Engagement in Health Education: Just a Fairy Tale?

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Education
in
Curriculum and Instruction
University of Regina

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Regina, Saskatchewan
April, 2014

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Kyla Faye Christiansen, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Curriculum & Instruction, has presented a thesis titled, *Engagement in Health Education: Just a Fairy Tale?*, in an oral examination held on April 16, 2014. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

Engagement is increasingly used to describe students’ involvement and investment within their learning environments. Student engagement continues to be part of the student achievement conversation in Saskatchewan. The purpose of this study is to examine what constitutes engaged learning for grade 8 health education students and to develop a deeper understanding of how a teacher plans for and supports student engagement in health education. This single case study is guided by two research questions: How do students understand engagement? How can a grade 8 teacher plan for and support student engagement in health education?

Drawing on the method of case studies, this study will seek to understand how a teacher plans for and supports student engagement in a grade 8 health education class. Case study research is not limited to a single source of data (Yin, 2012). Thus, multiple sources of data were used in this study, including a student questionnaire, four direct observations of classroom teaching and learning, five teacher interviews, seven student focus-group discussions with 22 of the 24 grade 8 students, and a personal research journal. This research allowed for direct observation of events being studied and interviews of the people involved in the events. This real-life context provided a depth and breadth for rich descriptions. Grounded theory analysis techniques were used to code and compare ideas as main themes emerged from both the interviews and the focus group.

As determined from the data, students understood engagement to be learning that was enjoyable and purposeful, with teachers who were likeable.
Health education was enjoyable and purposeful when it involved opportunities to work with others, learning that was interactive and hands-on, as well as topics that were interesting to the students.

The grade 8 teacher planned for and supported student engagement in health education by getting to know her students and making individual connections with each of them. Once the teacher knew her students, flexibility in her planning was important so she could create meaningful learning environments that reflected local and current contexts as well as provide safe learning environments for students to take risks and make mistakes.

It was determined that planning for and supporting enjoyable and purposeful learning experiences while planning for student choice within supportive environments are critical elements for student engagement in health education. Findings also suggested engagement was influenced by planning activities that were relevant to students’ lives, were perceived as interesting and important, and allowed for collaboration and participation. Planning for engagement also included building on and activating students’ background knowledge and experiences, developing a community of active learners, and giving students’ opportunities to share responsibility for planning, learning, and assessment. Based on these findings, this study is significant for those teachers committed to addressing disengagement and focussing on the solution of planning for and supporting student engagement.
Acknowledgements

I am truly grateful to my thesis advisor, Dr. Twyla Salm. Her depth of understanding of health education as well as her breadth of research knowledge is admirable. Dr. Salm’s willingness to discuss both the big questions and the small details throughout my thesis journey is greatly appreciated.

As well, I offer sincere thanks to members of my committee, Dr. Jennifer Tupper and Dr. Kathy Nolan. Their guidance and insight assisted me in considering multiple perspectives in developing and revising my thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge the participants in this study. In sharing their stories and discussing how sometimes they pretend to be engaged, they displayed insights that were unexpectedly mature.

This list would not be complete without thanking my husband, Jeff Christiansen, who offered his support, encouragement, and understanding throughout this journey.
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1.1 Foreward

Goodlad (1984), in his well-known study of schooling in the 1980s, observed that students were not engaged or active learning partners in the classroom. He concluded that classrooms across the United States were remarkably similar and that at the secondary level, direct teaching and teacher talk accounted for about 90 percent of instructional time. His research also highlighted that students were not active learning participants in the classroom as they wrote notes and responded to short, factually-based questions (Keedy & Drmacich, 1991). Goodlad’s description of student learning calls to mind my own learning experience as a Saskatchewan high-school student in the 1980s: copying notes from a physics textbook, answering questions on a math worksheet, listening to my social studies teacher read aloud and then describe historical events. However, more than twenty-five years later, “…schools have changed far less than society or the young people of today. Many students report life in high school to be characterized by widespread disengagement, apathy, boredom, and alienation” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005).

The Canadian School Health Knowledge Network (2002) asserts that schools can provide a number of opportunities for engaging youth in meaningful ways that will empower them to take ownership of their learning. Other researchers contend that within each opportunity there are various factors contributing to students’ interest and level of engagement in learning (Brewster & Fager, 2000). Black (2004) asserts that teaching practices largely influence students’ engagement and “schools can do plenty to keep students engaged in
learning” (p. 58). Efforts to examine how particular teaching practices are more engaging for students than other practices have been highlighted. In addition, Atweh et al. (2007) explores the concept of disengagement and implies that the factors stimulating student engagement, such as student-teacher relationships, curricular choices, and size of the school are the same factors that influence student disengagement. Furthermore, much of the literature has attributed the lack of engagement to “factors in students’ personal backgrounds and to characteristics of their schools, including curricular fragmentation, weak instruction, and low expectations” (Marks, 2000, p. 154). Mark’s study suggests that deepening our understanding of how to plan for and support student engagement requires attention to these interrelated factors and thoughtfulness to how they are addressed in teacher planning.

Saskatchewan continues to respond to the research on student engagement as one of many factors influencing the evolving direction of education in our province. A number of local initiatives and documents describing student engagement have been published by the Ministry of Education (e.g., Youth, Families, Human Service Providers, Communities and Schools Working Toward Youth Engagement: A Discussion Paper 2005, SCHOOLPLUS: A Vision for Children and Youth 2001). These documents discuss the importance of student engagement for learning and achievement while indicating,

…that children who are strongly connected to schools do better than those who are not. A challenge for schools and communities is to find strategies that reduce the number of children and youth who are marginalized in these settings and who do not participate fully in available activities (Tymchak, 2001).
SchoolPLUS and the Continuous Improvement Framework (CIF) are two notable learning renewal initiatives in Saskatchewan in the past decade. In the mid 2000s, *Towards SchoolPLUS: Empowering High Schools As Communities of Learning and Support* (2005) provided a framework for communities to work together toward SchoolPLUS. Like Ontario’s more recent educational reform, a primary focus of Saskatchewan SchoolPLUS was “… a commitment to providing learning opportunities and benefits for every young person.” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 1). This commitment, by the Saskatchewan Government at that time, encouraged educators to examine the potential opportunities to engage children and youth in learning and to consider how to positively influence the engagement of students. The Government concluded that,

…teachers often observe the pervasive withdrawal and passivity of too many students “going through the motions” in school – playing the game of seeing how little effort they can invest and still pass. Too often …students are disengaged and biding their time, enduring and drifting through school until they can enter the real world. (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 6).

The Government acknowledges that SchoolPLUS envisioned an “education system relevant to the interests and aspirations of today’s children and youth …and a focus on improving outcomes for all students” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 6). SchoolPLUS helped shape the Government’s Pre-K-12 Continuous Improvement Framework. This government accountability framework was and continues to be designed to assist school divisions in an annual strategic planning process that aligns provincial and school division priorities with appropriate strategies, operational supports, and outcome measures to strengthen teaching and learning for improved student outcomes.
(Saskatchewan Education, 2008). The government’s focus on improving teaching and learning has the flexibility to focus increased attention on the importance of student voice, student engagement, and active participation in learning.

According to Saskatchewan Learning (2005), “a large majority of Saskatchewan students complete high school but the quality of their learning and performance varies significantly” (p. 6). Contemporary studies of numerous schools also highlight that student learning and engagement “varies considerably among different classes [even] within the same school …” (Dunleavy, 2008, p. 1). While acknowledging these variances, the purpose of this study is to more deeply understand engagement by researching how a teacher plans for and supports student engagement in grade 8 health education.

Saskatchewan teachers are mandated by law to teach the provincial curricula, including health education (Saskatchewan Education, 1995). Health education curricula, like other Saskatchewan curricula, have specific understandings, skills, and confidences that students are to achieve and demonstrate. With the focus on outcomes and indicators that emerged through Saskatchewan’s learning renewal process and through the Continuous Improvement Framework, questions concerning the relationship among learning outcomes, school division accountability, and student engagement are critical: For example, asking the question if the focus on engagement is for the purpose of improved teaching and learning or for the purpose of increased student outcomes becomes critical? My assumption is that schools should be, in a
conscious and an informed manner, preparing for and supporting student engagement through enriched teacher planning for improved student learning.

In Saskatchewan, the adults responsible for the formal education of children and youth need to understand what constitutes engagement and to reflect on how to plan for and support student engagement as it aligns with the expectations of the province’s education system (i.e., provincial curricula). Notably, the health education curricula are developed to provide opportunities for students to build knowledge, abilities, and inquiring habits of mind that lead to deeper understanding of their world and human experiences. According to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, the learning opportunities are to focus on student-directed questions that motivate and guide their inquiries into topics, issues, and challenges related to curriculum content and outcomes. These opportunities are to be provided within a “culture of inquiry”, which implies a “need or want to know” premise. Inquiry is “not so much as seeking the right answer – because often there is not one answer – but rather seeking appropriate resolutions to questions and issues.” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.10). The notion is that inquiry-based learning experiences within an inquiry-based classroom build on students’ inherent sense of curiosity and wonder while empowering them to take ownership of and engage in their learning. Through inquiry approaches, students become active and engaged participants while participating in a collaborative search for meaning and understanding. My study is based on the premise that the Saskatchewan health education curricula are developed to allow and/or support such ownership of and engagement in learning.
The student engagement research is relevant to my work in education for many reasons. In my career as an educator (8 years) and as a high school administrator (6 years) in rural Saskatchewan, a professional priority and a consistent school improvement goal was to address teaching and learning practices to enhance students’ involvement in and engagement with their own education. In my school, engagement became a priority because of various factors, including levels of disengagement among particular students, discipline issues for teachers, negative experiences for students and families, and ineffective and inefficient use of staff energies. For example, teacher energies often included trying to have students arrive to class on time, encouraging and reminding students to be prepared for class, struggling for ways to have students demonstrate their knowledge, and managing students’ responses to learning tasks. From my administrative perspective, these energies could have been better focussed on planning for student engagement.

In my current role as the Health Education Consultant for the Ministry of Education, my work priorities include development of health education curricula and support for the instructional leadership of administrators. My discussions with schools and administrators often focus on the relationship between student engagement and student learning outcomes. The Ministry of Education has recently (2012) purchased a license for the *Tell Them From Me* (TTFM) assessment system to enable school jurisdictions to survey both students (Grades 4 to 12) and teachers to collect data on their opinions and experiences in relation to effective school practices. This data will provide indicators of student and teacher engagement, wellness, safety, and school climate to help guide...
schools and the Ministry to implement policy and practice for improving student engagement and ultimately, student outcomes. These indicators of student engagement can be used to help inform decisions that impact how schools can further support learning environments that support student engagement.

The Canadian School Health Knowledge Network (2002) contends that schools provide a number of opportunities for engaging youth in meaningful ways that will empower them to willingly participate in their learning. The desire to engage students as active participants in their learning is shared by many jurisdictions. Brady (2006) examined Ontario’s educational reform initiatives of the late 1990s that were aimed at restructuring the province’s system of high-school education. Through his examinations, he identified many of the structures of and potential roadblocks to student engagement and success, such as the degree to which students felt respected at school and how the school encouraged students’ achievement. Brady (2006) also proposed a number of ways teachers can organize the learning environment, such as planning for learning that is meaningful and supporting a classroom culture of inclusion that informed my questions and focus group discussions. Drawing on the findings in these studies as well as in the existing literature on student engagement, my study will focus on examining what makes learning engaging for grade 8 health education students and on developing a deeper understanding of how a teacher plans for and supports student engagement in health education.
1.2 Framing the Dialogue

Engagement is a diversely interpreted concept. There are numerous assumptions that influence the research on student engagement and a number of ideological lenses through which the understanding of engagement is established (Bland, Carrington & Brady, 2009). These lenses influence how students, teachers, and educators perceive engagement and how they guide the nature of questions asked, the sort of answers shared, and the type of data collected. Furthermore, these lenses help to explain potential divergent perceptions of student engagement among study participants. The first and often most common ideological view, the techno-rational lens, reflects a somewhat superficial construct of engagement and the assumptions that programs done to or on students will fix problems of disengagement. Student engagement perceived through this lens emphasizes the observable and behavioural classroom conduct such as student attention and on-task behaviours (Bland et al., 2009).

Less superficial is the second ideological lens, the interpretive/student-centered, which emphasizes the planning of opportunities for student choice and active learning. This view of student engagement consists of students' sharing responsibility for their learning and relying on teachers to plan for and provide particular opportunities (Bland et al., 2009).

The third lens, referred to as critical/transformative, situates engagement in relationships and social interests. Engagement perceived through this lens focuses on social efficacy and responsibility as students critique the school structures that prevent them from engaging in what is meaningful to them. This
view of student engagement, unlike the techno-rational lens, is less about student behaviours, such as compliancy, and more about students’ understanding of how to activate their agency or voice (Bland et. al., 2009). The planning and support for particular learning opportunities often encourages this emotional involvement but is not dependent on it. Understanding these lenses and the engagement of students in a grade 8 classroom, my study will contribute to the student engagement literature by recognizing that the realities of a teacher’s planning for and support of student engagement, may take place at times through individual lenses and possible more often, through intersecting lenses.

The concept of student engagement continues to attract much attention as a possible solution to declining academic motivation and achievement. Considering that student engagement, within the intellectual work of school, is important to students’ achievement and to their social and cognitive development, Marks (2000) recognizes that “studies over a span of two decades have documented low levels of engagement, particularly in the classroom” (p. 153). Educators, as reflective practitioners, can consider current pedagogical practices within the reality that “keeping students interested in school and motivating them to succeed are challenges that present themselves year after year to even the most seasoned teachers” (Brewster & Fager, 2000, p. 2). As a former health educator, and in my current role as health education consultant for the Ministry of Education, student engagement in health education has been and continues to be a priority in my work.
This study is the first, to my knowledge, to examine student engagement within middle level health education. My research included numerous opportunities for observation of and discussion with a case study of a particular grade 8 health education classroom. These opportunities, both in the interviews with the teacher and in the focus group discussions with the students, required critical reflection as a researcher. These reflections were influenced by multiple years as an administrator working with teachers to improve their practice in the classroom. Reflection on interactions with the teacher in this study brought the recognition that her teaching practices were very different than my own. This required the effort to become comfortable in a classroom environment with particular routines and procedures that varied greatly from those that were used in my classroom. As a teacher, I focused on positively reinforcing desired behaviours, on reducing distractions to increase students’ learning opportunities, and on being consistent with my expectations. In contrast to the processes demonstrated in this grade 8 health education classroom, I used little of my classroom instructional time taking attendance, doing homework checks, and/or having students get out whatever materials were needed for class. As a class, we developed routines that reduced the amount of time expended on the procedural aspects of managing a classroom and instead began each class with a learning task that encouraged student involvement and supported student engagement.

While qualitative research recognizes and embraces researcher subjectivities, my role is to be aware of any preconceived notions and recognize how my ideological assumptions embed personal bias and subjectivity into my
research. As a former health educator, I have developed particular classroom routines and structures that I believed were engaging. In this study I need to reflect on these personal practices and to identify personal assumptions and predeterminations about teaching and student engagement, as any lack of reflexivity would find my research contaminated with an array of potentially unrecognized preconceptions. Negotiating this dilemma is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

1.3 Purpose of This Study

Considerable research has investigated student engagement but many studies have been quantitative, focusing on the analysis of questionnaires, surveys, and numerical data (Fredericks, Blumfeld & Paris, 2004; Willms, Friesen & Milston, 2009). Quantitative studies have identified engagement as an area of educational interest; however, “this type of research cannot be used to explain how people make sense of this concept” (Harris, 2008, p. 60). While there has been some qualitative research on student engagement from pupil perspectives (Pope, 2001), and on the influence of constructivist informed pedagogy on student engagement in a Social Studies classroom (Mitchell, 2007), studies on teacher understandings of student engagement in health education are lacking in the academic research. However, it is suggested that teachers have a significant impact on the teaching and learning process (Bryson & Hand, 2007). The purpose of this study is to examine what makes learning engaging for grade 8 health education students, and to develop a deeper understanding of how a teacher plans for and supports student engagement in health education. Middle
level students, according to the existing research, are at a time of particular escalation of disengagement (Bland et. al, 2009). While teachers can focus on assessing the actions of students, “only the students can say what they feel …or understand about their learning” (Manitoba Education and Training, 2006, p. 14). In light of this, my research asks students what they feel and understand about their learning and discusses with their teacher the planning she does that supports what students feel and understand to be engaging.

Provincially, nationally, and internationally, educational stakeholders are concerned with the prevalence of student disengagement while the solution – student engagement – “is a contested concept, theorized in a variety of different ways within the academic research” (Harris, 2008, p. 47). Some educational scholars consider student engagement to be one of the more substantial challenges facing educators in the 21st century, “as between 25% and 66% of students are considered to be disengaged” (Harris, 2008, p. 57). It has been documented that “disengagement from education increases as students’ progress through school, with a particular escalation in the problem in middle years (grades 7-9)”, another reason this study focuses on a grade 8 classroom (Bland, Carrington & Brady, 2009, p. 237). Definitions of engagement and disengagement in the research are often informed from the adult perspective (Black, 2003; Bryson & Hand, 2007). My research is informed from the adult perspective yet includes student voice and their personal experiences with engagement in health education. These voices are necessary to my research as student data about how they experience and understand engagement may inform how the teacher plans for and supports their engagement. These voices
can provide a vivid perspective on the issue and possible implications for how
health educators might work with students to enhance opportunities for
engagement in their own learning. To explore and describe effective planning
and support for student engagement in health education, the following research
questions guide this study: How do students understand engagement? How can
a grade 8 teacher plan for and support student engagement in health education?

