aware of the unequal access to education that many adolescents face, and was of the opinion that 'fair' did not always amount to 'equal' (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1989). What his attitudes suggest is that through his struggles with marginalization and disempowerment Mateen has grown acquainted with the challenges that are evident in the lives of disadvantaged youths; self-identified as belonging to that group; and came to appreciate the modified treatment that he was receiving, while promoting similar accommodation of all students. This is somewhat contrary to Freire's (1970) theorization on the subject, since he believed that the oppressed would attempt to emulate the oppressor unless conscientized. Mateen rejected the individualistic ideology that has been used to oppress disadvantaged youths as being too rigid and was more aligned with a more culturally and economically sensitive conception of fairness and equality. I believe through his struggles Mateen has created an identity that is appreciative of the delicate nature of the lives of marginalized students and this has influenced his conceptualization of fairness and equality.

Joel's comments displayed an intriguing comprehension of his social position, and he was able to construct a system that relied both on the need for a support network and the individual's resilience to oppressive forces. This may reflect Joel's perception on

the amount of support that he had received from his family and the school. Joel identified as being lower-middle class, which points both to his acknowledgment of the economic disparities evident in his life, while still maintaining a desire to be a part of the dominant class. Joel articulated that he had received assistance from the faculty in his educational progress, but believed that his personal attitude and ability was a determining factor in his success at school. These experiences may explain how Joel thought that students should be aided in their schooling, but that the onus to succeed should still reside with the individual pupil. Joel's rationalization appears to be split between being cognizant of the inequalities apparent in his life, while still relating to middle-class ideology. The perceived lack of stereotypical middle-class involvement of his parent(s) in his schooling may have led Joel to notice the disparity between his life and the one being promoted by middle-class values. While being accommodated by the school promoted Joel's feelings of self-sufficiency, and warranted his belief that differential treatment should be based on an individual's drive. Joel's partial identification with middle-class values has manifested itself in his conception of fair and equal, where he conceives these terms with a dual approach. He is simultaneously aware that he is not a part of the typical middle-class, advocating for accommodation, yet refuses to relinquish his aspiration to join the category, and promotes meritocratic attitudes. Joel's narrative exemplifies the middle ground between Mateen and Rashmee's positions.

Unlike the other two respondents Rashmee perceived the greatest amount of social support in her schooling, which originated out of her interactions with her instructors and family. As discussed above Rashmee had spoken about utilizing the

various sources of capital that were available to her within her family (Yosso, 2005). What is striking is that Rashmee perceived 'fairness' and 'equality' in neoliberal terms, and prided herself on her accomplishments (Keil, 2002). She was of the opinion that everyone faced obstacles to education, and that it was the individual's responsibility to overcome those hurdles. Rashmee felt that it was unrealistic to expect the school to modify its instruction and evaluation based on a student's life circumstances, since every pupil had varying situations. Rashmee focused on the legitimacy of the absences as the focal determinant of differential treatment, and her definition of excusable absences generally revolved around health issues, likely due to her experiences with her mother.. This is an intriguing development, as it seems that Rashmee took the support systems that she had received for granted, and was of the opinion that if she was able to succeed in the current system, so could others. The fact that Rashmee identified as middle-class, while living in subsidized housing points to the creation of her social identity as conforming to the dominant ideological view. Rashmee may have evaluated the life conditions of her family compared to others living in her neighborhood, and determined that it was her family's values, ambition and drive that has led to their success. Having two siblings who have completed postsecondary education and found employment may point to her belief that if one works hard enough they will accomplish their goals. Thus Rashmee created an identity that ignored certain characteristics of her life, such as: her race, gender, immigrant status, and class; while overemphasizing others, such as: the resilience of her parents, and success of her older siblings. Even when challenged about her assertion that

education was equal, Rashmee maintained her stance on the fairness of treating all students uniformly.

The variance in the three respondents, one that appears to correlate between the availability of support networks; social identity; and stance on individualism is quite fascinating. I will tread carefully in this discussion, as I fear inaccurately representing the voices of the participants, but I think the data contains some significant implications. What the data suggests is that the more resources that a particular student has, the more likely they are to take them for granted, and pride themselves on their *own* accomplishments, while regarding those who could not succeed as ‘not trying hard enough’. Therefore it can be argued that having added advantages creates an identity that blinds the individual to the resources at their disposal, and they interpret their success as originating out of their *own* commitment and ability, rather than being assisted by outside forces. The particular youth creates an identity that is in agreement to these viewpoints, and which perpetuates notions self-sufficiency. This line of reasoning is aligned with the reviewed publications regarding neoliberalism, in that it perpetuates a rationalization process that tactically ignores an individual’s advantages, while concentrating on personal ability (Boudreau, et al., 2009; Keil, 2002; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Seccombe, 2008). What the data displays is the tendency of an individual to internalize this ideological grounding, especially when they are able to succeed within the current educational framework. This also results with the failure by a youth to see how the absence of these (taken for granted) resources could be harmful to others. This has profound consequences, as it not only fosters hostility within the classroom, where youths

hold detrimental views of one another that are based on competition, but it also points to the socialization process that Toronto's students must undergo. What neoliberalism dictates is competition, one that is blind to the social contexts that effectively prohibit certain people from participating in this process (Keil, 2002). With competition as the basis of education there must be winners and losers, which is the fundamental shortcoming of the current educational paradigm. The ranking of students without situating their lives creates a cycle of disempowerment that relegates those who are already disadvantaged to the margins of society. The stakes at play in this dilemma are extremely high, as 'losing' in education holds significant repercussions for the individual student. A more sensitive approach is needed, which I think must emerge out of the inner city educators, one that is concerned with articulating the unequal state of the Torontonians society, in an attempt to create a critical awareness in the students (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989).

Another theme that I think is relevant to the present discussion is the overarching goals of formal education. When asked why they were in school the three student respondents unanimously agreed that academic credentials were the key goals of their schooling experience. They envisioned going to school as a stepping-stone to gain degrees and/or diplomas, which were necessary to find meaningful employment. The students followed a linear path of progression that framed secondary school as the beginning, post-secondary institutions as the middle, and a successful career as the end goal. This is an attitude that is commonly held by many teenagers and young adults alike (Albo, 2010). What is ironic is that the proliferation of neoliberal ideology that promotes

white collar efficiency has led to the elimination of previously prestigious manual labour positions, and today's youths find themselves searching for employment opportunities, many of which require advanced schooling at a post-secondary level (Keil, 2002; Seccombe, 2000; Stinson, 2010). What is concerning is the fact that a segment of Toronto's secondary school students are effectively shut out from the post-secondary school experience. Youths living in the lower strata of the socioeconomic scale were not only more likely to be classified as 'at-risk' of premature school withdrawal, but were also overrepresented in identification of a behavioral disorder and/or pertaining 'special needs'. Being a member of either one of the categories drastically reduced post-secondary options (Brown, & Parekh, 2010). In General High the classification of students as qualifying for the label of 'at-risk' of premature school withdrawal is ambiguous, and pupils are assigned to this category once they exhibited irregular attendance patterns. Thus the respondents, and much of the student body, at one point of time or another in their journey in General High would qualify as 'at-risk'. This complicates the present application of certain labels as being too rigid in their assertion of definable groups and existing categories. I return to Yon's (2000) writing on the issue of assigning youths to preconceived groups or cultures, and the implied assumption that these assemblages can be distinguished by a set of particular characteristics. My data points to similar conclusions as Yon (2000) in highlighting the shortcomings of establishing fixed labels as being too constraining in their application. The label of 'at-risk' when assigned did not dictate a youth belonging in the group indefinitely, and often students would traverse in and out of this category. More so, the 'at-risk' group in General High contained much

variance; the members were a heterogeneous set, with strikingly different life positions and attitudes. It is useful to conceptualize 'at-risk' as a fluid category with no absolute distinctions or attributes. However, as Brown and Parekh (2010) have documented, youths who are classified as 'at-risk', in fact, do have challenges in reaching postsecondary education; thus the respondents' preoccupation with utilizing education as a route towards sustainable employment is in contradiction to the actual possibilities that may present themselves to these youths. Many high school students narrowly define the opportunities that are available to them. They are partially correct in their assumptions that without academic credentials they face limited employment choices, but to constrain schooling to serve as a means to an end is troublesome. What is interesting is that the participants' responses concerning the overarching goals of formal education reflected their perceived social position. Rashmee conceptualized education as a way to attain successful employment, and mentioned that she did not like having to attend school, but that it was something to be endured in order to find meaningful work. Rashmee's ideas about the goals of schooling were practical, and concerned with the reward paradigm, one that promises future compensation for the effort spent at school (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). Thus, Rashmee held a contracted definition of school as a source of potential reward. Mateen and Joel spoke about valid skills that they were learning in school, mainly pertaining to the dialogical nature of education, and learning certain patterns of behavior that are useful in the workplace. Joel did speak about learning for the sake of learning; however, it seems that Mateen was the only respondent who was truly appreciative of education as an act in and of itself. He conceptualized schooling not as a process that one

was obliged to partake in, but as a valuable experience, and Mateen had a general love of knowledge. Thus, it becomes evident that as an individual comes to embody the neoliberal mantra, the more likely they are to confine education to the role of a tool that is necessary for future success (Keil, 2002). Once again the development of critical skills would be of use in this scenario, as the students could make themselves aware that education and learning is an ongoing process, one that does not take place only in a school (Freire, 1970). The sentiment that knowledge creation and retention is a continuous cycle, one that all should attempt to become enveloped in is a message that needs to be instilled at an early age, and should be ingrained into the pedagogic practices of all educators (Giroux, 1989).