This case study consisted of 22 Grade 8 students and one Grade 8 health
educator in a diverse, urban, Pre-K-8 school in Saskatchewan. Participant
surveys and interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations
reflected some of the grounded theory analysis techniques used to gather and
interpret the data. Observing and discussing the planning for, support of, and
experiences in engagement enriches existing research and moves my study
toward a greater understanding of how students are and might become engaged
in their learning.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter two provides a review
of student engagement literature, exploring the multi-faceted nature of
engagement and emphasizing the complexity of factors that increase the
likelihood of engagement. Chapter three describes the methodology used in this
study. Drawing on case study as the research method, and applying some of the
strategies used in grounded theory, chapter three also demonstrates how case
study, as a research method, and data analysis strategies from grounded theory
provided complementary and effective methods for this particular study.

Chapter four provides insight into the findings of the researcher as it
focuses on the perceptions and experiences of engagement according to the
participants. Chapter five deepens this understanding, illustrating that planning and supporting learning experiences that are enjoyable and purposeful influences student engagement and that planning for student choice within supportive environments is a critical element for student engagement in health education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Many students thrive during adolescence: they are deeply engaged in their studies, participate in – and often lead – school and community activities, and seem set for life as they move on to post-secondary education with certificates and awards in hand. But many others “withdraw” from the learning process, in body or in spirit, before they have achieved the level of knowledge and understanding needed to succeed as adults in today’s world” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 5).

The aim of this review of the literature is two-fold. Firstly, it examines and draws on the teaching and learning research regarding the nature of what is and what “counts” as engagement. Secondly, by deepening the researcher’s understanding of engagement, the review supports the intention that the data as interpreted by the researcher, reflects a thoughtful representation of how the teacher plans for and supports student engagement in her grade 8 health education class. To further enhance understanding of engagement the concepts of flow theory and disengagement are also examined. As a result, this chapter intends to increase conceptual clarity within a crowded landscape of definitions, descriptions, and discourse regarding student engagement frameworks.

In the midst of the most recent changes in Saskatchewan’s education system, educational stakeholders continue to pursue the goal of improving student learning. Much of the research on teaching and learning is concerned with “…failing students, relevance of curriculum, effectiveness of teachers, conceptions of teaching and/or learning, or approaches to learning” (Bryson & Hand, 2007, p. 349). Desire to increase engagement for the purpose of improving learning has led to an interest in collecting data and measuring student engagement (Harris, 2008). Empirical studies in the past few decades have shaped the concept of engagement as an approach for improving academic
achievement and as an independent and desired outcome of schooling (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004, Willms et al., 2009). The general agreement that student engagement improves student learning is rendered somewhat problematic by the varying opinions regarding what “counts” as student engagement, for example various on-task behaviours. In addition, the first-year findings in a Canadian study of student engagement contributes to previous research on student achievement and engagement which show that while Canadian students achieve relatively high standings in tests of student achievement, that is not matched by similarly high levels of engagement (Willms et al., 2009). The findings in this same study add to this tension by illustrating the contradiction of significantly lower levels of students’ intellectual engagement than expected.

As the range of characterizations of student engagement continues to expand, educational scholars and researchers are expressing concerns about the increasing ambiguity of the concept and arguing for a more coherent definition (Coates, 2006; Schlechty, 2011). Understanding how student engagement has been described, defined, and categorized is an important first step in concept clarification and in understanding how teachers might plan learning opportunities that enhance engagement. Student engagement has been described as the students’ relationships with the aspects of school community (Libbey, 2004); the school structures (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006); the learning, curriculum and content (Brady, 2006); the pedagogy (Marks, 2000); and the opportunities to learn (Canadian School Health Knowledge Network, 2002).
extent to which students are engaged in their learning is dependent on the quality, depth, and breadth of the relationship among these aspects.

In Coates’ (2006) background paper to the symposium on *Student Engagement: The Specifications and Measurement of Student Engagement*, he describes student engagement as “concerned with the point of intersection between individuals and the things that are critical for their learning” (p. 5). Given the emphasis placed on student achievement in Saskatchewan, the intersection of the “things that are critical for learning” and the ways in which students acquire knowledge and develop understanding through the learning process may be considered a primary concern. Student engagement is “variable and depends on a number of factors” (Manitoba Education and Training, 2006, p. 17). Two studies (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Marks 2000) have consequently highlighted the considerable role that certain factors, conditions, and structures (e.g., student background, culture, classroom instruction, sense of belonging, previous experience) might play in the learning process, placing particular emphasis on those associated with student engagement. In these studies, the definitions, the findings and the recommendations vary considerably. For example, some of the identified school structures that influence student engagement include homework expectations (Brewster & Fager, 2000), acceptance of school goals, (Marks, 2000), mentoring programs, decision-making processes and school policies (Canadian School Health Knowledge Network, 2002). These, like many influencing factors and structures, may positively affect student engagement but may also become roadblocks and barriers to student engagement. These
barriers and the resistance they create are examined within the definitions of student engagement.

2.1 Definitions of Student Engagement

Engagement is difficult to define operationally, but “we know it when we see it, and we know it when it is missing” (Newmann, 1986, p. 242). A review of the research finds that engagement is used to describe innumerable student attitudes and behaviours which are “deemed essential to a high quality …learning experience” (Krause, 2005, p.3). It is essential for educators to recognize the compendium of “essential” student attitudes and behaviours because it “…may sometimes seem that teachers have no control over students’ attitudes about learning [but] researchers confirm that they do” (Brewster & Fager, 2000, p. 3).

There is general agreement in the research that student engagement produces positive outcomes, such as increased involvement and quality of effort, yet there is disagreement about what is actually considered student engagement. Student engagement was recognized as an academic concept in the 1970s and 1980s, with many of the constructs reflecting a techno-rational lens emphasizing participation and time-on-task (Harris, 2008; McKinney, Mason, Perkerson & Clifford, 1975). In the early 1990s, Finn and Voelkl (1993) used the terms participation and identification to define engagement as having both a behavioural and an emotional component. In the same study, Finn and Voelkl (1993) examined the “structural and regulatory environment of schools” (p. 249), emphasizing the impact of participation and belonging on students’ engagement.
Since then, numerous studies have defined engagement as a multidimensional construct, including behavioural, emotional, and intellectual dimensions. Although there are studies that investigate dimensions in isolation from each other (Harris, 2008, p. 58), this study will rely more heavily on more recent studies concerning engagement that support an emphasis on multidimensional frameworks (Brady, 2006; Chapman, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004; Marks, 2000).

Klem and Connel (2004) state that “it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the overlapping components/dimensions of engagement” (p. 272). Each of the dimensions “frame the conditions and outcomes of engagement differently, and when considered together they offer distinct perspectives in their stance toward students” (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009, p. 6). The literature even suggests that the term engagement should be reserved specifically for work where multiple components are present. The fusion of behaviour with emotion and cognition as the foundation of the understanding of engagement is “valuable because it may provide a richer characterization …than is possible in research on single components” as the dimensions are also complementary (Fredericks et al, 2004). Efforts to clarify definitions are complicated somewhat by the fluidity of each of the components of engagement. Many academics, including Dunleavy (2008), assert that the “multidimensional concept [in each component] …incorporates the social, behavioural, and emotional aspects of learning” (p.23) and this influenced focus group discussions with the students in this study as they clarified their definitions of engagement. What can be said is that, whether considered alone or in unison, the varying conceptions of engagement draw increased attention to
the importance of students’ realities in schools and the similarities within their realities.

A recent Canadian study by Willms et al. (2009) suggests that within any one, two, three (or more) dimensions of engagement, students can be deeply, moderately, and superficially engaged. Furthermore, this same study also reports that students can be engaged in some ways and disengaged in others, or they can be disengaged in one or more of the dimensions altogether (Willms et al., 2009). A comprehensive understanding of the individual dimensions of engagement categorized as behavioural, emotional, and intellectual dimensions, and the interplay amongst them is the focus of the next part of this chapter.

2.1.1 Behavioural Dimension of Engagement

It is notable that within the common understanding of the multi-faceted nature of engagement that a topical ethnographic study by Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, and Vincent (2003) includes observations and interviews with grade three teachers and focuses primarily on behavioural or school-processed engagement. This dimensional conceptualization of engagement as a set of observable behaviours is limiting as it does not “help us to better understand the complexity of children’s experiences in school and to design more specifically targeted and nuanced interventions” to increase student engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 61). Behavioural engagement, unlike its intellectual counterpart, can include busy work and hands-on activities that do not necessarily lead to engagement in learning.

In general, most definitions of behavioural engagement do not make distinctions among the types of behaviours (Brady, 2006; Finn & Voelkl, 1993),
but an early definition by Finn (1989) identifies the behaviour of student participation on a continuum, which includes at one end students following teacher directions to the other end where students initiate involvement in extra-curricular activities. Researchers (Fisher et al., 1980; Fredericks et al., 2004; Krause, 2005; McIntyre, Copenhaver, Byrd & Norris, 1983) summarize other studies that define behavioural engagement in three ways: positive conduct and adhering to classroom norms (e.g., following procedures); involvement in learning and related learning tasks including behaviours such as attention, concentration, contribution, effort, and persistence; and thirdly, student participation in school-related activities such as sports, clubs, and committees as isolated measurements of engagements. These measurements may indicate engagement in the learning process such as enjoying researching on the internet, but not necessarily engagement in the learning outcomes within the provincial curricula.

Hesitations with adopting these objective or “instrumentalist” definitions of behavioural engagement result from the “focus on quantitatively counting the students who are involved in the activity and the risk for the researchers that no attempt is made to go beneath the surface; that is, to understand the meaning that students make of the activity or the motivation to participate” (Zyngier, 2007, p. 98). In addition, some of the literature (Klem & Connel, 2004; Willms et al., 2009) considers the social engagement as a possible separate dimension while other studies (Harris, 2008; Marks, 2000) consider the social aspect of engagement to be incorporated into the behavioural dimension and recognize
that social engagement can involve participation in sports, clubs, and other social activities with no direct connection to the teaching and learning process.

These definitions of engagement that include a focus on participation and following teachers' directions distinguish more among the nature of activities than the nature of behaviours and do not address that behavioural engagement can mean nothing more than the ability to “do” school without actually having to be engaged in learning. Understanding the other dimensions of engagement and seeking a more substantive definition is necessary for educators and students as Marks (2000) notes that “high levels of procedural engagement [can] exist but with little substantive engagement” (p. 159). Also, Harris (2008) questions the fruitfulness of measuring behavioural engagement since qualitative studies have shown that “many students know how to appear engaged and involved in class work while they are doing off-task activities” (p. 59). Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) confirm this scepticism explaining that “…simple attention in terms of the students having their eyes on the teacher and not talking to peers may not be enough for learning …learning should not just be hand-on but minds-on as well” (p. 124).

2.1.2 Emotional Dimension of Engagement

Emotional engagement, like behavioural engagement, is also often criticized as a stand-alone mode (Harris, 2008). Part of this criticism comes from knowing students who were enthusiastic or optimistic about school yet nevertheless failed to learn. However, researchers tend to agree that emotional engagement refers to students’ affective reactions to learning and school (Fredericks et al., 2004, Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). These attitudes and emotions
include “heightened levels of positive emotion during completion of an activity, demonstrated by enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest” (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 262). Finn (1989) and Fredericks et al. (2004) define emotional engagement as “identification” with school; identification being synonymous with the feeling of belonging (i.e., being important to the school) and valuing (i.e., appreciation of success in school-related outcomes). This affective reaction is examined more carefully later in this study.

The question of how emotional engagement can be supported is important to this study. Klem and Connel (2004) suggest that factors outside of the classroom, such as a caring school community, influences student engagement. Students need to feel that people in the school know and care about them, that students have “autonomy support” which allows them to make important decisions for themselves (2004, p. 1). Libbey (2004) adds to Klem and Connell’s (2004) explanation of this aspect by considering terms that are often used synonymously with the concept of engagement to include school attachment, school bonding, and school connection. Researchers also articulate a similar explanation and clarify the terms of school connectedness and bonding to consist of “two primary and interdependent components: 1) attachment, characterized by close affective relationships with those at school, and 2) commitment, characterized by an investment in school and doing well in school” (Catalano et al., 2004, p. 252). Fredericks et al. (2004) concludes that feelings of belonging are linked to engagement and that these feelings influence one’s behaviour and vice versa. As suggested, one obvious overlap between emotional engagement and behavioural engagement is that “identification [belonging] … is likely to occur
over time if …[the student] continues to participate in classroom and school 
activities and …an internalized sense of identification can, in turn, serve to 
perpetuate the student’s active participation [behaviour] in class and school” 
(Finn & Voelkl, 1993, p. 250).

Students’ investment in, and their emotional reactions to learning have 
been presented in the research in at least two ways: individual interest refers to 
relatively stable and enduring feelings about different activities while situational 
interest, in contrast, tends to be more context specific (Chapman, 2003). These 
forms of interest are “similar to the constructs of attitudes and intrinsic motivation” 
(Chapman, 2003, p.3). A number of studies (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Chapman, 
2003; Fredricks et al., 2004) consider motivation and engagement as one and 
the same and use the terms interchangeably. However, in comparison to other 
engagement studies such as the National Research Council and Institute of 
Medicine (2004), the distinctions drawn in motivational literature are more 
sophisticated and varied. For example, motivational literature differentiates 
between situational and personal interest (Hidi, Krapp & Renninger, 1992). 
Brewster and Fager (2000) align their thinking with what the research says about 
motivation and provide the definition that students who are motivated to engage 
in school “select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when 
given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the 
implementation of the learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions 
during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest” (p. 
3).
The literature also suggests that motivation can be divided into two categories of “extrinsic motivation” where students engage in learning for the sake of attaining reward or avoiding punishment, and “intrinsic motivation” when students actively engage out of interest, curiosity, enjoyment, or to achieve personal goals (Brewster & Fager, 2000, p. 3). In contrast, in the engagement literature, emotional engagement “tend[s] to be general and not differentiated by domain or activity” and the definitions used do not differentiate between personal (e.g., consistent choices) and situational (e.g., novelty of an activity) interest (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 63). This begs the question of whether the positive emotions are directed towards the learning, one’s peers, the environment, and/or one’s teacher?

2.1.4 Intellectual Dimension of Engagement

A distinction needs to be made between efforts that are primarily behavioural, or as Kirkpatrick-Johnson et al. (2001) label it, procedural or simply doing the work, and efforts that are substantive and focused on learning and understanding. Students’ cognitive investment in learning – the focus on learning and understanding – has been studied by many researchers (Kirkpatrick-Johnson et al., 2001; Meece, Blumefeld & Hoyle, 1988). This focus on the “psychological investment in learning, a desire to go beyond the requirements, and a preference for challenge” (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 63) considers students’ “willingness to invest in their education, to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (Atweh et al., 2007). This conceptualization of engagement is consistent with other researchers’ definitions (Chapman, 2003; Dunleavy, 2008; Marks, 2000) and appears to some to be most strongly linked to
learning (Harris, 2008, p. 60). Within these definitions, the specific strategies and skills that illustrate intellectual engagement include examples such as flexibility in problem-solving, self-regulating, planning and monitoring one’s cognition, preference for hard work, positive coping in the face of failure, and mastering the knowledge and skills. Students who “adopt learning rather than performance goals are focused on learning, mastering the task, understanding and trying to accomplish something that is challenging” (Meece et al., 1988). Similarly, like emotional engagement, connections can again be made to the motivational literature that asserts that “intrinsically motivated students prefer challenge and are persistent when faced with difficulty” (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 64).

From among the various definitions, the description that Chapman (2003) provides is one of the most comprehensive and inclusive, emphasizing the difference between being engaged in learning and doing school. This definition reflects the intent of engagement sought after in this study and is deepened in the next section that discusses student engagement from the perspective of flow theory.

Engagement versus disaffection in school refers to the intensity and emotional quality of children’s involvement in initiating and carrying out learning activities. Children who are engaged show sustained behavioural involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest (Chapman, 2003, p. 572).
2.2 Student Engagement from the Perspective of Flow Theory

One of the most interesting conceptions of student engagement is based on the culmination of concentration, interest, and enjoyment (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Steele-Shernoff, 2003). In a US study of 526 high school students, researchers (Shernoff et al., 2003) investigated how youth used their time in school and the conditions under which they reported being engaged. The students surveyed experienced increased engagement when “the perceived challenge of the task and their own skills were high and in balance, the instruction was relevant, and the learning environment was under their control” (2003, p.1). Psychologist Minhaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his work on what it means to be engaged in learning, labelled the state of deep and meaningful engagement using the term flow (Pottruck Technology Resource Center, 2004). Csikszentmihalyi defined and explored the concept of "flow" - as in being "in the flow" - as the experience of optimal fulfillment and engagement. Flow, whether in creative arts, athletic competition, engaging work, or spiritual practice is, as stressed by Debold (n.d.) a deep and uniquely human motivation to excel, exceed, and triumph over limitation. Based on flow theory, flow occurs when the point of balance among the challenge, the task, and the required skills matches the simultaneous experience of “concentration, interest, and enjoyment” (Shernoff et al., 2003, p. 160). Applied to education, concentration, interest, and enjoyment are described as:

- Concentration: Flow experiences are described as states of “intense concentration or absolute absorption in an activity” (p. 3).
• Interest: Provides “the basis for becoming engaged with a topic for its own sake” and allows the “…individual [to] seize opportunities to learn, read, work with others, and gain feedback in a way that supports their curiosity and serves as a bridge to more complex tasks” (p. 4).

• Enjoyment: “Flow activities, including intellectually demanding tasks …may provide a feeling of creative accomplishment and satisfaction” (p. 4).

Flow theory, as a classroom factor, allows us to better understand the extent to which teaching practices are associated with and connected to students’ intellectual engagement. Flow theory also associates with Marks’ (2000) conceptualization of engagement as a psychological process. In relation to Marks’ (2000) descriptions of engagement, Csikszentmihalyi’s understanding of flow is more specifically characterized as “an engrossing experience during which energy, thought, and creativity are focused on the project or goal” (Pottruck Technology Resource Center, 2004, p. 1).