Relationship With the Faculty

For the last thematic discussion that will comprise this section, I focus on the role of educators in Toronto's inner city schools. Numerous publications have documented the importance of having culturally sensitive educators present in all schools, and inner city schools in particular (DiBara, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2009; Glass, & Wong, 2004; Skinner, & Schultz, 2011). When serving a diverse and disadvantaged demographic, it is vital for teachers to be aware of the social conditions that their students are living in (Au, & Raphael, 2000; De Wit, et al., 2010). A failure to do so can lead to a breakdown of relationships between the faculty and the student body, which can result in student disengagement from formal schooling (Bridgeland, 2010; Meadows, 2007). The data in

my research draws similar conclusions as those raised in the literature, and points for the need to develop critically orientated educators.

It became evident that having strong bonds with their faculty at General High was paramount to the success of each of the students in this study. All three described personal accounts of how particular educators made accommodations for them, and assisted them in their schooling. Joel and Mateen both remarked that without this guidance and support they would not have been as far along in their educational journey as they were, and there seemed to be a general consensus on the immense role that teachers played in helping the students move forward with school. All the participants felt that they could approach an instructor, and receive additional help, if they were struggling. These sentiments highlight the commitment that both teachers, Jennifer and Jessica, had to ensuring that all of their students had an opportunity to progress their education to the highest level. Their descriptions of feeling frustrated about not being able to alter the lives of their pupils points to their emotional investment in the profession. As well as being sensitive to the varying needs of their students, both instructors engaged in the development of a critical awareness that I find crucial in education (Glass, & Wong, 2003; Giroux, 1989). Although we did not speak about gender and race specifically, I feel that Jessica and Jennifer were attuned not only to their roles of authority, but also of how they personally were faced with discrimination. Both of the educators were White females, and were not only aware of the White privilege that they possessed, but were cognizant of how gendered identification is saturated with oppressive connotations. This may have contributed to the heightened sensitivity to

discriminatory practices exhibited by the two teachers (Heron, 2005). I think that Jessica and Jennifer espouse the image of the ideal educator; my opinion may be swayed due to my past relationship with them, but also exposes the challenges of teaching in an inner city school in Toronto.

Both instructors attempted to meet the needs of their students as best that they could, and in fact pushed themselves to such a degree that they began having difficulty delineating where their responsibilities ended. Being an engaged pedagogue is an extremely time and emotionally consuming process, especially when working with a multitude of disadvantaged youths, all of them requiring some sort of assistance (DiBara, 2007). Having to attend to the needs of all the students is currently impossible for educators such as Jessica and Jennifer. It is not due to a lack of interest or commitment on the part of the instructor, but rather on the acute shortage of resources at their disposal (Fine, 1991). The two teachers were simply spread too thin, and were relegated to reactive practices that strove to support as many students as possible at a given time. This trend speaks more to General High's inadequate infrastructure to accommodate the varying needs of its constituents, rather than the ability of individual educators to build strong bonds with their students. What is necessary is not only the training of more culturally sensitive instructors, but the influx of funding to schools that serve the most underprivileged demographics (Fine, 1991; Glass, & Wong, 2003).

Culture of Absenteeism

For the last segment of the discussion section I turn to define the term of 'culture of absenteeism', before proposing some steps aimed at eradicating this cycle. When I had originally conceptualized 'culture of absenteeism' I had envisioned students manipulating a system that was put in place to assist disadvantaged youths to graduate from secondary school. Having analyzed the data, it appears that I have missed the mark in my initial theorization. A culture of absenteeism is at play in General High, but rather than just pertaining to the atmosphere within the building that encourages absenteeism, it is operating on a much wider scale than I had originally realized. It is not a static 'culture' that is perpetuating poor attendance patterns, but rather a more dynamic and multifaceted predicament that complicates the notion of 'absentee' and 'attendance' (Yon, 2000). I now frame this development as a cycle, one that is shaping the school, faculty and the pupils alike. I am unsure of what provoked this continuous pattern, but it seems that it has become firmly ingrained in General High.

The source of General High's troubles with attendance is attributed to the demographic that they serve. As previously documented, there is a disproportionate number of youths in the school who face various disadvantages, and hindrances to attending regularly. The lack of homogeneity in the make-up of the study body leads to the impossibility of creating a coherent message concerning attendance patterns from the administration, one that Jessica and Jennifer cited as the main cause of their frustration when confronting persistent absenteeism. The faculty and administration are unable to curb absenteeism rates due to the variations of the life circumstances of their pupils, and

must find ways to support the students on an individual basis. This is exacerbated by the fact that General High cannot lose any more pupils, as it is already in a precarious situation with declining enrollment numbers, and must work with the youths that are currently enrolled, regardless of their attendance patterns. Through this process, General High has earned a reputation for being a school of second chances, and attracts students who may have difficulty completing their education, thereby adding the number of youths requiring differential treatment. Being comprised mainly of disadvantaged youths, General High has been stereotyped as a deficient and dangerous school, which curtails the number of new adolescents enrolling every single year, thereby propagating the cycle of absenteeism. This is a self-perpetuating cycle, one that is difficult to stop.

The student participants articulated both internal and external factors that prohibit them, and other pupils, in coming to school on a regular basis. Internal aspects are of particular interest here, as the causes listed by the participants such as: lack of motivation; boredom; a lack of ability to concentrate; and apathy; are ambiguous in their designation as internal. Although these factors may seem to be personal to the particular student I believe that they are a manifestation of the school's and Canadian society's inability to adequately meet the needs of its constituents. I do not think that many of these sentiments would have arisen had the schooling system been made to be sensitive to the heterogeneous makeup of the students and their particular life conditions. This points to the plethora of external causes of absences, which were more readily identified by the respondents, and included, but were not restricted to: employment commitments; uninteresting curriculum; family obligations; and transportation. I think that this is where

the root cause of absenteeism lies, and without proper implementation of a support network persistent student absenteeism in Toronto's inner city secondary schools is likely to continue. Yet establishing these systems is a difficult endeavor, as the dominant elites are uninterested in promoting social change, and strive to maintain the status quo. Through this research it has become even more evident that persistent student absenteeism is a multifaceted interplay of interconnected factors, which cannot be analyzed individually. Rather, what is required is an acknowledgement of these factors, and how they combine together to create a 'cycle of absenteeism'. After spending time grappling with this quandary I have come to some tentative steps that could be implemented in an attempt to break the 'cycle of absenteeism' currently operating in General High.

Possible Solutions to Break the Cycle of Absenteeism

I propose two interrelated approaches that vary in their scope of implementation, where one operates under the current model that is being used by General High, while the other seeks to transform the fundamental nature of the school. I will discuss the approach that will be easier to put into action, before describing the more complex proposition.

Instilling Critical Awareness

Jennifer and Jessica both expressed an interest in, and a commitment to exposing their students to critical lines of thought. They entreated their pupils to question their daily lives, and the social structures that they were navigating. Following this line of thought, I recommend for the instructors in General High to embrace critical thinking to a

higher degree. The teachers should actively expose the inequalities that are apparent in the lives of their students, and to problematize their conventional assumptions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). This is a useful tactic considering the underprivileged demographic of General High. By articulating the disparities that are evident in the lives of their students, the instructors can instill a greater sense of comradeship between the youths, many of whom are in similar situations (Yosso, 2005). Once these students become fully aware of their own marginalization, and that of their peers, they may be more inclined to recognize the need for differential treatment of certain students. Educators can elucidate that what may at a glance appear as fair, does not necessarily correspond to equal. This may be a useful approach, seeing as the majority of the youths in General High are familiar with one another, and to a degree, are aware of the life conditions of their peers. Highlighting the numerous obstacles that all of the youths in General High face can relieve the peer tensions, and might promote a more harmonious existence that is marked by understanding and mutual support. By reducing the animosity between the absentees and the attendees, the administrative staff can articulate their policy regarding attendance, one that would acknowledge the need to treat some pupils differently from others. This would address the issue of the relaxed attitude towards attendance that is currently being practiced in General High, by making it explicit that certain students must miss class due to their life circumstances. I believe that this strategy would be fairly simple to introduce, and would not require large quantities of resource on the part of the school staff. However, it does not address the cycle of absenteeism that is occurring in General High, or reach at the root cause of the problem, but is simply a stopgap measure.

Adapting the Alternative School Model

General High is unique in that it is a mixture of both regular and alternative school models. The differentiated instruction, and the lackadaisical approach to attendance, signify that General High does not function as a typical secondary school. Yet, it falls short of becoming a full-fledged alternative school. I think that the administration staff in General High should embrace the alternative school model rather than attempting to function as a regular school with poor attendance patterns.

The TDSB already has 22 alternative secondary schools operating within its boundaries. These schools are characterized as being small, intimate, and flexible in their content delivery, pedagogical approaches, and their focus on attendance. I read the descriptions of quite a few of these schools and found some commonalities (for alternative school profiles refer to

http://www.tdsb.on.ca/_site/Viewitem.asp?siteid=122&menuid=490&pageid=379).

Toronto's alternative schools pride themselves on their ability to engage students who may have experienced difficulties attending 'mainstream' schools, and a large number were designed to assist youths who are habitually absent to progress their education. The aim is to shed the stigma that many persistent absentees are imbued with in 'mainstream' schools, and to create a nurturing environment that is flexible enough to accommodate the varying lifestyles and needs of the students. The vast majority of these schools served a relatively small number of pupils when compared to 'mainstream' schools, rarely exceeding 200 students. This was intended to provide the necessary time and resources to give attention to each individual youth during their educational journey. Complimenting

this approach was the increased involvement of the community in schooling, and there were opportunities for adolescents to engage and interact with their own communities, as well as those surrounding the actual school. It appears as though adapting this method of schooling would be beneficial for General High, as certain aspects of its educational approach mirror the alternative school model. The greatest discrepancy I found is the extremely low number of students attending alternative schools in Toronto who were identified as living in Canada for five or less years. This is problematic, as General High serves a large quantity of new immigrants and may be experiencing challenges that the current alternative schools may not. Yet, I think adopting the alternative school model would benefit General High in several ways.