Willms et al. (2009), in their study on student engagement, included a measure they called “instructional challenge” based on Czikszmentmihalyi’s theory of flow. They summarize Czikszmentmihalyi’s four general relationships between skills and instructional challenge in students’ experiences of learning to include (p. 12):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-Skills/Low Challenge (+, -)</th>
<th>High-Skills/High Challenge (+, +)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of learning are too few in relation to skills and they cannot identify how they can make it more challenging. The perception is a task of little relevance and this leads to boredom and disengagement.</td>
<td>Skills and challenges are in balance. Flow is experienced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low-Skills/High Challenge (-, +)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Low Skills, Low Challenge (-, -)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges are perceived as too difficult and low confidence leads to anxiety.</td>
<td>Apathy about learning is the norm as tasks are inconsequential.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Willms et al. (2009) associated the high-skills/high challenge quadrant with a sense of flow, and their research identified that students in the other three quadrants were less engaged. These identified relationships between skill levels and engagement are not unique as they are consistent with earlier research by Willms (2003) and they present a challenge for administrators and teachers to plan a “careful, intentional learning scaffold constructed around concepts that are central to the discipline or disciplines (Willms et al., 2009, p. 33).

### 2.3 The Dilemma of Disengagement: Has Inertia Set In?

Student disengagement in school became a considerable focus in the mid-1980s when researchers presented a troubling picture of education with studies portraying discouraged teachers and disengaged students putting in their time while negotiating an extensive and fragmented curriculum (Marks, 2000, p. 156). The disengagement, as portrayed by Marks (2000), remains a pervasive problem. In a 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement, 60 percent of the respondents who had considered dropping out of high school gave the reason as not “seeing value in the work [they] were being asked to do” (Yazzie-
Mintz, 2006, p. 5). In a more recent Canadian study, levels of behavioural engagement, such as positive conduct, were between 55 percent and 85 percent. The median level of intellectual engagement (e.g., comprehension of complex ideas and mastery of difficult skills) was only 38 percent, yet many students were “putting in time” as the average level of attendance was 73 percent (Willms et al., 2009, p. 21). Students who “are putting in time”, as Marks (2005) claims, are often disengaged from the learning and from the school (p. 155).

Much of the literature has ascribed the lack of engagement to factors in students’ personal backgrounds such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, minority status and to characteristics of their schools, including curricular fragmentations, ineffective instruction, and low expectations (Marks, 2000). Atweh et al. (2007) explore the constructions and management of disengagement and imply that the factors that stimulate student engagement are the same factors that influence student disengagement.

Krause (2005) favours the term “inertia” in place of disengagement, and highlights the narrow but notable difference between the two concepts to claim that disengagement is “an active detachment or separation” whereas inertia is “more suggestive of doing nothing, which aptly depicts the state of being for the group of students who do not actively pursue opportunities to engage…” (p. 7). Regardless, disengagement, for the purposes of this study, is when the learner does not have an emotional attachment to the learning nor is interested in what is being learned.
2.4 Relevance of Curriculum: A Blueprint for Learning

This section addresses the question of the relevance of curriculum to student engagement. Curriculum is known as the blueprint for teacher planning. As such, there are implications when “our classrooms are not intellectually stimulating and when students are empty vessels to be filled with teacher-dispensed information designed for fifty-minute assembly-line ‘stops’ and dissected for multiple-choice tests (Keedy & Drmacich, 1991, p. 2).

Before considering what the literature suggests curriculum “should be” in order to encourage and support student engagement, it is helpful to note what curriculum theorists identify curriculum “has been” and in some instances “still is”. Bobbit (1918), in one of the first books ever written on the curriculum, defined curriculum as a sequence of experiences which children and youth must have by way of attaining objectives. He suggested the industrial revolution was the initial motivation behind establishing common curriculum with common skill sets and objectives (Bobbit, 1918). Over the past half century and with the end of the industrial revolution, the curriculum field has expanded and controversies continue to exist over what curriculum is and what it should be.

Numerous metaphors have been used in the research to illustrate curriculum. The focus in these metaphors is on the achievement of specific knowledge and skills and they all have some affinity with Bobbitt’s original conception (Kliebard, 1972, p. 84). For example, the foundations of curriculum design have been described through the metaphorical descriptors of production and travel. Curriculum is compared to a means of production where the student is the raw material which will be transformed into a particular finished and useful
product under the highly skilled technician. In the second metaphor, curriculum is a carefully plotted route over which students will travel under the leadership of an experienced (albeit limited) guide and companion. No effort is made to anticipate the exact nature of the engagement or of the effect on the traveller (Pinar, 1999). Yet another metaphor compares curriculum to a map and in this metaphor,

When a stranger comes to the town, he has to learn to orientate in it and to know it. Nothing is self-explanatory for him and he has to ask an expert ... to learn how to get from one point to another. He may, of course, refer to a map of the town, but even to use the map successfully he must know the meaning of the signs on the map, the exact point within the town where he stands and its correlative on the map, and at least one more point in order correctly to relate the signs on the map to the real objects in the city (Greene, 1971, p. 6)

William Pinar (1999) is concerned that education continues to be conceived of as the “means to a specified end”. Pinar critiques current curricular discourse that likens curriculum to little more than “…an academic version of the postal service, delivering other people’s mail” (p. 365). The current metaphor of curriculum in Saskatchewan may not be that different than those listed above. Keedy and Drmacich (2008) suggest in their study of school and curricula that one would likely not find a drastic difference across provinces and schools.

Chapman (2003) cautions us that “given the emphasis placed on levels of academic achievement in schools, the way in which students acquire knowledge through the learning process has become a primary concern” (p. 1). Pinar (1999) and his colleagues encourage curriculum developers and educators to consider and question how history and tradition have influenced curricular discourse and challenge us to create new reconceptualised metaphors for curriculum;
metaphors that will allow educators and students to examine and challenge the 
learning process and at the same time include support and opportunities for 
students to become engaged in their learning.

As noted earlier, curriculum is one of the factors that is identified as 
influencing student engagement yet Schwartz (2006) and others who have 
engaged in curriculum studies have pondered whether or not it is possible to 
“convey directives for action-oriented teaching via the static conventions of a 
written curriculum” and recognize that “all curricular materials are subject to the 
interpretation and individual application of the teacher” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 449). 
Bobbitt (1918) understood that curriculum was to represent what students 
needed to do and experience in order to adequately perform as adults. The 
curriculum writer’s task, at that time, was to define the particular path the student 
should take. Overly and Spalding (1993) have suggested using the novel as a 
metaphor for curriculum-writing:

Novels invite fresh interpretations of new and old experiences. They 
are unpredictable, exciting, multi-layered creations, giving their readers 
diverse images and new understandings. Good novels, if we are ready 
for them, transform us. Good curricula should have the same effect. 
(p. 140)

Overly and Spalding’s (1993) metaphor of the novel views the teacher voice as 
central to the learning process and recognizes that there are many 
interpretations of curriculum. The curriculum, through interpretation by the 
teacher, is a significant influence on the teaching and learning process and the 
kinds of opportunities that engage/disengage students. Willms et al. (2009) 
provide the reminder that curriculum content, as one factor that influences 
engagement, should ensure that topics are “not objects that can be
disassembled and treated as if they were authentically learnable, independently and without regard to the relationships among the parts” (Willms et al., 2009, p.33).

There is a common consensus in the literature that providing a meaningful, rigorous, and relevant curriculum enhances student engagement in learning (Klem & Connell, 2004; Willms et al., 2009; Zyngier, 2007). The grades 6-9 Saskatchewan health education curricula (2009) are developed to provide opportunities for students to build knowledge, abilities, and inquiring habits of mind that lead to deeper understanding of their world and human experience. The opportunities are to focus on students asking compelling questions to motivate and guide inquiries into topics, issues, and challenges related to curriculum content and outcomes. These opportunities are to be provided within a culture of inquiry, which implies a “need or want to know” premise. In addition, “inquiry is not so much as seeking the right answer – because often there is not one answer – but rather seeking appropriate resolutions to questions and issues” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.10). It is assumed that such inquiry-based learning experiences build on students’ inherent sense of curiosity and wonder, drawing in their diverse backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Students can become active and engaged participants while involved in a collaborative search for meaning and understanding. This study is grounded in the premise that our provincial health education curricula, through the Inquiry for Health Decision Making (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 12) have been developed to create such opportunities and to support such participation.
2.5 Classroom Practices and Three Contesting Perspectives of Engagement

Evidence is mounting to show that many problems experienced by students in middle and secondary schools – such as disengagement, dissatisfaction with their schooling experience, and dropping out – are significantly linked to the learning environment (Willms et al., 2009, p. 6). The question of what teachers can do to engage students depends upon one’s frame of reference for understanding engagement.

Many researchers have documented that instruction that promotes passivity, rote learning, and routine tends to be the rule rather than the exception (Jablon & Wilkinson, 2006, p. 2). Within the academic literature, a wide range of strategies are put forward as how to facilitate engagement. While many educational scholars discuss the importance of engagement, there is a lack of consensus about how to facilitate student engagement.

Bryson and Hand (2007) address the issues of how teachers can positively influence the engagement of students. Their study included numerous student focus groups with questions that asked what role their teacher had in engaging these students. Some of the responses included the importance of the teacher as a communicator, an enthusiast, a team player, an assessor, and a nurturer. Robinson (2009) proposes the adoption of personalized learning approaches and a student-centered approach to planning to engage or re-engage students in learning. Robinson (2009) highlights the importance of a culture of open communication, mentorship opportunities, experiential learning
programs, and reinforcement of choice and empowerment. The conclusion by Zyngier (2007) states that engaging pedagogy ensures,

that what teachers and students do involves connecting to and engaging with the students’ cultural knowledge; owning or ensuring all students should be able to see themselves represented in the work; responding to students’ lived experiences; and empowering students with a belief that what they do will make a difference in their lives and giving them opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life. (p. 113)

How educators think and what they believe about knowledge development will impact their pedagogical practices. An epistemological position has direct practical consequences for teaching and learning and impacts the type of engagement that an individual is likely to focus on and to encourage. Three dominant epistemological perspectives, as described in the literature play a significant role in shaping how engagement is viewed and consequently planned for. As mentioned previously in this chapter the instrumentalist/objective perspective views engagement as “ritualistic” where students have engagement done to and for them instead of with them. A teacher operating within this objectivist view is more likely to believe that a subject area, like health education, must present a body of knowledge to be learned. In health education this may consist of factual information and low level knowledge such as terminology, basic information, and theories. The effective transmission of information from the teacher to the student is of primary importance, much like the metaphor of the postal system noted earlier. Using textbooks, planning for direct instruction, including lectures, and notes are common planning strategies. Class assignments and exams require students to regurgitate the one right answer and pre-planned/purchased answer keys can be used to assess students’ work.
Deep thinking, reflection, and/or engagement in the learning are not typically required.

The second and third perspectives emphasize the role of the learner, but do so with differing foci. The social constructivist or individualist perspective includes a more student-centered pedagogy that involves active learning and opportunities for intrinsic motivation, reflection, and choice. However, it does not necessarily “raise substantive (and critical) student inquiry that questions the acceptance of official knowledge for all students” (Zyngier, 2007, p.10). Of significant concern to education is the risk of perpetuating particular stereotypes, such as those often associated with hegemonic masculinity, and reinforcing what Kumashiro (2004) calls practices of “common sense” (p. 41). Examples of discourses that reinforce “common sense” and reinforce dominant and often oppressive norms include believing that students who are not engaged are lazy or unwise. These perspectives emphasize learning as focused inward, with emphasis being on the advancement of the learner.

Thirdly and notably, the critical-transformative perspective establishes engagement as a “rethinking of these experiences and interests in communal and social terms for the purpose of creating a more just and democratic community, not solely for the advancement of the individual.” (Zyngier, 2007, p. 104). Through this perspective, all students can see themselves represented in the curriculum and in the learning experiences. Unlike the social constructivist view, the critical-transformative perspective “challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations existing between…” and among the various social constructs (Zyngier, 2007, p 104). Engagement within the critical-transformative
perspective aligns with the new emphasis on authentic learning and teaching/learning for deeper understanding as teachers “must go beyond developing techniques to implement the curriculum …and rethink what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 34).

Effective teaching practices that increase opportunities for critical-transformative engagement have been identified in and generalized from numerous studies. Common antecedents of engagement include learning experiences that:

- involve substantive conversation,
- have intellectual rigour,
- are connected to the world outside the school,
- immerse students in disciplinary inquiry,
- require and instil deep thinking,
- build a positive classroom disciplinary climate,
- support risk-taking,
- allow peers to learn from each other,
- challenge dominant knowledge systems, and
- include pedagogical reciprocity (Fredericks et al., 2004).

These antecedents to engagement require careful planning and support for students to see the value in what they are learning and in the processes through which they are learning. It is obvious from the research that teaching to influence student engagement in a positive way is both complex and difficult. Willms et al. (2009) remind us that “learning can no longer be understood as ‘we teach, they
learn’ but something that takes place in a socially, academically, and intellectually exciting and worthwhile place to be” (p. 39).

2.6 Conclusion

The genuine work of teaching and student engagement can be messy, complex, and challenging. Marks (2000) situates engagement within a cyclical journey and claim that “participation leads to academic success …influences identification with school …[which] increases the likelihood of future engagement (p. 158). This ongoing cyclical process emphasizes how engagement, and/or disengagement, do not happen by accident, but happen by design, or lack there-of. Engagement requires us to plan for it. As educators we must actively create the conditions that foster student engagement.

Education is as much about what is said and done as is about what is not said and done. Students may become disengaged with learning because teachers continue to teach in ways that reinforce dominant and often oppressing discourses (Kumashiro, 2004), perpetuating the transmission metaphor of curriculum. Kumashiro (2004), asserts that commonsensical ideas are familiar and comfortable (p. XXIII). As a result, it is not surprising that curriculum development and teaching/learning continue to reflect what is familiar and normalized, whether the learning is/is not engaging for students.

Presently, much of the literature regarding engagement education focuses on the multifaceted nature of engagement. One piece of ethnographic work with young children shows “[health] education is not just a matter of the formal curriculum (Epstein, O’Flynn & Telford, 2000-2001 p. 138) and, as Weis and Fine
(2004) argue, “education does not take place just in schools…” (p. 122). To embrace pedagogy that fosters engagement and directly challenges disengagement, it is helpful to look beyond what is included in curriculum, and recognize that individuals bring their own experiences and ideologies to the “living/practised” curriculum.

Researchers have yet to explore the concept of engagement to its fullest and to consider if education systems and individuals are using old paradigms to interpret the changing learning process in renewed learning and school reforms. The definition of engagement that I employ in my research focuses on an understanding that “the purpose of schooling is broader than academic achievement” and that “engagement must be broadly construed” (Brady, 2006, p. 26). Pedagogical practices in the classroom are as much a part of the metaphorical postal service as is the curriculum. Kumashiro (2004) maintains that “learning to standards in the disciplines is a practise of repetition, or repeating or perpetuating only certain ways of knowing or doing the disciplines” (p. 110). Perhaps all too often education and curriculum discourse, including some pedagogical practice, closely resemble Pinar’s postal service metaphor. In the absence of effective planning, a deep understanding of engagement and when curriculum is merely “…delivered, opened, read and then learned” the teacher becomes no more than a glorified postal delivery agent and the student akin to a mailbox (Pinar, 1999, p. 366).
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

While numerous studies have investigated student engagement, many of the studies have been quantitative, focusing on student engagement by using teacher and student surveys, direct observation, and numerical data (Fredericks et al., 2004; Willms et al., 2009; Yassie-Mintz, 2006). Unlike quantitative research, engagement studies that involve qualitative data can explain how people make sense of the concept and provide a different understanding of engagement through the realities of the participants.

Educational research, like all social science research, is influenced by ideological factors (e.g., assumptions of race, gender, age, culture) (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). These ideological factors both shape my study and position my analysis. In addition, my educational research is influenced by connections between my position of power and my ability to conduct research. Just as the methods I choose to use in this study influence how I interpret the data, who I am also shapes what is interpreted from the data.

At the time of this study, I was a 41 year-old, white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual woman who grew up in the southern, rural, bible-belt area of Saskatchewan. I am a product of my socialization and possess both recognized and unrecognized biases, prejudices, and privileges. These privileges and prejudices are my lived “reality” and affect both the researched and the research process. Therefore, as the researcher I must manage, negotiate, and balance my research to best ensure “…the integrity and authenticity of the knowledge produced” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 50). Charmaz (2006)
also provides the important reminder that all researchers’ personal interests and
disciplinary perspectives influence their knowledge production but these
perspectives, when examined, provide a place to start and not to end.

Within a constructivist perspective, qualitative research is a creation of the
shared experiences of the participants and the researcher. Constructivists see
relationships between facts and values and they acknowledge that what they see
– and what they don’t see – is influenced by values. Constructivists also attempt
to become aware of personal presuppositions and to grapple with how they
shape the research (Charmaz, 2006). The analyses of the data are also social
constructions that acknowledge the multiple realities and multiple ways of
interpreting a specific set of data (Corbin & Holt, 2005). The fact that the data is
the perspective of the participants that is then processed and interpreted through
the perspective of the researcher, aligns with the constructivist viewpoint of the
multiplicity of constructing meaning from data. For those who accept that theory
is constructed or co-constructed out of data, it is recognized that analytical tools
are designed to clarify thinking and to provide alternate ways of thinking and
drawing out of relevant concepts from the data. Therefore, while using a case
study method, my goal is to maintain, as Charmaz (2006) defines it, an “emic”
view of behaviour - the view from within - while acknowledging that my reality
influences my efforts to represent the experiences of the participants and that all
efforts to represent experience are interpretive, making it is impossible to fully
represent the experiences of the participants.
3.2 Case Study

Case study has its pedigree in sociology and concentrates on describing, understanding, and/or predicting human behaviour. Case study is a method of studying a particular context through comprehensive description and analysis. It is often referred to as a methodology but O’Leary (2004) references case study as a term that “refers to the form and shape of the ‘participants’. The methodological approaches associated with case studies are actually eclectic and broad …involve any number of data gathering methods …but they can also involve the use of a number of methodologies.” (p. 115).

Case study research begins with the desire to “derive an up-close or otherwise in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases, set in their real-world contexts” (Yin, 2012, p. 4). However, this understanding encompasses important contextual conditions that are examined within real-life situations through multiple sources of evidence with the data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion. (Yin, 2009; Yin 2012).

The essence of a case study “is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions; why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Yin, 2009, p. 17). They seek to engage with and describe the complexity of social activity in order to represent the meanings that individuals bring to particular settings (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). This study is a single-case study that captures the circumstances and conditions of a commonplace situation: namely a grade 8 health education classroom in Saskatchewan. Careful consideration of this case minimized chances of misrepresentation and maximized the access needed to collect the evidence through a variety of data
collection tools including student questionnaire, classroom observations, teacher interviews, student focus group discussions, and a personal research journal.

There are situations that create “relevant opportunities” for using case study as a research method (Yin, 2012, p. 4). Foremost is the type of research question that a study is trying to address. According to Yin (2012), case studies are pertinent when addressing a descriptive question – “What is happening or what has happened?” – or an explanatory question – “How or why did something happen?”. The research question “How does a teacher plan for and support student engagement in health education?” both explains and describes a particular case and the real-life context in which it occurred.

Case studies privilege in-depth inquiry and rich descriptions of an “instance in action” and use multiple tools and data sources to explore and interrogate it (Stark & Torrance, 2005, p. 33). My research relies on a variety of techniques for data gathering within the case study that help focus on the particularities of engagement in a grade 8 classroom. This “context-dependency” concludes that what is learned from a case study cannot be generalized beyond a certain point (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 105). However another logic, referred to as “reasoning by analogy”, allows the researcher to apply the lessons learned in one case to another set of circumstances “believed or assumed to be sufficiently similar to the study sample that findings apply there as well” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 105). The findings in this study are not generalized, yet researchers who examine planning for and supporting student engagement in health education may develop similar conclusions to those discussed in this study.
I have chosen to use case study as a way to concentrate my research efforts on a particular case and to analyze the data with techniques found within grounded theory. As case study research is not limited to a single source of data (Yin, 2012), the multiple sources of data used in my research included student questionnaire, classroom observations, teacher interviews, student focus group discussions, and a personal research journal. Drawing on the method of case studies, a distinctive form of empirical inquiry, my research will seek to understand how a teacher plans for and supports student engagement in a grade 8 health education class. This study allowed for direct observation of events being studied and interviews of the people involved in the events. This real-life context provided a depth and breadth to the evidence and was key to examining the “how” of the research question.

3.3 Grounded Theory Analysis

Grounded theory often complements other approaches to qualitative data analysis, like case studies, that require the researcher to analyze data through their “interpretive portrayal of the studied world” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). This interplay of case study with grounded theory analysis techniques lent itself to be descriptive and inductive as it helped to clarify the readers' understanding of engagement. The analysis resulted in using a number of techniques to collect and analyze data about what was actually going on in the particular case, why it was happening, and what the outcomes were (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). It is important to note that many of my techniques and questions were not “…developed in advance, and are, in fact, dependent on what emerge[d] from
the initial data” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 98). Using grounded theory analysis lead to initial concept identification and the resulting alternating of data collection with data analysis.

Using multiple methods such as interviewing, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and writing a research journal has guided my research to begin with an area of study and to include analysis of the data resulting in emerging themes. Within these emerging themes, the findings were not generalized yet particular theoretical propositions could be used to generalize to the likely experiences of middle-level students and their teachers when engagement in other classrooms and other subject areas has occurred (Yin, 2012).

Although my study does not employ grounded theory for the purpose of developing a theory, many of the grounded theory analysis techniques were applied to analyze the data collected from the case study. Charmaz (2006) identifies how grounded theory contributes to knowledge development. By the 1990s, grounded theory “not only became known for its rigor and usefulness, but also for its positivistic assumptions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9). This paradigm of positivism, as described by Rossman and Rallis (2003), operates within important sets of assumptions. Much of the work within this paradigm takes a “fundamentally rational view of the social world” while assuming an ordered social world, an orientation toward status quo, and the purpose to explain and improve organizational functioning (p. 45). In the early 2000s, researchers moved grounded theory toward a post-positivist understanding and called the assumptions of positivism into question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; O’Leary, 2004).
These post-positive assumptions are presented by Corbin and Holt (2005) who articulate:

- The world is complicated, open to interpretation, ambiguous, fickle, and multiple in its realities;
- The nature of the research is reflexive, intuitive, and holistic;
- The researcher is both participant and collaborator of a value-bound study;
- The methods are inductive and dependable; and,
- The findings are qualitative, valuable, unique, and/or transferable.

The emphasis placed on using multi-methods to obtain rich data, while incorporating coding into its analysis was to make the method more inductive, dependable, and auditable (O’Leary, 2004).

Qualitative research originates in the naturalist pool of thought, which attempts to examine the environmental influences of human behaviour. This study is inspired by the strategies used in case study and in grounded theory. Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative methodology involving the discovery of theory through analysis of data from a particular source and in this study, a particular grade 8 health education class. As grounded theory analysis requires initial examination of large amounts of data and labelling of specific contextual variables, my fieldwork required dialogue with both the teacher doing the planning for and supporting of engagement, and the students’ as they shared personal experiences of engagement. Subsequently, observations of and focus group discussion with these grade 8 students’ behaviours and interpretation of their voices were important to this study of engagement.
3.4 Strengths and Weaknesses of Case Study

Case study contributes to knowledge production. My single-case study is embedded in the framework of constructivism and produces a definitive account of a case from the outside with a glimpse of the inside that will deepen the findings (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Particular characteristics of case studies, such as those summarized by O’Leary (2004) are identified as strengths as they may (p. 116):

- have an intrinsic value if the cases are unique, interesting, or even misunderstood,
- be used to debunk a theory if one case demonstrates that what is commonly accepted might, in fact, be inaccurate,
- bring new variables and additional understandings to light,
- provide support and evidence for a theory, such as anecdotal evidence, or to triangulate other data collection methods, and
- be used to support the analysis of large amounts of data in coding and categorizing.

Some difficulties associated with case studies are similar to weaknesses of other qualitative methodologies (Yin, 2012). These limitations are dependent on both the researcher and the researched. For example, the focus on a single case study leads to prolonged commitment on behalf of the participants. The researcher required regular access to the health education class, and for a variety of reasons (e.g., illness, relocation, extra-curricular), I was not always
guaranteed that the entire group of participants would be available. Additional limitations to educational research include (O’Leary, 2004):

- Subjectivity as this approach relies on personal interpretation and the risk of inferring too much from circumstance (p. 59);
- Findings are context specific for a particular case at a particular time (p. 115);
- Personal biases may sneak into how the study is conducted, how the data collection tools (e.g., student questionnaires) are prepared, and how alternative research methods are chosen (p. 116); and,
- Researchers may alter direction during the study and be ignorant that the original design was inadequate for the amended investigation. As a result, unspecified gaps and biases may result (p. 44).

Although little can be done to address the challenges of generalizing case studies, most writers suggest that qualitative research, including case studies, should be judged as credible and confirmable as opposed to valid and reliable (Merriam, 1985). Similarly, Merriam also argues that rather than duplicating the statistical, quantitative notions of generalizability and assuming qualitative research inadequate, it makes more sense to develop an understanding of generalization that is compatible with the basic characteristics of qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, critiquing case study method for being non-generalizable is like denouncing my computer for not being able to clean my carpets. Should case study be criticized for not being able to do something for which it was not designed to do?
The merits and limitations of grounded theory have been analyzed by many for critical analyses. The strengths of using grounded theory analysis techniques include (Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Holt, 2005; and O'Leary 2004):

1. findings that are carefully developed from on-going analysis of the data;
2. procedures that are specific and systematic for collecting data;
3. data that requires collection over time and analysis through various lenses to ensure meaningful results; and
4. data-collection strategies that provide for initial assessment of relevance to the study.

The shortcomings of grounded theory analysis techniques experienced in this study include the large amounts of data that become so time-consuming and labour intensive to analyze. Moreover, the data was collected in a fairly fixed and systematic approach which can challenge the flexible process of the study. One of the most difficult challenges of using grounded theory analysis techniques was the expected absence of pre-existing assumptions and theories. This expectation can create, at times, a distraction from knowing when the coding is sufficient and the categories are “satiated”. That said, applying some of the grounded theory data collection and analysis strategies within the case study provided a comprehensive interpretation but also presented a challenge in determining when sufficient data had been collected.
3.5 Approach to the Research

In this study I am unconditionally responsible for the integrity of the research process. I am obliged to know my research landscape prior to beginning my study and to examine my responsibility for the “dignity, respect, and welfare” of the participants (O’Leary, 2004, pp. 52-53). I obtained ethics approval from the University of Regina for my study on student engagement in health education. See Appendix A for a copy of the approval form.

3.5.1 Participants: Selection Process

Stark and Torrence (2005) assert that difficult decisions have to be made about which case/cases to select for study, how and where the parameters are constructed, how much time is spent in each fieldwork site and what methods of investigation to employ (Somekh et al., 2005). The process of sample selection involves identifying the population, determining the sample size, and employing appropriate sampling strategies. The population involved in this study on student engagement was a grade 8 class. The choice to study student engagement at this grade level was influenced by the fact that it has been documented that “disengagement from education increases as students progress through school, with a particular escalation in the problem in middle years” (Bland et al., 2009, p. 237).

All of the students in this class were invited to participate in the study. Twenty-two of the 24 students volunteered; 11 girls and 11 boys. Their ages ranged from 13-15 years old. Six of the students spoke English as an additional language and three of the six were newcomers to Canada. This class of grade 8 students was a handpicked sample because 1) of the equal gender numbers, 2)
their diverse backgrounds, and 3) because the grade 8 teacher was familiar with and using the renewed provincial health education curriculum.

In the beginning of the research process, permission was sought and received from the public school board and from the administrator of the elementary school. I contacted the grade 8 teacher by phone and we met at her school to discuss the study. We arranged for me to visit her class to ensure the students’ understanding of the study and to seek their interest in participating. During this initial visit, the Focus Group Consent Form and the Group Agreement for Maintaining Confidentiality were read and clarified (Appendices B & C). The participants were asked to discuss these forms with their parents/guardians, to sign them, and to return them to school prior to my first class observation and focus group discussion. The parent/guardian permission letter (Appendix D) was read aloud and clarified before students were asked to have it signed by their parents/guardians. Unlike the student forms that we discussed and they signed while I was at the school, the students were expected to take the permission letters home to be signed, which in itself created a few challenges. Four of the students did not return their permission letters prior to my first official visit, and two of the four were excited to participate but had forgotten and/or lost the letters. A second letter was sent home and returned the next day permitting students to join the study.

3.5.2 Data Collection

Qualitative research is descriptive in nature. The quality – and credibility – of my study relies on the data. Case studies “typically rely on a variety of techniques for data gathering and are conducted over a period of time.”
(Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 105). A certain breadth and depth of data are required for case studies, so the variety of techniques used to gather data in my study included an exploratory questionnaire, five interviews with a teacher, four visits to observe the health education class, and seven focus group discussions with the students, three of which were with the whole class and five were with small groups of students. All of these data collection strategies took place at the school.

Once permission was granted, and before our first focus group discussion, I provided the four question questionnaire for students to complete in class. The questions were read aloud and clarification was provided to those participants with questions. The participants were reminded that they could refuse to respond to any part of the survey. The four open-ended questions in the anonymous questionnaire included asking them 1) what they like to do in health education, 2) why they like those particular activities, 3) what factors about health education would they change if they could, and why, and 4) what questions did they have about health education. The purpose of the questionnaire was to assist with generating questions for the first focus group. Using this survey instrument ensured all student voices in the class were heard through confidential and anonymous reporting and complemented the other research methods employed (e.g., interviewing, focus groups, observations).

I conducted five semi-structured interviews of 12 to 27 minutes with the teacher prior to observing each health education class and before facilitating the student focus groups. The interview questions were shared in advance via email and all of the interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed.
Building upon Charmaz’s (2006) suggestions for developing effective interview questions, I intentionally provided an overlap of open-ended questions and sub-questions to guide the discussions and create thick, contextual descriptions (Appendix E). The interview questions complemented grounded theory analysis techniques as they were “…open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28).

Classroom observations provided the opportunity to watch for the teacher’s planning and support for engagement in her class. Before each class, as part of the teacher interview, Claire and I would discuss what she had planned for the health education lesson. The observations allowed me to see if teacher planning was reflected in her teaching, and how planning for engagement might be observable in her pedagogical strategies.

Observation of each health education class took me inside the setting to help me discover both subtle and obvious complexities in this particular social setting. An observational challenge for me, as identified by Rossman and Rallis (2003), was to recognize the “big picture” while noting huge amounts of detail. I consciously had to remind myself to create a holistic description of the events while noting some of the details of the lesson, of the participants’ behaviours, and of their dialogue. My observations became more planned and systematic as I began to recognize patterns, such as those students who regularly asked questions. The observations also became more strategic as I began to discern possible insights into students’ focus group discussions, such as why they said they prefer particular tasks, as compared to what I recorded from my observations.
The health education class was scheduled for fifty minute periods at various times throughout the day. I observed this particular grade 8 classroom four times over the span of seven weeks. As unobtrusive as I planned for my classroom observations to be, Rallis and Rossman (2003) remind us that the participants likely do not act the same when they know they are being observed. Nonetheless, observing what the participants did and said during class allowed for augmented analysis to what was shared in the focus group discussions.

Immediately after each observation, I facilitated student focus group discussions. Questions were provided, via email to the teacher, a few days in advance of my visits. These focus group conversations lasted from 14-26 minutes. The teacher and the two non-participating students left the class at those times and worked in the resource room. For this particular class, daily attendance was an ongoing issue; at most I had 20 of the 22 students present for the focus group discussions as follows: March 2, 2010, 18 students in attendance; March 15, 2010, 19 students in attendance; March 31, 2010, 20 students in attendance; April 23, 2010, 19 students in attendance.

Talking with and listening to young adults in a focus group setting was quite interesting and at times unstructured. Charmaz (2006) suggests that such experiences for a grounded theory study “may range from a loosely guided exploration of topics to semi-structured focused questions” (p. 26). My pre-conceived interview questions guided our discussions such as “Do you feel that your health education class is engaging?” and “What makes your health education class engaging?” As the categories developed I considered additional questions, such as “Do you know when your teacher has planned for
engagement and when she hasn't?” and “If you are interested in a topic, does that mean you will automatically be engaged in the learning?” As well, my priority was to engage the students in a dialogue where they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. To do this, I needed to be flexible in my questioning and in encouraging participation amongst the students. My experiences of both teaching grade 8 and of being an administrator in a grades 7-12 school, supported my efforts in doing so.

The research process was modified part way through the study to adapt to the size of the focus group discussions to ensure all voices were being heard. The first three discussions included all the participants in attendance seated in a circle on the floor. The students for whom English was an additional language rarely participated in these focus group discussions; there were three who said nothing. In response to the language barrier that made their contributions limited, I ensured that the last four focus groups were much smaller – some as few as two participants to the largest that consisted of six participants. The resource room, located next to the grade 8 classroom, provided a quiet area for the discussions to occur. There were pros and cons of using both the larger and the more intimate discussions. In the larger groups, participants were able to build off of each others' ideas but in smaller groups the quieter students had a stronger voice. Some participants, especially those for whom English was an additional language, found the large group environments to be challenging for participation. In addition, I was concerned that some of the less vocal students nodded in agreement with what was being said, as it was probably more comfortable to be in agreement. Allowing a more intimate experience led to
more participation in the discussions about students’ particular perspectives of engagement and how teachers plan for and support it in their classes. A vivid example was when I asked the EAL students to form a focus group. Their participation in the discussion increased immensely. I noted my observation with them and learned that they were much more comfortable communicating with peers who were also hesitant to communicate in English in front of others.

3.5.3 Data Analysis

The first step in grounded theory analysis is concept identification (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Identification of concepts begins with the initial data collection, thereby concepts are identified “from distinct events/incidents in the data which may be actions and interactions, or meanings given to events or emotions that are expressed about certain events” (Somekh & Lewin, 2005 p. 50). Concept identification began with my first interview with the teacher and was developed more fully in my initial class observation and discussion with the students. This early coding is sometimes referred to as “open coding” or “initial coding” (Corbin & Holt, 2005 p. 50). Questions that I considered as I analyzed what I observed, heard, and thought are reflective of a grounded theory analysis and are borrowed from Charmaz (2006, p. 47):

- What is this data a study of?
- What does the data suggest? Pronounce?
- From whose point of view?
- What theoretical category is indicated within the specific data?

As these questions are answered, Charmaz (2006) advises that the coding also involves analysis “… involving naming each word, line, or segment of data” and a
focused, selective phase “that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize” to explain larger segments of data” (p. 46). My coding began with simple, yet comprehensive categories such as “1) liked the task, 2) disliked the task, and 3) involved in the task” as I established possibilities and connections through data analysis. This initial coding and analysis required the following, as summarized by Strauss and Corbin (1998, pp. 65-67):

1) Focussing on the range of plausibility;
2) Examining the specifics of the data;
3) Listening to both what is being said and how it is being said;
4) Asking general, specific, and theoretical questions;
5) Conceptualizing and classifying ideas and reflections;
6) Grouping concepts according to their salient properties into categories;
7) Making comparisons to increase researcher sensitivity; and
8) Examining assumptions that are made.