Jessica and Jennifer both felt a sense of pride that General High is a school where a youth could turn to in time of trouble, and that they were able to assist struggling students not only to graduate high school, but also move on to a post-secondary level. This sentiment is also present in one way or another among the student respondents. I believe that the administration in General High should capitalize on these feelings, and model the school to be geared towards support of disadvantaged students, or youths who have a previous history of difficulty in other schools.

By adapting to an alternative model, the faculty could make explicit their commitment to working with students who are falling through the gaps in other institutions. By becoming an alternative school, the administrative staff would have greater flexibility in content delivery methods, and would have extended leeway to accommodate students. Regular attendance would cease to be a rigid requirement, and

General High would become better suited to meet the needs of its pupils. Since many alternative schools in Toronto are specifically designed to work with small numbers of students, the stress of meeting enrollment criteria in General High would dissipate, and the staff would be able to concentrate on working with youths who may be having difficulty completing secondary school. This does not imply that regular attendees would no longer be welcome in General High, but rather it would articulate the ethos of the school as one of accommodation. This statement would justify the adjustments in treatment and evaluation of its students, and would reconceptualize absentees from being considered as pathological agents intent on eradicating the standard school model, to youths who are in dire need of special treatment and assistance. Thus, what is currently being considered as a negative aspect in General High, differentiated administration and accommodation, becomes its strongest feature; that is, the continual support of all students, regardless of attendance patterns. It would also put an end to the competition that General High is in with other schools in the area in its attempts to recruit new students. Instead of fighting persistent absenteeism and making fledging attempts to keep the school aligned with the traditional model, the administration in General High should embrace the unique nature of their institution, and use it in a proactive way.

I think that this transition would be aided by a concentration on what the students and their communities possess, rather than on what they are perceived to be lacking. Yosso's (2005) theorization on community cultural capital is particularly pertinent to the present discussion, and I turn to elaborate on how her concepts could be mobilized in General High to create an 'alternative model' of schooling, one which authentically

recognizes the potential present within the student body. Yosso's (2005) framework revolves around refuting the deficit model of social capital that characterizes disadvantaged youths, and their families, as lacking the necessary social capital to succeed in formal schooling. The basis for her critique is the fact that White, middle-class culture is deemed as the idealized standard, and all other forms of capital are judged in comparison to this norm. For Yosso (2005) the term 'capital' refers to an interconnected framework of resources that are available in marginalized families and communities, many of which are currently being ignored by dominant educational systems. The importance of capital in the educational setting is the inscribed value on certain concepts of capital, which are mainly associated with White middle-class ideological beliefs. Thus, when one does not possess the desired sets of capital the student is characterized as deficient. What Yosso (2005) proposes, and what I think could be utilized in General High, is the acknowledgement and employment of at least six different forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant, that are evident in marginalized communities. Each one of these resources is present in the communities that General High's students reside in, and I turn to elaborate on each type of capital.

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain goals and aspirations even in the face of real or perceived oppression, and points to the resiliency of marginalized groups in preserving feelings of ambition in an unequal society. Through engaging in meaningful dialogues with the families of General High's students the faculty and administration could gain an understanding of the wishes and desires of the parent(s) who are often shut out from direct involvement with their children's schooling. This process

could lead to the creation of high aspirations, which are the foundation for student success. Once the pupils are instilled with ambition, and recognize that their families, although often struggling in poverty, are making strides to rise out of the margins, they can take an active role in pursuing a better future. Without hopes and dreams it is unlikely that disadvantaged youths will embrace the alternative school model, and the entire exercise would collapse before it could be fully implemented.

Navigational capital is associated with the skills of maneuvering through social institutions, and is often considered an assumed aspect of a White middle-class individual's skill set. It takes on considerable significance when considering the fact that numerous marginalized individuals are expected to navigate institutions that were not created with communities of color in mind. Navigational capital manifested itself during my conversation with Rashmee when she spoke about utilizing her siblings, who had already graduated from high school and university, in her navigation of both General High and her future in postsecondary education. This example signifies that there are imbedded sources of navigational capital apparent within marginalized communities, that must be mobilized in order to assist youths in their academic pursuits. Not only would this validate the knowledge and experiences of individuals who have previously maneuvered these often-unwelcoming institutions, but would also provide examples of success in disadvantaged communities, which could lead to a higher sense of aspirational capital. The staff in General High could inquire about past schooling experiences of family and community members and encourage them to share their stories, and provide advice to youths who are about to embark on a similar journey.

Social capital refers to the multitude of various types of resources that are evident within communities, as well as the social networks that operate within them. Instead of regarding marginalized communities as dangerous enclaves of pathology, there is a need to recognize the plethora of useful tools and skills that these communities contain. Through mutual assistance within the community a sense of power is established, and can be used in an attempt to eradicate the disparities evident in Canadian society. This could be carried out in General High in something as simple as finding employment options within the community that do not compete with an adolescent's schooling, and that are sensitive to the particular life conditions of that youth.