Qualitative researchers, like Charmaz (2006) and Strauss & Corbin (1998), suggest the use of several analytical tools to facilitate the coding process and assist in the probing and organizing of data. Examples of particular tools adopted to help me make meaning of the data and develop theoretical interpretations include:

- Comparisons - looking for similarities and differences among ideas and/or comparing categories to similar or different concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, early in the coding, I examined the responses to the question “What does engagement look like, sound like, and feel like” to
what I was observing in the classroom. When I compared the data, I
realized that there were some differences from what I was told by students
to what I observed in the classes. For example, students had indicated
both in the student survey and in the focus group discussions that group
work was engaging to them yet when I observed the health education
classes, I observed students who did not look like they were engaged in
the task or in the discussion. This observation led to reflecting on whether
students who appeared to be engaged in the task and/or the discussion,
were actually engaged. At this point I introduced questions in the focus
group discussions about students pretending to be engaged and how
would an observer know the difference.

- “Waving the Red Flag” – refers to the process of recognizing when biases,
  assumptions, and beliefs are intruding into the analysis (Strauss & Corbin,
  1998, p. 97, Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Throughout my data gathering and
  analysis, I “waved the red flag”. For example, I recognized my strong
  personal bias that engagement would be enhanced if there were particular
  classroom routines and methods of organizing tasks, such as seating
  arrangements, establishing groups, and taking attendance. In this
  classroom many of these structures were not often in place, yet
  engagement for some of the students appeared to exist without structures.
  These structures and my related classroom management expectations
  and personal reflections are examined further in chapter four.

- Coding – specifying properties and dimensions of a category for the
  purpose of relating categories to subcategories and organizing the data in
a particular conceptual way. This is often referred to as a paradigm model (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once the initial coding was complete, nine categories were interpreted from the data, such as liking what they do, interested in the work, having a fun teacher, and not having to take notes or write “a bunch of stuff down”. I went back to the data and distinguished what I meant by each category. At that point, I realized that some of the categories, such as “students liking the work” reflected more on the emotional state of the student while the category of “teacher must like her work” reflected the disposition of the teacher.

- Theoretical Sampling – gathering more data that focuses on the category(ies) and its/their properties and sorting (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96 & 115). Most of the theoretical sampling in this study occurred after initial coding, with the development of additional questions to be discussed with the focus groups in response to the data that had previously been collected. For example, after the student survey was completed, I realized that I needed to know what the participants understood engagement to be and how engagement may be related to but different from liking something. Teacher interviews and focus group discussions evolved to discuss different types of engagement and to identify those that were more process focused, such as engaging in the task, and those that were more emotional focused, such as being passionate about and sharing the leadership of learning.
3.6 Reflections on the Research Process

Theory cannot be developed by description alone (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Theorizing means “stopping, pondering, and rethinking anew” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 135). Both Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (2003) establish acts or stages of theorizing to include seeing possibilities, establishing connections, and asking questions. A range of methods for data collection and analysis were called upon to help me understand the complexity of planning for student engagement and supported the ongoing analysis of recurring patterns. At times throughout the research process, I needed to slow the flow of my study to take it apart. This fracturing of the data allowed me to consider what I had learned from multiple vantage points, to make new comparisons, to follow leads, and to build on ideas.
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The familiar debate in education over standards and assessment is now including the discussions of how young people best learn in the 21st century and of how to make “...schools (and those who work in them) catalysts for vibrant engagement, not simply achievement” (Hamlyn, 2008, p. 2). This study adds to this examination of learning by investigating how a teacher, as a catalyst for engagement, plans for and supports student engagement. These investigations include assumptions and discussions, as examined in chapter three, surrounding the notion of student engagement as 1) a set of valued behaviours and performances, 2) a desired disposition to learning, and 3) as an ideal outcome from purposeful planning. As a result, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate, from the points of view of a teacher and her students, the research questions: what do students find engaging and how does one grade 8 health educator plan for and support student engagement in health education?

Planning for student voice and choice and creating supportive learning environments are critical elements for student engagement in health education. The research literature is clear; effective teachers present learning opportunities that are thoughtfully and intentionally designed to engage students (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Designing learning that invites students to engage intellectually has the potential to awaken a personal “desire to know.” The potential result is a deep, personal commitment on the part of learners to explore and investigate ideas, issues, problems, or questions for a sustained period of time. Moreover, given the right set of circumstances, engagement is possible for all students.
In this chapter, I begin by highlighting students’ understanding of and experiences with engagement. Understanding their experiences is necessary to contextualize my classroom observations and to guide the focus group discussions. In addition, this understanding will help to determine if the data is conceptually similar to or different from my perceptions of student engagement to develop emerging categories. As students shared their experiences, it was not surprising that our discussions were a starting point for many of them to think both broadly and deeply about their own perceptions of engagement and to consider the various ways it is manifested. This diversity of perceptions and experiences is captured throughout this chapter and the initial data analysis leads to the identification of a number of incidents or events that evolve into concepts that are identified through the processes of open coding, and selective coding in grounded theory analysis (Somekh & Lewin, 2006).

4.2 Overview of Process

To understand the context of the data and the evolving concepts, participant profiles are shared. First, I provide the class profile, including the health educator’s background and experiences, and continue by considering the students’ circumstances and experiences. Second, participants’ perceptions and understandings of engagement are presented for a shared understanding. Third, I consider how the teacher participant plans for and supports student engagement in a particular grade 8 health education class. Within this consideration, every effort is made to capture both the teacher’s and the students’ stories and reflections of engagement in health education while at the
same time conveying these discussions within a framework that provides insight into possible meanings. Last, initial concepts are revealed, categorized, and analyzed based on participant’s responses and discussions throughout the study. This four-part process is reflective of the comprehensive nature of qualitative research.

4.2.1 Establishing the Context

Of the 25 individuals invited to participate in this research, 23 participants took part. The participants included grade 8 students and their teacher in an urban K-8 Saskatchewan school. Their thoughts and reflections were captured through multiple sources of data as a way of enriching the research findings. These methods of data collection included a student survey, seven focus-group discussions of various sizes, four observations of the grade 8 health education class, and five interviews with the teacher. These varied data collection methods defined both the kind of data to be collected and the multiple opportunities through which it was collected.

4.3 Participants

The contributing grade 8 teacher, Claire (a pseudonym), has been a middle-level teacher for the majority of her career. She has a Masters Degree in Education, with a major in Arts Education. At the time of the study, she was in her 26th year of teaching. She was the only Grade 8 teacher in her school (in a school of 24.3 full-time equivalent staff) and taught all Grade 8 subjects except physical education and French. Her teaching career has included teaching health education at various grade levels, participating as a Middle Level Health
Education catalyst teacher for the past renewal of *Health Education: A Curriculum for the Middle Level* (1998) and for the recent renewal of *Saskatchewan Curriculum: Health Education 6-9* (2009), and participating on a variety of health-related advisory committees.

Claire’s four-year involvement as a provincial catalyst teacher included attending several annual two-day professional learning workshops. These workshops focused on the provincial middle-level health education curricula and prepared participants to co-facilitate regional health education curriculum workshops. Her extensive involvement in the discipline of health education provided breadth to our interviews. From our conversations and my classroom observations, I recognized how essential it was to involve the educator in this investigation because as research suggests, “…teachers have a significant effect on how learning occurs in the classroom” (Harris, 2008, p. 60), and as noted by Wilms et al. (2009), teachers have an even greater effect on the students’ learning than do the quality of the schools that students attend. Consequently, this study examines how student engagement, as a desired disposition to learning, is planned for and supported by the classroom teacher.

Twenty-two (11 females and 11 males) of the 24 grade 8 students ranging in ages from 13 to 15 years old (the ages mentioned reflect the students’ ages at the time of the study) contributed to this study. All 22 students were from the same grade 8 class, but their backgrounds and related experiences with engagement were diverse. Moreover, three of the students were new to the school, and three of the 11 male participants were new Canadians (moved to Canada within the past two years) at the time of this study. This study captures
the various perceptions and experiences of student engagement as it was planned for and supported in grade 8 health education.

4.3.1 Student Voice in Qualitative Research

From my experiences as both a high school teacher and an administrator, I am cognizant of the reality that students have limited voice within our educational system. When I reflected back on my teaching experiences, I was reminded that including both teachers’ and students’ voices was important as their perceptions of engagement in health education may differ greatly. What students believed teachers should do to plan for and support engagement may be very different than the teacher’s perception of what she does and what should be done. Interviewing and observing both the teacher and her students in this case study broadened my understanding and helped to deepen my interpretations.

My experiences teaching in a grades 7-12 school, and working with middle-level students lead me to anticipate that some of the participating students in my research on engagement would be initially hesitant to share their stories. To provide a safe environment for all students’ voices and as part of my ethical responsibility as a researcher, I ensured our discussions would be kept confidential and I would not share my classroom observations with others. While recognizing that some of the tools used to gather data did not guarantee anonymity within the class, we discussed the importance of privacy and keeping our discussions confidential. To emphasize the importance of confidentiality, students completed the Group Agreement for Maintaining Confidentiality form (Appendix A). I also informed and reminded the students that their names would
not be used in the study and their teacher(s) would not hear the recordings of our conversations. I also reassured the students of the significance of their insights and of the value of their voices in this research project. As my time with students continued, their hesitancy diminished, their voices grew richer and more descriptive, and their confidence increased.

Near the end of the study, I met with five students who were new Canadians. For three of them, English was not their first language. I remember talking with my advisor during the data collection phase about my concerns with the lack of participation of some of the students, and my desire to provide an environment where all students would participate. My advisor and I examined how my discussions needed to be sensitive to the power of language and of diverse worldviews that are not necessarily the “norm”. It was certainly possible that these students and their families had differing beliefs, cultures, traditions, and ways of knowing. Our discussions needed to provide the environment where students felt comfortable asking questions, participating in the conversation, and at times, re-stating what another had said. This particular focus group with EAL students was also an opportunity for me to ask the questions and ask them to paraphrase what was being asked in their own words. Given their enthusiasm and willingness to share, it appears that establishing this separate focus-group discussion for these students provided a safe and comfortable space for them to share their experiences and perspectives.

The smaller groups facilitated more active participation than the larger focus group discussions. This environmental influence on student participation was reinforced in their stories of engagement. Their experiences will be
highlighted later in this chapter as their voices, through their stories of and reflections on school life in Saskatchewan are consistent with other engagement research that determines “disengagement is disproportionately experienced by students …from ethnic minority communities” (Wilms et al., 2009, p. 7).

4.4 Initial Concept Identification - Student Questionnaire Findings and Discussion

The grounded theory analysis techniques used in this study allowed for the theoretical development of particular themes and descriptions of how engagement is planned for and supported in a specific grade 8 health education class. This section discusses the emerging themes of engagement as learning that is a) enjoyable, and b) purposeful. To develop the themes, I used a variety of analytical tools such as asking questions and keeping a research journal which helped to clarify my thinking and prompted the development of relevant concepts. The examination of these themes and what these students identified as enjoyable and purposeful was constructed out of participant experiences that were described through a questionnaire, interviews, discussions, observations, and a research journal.

Considering that data is processed and interpreted through both the eyes of participants and through those of the researcher, I used a variety of tools to collect data in order to include multiple perspectives and provide a broad reflective lens. Within this reflective lens, I “waved the red flag” on my first day when I introduced the four-question student survey to the students. I immediately realized that my expectations for classroom management were not
the same as the participating teacher’s. This difference is highlighted in my research journal entry included below:

This was my first data collection experience with the students. At the beginning of class, in the confusion of students not finding their seats, having multiple conversations, and some not acknowledging that class had begun, Claire introduced me and then sat at her desk and did some marking. I had expected to go to the class to distribute the questions and then collect them when they were done, but it was obvious that this group of students were ‘mine’ for the moment and decided to employ my management skills. I asked the students to find their seats and to give me their attention so that I could review with them what today would entail. The students were respondent and quickly quieted down. I reminded them of why I was here and of the research journey we were venturing on together. Students proceeded to ask a few questions, such as “Can we use a pencil?” and “Do we have to use full sentences?” Once their questions were addressed, the questionnaire was discussed, and I shared with them that today’s task, although an independent activity, would allow for me to look at their responses and create group discussion questions for next day. Students, quietly and intently, completed the questionnaire. The time required for completion ranged from about 8 minutes to 15 minutes. (March 2, 2010)

The intent of the survey (Appendix D) was to allow individual student voices to be captured in print and to facilitate initial data analysis for the purpose of creating effective questions to guide the teacher interviews and to lead the student focus group discussions. Two of the survey questions included a starter list of suggestions on which students could reflect, choose from, as well as add their own ideas. The remaining two survey questions were open-ended. An abbreviated version of the questions is included below. The student survey questions include:

- What activities do you like to do in health education?
Why do you like those particular activities you identified in the first question?

What factors would you change about health education if you could? Please indicate how and/or why you would change them.

What questions do you have about health education?

The first survey question asked students to identify favoured activities in health education. Working in groups was most desired, with 91 percent of students identifying this as their preference. Active learning opportunities, such as role plays, watching/making videos, experiments, drawing/painting, presentations, and power points were also provided as choices in the survey and not constructed by students. However, students did not highlight activities such as journaling, case studies, interviews, action plans, and research as favourable activities in health education. Student survey responses guided some of my earlier interviews with the teacher to examine activities she believed were engaging for students. These preliminary discussions began to shape my interpretations of how she planned for and supported student engagement.

When students replied to “Why do you like these particular activities?” many of them articulated their ideas in brief points such as “I am interested in that kind of learning” and “I always want to have fun and to be engaged while learning”. Eighty percent of students preferred the kind of opportunities that lend themselves to less traditional instructional approaches to learning, or as one student wrote, “…that were different from the regular taking notes and stuff like that”, and 58 percent of students favoured activities that involve multiple ways of learning, or as another student remarked, “activities that involve either kinesthetic
or visual learning which I like to do are engaging. I enjoy doing hands-on things or making visual displays.” This preference for more of a hands-on approach to learning was captured in another student’s responses when he identified wanting opportunities that allowed him “to show your creative side in power points, drawing/painting, videos, and experiments”. One student suggested this preference existed “because these kinds of activities make health class fun and interesting.”

Students also identified that they like particular activities that allow them to work with their peers. Of the 20 students who identified group work as a favoured activity, 10 of those students provided various reasons for this preference, such as “because it is better for me to learn this way”, “I feel more comfortable when I work in a group”, and “it is engaging when you can work with your friends and show your creative side”. Clearly, working with others allowed students to feel more comfortable and made the learning more comfortable and accessible for some. This accessibility was noted in survey responses such as “I like working in a group because it’s much easier when I don’t understand words” and by another student who claimed that “I prefer working in groups because it’s easier for me to learn that way.” These responses were used to shape the early focus group discussions in an attempt to qualitatively examine why desired activities were engaging, what made them engaging, and how this engagement was planned for and supported in health education.

The third survey question asked participants to highlight changes that would make their health education more engaging and to also elaborate on how and/or why they would make these changes. A starter list (including less note-
taking, more technology, and more variety in topics) was provided. I included a starter list because I was interested in knowing these particulars for triangulation of the data that would be collected from my later interviews and focus group discussions.

Increasing class time and decreasing note taking were highlighted in several student responses. Notably, in Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Education recommends that health education is taught 80 minutes/week in grade 8 (Ministry of Education, 2012). At this particular school, health education was scheduled for 100 minutes in a six-day cycle. Fifty-seven percent of the students who suggested an increase in the time allotment reasoned that this would allow for more time to do all that was expected. These same students claimed that not having enough time to complete tasks led to feelings of being rushed and those feelings discouraged engagement. As one student wrote, “If we have more class time to do work, this would mean less homework”. Another student echoed this sentiment but made a connection between increased time and the possibility of better topic choices. This student “would like some more class time because you can finish more stuff and have more time for a good topic.”

Several other students also suggested changes to health education topics. Twenty-seven percent of the students wished there were more opportunities to choose topics. While one student stated “I would like permission to pick the topics we learn about,” others wrote more about the depth of exploration, such as “I want time to learn more deeply about some good topics”, and others emphasized relevancy, saying that “we should have opportunities to learn about
topics that are personally interesting”. For the most part, these students believed that the topics in health education needed to be interesting and/or relevant.

Resources and learning materials, including the use of technology, were common factors that students claimed made learning enjoyable and influenced engagement. For example, 32 percent of student responses concentrated on wanting “better supplies like new books and other stuff” and “having less handouts and learning from seeing things and watching more videos.” Technology was suggested as a significant factor for engagement; primarily to be used as a resource tool for investigation or demonstration. Interestingly, survey responses ranged from recommending the use of less technology during health education, because technology was limiting to learning experiences, to using computers more often with a focus on tasks such as word processing and researching. The 10 percent who wanted to use less technology advocated that computers could do the thinking for students and that they “should use the same amount of technology and the same amount of brain power."

The final survey question was open-ended and required students to document their questions or comments about engagement and health education. I included this last question to potentially inform some of the focus group discussions and to acknowledge any student reflections that may not have been captured in the first three questions. Fifty percent of students’ questions sought factual knowledge about what were the required areas in health education while the other 50 percent were more conceptual and/or metacognitive in nature by asking questions such as “Does a lot affect you in your life?”; “How will health education help us in life?”; “Can we, as students, raise awareness about what
happens after you smoke or drink, outside the school but as a class?” As a result, these questions were revisited in our focus group discussions and are related to the emerging themes examined more closely later in this study.

**4.4.1 Survey Summary**

The student survey provided initial opportunities for students to reflect on and to draw attention to their overall health education experiences. As in all research, I acknowledge that what I hear is largely dependent on what I ask. When given the opportunity to respond to the survey questions, these grade 8 students demonstrated the ability to discern what they like in health education, why they like it, and what needs to be changed to make it more engaging. Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory analysis of theoretical sampling was useful to move this process forward and the four survey questions provided a starting point for beginning to understand how powerful the relationships are between student engagement in health education and classroom practices as they relate to teacher planning and support.

**4.5 Establishing the Context: Defining the Experience**

A review of the literature, as presented in Chapter Two of this study, determined there are numerous definitions and varying perceptions of the term student engagement. Consequently, it was necessary for me, as the researcher, to consider participants’ perceptions of the meaning of engagement. Recognizing that context informs one’s experience, discussing participants’ definitions and perceptions of engagement created at least a common language and a stronger shared context for our discussions. In both the teacher interviews and during the
student focus group discussions, participants were asked to reflect on personal experiences and to describe what engagement looked like, sounded like, and felt like within the context of health education. These perceptions resonated in my interviews with Claire when I asked her to talk about what I might see and hear if her students were engaged and to describe what I would observe as she supported this engagement. Likewise, students were also asked to reflect on engaging learning experiences and their overall perceptions on how their teacher planned for their engagement in health education.

As the study developed and themes began to emerge, the interviews with Claire became more multi-dimensional (e.g., discussions of behavioural, emotional, and intellectual engagement) and more complicated as she reflected on how she purposefully planned for and supported engagement in health education. The student focus group discussions were more straight-forward and initially one-dimensional, focusing on emotional engagement and in particular, concentrating on enjoyment and having fun. Eventually these conversations included other dimensional factors such as the importance of challenging one’s learning, taking risks, and learning about real life. All of these discussions provided for a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of how Claire planned and/or could plan for and support student engagement.

4.6 Understanding Engagement

After much discussion, the student participants claimed there would be two observable components present when they were engaged:

- Concentration/On-task behaviour
• Enthusiasm/Interested in the task

My insight into their understanding of engagement began when students suggested I would hear (e.g., by asking questions) and see them concentrating if they were engaged. I was uncertain of what they meant by concentrating, and when prompted to elaborate, students described observable and typical behaviours such as “usually the concentrating people answer the questions while others just stare.” One student noted that, “when you are concentrating, you would be talking a lot and writing stuff down, and if you are not, you would just be looking up or playing with your pencil.” Another student indicated that if you are engaged, “you are more concentrated on what you are doing … you are not looking around. You are not distracted by what is around you.” Although students’ initial assumptions that learning was about compliance and participation, these on-task behaviours also implied engagement.

The example of Miro, an eighth grade student in this study, illustrates the importance and complex nature of planning for engagement and the notion that engagement is more than a pre-determined set of behavioural criteria. When Miro’s eighth grade teacher introduced a group work activity related to body image and had students working in small groups, Miro, a student who seemed to have some self-regulation challenges that included speaking out-of-turn, fidgeting continuously, and looking for his supplies long after the instruction had begun, struggled to form/join a group. If this study had only included a focus on discernable behaviours through classroom observations, my data would have indicated that Miro, as a non-compliant learner, was not engaged in learning. In the classroom observation (March 15, 2010) Miro and four other boys had
chosen to work together in a group to examine eating patterns of youth. As the group of students congregated at their table, instead of identifying roles of each group member and beginning to organize their work, the group of boys argued over who would work on the computer. When Miro discovered he was not going to be initially working on the computer, he sat on the edge of the table, tapped his ruler on anything and everyone who was around him, and provided direction to the student who was working with the computer. Each group had been asked to have only one student per computer at one time. He was not complying with the task instructions and appeared to neither be creating tools (e.g., peer survey) or gathering information about eating patterns. Fortunately, during a discussion with him at the end of class, it became obvious that Miro, although not following directions or demonstrating self-regulation, had actually been engaged in learning. This was evident as he spoke about the task and the enjoyment he found when using the computer as a tool to gather information about eating patterns, what he learned about the impact of body image on some people’s eating patterns, and personal connections to what he regularly ate or did not eat, and reflections on why he often did not eat breakfast.

To investigate students’ perspectives more fully about particular behaviours representing engagement, I asked in one of the focus group discussions if they thought students could pretend to concentrate (i.e., be engaged). I also posed the question that if a student looked/sounded like she/he was concentrating, did that automatically mean she/he was engaged in the task and/or in the learning? This conversation came full circle when students determined that being on-task did not mean being engaged. For example,
several of the students suggested that it was easy to pretend to be engaged. In particular, throughout the four times I visited the health education class, there were two female students who very compliant. They were in their seats when the bell rang, had their materials on the tables, and sat quietly waiting for instruction. These two girls seldom spoke. One of the girls shared her own experience and claimed, “I do pretend to concentrate and be engaged …I tell my counsellor that it is like a fairy tale, and I can even smile and wave when I don’t want to really be like that.”

The idea of engagement being make-believe with a focus on telling a fictitious story, is a reminder of the restrictions of using observation as a sole determinant of engagement. The fairy tale comment was discussed and other students reflected on whether concentration was truly a characteristic of engagement. Some students agreed that they could pretend to concentrate, yet others took this thinking further and talked about differing situations when it may look like they were not concentrating though they were engaged in the learning. More importantly, one of the students claimed that you cannot always see if someone is engaged; engagement is not always observable. He described how “students sometimes pretend [to be engaged] but there are some students too shy to ask questions yet they are engaged – you just can’t see it.”

Another student shared that “sometimes translation makes it difficult to communicate. When I wasn’t here, I didn’t talk too much here, and I only knew a bit of English.” Other students talked about how they would pretend to be engaged by demonstrating ideal behaviours to avoid unpleasant consequences or obtain desired results. For instance, one student commented that if the
learning is not fun, he often pretends to be engaged, and “I just feel I should just get this over with so that I can go home and do funner stuff”. Three of his peers in this focus group added that they feign engagement when they are not interested in what is going on and they will pretend when they “… are mostly just not interested in the stuff that is happening, and it is just boring what we have to do.”

This conversation led to another boy cautioning his peers about pretending to be engaged as he claimed that “you can pretend, but only to a certain point until the teacher asks you a question. She (Claire) will know if you are engaged then.” Another student added and many of his peers nodded in agreement that “you cannot fake it because when you are going to have quizzes and tests, they [teachers] will automatically know that you were engaged and learned or didn’t learn.” Students wanted to avoid unpleasant consequences, which can happen when questioned or assessed. Equating engagement with looking focused and pretending to be on-task were strategies that many students had acquired as a way to navigate through their school experience, regardless if the learning was engaging or not.

At this point, the students shifted the conversation to talk about the extraneous factors that may prevent them from concentrating and being engaged. These factors had little to do with the teacher’s planning and/or supports. For instance, two students in the same focus group recognized that sometimes it is hard to concentrate and focus, regardless of the activity or the teacher’s planning and support. They claimed that,
if you are nervous about what is happening - like something at home or somewhere else, you can’t concentrate and likely won’t be engaged or if you ...experience stress - you are probably thinking of something else like I’m going to go home and have to do this and twiddling with your pencil and thinking about it. You are nervous about what happens. Something at home or somewhere else and you can’t concentrate or focus.

The second example echoed back to the discussion of on-task behaviour yet deepened the students’ thinking that being on-task does not always mean being engaged. In these situations, one student also revealed that a person’s confidence and/or self-concept influenced engagement as “low self-esteem kids don’t like it when people laugh at them if they say something … and they are scared and don’t want to ask or be too involved because they want to be popular.” Therefore, supporting these students and building their beliefs in themselves was necessary for engagement opportunities to occur.

This conversation about the relationship between concentration and engagement was evident in my interviews with Claire and the common stories of compliance and enthusiasm reverberated in our discussions. When Claire was asked to describe engagement, her initial illustrations were of on-task behaviours. However, upon reflection, she also considered an emotional component to engagement. Her illustrations highlighted engagement as behavioural and observable. Claire claimed, “I can walk around and see who’s engaged … and I guess when you look at those on-task things I think that gives it away, but also, how excited they [the students] are to be working on what they are working on ... or how many questions they maybe ask me.” Claire continued to describe the behavioural aspect of engagement when she commented:
You could almost ask students if they are engaged. So, so you could almost say, is this engagement? What does engagement look like, feel like, sound like - and yet I think in so many ways we’re not engaged. You do it from the outside looking in at someone but truly most often with the exception of two …I knew what engagement looked like, what it sounded like, and what it felt like in my classroom.

Claire continued to reflect on her evolving understanding of engagement and shared with me her thoughts in terms of disengagement and the related implications for planning for and supporting engagement in health education. Claire’s descriptions of student disengagement created images of students who did not have an emotional attachment to what they were learning and/or doing and were “only there in the physical sense and took up space …the ones who are disengaged, you know, those who sit back and they are the quiet ones in the classroom. They never cause any disruption but they never do a thing. I call them the seat warmers.” Engagement, for Claire at this point in our discussions, was about ‘doing’ and unless students were active learners, they were not engaged. She also cautioned that “students who complete tasks quickly but do not ask questions are also likely disengaged …because their hearts are not connected to it.”

Similarly, when I asked the students about disengagement, the conversation echoed the data collected in the survey. Four students articulated, while a number of other students nodded in agreement, that their disengagement was often because the task was not fun and/or interesting. I began to formulate a direction for our next discussion that focused on what this all meant for planning and supporting student engagement in health education.
Claire’s reflections on engagement included thoughts about behaviours, such as concentration, but also about student performance, marks, and assessment. Regarding assessment and its relationship to behaviour and performance, Claire remarked,

I guess we use assessment. I think you can jump right to assessment. Assessment kind of gives you an idea of, whether or not, whether it is formal or informal assessment. And I always keep tabulation of process for my students. So I always find out how they are doing, what is their status, where are you at right now, did you get this stage done, are you on to this stage, that kind of thing. And when it comes to anything large like a large project ...I mean a little project I could just hand in, hand out, hand it back in, looks like you get it. Oh, ok. Or in a class discussion, you know, are you participating in the discussion or something. But if it's something larger, like a bigger project, I will have them sort of help me. We will work together to set dates for when this has to be, because I will have this broken down. And we work on that to determine how that has to work (Adult Interview, February 22, 2010).

Keeping track of students’ behaviour and of their completed assignments (i.e., monitoring her students’ compliance) were described by Claire as a way she supported student engagement in health education. This was consistent with other findings in this study. For instance, when Claire spoke about supporting students, she considered that one way of supporting them was “keeping track of” students who were compliant but not necessarily engaged. As she described some of these particular students, she emphasized that the compliant students, although may appear to be engaged because they “never cause any distractions but, but honestly, wooo those guys …and yet they don't fall through the cracks. You know I am able to kind of keep track of them, I am able, you know, these would be the ones who would have fallen through”.

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This insight prompted a discussion that explained if engagement is observable, then engagement must be assessable, and if so, what kind of engagement is assessable? As a result, assessment of “doing (i.e., student compliance) and learning” is another concept constructed from the data. The types of assessments that students described as influencing engagement in learning were not those that focused as much on students’ behaviour but those that allowed students to reflect on their learning. In relationship to the work they were currently doing in health education on healthy eating and body image, Claire planned for engagement by having students assess their learning. One student provided an example of what they would often be allowed to do, “for example, she lets us do our own self-assessments and we can kind of think back and reflect on what we did …definitely more engaging.” In the assessment literature, assessment as learning actively involves student reflection on learning and monitoring of his/her own progress (Schlechty, 2011). Many of the participants, through nodding and making comments such as “right” or “I agree”, concurred that self-assessment was a regular practice in their health education class, although they articulated that the assessments were primarily of their behaviours/progress and less on their learning.

### 4.7 Planning for Engagement

With further discussion and after preliminary sorting of the data from the focus group discussions, classroom observations, and from the teacher interviews, themes constructed from the data suggest that planning for engagement is
related to a set of three interdependent and interconnected ideal behaviours and emotions, categorized as follows:

- Enjoyable Learning
- Likeable Teachers
- Purposeful Learning

### 4.7.1 Enjoyable Learning

*I think that we sometimes feel we should just get this [school] over with so that we can go home and do funner stuff. We are mostly just not interested in some of the stuff that is happening and it is just boring what you have to do* (Student).

During one of my first classroom observations, the students were in the middle of a body image unit. Claire likes to have the students work in groups and in this class, like many others, she asked her students to divide into groups based on individual interest in a particular topic (e.g., nutrition, body image, physical activity). Many students immediately formed small groups while other students were either undecided or reluctant. For those who had not chosen a group, Claire suggested they “should think carefully about the topic [they] want to work on but also pick the group that looks like it would be the most fun.” Her prompting for students to make choices based on the opportunity to have fun was a theme throughout her and the students’ discussions. It was very clear – students wanted their learning to be fun if they were going to be engaged. As one student explained,

My favourite things to do to get me really engaged are acting – of course – and being active, like in my karate class. It is also much funner if you were in partners and changed the work to a game. If we did a game like rotating each other’s bodies or something like that, I would go for that.
Students, when given the opportunity, actually discussed their wish list of what they would like to see to make their health education classes, and classes in general, more enjoyable and therefore, more engaging.

When I asked the students to help me understand more fully what made learning “fun”, students described various interactive learning experiences. Interactive learning describes strategies of building understanding through dynamic, hands-on tasks (Jablon & Wilkinson, 2006). Students were quick to note that passive learning, which included merely observing a learning process or just viewing/listening to information, was not fun. Students needed to be interested in the learning. These students described this kind of learning by using comparisons and examples. For instance, one student thought “we don’t really learn by reading lots of books …its hands-on work like if we are doing and learning about something …but if we just sit and listen to a teacher reading a book all day.” Another compared direct learning to a more visual learning experience. This young man indicated, “I like activities which are engaging. It’s really not that interesting to just listen to a teacher go on and on and you don’t learn that much either. But if a teacher shows you a video or something visual, it just makes it more fun.”

Another student continued the conversation by emphasizing that “being interested in and enjoying the activity they were asked to do was important …” to be engaged in the learning. His peer commented more specifically and referred to interactive learning methods when he described how “…in class there are lots of ways to be interactive, learn things, and have fun. My favourite thing is doing a game by like exercising - moving as we learn.” This idea was also supported
by another student, who until this point in the focus-group discussion had said very little. She believed that “games made learning fun” and claimed “it [health education] is much funner if you were in partners and changed the work to a game … then I would be up for that.”

When prompted for other examples about having fun when learning, one boy described a particular activity related to their HIV/AIDS unit from earlier in the year. He asserted that they had fun “when we do really good projects … when we were doing our health unit on HIV/AIDS and we were using candy and stuff to show those who were infected or not by if they shared your candy - to show infections.” These interactive teaching-learning practices created engagement opportunities, where students were eager to participate when they enjoyed the learning task.

Exploring topics were significant to students’ enjoyment of learning.

Students spoke about being interested in the topic, such as,

If you have an interest in some topic or like participate a lot in a topic and you don’t want to leave it, but if we have a zone in the area of the class, people would want to learn more and want to be at school more often instead of being at home to play games. It’s like when you have interest, it is everything to you.

It was also noted that “if the most engaging topics are those that are interesting, that is what will engage kids in Health Education. If you just stick and have interesting stuff then everyone else will be engaged and following along with what the teachers are doing”. A student succinctly synthesized this particular part of our conversations by stating, “situations are really engaging only if the topic interests me”.
4.7.2 Likeable Teachers

Teachers need to be enthusiastic and happy and that makes me learn because it seems like it really matters to them. (Student)

In our conversations about learning that was fun and engaging, students also concentrated on the teacher’s personality and how that influences (i.e., supports) whether learning is engaging or not. They described two main types of teachers, and they were confident that one type made learning fun and engaging while the other did not. One student thought that “…having an interesting and unique kind of teacher …teachers need to be enthusiastic and happy and that makes me want to learn more because we have fun and it seems like what we are doing really matters to them.” Another student added to that notion by musing,

…we don’t like negative teachers and teachers who are negative about their jobs or something and they are just negative about their jobs and they have to do it to get paid or something …just like we have to do school they have to do their jobs. They don’t really care about their students and are mad all the time. It is easy to pick out those teachers who do like teaching and those who don’t.

All students agreed that when a teacher loves her job and is excited about teaching, that is when learning will be fun and students likely become engaged. If not, “those teachers don’t really care about their students and are mad all the time.” The participants claimed they could “pick out those teachers who liked teaching” and from the onset, found these teachers’ classes to be more engaging. These kinds of teachers take the time to “get to know the students”, especially about their lives outside of the classroom, and to schedule time to “…discuss how we feel about learning”. A constant support for student learning and
well-being balanced with “… leaving us [students] alone and letting us do our work” were critical characteristics of the kind of teacher who planned for enjoyable and engaging student learning.

### 4.7.3 Purposeful Learning

For students to understand why they are learning what they are learning is important to them. This purpose for learning is described as,

Stuff that connects to your life does matter …you could be in a situation sometimes where what you learn could be in use, but for that person that doesn’t really pay attention in class but has that situation, it is over, and they can’t do nothing about it (Student).

To more fully explore the earlier identified component of being interested in their learning, and to have some direction to begin to talk with Claire about how she planned for this kind of learning, students were asked to talk about what made learning purposeful. In what became an unplanned brainstorming activity, students briefly expressed numerous suggestions that I determined, through sorting, to be primarily related to one or more of the following:

- Self and Identity
- Appearance and Body Image
- Athletic Pursuits
- Careers
- Outdoors and the Environment
- Sexual Health.

If what students were learning related to their lives and their interests, then for them the learning was purposeful.
Learning about healthy habits, related to food and exercise was highlighted in the student surveys, in the students’ discussions, and was illustrated in one of my classroom observations (March 31, 2010). In Claire’s eighth grade health education class, there were always a few students who regularly asked questions when what they were learning was relevant to their own lives. For instance, during one classroom observation, students were given the questions of “What are common eating habits? What are common exercise habits? How can we find out about ours’ and others' eating and exercise habits?”

Claire reminded students not to answer the questions aloud but to think quietly and give everyone a chance to think. She told them as they reflected on the questions that she was considering using food and exercise diaries/logs to help answer these questions. A number of students commented that they had done that the previous year but would like to do it again. Some students groaned. Claire commented that for those who groaned, keeping a food/exercise diary/log is probably an option they shouldn’t pick. Quickly there were several conversations happening throughout the room with students talking about their own eating habits and the habits of their families. With the diversity of students in the classroom, albeit a chaotic few moments, most of the students were engaged in dialogue and both telling and listening to the various habits being shared. Most students were participating, on topic, and eager to discover more. (Research Journal, March 15, 2010)

It was interesting to listen to students’ reflections about what they believed was valuable to learn. They suggested that for health education to be really engaging, the learning needed to have a purpose. Students not only wanted to enjoy (i.e., have fun) what they were doing but also claimed they needed to care about, feel connected to, and have some ownership for what they were learning. The students spoke about how health education should, and at times does, connect to their personal lives, and at these times, they are engaged in what they
are learning. One young girl, who often talked about her passion for sports, and in particular soccer, commented that “lots of what we learn in health education allows me to reflect on how I like to play sports and that if I am healthy, I can better achieve my best.” Health education was also purposeful for her because “when I play sports, there are things I need to know and practise that I learn in health education and it helps you be aware of what you do know and to set goals in the future so you do better.”