Many students in General High speak more than one language and exhibit what Yosso (2005) has termed as 'linguistic capital'. This concept refers to the multiple abilities that multilingual youth possess that are currently not considered valuable in Toronto's schools. Much like Rashmee's narrative has highlighted, the ability to act as a translator requires an incredible amount of cognitive ability and is an extremely valuable skill. Yet languages that are not deemed as 'mainstream' in Toronto are being ignored and suppressed in schools that concentrate on English or French language acquisition (Au, & Raphael, 2000). Validating this skill set serves to elevate the notions of agency, and instills the sentiment that speaking multiple languages is an *asset* rather than a *deficit*. This process also recognizes the histories of the students, and sheds the White middle class hegemonic hold on what is considered valuable.

When approaching familial capital Yosso (2005) is quick to point out the need to transgress confining traditional understandings of 'family' to a more comprehensive

conceptualization of the term. Family can refer to the immediate family, as well as more distant relatives and ancestors. Through a reliance on familial capital, individuals learn the importance of maintaining bonds with their community, as well as inheriting valuable sources of knowledge and morals that are unique to their families. Once the concept of family is thus positioned, a dialogue arises between various families living in communities that are experiencing similar issues. This builds solidarity, and an awareness that others are facing the same problems. General High's role would be to foster these relationships by providing a neutral space for the community to meet and interact with each other. This reflects Jessica's sentiment that the school should be a fundamental aspect within the neighborhood that it is located in, and should provide an area where community members can freely discuss issues and ideas that are relevant to their lives.

The last type of capital that Yosso (2005) describes is resistant, and is informed by the Freirian (1970) concept of critical consciousness. This concept acknowledges the need to elevate critical awareness, but also utilizes community cultural wealth in the celebration of differences and the expression of healthy self-esteem. As documented earlier, I think this is a fundamental aspect of school reform, one that is tightly intertwined with aspirational capital in the creation of positive images of the self, and of the wider community. By becoming aware of the oppressive forces, and how they stigmatize disadvantaged communities, the youths who live in them are not only instilled with a critical lens, but are also imbued with an elevated sense of self-worth, which is an indispensable part of striving for social change. I have spoken at length about the

necessity of General High to adopt more critically orientated pedagogic practices, and it will suffice to say that that is a crucial aspect of creating an alternative school model.

As this discussion has highlighted disadvantaged communities possess numerous types of capital, many of which are complex interconnected and interdependent networks of resources. Transgressing the deficit model of social capital presents an opportunity to recognize the imbedded types of capital in marginalized communities. By adapting this approach, the staff in General High would serve not only their students, but the wider community as well. This process would empower marginalized people to utilize resources that are abundant in their communities, and promote a solidarity to fight oppressive forces in Canadian society.

Chapter 8: Conclusion & Possibilities for Future Inquiry

This research was concerned with investigating the causes of a ‘culture of absenteeism’ and ways to eradicate the phenomena. Speaking with three students in General High highlighted the complex nature of the lives of absentees, and displayed the difficulties in explicating the concept. Through my discussions with Joel, Rashmee and Mateen I was able to gain insight into the youths’ perceptions concerning the importance of attendance, and their views on schooling in general. Conversing with two instructors elucidated the challenges that many urban teachers face in working with disadvantaged youths. What became apparent is that General High found itself trapped in a cycle of absenteeism, with no real solutions to break the continuum. What I propose is that instead of attempting to normalize the school, and seeking ways of coping with absenteeism, General High should alter its system to a more alternative model and embrace serving a disadvantaged demographic.

I must stress that General High is an extremely unique school, and that this study was carried out at a particular time and in a particular context. The developments that have been described in this research are time and place specific, and the results cannot be generalized, or applied to other secondary institutions. Although I would imagine some urban high schools may be facing a similar dilemma, the data I have gathered is isolated, and I did not carry out other research in different schools to compare the findings. I think it would be of interest for similar research to be carried out in another secondary school

that is having problems with attendance in order to examine whether or not there are any commonalities.

As part of my conclusion, some of the study limitations will be offered, as well as suggestions for future research. The sample size of three pupils is not representative of the entire student body in General High. Although I sought a fairly diverse student demographic I was limited to speaking with pupils who are over the age of 18 due to ethical considerations. Likewise, the two instructors that took part in the study do not form an accurate sample of the other teachers in General High, and I cannot comment on how those individuals conceptualized the absenteeism rates. Therefore, the opinions expressed are only of the participants themselves, and cannot be generalized any further. Having a wider sample may provide additional thematic content that was unavailable to me, and may shed further insights into the cycle of absenteeism.

I have spoken about Joel's sudden withdrawal from General High shortly after the completion of the first interview. This prohibited me from having the opportunity to speak with Joel again, as I did with the other participants, to clarify some of his answers, and to investigate further into the themes that originated from his initial data. I was faced with a dilemma, where I could have refrained from using the partial data that I had gathered, or to press on with the limited material that I had. I think that Joel's drop in attendance was relevant to the research, and provided an example of the dangers of absenteeism. I did my utmost to ensure that Joel's views were presented accurately by leaving out some ambiguous comments that he had made, but his section is constrained by the lack of a follow-up interview. Although I made several attempts to contact him, as

did his teachers, I have been unable to speak with Joel since the completion of the first interview.