Another student reported on the current unit on body image, saying “what we’re learning - it connects to my life because it depends on what I am eating and my body image and that is what we are learning to control our eating habits and how we feel about ourselves.” This relationship to learning being purposeful was also noted in one student’s description of how health education “helps me to become a better person, be positive, and to learn different lifestyles.”

Participants also felt learning was purposeful when they were learning about self. For example, one of the students talked about the value of most of what they learn in health education because they “are learning about their own self-esteem and how we feel about [their] bodies”. Student learning needed to be connected to their lives, and they felt that teachers needed to plan for and support this connection.

Of significance in our conversations about purposeful learning was the importance of acquiring relevant experience, applicable knowledge, and decent marks. I asked the students what made particular knowledge and experiences purposeful. Their responses varied; however, to four students, “purposeful” meant that the knowledge and experiences centred on career and life success,
drawing attention to the necessity of specific learning that would allow them to be, as one student claimed,

Successful in careers from Subway …or to bring to a career as a vet because if you want to work in Subway, health is going to matter because you have to wash your hands and stuff so in some way health connects to every job. I think health education is really important for me because I want to be a vet and want to know what is healthy and what is not healthy.

This thinking about health education and its relevancy to their futures was communicated in another group when a student stated,

All the stuff we are learning in health matters to our future …when we get older we need experience with health and we need to be - like on topic with everyday things - and I want to be a doctor because I want to know about health stuff for my patients. If you want to lead/live your dream, you have to learn.

Within this context, students were referring to the broader picture of health education that was engaging, and not to the day-to-day tasks that they necessarily found enjoyable.

A number of students suggested that one’s desire for good marks automatically made any learning purposeful. Their motivation to get “A” meant they would likely be engaged in the learning. These students wanted to, as one student offered, “get good work [so] they get recognized outside of school because our parents care if we are successful.” It was also suggested that students earned good marks by learning and understanding, and that the learning and understanding is what was important – whether they are engaged or not. One student noted “I think for all of us here we all want to get good marks and that but it’s kinda not really about good marks – but if you learn and you understand what you are doing, you will get good marks and I think that’s what
matters to all of us.” Adding to the conversation, another student reflected that it is purposeful to be engaged and get good marks

…because when you do good work and you get recognized by people you get more recognized by other people out of school so then if you are seen across the street, people will know you are a good person. It’s like repetition, I mean a good reputation.

Not all students agreed that wanting good marks made learning purposeful or engaging. One student challenged his peers to think more deeply and suggested that for some students, it was more important to complete the work than to be engaged in it. He also believed that the work may not require engagement by the student, and that marks are not always a motivator for engagement. As he stated,

It all depends how good you are …but you can do all that but your marks might still be a D …but it is sometimes more important to get done and then you get an A. We know that if we do it [the work] we will get a better future and we want a better future even if we don’t want to learn stuff.

I prompted students to think about situations where students could earn good marks without really engaging in the learning, and I encouraged them to ponder occasions where they were engaged in their learning but their marks did not reflect it. This brought the conversation back to their ability to pretend to be engaged and that students could “do school” and this “doing” manifested in situations when they did not find the learning was purposeful yet felt they just had to do it and they knew they were being marked on it. A number of students agreed with the three others who were emphatic that their marks, which gave them a purpose for learning and for being engaged, demonstrated if they were engaged or not. The assumption embedded in this conversation was that
engagement was synonymous with achievement, and that if one earned the marks, that meant one was engaged with the learning.

4.8 Planning and Supports for Student Engagement

All of the participants agreed that teachers had some responsibility for student learning. As one student offered, “the teacher is responsible for teaching us what we have to learn and we are responsible for learning it.” When asked what their teacher needs to do to make health education engaging, students stated that the teacher’s responsibility involved planning for and supporting learning tasks that are collaborative, interesting, and relevant.” One student claimed, “There are so many ways to be interactive and learn stuff. My favourite thing is the same as what she said, to do a game that has like exercising. Moving as we learn”. Another student suggested, “We should use smartboards. At my old school we have a couple of smartboards and they are like really cool cause, the um, the teachers asks the students to go up to it and solve the problems or write something” while another claimed, “It is much funner if you were in partners and changed the work to a game. If we did a game like rotating each other’s bodies or something like that I would go up for that.”

Although the teaching and learning process often involves both planning and support for student engagement, a couple of essential themes have been constructed from the data that provide direction as to how to do so. These themes, though interdependent, are separated within this section for the purpose of identification and discussion and derive from the concepts of enjoyable learning and purposeful learning as discussed earlier. The themes are related to
1) the educator’s flexibility in the planning for student voice and choice, and 2) establishing supportive learning environments.

4.8.1 Planning for Student Voice and Choice

She asks us what we want to do …well she did …she asked us what we wanted to do in this unit. (Student)

Claire claimed that her “planning comes from students’ lives so I try to …I always question the teachers who do all their planning in the summer months and then they have never met the kids. I don’t understand that. How can you plan units that connect to them?” Throughout this study, Claire described how cultivating individualized connections with her students is important for student engagement and learning. These connections allow Claire to uncover student interests and embed these interests in the learning program. Claire described a student who “does” school really well: he gets fairly decent marks and works hard to finish assignments quickly that are frequently not completed to his potential. His attendance has been inconsistent in the past year-and-a-half, and he is certain that he can, as she stated, “take a day off every couple of weeks because [he] know[s] it all.” Claire deliberately sought out opportunities to get to know him better and discovered he was interested in and very passionate about the health and well-being of animals. The flexibility in her planning and the attentiveness to his interests allowed her to adapt the learning task to better individualize his learning. This young man was encouraged to investigate, document, and communicate what he knew and what he was learning about animals. His research into a local no-kill shelter for animals was not a part of Claire’s initial planning, but the flexibility in her planning allowed her to accommodate an often
absent student to become engaged in his learning. At parent-teacher interviews, this student’s parents reported to Claire that their son was “really enjoying school this year” and noted that his attendance had improved. The significance of Claire’s support for personalizing learning is shared below by Claire (April 12, 2010):

… and his parents had said in the fall that he’s really enjoying school this year. I noticed his attendance and will compare it and the end of the year but it’s better attendance then he’s had in the past. And, um, it’s also that he talked about his topic. So he came up, he said, he couldn’t even think and he told me today. Um, we were in here and we had a chance to kind of, I had a chance to talk to students about their speech as well and some of them were writing. So some of them were still working on their health stuff in a couple of groups while you were meeting with the students and he said to me. You know I went home and I thought about it and I thought about it and thought why didn’t I think about this. My sister and I got talking about the no kill shelter and it’s all, and it’s, it’s for animals. So there’s a no-kill shelter. So this is what he’d like to see, a no-kill shelter outside the city somewhere. Built so that animals could be kept as opposed to killing them because there’s no space for them and they can’t look after them. And he said, “Oh, I can’t believe I didn’t even think of that!” And I thought it’s taken until now, it’s taken until May, oh April, almost May for D. And I hope that his curiosity is starting because those other kids will always do well in school but are they really engaged? And are they really? And are they really sharing with others their ideas and things like that, you know?

Claire planned around students’ interests and abilities as a way to enhance engagement to support learning. In the focus group discussions, students shared how they thought the teacher should make the learning relevant by planning around their interests, including “the teacher should try to work around so you can still have the same topic but dissolve it into everyone’s interest – although I know that might be a little hard” or that she should “ask us what we want to do … well she did … she asked us if we wanted to do this.”
This planning for relevancy to each student’s learning and for cultivating interest was not only achieved in Claire’s flexibility but in other planning as well. Firstly, she would plan around current and local news and other media for items of relevance. As she described, this was

… to engage them. The editorial section and the financial section on Saturday or Friday was all about this [body image]. Maybe it’s was last week because I was catching up on papers last week, and it was on body image and models and how they’re just forcing the whole industry to re-examine what we see in magazines, and to stop extending those messages, those distorted messages of body image to young people (March 2, 2010).

Secondly, Claire planned her lessons using the provincial health education curriculum. The change from learning objectives to outcomes and, as she claimed, “knowing what students need to know by the end of the year instead of what the teacher is supposed to do,” provide some freedom to teach to students’ interests. Not having to follow a step-by-step process and instead knowing, as Claire says “where we are going and what we need to do allows me to plan for engagement differently.” She continued by claiming the flexibility provided within the curriculum allows for her “kids to sort of lead [her] through it” and although you can find “…some people [who] think of the curriculum as being you know, constricting but really it’s a guide for, you know, remaining focused as an educator and it actually provides a freedom to adapt what you are doing to students’ needs and interests.” Claire used an analogy of a luge to describe her experience with the health education curriculum and planning for student engagement:

… a luge going down the track and we’re in there. And we’re in the luge and we’re going down and sometimes we come along and there
are things, things that can be part of that. So, whether it’s like the snowflakes coming down, or the rain … you’ve got things joining on with you and attaching to you that you can bring it along … the kids can bring things. You can change what you wear to go down this luge. You can change your equipment or whatever but the reality is that you’re still on the track (March 15, 2010).

Knowing and using the renewed health education curriculum had been helpful to Claire’s planning for engagement as it does not include busywork that she describes as “filling in the blanks or doing crossword puzzles …” but focuses on starting where students are using “multi-entry activities that are inquiry based, and problem-solving. She suggested that the curriculum outcomes were broad enough that “… multi-entry and multi-exit, so everybody can come in on whatever level they are on and they can be engaged because … not that I don’t have to be able to do this to do it. I don’t have to be able to do that.”

According to Claire, collaboration begins with students’ involvement in the actual planning process, and making decisions about both what will be learned, as explored earlier, and how it will be learned. Claire shared a number of stories where she had carefully planned for particular learning experiences only to discover that her students wanted to take the learning in a new and often “not thought of before” direction. For example, Claire described a student who was not engaged in the classroom. In the spring the class took their learning to the outdoors. The student quickly became engaged both in the content of healthy environments and the process of learning in an alternative environment. Upon heading back to the school, this student spent much of his time asking questions and enthusiastically sharing reflections of what he had seen, heard, and felt. His enthusiasm for what he had learned continued to be expressed in the classroom
where he volunteered to creatively share his new knowledge with his peers. Claire now refers to her flexibility in planning as a “road map” so she knows where she wants to go but there are many paths that individual students can follow/create to get where they need to go.

Part of the flexibility in Claire’s planning that also supported “student choice and voice” in her grade 8 health education classroom is demonstrated in a particular lesson on healthy bodies - healthy minds. Students were asked to do the following:

- select the related topic (e.g., body weight, body image, self-esteem),
- decide on the group they wanted to work in (e.g., pairs, trios, small groups, large groups), and
- pick the method of investigation they would use (e.g., technology, personal interviews, watching audio-visual).

Claire asked those who were not partial to the choices (as indicated above) available, “What do you want to do? How can you bring what your interests are into this, and how do you see this maybe working a little bit better … as warming a seat [is] not an option.” At that point, all students had chosen what they wanted to learn about and how they were going to work. When we debriefed this class during our large focus-group discussion, student reflections highlighted that being able to make decisions regarding student learning should be part of a teacher’s regular planning. Students talked about “sometime we get to pick like for projects and all that other stuff.” Claire called this flexibility as “multi-entry” into the learning. The student participants described it simply as teachers need to be flexible and “work around individual interests by keeping the same topic and
dissolving into everyone’s interests” while also recognizing “that may be kind of hard”.

4.8.2 Establishing Supportive Learning Environments

Creating supportive environments was another theme constructed from the data. Based on the participants’ discussions about the earlier concepts of personal and purposeful learning, students and their teacher co-constructed a focus on creating learning environments that facilitate, as the students named it, “ownership of learning.” Clearly, the students and their teacher recognized that students cannot be forced to engage or to learn, and they asserted that they are “responsible to want to learn” and own their learning by “borrowing it [knowledge] to develop new learnings.” Two students articulated and others nodded in agreement that the teacher was partially responsible for their learning and engagement. One student suggested that “mostly our teacher is responsible but also mostly ourselves because we are engaged in this project so we actually took the steps of learning all of it so we know what we are doing.”

A peer in the same focus group added that learning was a shared responsibility with home, school, and self. His “teacher is probably the most responsible and yet myself, yes, but I will have to also say my parents ‘cause they will push me to do my best and yah, but I do say that myself is pretty important.” Another student stated, “I think that we are responsible for our learning and other people should help us, but if you don’t know what to do, you can ask a friend,” and another added that “our parents encourage us to be engaged but it’s not really forcing us – it is for our own good.” Believing that
most of the onus for learning and being engaged rested with the student, one of
the students commented,

It’s our education and we should take care of it. When you go in the
future your parents or your people that are close to you won’t be here
and they can’t really help you with it so it’s better if you learn as it is all
on you. You should have learned it the first time instead of taking it the
second time and when the person realized he didn’t do it, it is too late
because he already lived his life (April 23, 2010).

The teacher acts as a guide, providing direction and support while
accommodating the needs and interests of her students. The data in this current
qualitative study also suggests that students are more likely to be more engaged
when they can establish personal learning goals, while they are left alone to think
and do their work, and as they have opportunities to learn about themselves. It
was observed in all four of the classroom visits that distractions from instructional
time, such as class interruptions by announcements and messages, interrupt the
learning and take away from the engagement. As one student shared,
“Disruptions suck when you finally get into your work and you are trying to do
your work and you are worried you might miss something so you just rush.” Also
of concern was down time at the beginning of class where the focus was often
direct instruction. This included the structural disorganization that happens while
taking attendance, while students are making choices, and with the limited
monitoring during group work. This kind of organization impeded student
engagement in learning as students were left to fill this time as they pleased.
This use of instructional time limited both the time available for student
engagement as well as the type of engagement that existed. This use of
instructional time was observed on many classroom visits and an example is provided as follows:

Students wandered into class when the bell rang. Some found their seats, while others stood and talked to their peers. Claire reminded the students three times to quiet down and find their seats because she was going to take attendance. Claire stood to the side of the room as she began to call out names. Some students would respond with a “here” while others said “yep” or “present”. When a student was not in attendance and his/her name was called, Claire would ask if anyone had seen the absent student or knew where she/he might be. That resulted in several voices commenting about when they had last seen the absent student and where they knew or believed the student to be. There were three absent students on this day. Attendance took about eight minutes. (I thought about if that was eight minutes a class, for even five classes a day, would be 40 minutes of instructional time, each day, spent this way. Multiply that by 190+ school days and that is over three hours a week which equals over a 126 hours in a school year). The next 15-16 minutes was spent deciding topics for group work and then deciding which group each student wanted to work in. As a former classroom teacher and administrator, watching this way of structuring the beginning of class made me uncomfortable. I wanted the class to move along and for me to be able to observe the students as they engaged in their learning. (Research Journal, March 31, 2010)

The participants in this study agree that educators should be required to work with students to create learning environments that promote deeper engagement in learning. In this class, the students have frequent conversations and journaling opportunities to reflect on what could and what should be done differently. These conversations encouraged students to ask questions about their learning and engagement. Claire told me she often asks questions such as, “How do you know that you’re engaged and what if you’re not and you don’t want to be?”, and “What works and you know, what would you, what would you recommend we try next time …?” Students commented that they appreciated
these discussions and recognized the importance of planning more opportunities to discuss how they felt about learning. Claire’s appreciation for these conversations was also evident when she commented, “It just makes me happy to read through journals or to read through the stuff they are working on …to hear how you explain this …it’s so beautiful.”

Supportive environments are also established when teachers encourage students to take risks and challenge themselves to learn and think in new ways which build confidence in students. Knowing that mistakes are okay, or as one student commented, “It’s okay to be wrong and sometimes we can try to do things and then even if we do it wrong, we will get commended for trying and then shown how to do it right.” This permission to take risks and make mistakes was described by one student who claimed, “If you make mistakes, someone’s not going to say you made a mistake and you are getting a zero. We learn by making mistakes. We don’t learn by going a 100 percent or copying off of something.” The participants’ perspectives on taking risks were echoed when Claire described how she regularly reminds her students that “there is nothing you can do here that is going to be the end of the world …your partner will not leave you, and your boss will not fire you. This is not going to happen in grade 8 …I have made mistakes and guess what? It’s not the end of the world.” When students believe that they are valued by their teacher and other students, listened to and encouraged to learn and take risks, and allowed opportunities to make and learn from mistakes, they develop a respect for themselves, others, and cultivate an engagement in the learning.
4.9 Conclusion

Concepts and themes identified within the data are considered to be representative of perspectives and understandings within the sample group at the time when the interviews and discussions occurred. This study gathered evidence to illustrate the range of concepts present within this group and to address the categories and themes that were created from the data. Planning and supporting learning experiences that are enjoyable and purposeful influence all levels of engagement. In addition, teaching is not a one-sided exchange where teachers teach and students learn. It is a shared process that requires planning for and supporting student voice and choice while creating supportive learning environments. The personal desire and commitment on the part of the learner is both planned for and nurtured.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

5.1 Summary

Fostering engagement for students, whether in health education or in other subject areas, is a considerable challenge for educators and in some jurisdictions, it has even become a documented government priority (Dooner, et al., 2010). The discussions taking place in the education literature and across Canada have initiated meaningful questions about what is actually meant by the term engagement, about how educators plan for and engage students, and about how to identify authentic indicators of engagement. A central concern is the dilemma of whether the idea of student engagement can be and should be reduced to an established set of student behaviours and performances (Atweh et al., 2007; Coates, 2006) and this concern was also highlighted by Claire and her students as they described how students can pretend to be engaged.