There was a slight issue of a language barrier when I was speaking with Mateen. He had a great command of the English language, and I did not have difficulty communicating with him, but in retrospect I feel that perhaps some of my questions were too abstract, or perhaps made inaccessible by my language. Although I did my best to be as clear as possible, there is a chance that Mateen did not fully understand all I was asking him. The use of a translator might have mitigated this problem, but the time restrictions I was facing, and my lack of familiarity on the use translators discouraged me from pursuing this option. I believe that I did not misconstrue Mateen's views, or make any assumptions, but that his answers may have been more in-depth with the use of a translator.

The issue of absenteeism is exceptionally dense and convoluted, as there is a multitude of interconnected processes and agents at play at any given time. Discussing the topic as a whole is fraught with difficulty, as there is an abundance of overlapping variables. As researchers there is a need to probe deeper into the particulars, before proceeding to categorize and analyze absentees as a group. I hope that this research has been a small step in that direction.

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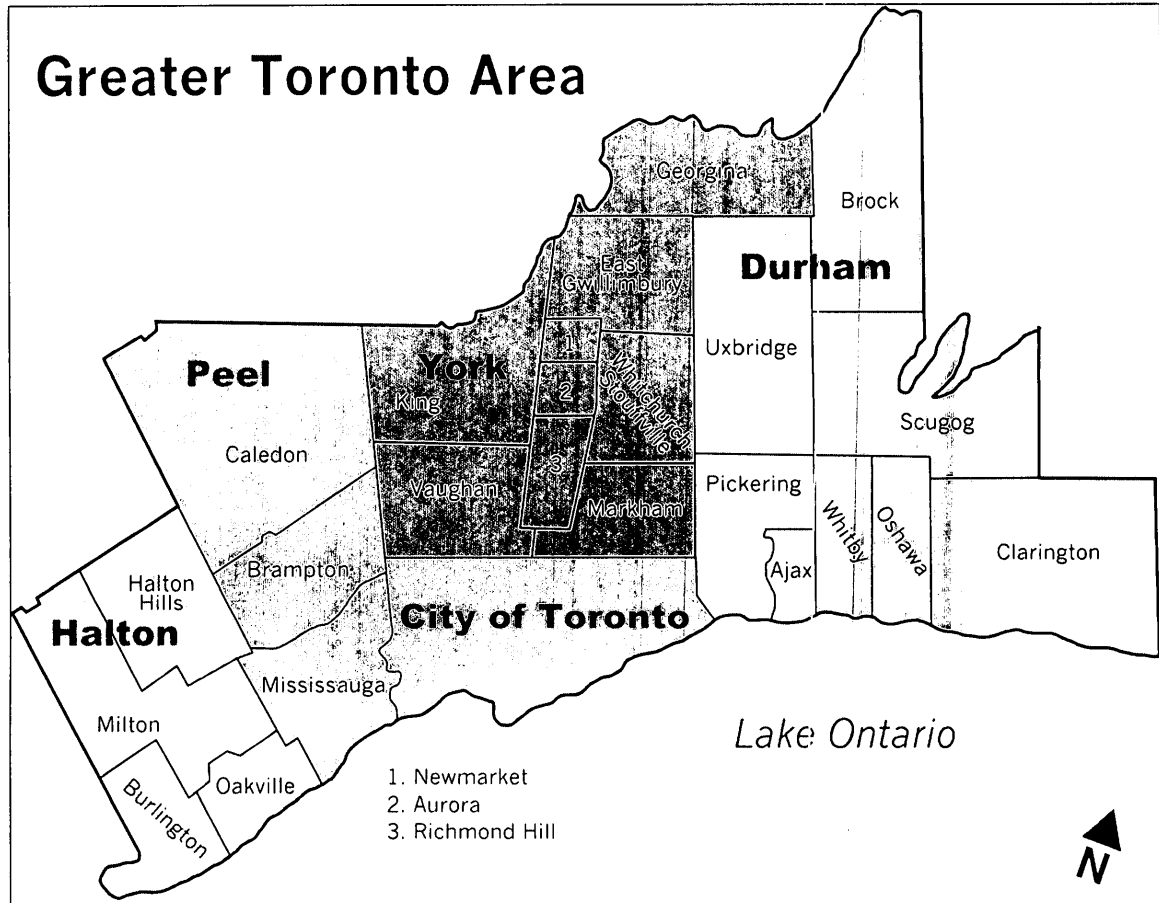
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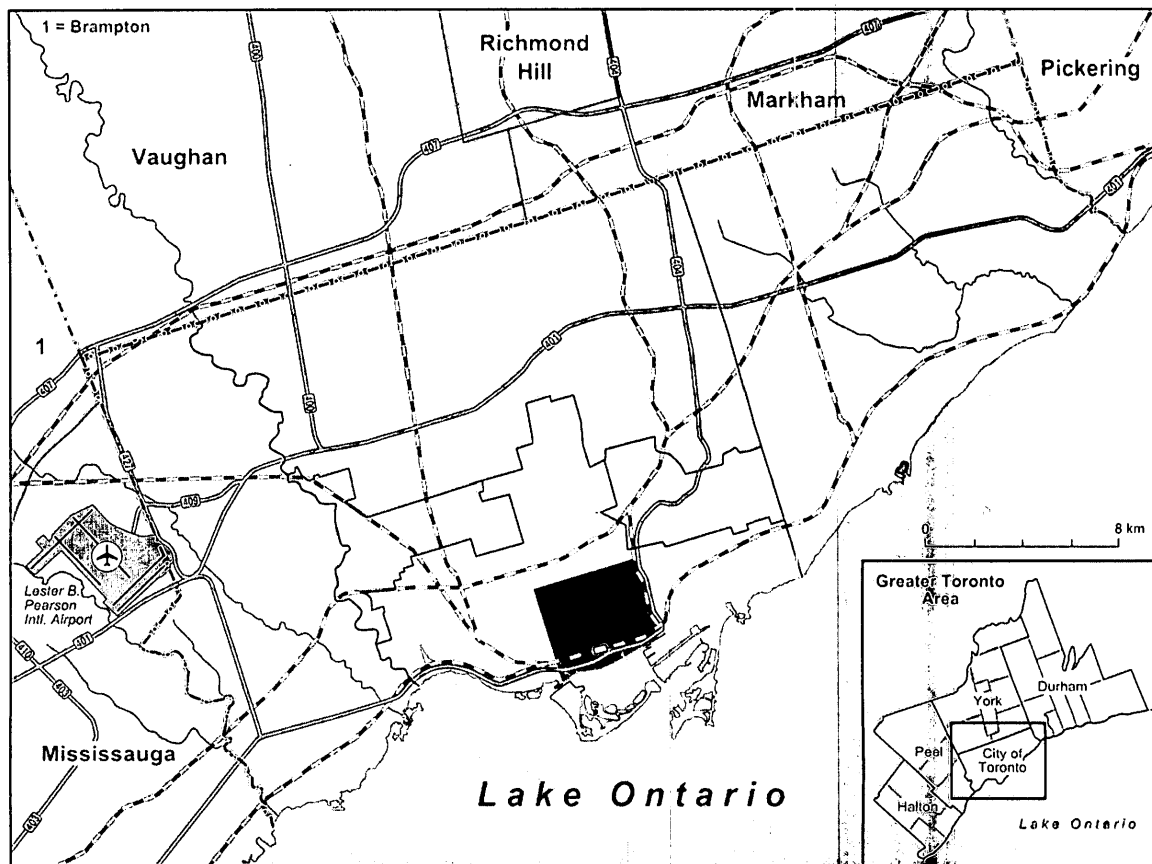
Appendix A: Maps of GTA and Downtown Toronto



Source: http://oceanbluepainting.net/Greater_toronto_area_map.png

ServiceArea.htm&usg=__FpTOur_pcAbHwOlau_iSzHyAwY=&h=1555&w=2000&sz=385&hl=en&start=5&sig2=ZFo9M3P3KVnxTU_55BUZg&zoom=1&tbnid=Y1GWLHIVYY7spM:&tbnh=117&imgrefurl=<http://oceanbluepainting.net/>

&tbnw=150&ei=DvwQUueMMsSQ2gX2l4CIDg&itbs=1&sa=X&ved=0C:DUQrQMwBA



Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/62/Downtown_Toronto_map.png



Source: <http://www.ryerson.ca/~rmal/pic/toronto.gif>

Appendix B: Student Participant Questions

Concerning the Respondent

Name, Age, Sex, Race, Nationality, Social Class, Housing situation, Employment,

Family commitments, Date of graduation

What are the plans for next year?

Describe your attendance patterns-do you miss school often?

Why?

Do your parents know/care-what is their involvement in your schooling?

Curriculum-relevance, interesting, engaging?

Do you feel supported in your learning-are you being accommodated?

Relationship with faculty?

Relationship with peers?

Are there any repercussions for missing school-is attending important?

Do you have a different identity in school?

Concerning Other Students in General High

Why do they miss school-mention money, family, peers, etc?

Talk about voluntary vs. involuntary absences

What are the consequences for missing school?

Are they being accommodated-are there chances to catch up?

How are they treated by staff and peers?

Is it fair for others to be treated differently?

Should education be equal to all?

Or is treating people on an individual basis more appropriate?

Bring in culture of absenteeism

Concerning Formal Education in Canada

What do you learn-why are you in school?

How is it important/valid-bring in critical theory

Do you feel in control of your future?

Is your life and what the school is advocating/stands for similar?

What is and could be done to curb persistent student absenteeism?