Desires to increase engagement in school have led to increased attention to measuring and analyzing data related to student engagement (Harris, 2008). However, this study did not measure student engagement but rather concentrated on understanding how students experienced engagement and examined how one teacher plans for and supports student engagement. The findings in this research indicate that there are many features that influence engagement, including teacher, instructional, individual, and environmental factors. The data also suggests that these factors are important for consideration when planning for and supporting engagement in health education.

An initial step in planning for engagement is to critique how engagement has traditionally been understood. From my experiences working with teachers,
many educators are “enforcers” when it comes to establishing classroom rules and standards for behaviour, conduct, and expectations. Often, compliant students - those who are often on time, on task, have work completed - are not necessarily engaged students (Frederick et al., 2004). I discovered examples of compliancy during my classroom observations. The reflections of one of the compliant female students indicated that her behaviour was often just a “fairy tale of make believe”, where she would pretend to be engaged because she had learned that was how to please the teacher. Her “fairy tale” suggested that it is necessary for educators to trouble their thinking about student compliance as a primary measure of engagement. For students who are understood in this light may be merely compliant or self-regulated rather than engaged. In addition to pleasing the teacher, the data proposes that student compliance may also be a strategy to avoid discipline action, please adults, and to get good marks. Planning for and supporting student compliance is not the same as planning for engagement. This is an important distinction.

Notably, engagement is not about following classroom rules; it is about a thirst for learning (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). As one of the student participants implied, self-regulated students may not even be interested in learning. This insight invited another student to conclude that students can “sometimes pretend to learn and to be engaged” and pretending “depends on how good you are …sometimes it is more important to get done [the task] and then you get an A.” Compliance does not indicate engagement but it may be confused for engagement in instances where learning is enjoyable and purposeful. Students can choose to be compliant when they are not engaged yet may demonstrate
similar behaviours when they are engaged. It is the intent behind the behaviours that determines student engagement.

Students suggested that many factors influenced their engagement. These factors included various student, teacher, instructional, and environmental factors. The data also suggested there were various complimentary and interdependent factors that influence how teachers planned for and supported student engagement in health education. Promoting students’ engagement in health education requires activities that are relevant to their lives, are perceived as interesting and important, and allow for collaboration and participation. Teachers can plan for and support this engagement by building on and activating students’ background knowledge and experiences, by developing a community of active learners, and by giving students’ voice by sharing responsibility for the planning, learning, and assessment. Such planning has the potential to facilitate engagement by creating conditions for students to experience a sense of volition and choice, and therefore an intrinsic interest in the learning.

5.2 Build on What Students Know

The classroom in this study, as may likely be the case in many other classrooms, included students of diverse backgrounds, varied world views, and distinct experiences. For example, some students lived in communities where food security was an issue while others did not; some students experienced white privilege while others had not; some students belonged to the dominant social group and others did not; some students had grown up in a democratic country while others had not, and some students lived with both a mother and a
father while others did not. Building upon and activating individual students’ background knowledge and experiences was essential for students to feel they were connected to the learning, had something to contribute, were able to participate, and could be engaged in the learning.

Literature has long emphasized the relationship between background knowledge and learning (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001; Wolfe & Goldman, 2005) and between background knowledge and engagement (Wilms et al., 2009). Educators can build upon and activate background knowledge, enabling students to engage more fully in learning experiences. The importance of determining relevant background knowledge and/or building upon students’ existing background knowledge was emphasized throughout the data. Students were engaged when they cared about what they are doing and when the work had meaning to them - when it mattered. In light of this, the question of how teachers plan so students care about what they are doing – so their work is important and meaningful to them is key. Activating and building upon students’ background knowledge and experiences are starting points for planning health education that matters and is meaningful.

Building upon and activating students’ background knowledge requires an instructional shift from planning for a particular course or subject to planning for individual students’ learning. Responding to and building upon background knowledge and experiences includes planning that focuses on what students know, on why they know what they know, on what they will learn, as well as on how they will use and apply their knowledge within particular contexts.
Claire claimed that to engage students, her planning needed to be in response to students more than in preparation for them. Claire’s desire to plan in a way that was responsive to the students made her reluctant to plan units in the summer. As a seasoned teacher, Claire was able to wait to plan until the fall; she had an understanding of the health education curriculum, she had access to personal files of resources and lesson plans, and she was familiar and comfortable with the teaching-learning relationship. For novice teachers or those who are new to health education, waiting to plan until school starts may not be a successful strategy. If teachers do not know their students or have teaching experience from which to draw on, waiting to prepare units/lessons may create a lot of stress. School divisions might want to consider providing creative timetabling to allow for collaborative preparation time, making mentor teachers available to model and support planning that builds on students’ background, and creating co-teaching opportunities for new teachers to work with experienced teachers.

Research offers “many examples of instructional techniques that develop and activate students’ background knowledge while supporting what they are learning” (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2012, p. 22). These include determining what core background knowledge students have and may need to understand a new concept. In health education, background knowledge can be developed and activated by reflecting on whether the intended knowledge is foundational (e.g., health-favouring and health-damaging behaviours) or incidental (e.g., calories in particular foods), whether the knowledge requires multiple exposures (e.g., conflict management) or is easily understood (e.g., washing hands), if the
knowledge is transferable and usable to enhance the health of self, family, community, and/or environment, and whether the big ideas will be remembered if the details are forgotten? Planning for learning opportunities to activate and/or build upon background knowledge include learning tasks that ask questions for deeper understanding, analyze case studies for knowledge development, and participate in virtual experiences that provide real-life contexts. These kinds of learning experiences create opportunities for multiple exposures and exploration of big ideas within various authentic contexts.

Planning that includes access to local and developmentally appropriate resources may make the learning meaningful and relevant. In one classroom observation, where the focus was the development of self-image as it relates to healthy eating and physical activity, Claire brought local newspaper articles that highlighted the importance of physical activity and she shared a pamphlet that had been attached to her dry-cleaning that simply illustrated the connection of “looking good – feeling good”. The newspaper articles and pamphlets were shared with students during health education class on March 31, 2010. Claire used the pamphlet to begin to activate students’ background knowledge about why, in some cultures, self-esteem is often so dependent on appearances. These newspaper articles and the dry-cleaning pamphlet led to student reflections on questions such as, “Am I obsessed with my appearance?” and “What is my level of self-esteem as it relates to my body-image?”. The resources and the questions activated students’ knowledge of and experiences with personal influences on self-image.
Planning for individual students encourages teachers to use an assortment of resources. A variety of culturally-responsive and developmentally appropriate resources allow students to better see themselves and their families represented, for students to identify with what is being learned, and for the teacher to build upon and/or activate their background knowledge.

Acknowledging and using background knowledge to plan for and support student engagement in health education allowed Claire to prepare relevant learning tasks and supportive learning environments. The findings also illustrate how critical it is for teachers to recognize and value each student’s perspective and how this perspective differs according to his/her life experience. This knowledge was a central component of Claire’s planning for engaging learning experiences.

5.3 Make it Comfortable and Collaborative

In this study, a community of learners refers to a group of people who support each other in their individual and collective learning. These communities are cooperative and can work productively together. Students who are encouraged to take risks and are supported in their mistakes are likely to participate, take risks, challenge themselves, and view mistakes as learning opportunities. Planning for and supporting this kind of learning community is essential for student engagement. Balancing each student’s sense of individuality with his/her membership within a learning community is one way teachers can support student engagement.
Claire intended to have students work as a community of learners but classroom observations indicated that, at times, some students worked in groups more so than in learning communities; they sat in close proximity as they completed the task. Reflective questions were asked in each class I observed and students were invited to record their thinking in a journal as well as share their thoughts in small groups. The students, although working in groups, did not always support each other’s ideas or work productively together. If planning for student engagement by organizing communities of learning, it may be effective for students to practice the behaviours and processes necessary to work cooperatively, encourage risk taking, and to view mistakes as learning opportunities. This would entail students establishing learning roles and responsibilities, allowing each peer to share his/her idea, knowing how to respond positively if a disagreement occurs, supporting each other when a mistake is made, and reflecting on personal behaviours on a regular basis.

On March 2, 2010, Claire also planned for students to participate, take risks, and to make mistakes while working in learning communities. The opportunity to work in groups for part of each class created environments that welcomed student participation in the task. Part of this invitation to participate was also supported when students were required to negotiate individual roles and tasks in each group. In addition, as Claire circulated amongst the groups she asked her students if they were okay with the plan for the class. Efforts were made to support student participation.

Participation also increases when students are not afraid of making mistakes. The EAL students clearly articulated that the fear of making mistakes
limited their participation in class. One particular moment that stands out to me during my observations was when Claire was moving amongst the student groups and, while checking in with one of the groups, she declared “We love it when you make mistakes. I make them all the time too!” Students in the group responded with smiles and nods. Students did not fear the consequences from their teacher if they made mistakes. The fear in this class was making mistakes in front of their peers.

At that time I reflected on my own teaching and although mistakes were addressed and learned from, I couldn’t remember a time when I had told my students that I loved when they made mistakes. Her comments reinforced what I heard in the students’ focus group discussions when one claimed that “It is okay to be wrong and sometimes we can try to do things and then even if we do it wrong, we will get commended for trying and then shown how to do it right”.

Group work can entice students to learn but can also distract students from the learning. Group work can be an important pedagogical strategy when it is a carefully planned learning interaction. Notably, for many students, learning with others attaches positive emotions and creates encouraging environments to what otherwise might be a negative and isolating experience (Igle & Urquhart, 2012). It was noted in the classroom observations in this study that group work is not always a positive learning experience for all students. Students who are quiet, learning to speak the English language, or who do not have many friends may not feel part of the learning community, may be hesitant or not invited to participate in class, may feel hesitant to contribute, or may become disengaged in the task or in the learning. Based on the findings, creating a learning
environment that supports inclusion, permits students to take risks, promotes positive relationships, and acknowledges and builds upon prior experiences is critical when planning for and supporting student engagement.

Student engagement is much more complicated than just putting people into groups and having them learn together. The students in Claire’s class expressed that they enjoyed working in groups but recognized that being able to work in groups, especially if the group consisted of their friends, was enjoyable and encouraged engagement in the task but not necessarily in the learning. In addition, specific structures and elements were required for many of them to engage in the learning. These structures and elements, as described in chapter four, required careful and reflective planning by the teacher. Of these elements, the relationship with the teacher, and the teacher’s passion for teaching, directly related to creating a community of learners.

5.4 Make It Theirs and Make It Meaningful

Students in this study established a sense of ownership of their learning through Claire’s responsive approaches to teaching and her consistent requests for student input into learning. The outcomes in the provincial curricula are not subject to negotiation and there are competing provincial and local initiatives that exist in schools. Nevertheless, sharing responsibility and allowing ownership was evident in Claire’s respect of her students’ opinions and suggestions, as she designed work that was worthy of their time and consideration.

Planning for student ownership is closely linked to the concepts of voice and choice. Students felt that their ownership of learning was nurtured when
they were involved in the decision making. The experience of owning their learning was reinforced when they had choice in selecting the task, including selecting their groups, and in understanding the rationale behind what they were doing. My teaching experiences led me to believe that building these choices into classroom routines was necessary for increasing engagement. My observations in this study reinforced that these routines may support engagement for some students; however, there are less structured times during class which also allow for students to be engaged in learning. It was evident that classroom structure does not create and/or support engagement for all students. The data from this research also implies that students’ experiences of engagement, albeit similar in many ways, were unique to the individual and to his/her response to the structured environment. Learning experiences that supported realistic choices, environments that encouraged students to voice their opinions, and classrooms where students felt that what they had to say was acknowledged and validated are all important for student engagement in health education.

5.5 Considerations

There is limited research in this study to describe a fully-developed plan for engagement. The data does not suggest a finite statement that “if Claire did only these things, student engagement would improve.” Knowing this, there are considerations for future qualitative researchers to bear in mind.
5.5.1 Policy Considerations

Across Canada, there is increased attention to the significant connection between the quality of learning environments – particularly the teaching that happens in these environments – and student achievement. In addition, “participation and engagement in learning are key to both individual and collective well-being” (Willms et al., 2009). In efforts to improve student achievement and well-being, consideration might be given to existing policy that directly affects the growth and development of educators. For example, policy considerations for pre-service education, professional learning, and educational mandates might include or build on:

- Pre-service programs - extending the understanding of pedagogical practices that build upon and/or activate students’ background knowledge, within the context of engagement as a multi-dimensional construct, to support pre-service teachers in enhancing their repertoire of planning practices.

- Professional learning opportunities – avoiding one-time events that do not provide opportunities for educators to dialogue, practice, and reflect. Moreover, given the various provincial and local educational priorities (e.g., anti-bullying, numeracy, literacy), professional learning about student engagement may not align with school divisions’ professional development calendars.

- Teaching-learning relationship - continuing to reflect on and develop ways to plan learning opportunities that invite and support student engagement and ensure that these plans are lived in the classroom. Students in this study suggested that planning/allowing for voice and choice in the learning was
important to engagement. Student voice requires that students know they have been heard and that what they have to say is important. It may also be significant to continue to build capacity in teachers so they can plan opportunities for students to develop their voices.

5.5.2 Planning or Designing?

Recent literature (Schlechty, 2011) identifies notable distinctions between planning and designing to include (p. 106):

- Design begins with students and the needs of students. Planning begins with goals, outcomes, programs, and activities.
- Design seeks alternatives and invites invention. Planning seeks to limit alternatives and encourages conformity.
- Design is a heuristic task (flexibility to experiment) whereas planning is an algorithmic task (linear preconceived process).

This study’s research question “How do teachers plan for and support student engagement in health education?” should likely have been asked as “How do teachers design student learning to support student engagement in health education?” Instead of research that focuses on what teachers can and should do in the classroom, we might want to reframe this dialogue to examine the roles and expertise of teachers. Engagement takes more than planning. This study shows that engagement was more likely to occur in the presence of learning opportunities that begin with the thoughtful and intentional design for learning.

Using the term designer instead of planner reframes the roles and the responsibilities of teachers. To be a designer of learning, a teacher must
understand the big picture that is provided by the experiences and backgrounds of their students and by the curriculum outcomes and indicators. Teachers who design, instead of plan for learning, create instructional environments that allow for voice and choice and view their classrooms as places for possibilities to engage all students. Students are more engaged when they play a role in determining the direction of their learning and when they are collaborators rather than passive recipients in the classroom. Students who participate in decision making and pursue their own interests are more engaged. The design of learning can reflect the qualities that seem especially important to the creation of engaging work for students, including providing opportunities to draw upon students’ background knowledge and experiences, to meet the needs of the students, and to allow a shared ownership of the teaching and learning. Claire, as a designer of learning, viewed the classroom as a place of possibilities of engagement for all students.

Various considerations exist to guide the practice of health educators as they design learning and create classrooms of engaged learners. First, it was evident that the participants initially thought of engagement in health education as a set of particular behaviours, and only upon further reflections and discussion determined that there was also an emotional component to engagement. It is possible to imagine that teachers may “plan” for and support student engagement in the procedural aspects of the task, yet “designing” for student engagement in health education exists more within the emotional aspects of it. Planning for engagement that concentrates on particular behaviours, (i.e., addressing non-compliance and supporting compliance), attends to establishing
classroom routines and procedures, and focuses on topics, materials, and resources may engage students in the behaviour dimension of the task but leaves to chance students’ emotional and/or intellectual engagement. Designing for engagement in health education requires teachers to be mindful of their audience so that learning is something students can relate to, can see themselves and their families reflected in, and is related to what is interesting and important to them.

Engaged learning requires thoughtful and timely preparation. It takes time for health educators, in particular, to learn the about their students - to have a relational awareness of who they are, where they come from, what they believe, and why they believe it. Effective designing creates an opportunity to activate students’ background knowledge but also acknowledges a potential limitation. It is a challenge to engage some students who may or may not feel like communicating or sharing information about themselves such as personal interests and/or what motivates them to want to learn. To ensure students who are less communicative are not disadvantaged, this research suggests it may be helpful for teachers to consider the importance of strong personal communication skills, of time spent carefully listening to and engaging with students throughout the school day, and of intuitive awareness of the non-verbal information that students may share about themselves.

Thirdly, one must ask if all background knowledge and experience is equally relevant. Who decides what is relevant and what is not? Health educators need to find ways to decipher and/or prioritize the background knowledge that is significant to the student and consider how it may guide the
learning process. In addition, there may be some students whose background knowledge is limiting their engagement, yet still highly relevant to who they are and what they believe. For example, if a teacher knows that a student is a member of a family where oppressive gender-relationships are the norm, this knowing may be relevant and might be activated and built upon in a sensitive and responsive manner.

Finally, this study suggests that planning, or better yet designing for engagement requires creating a community of learners that is focused on relationships and interactions. Yet, primarily because of students’ disruptive behaviours and concerns of inequity in work, some teachers avoid such cooperative learning environments. This avoidance creates cyclical planning where teachers plan for independent quiet work, which was not identified in the student survey or in the focus group discussions as a desirable way to learn. Students who stated they are often not engaged in independent learning require increased management and discipline. This, in turn, may lead to teachers being reluctant to design tasks that are interactive and foster a community of learning, and therefore more independent work is planned.

5.5.3 Complexity of Considerations

The study investigated one class of grade 8 students. In the context of this study it is important to acknowledge that students were asked to speak about their experiences in grade 8 health education, yet many of them reflected back to earlier years and to other subject areas. The focus group discussions were one of three primary sources of data, yet recalling of particular details was challenging for many of the students. As a result, participants may have
confused what was their actual experience with what their peers were saying and therefore offering reflections that support others’ statements instead of their own experiences.

My personal experiences as a health educator and a high school administrator are two perspectives through which I interpreted the data. I spent 12 of my 14 years in the classroom teaching health education and consciously worked on establishing classroom procedures and routines that created a community of learners and illustrated a shared ownership. As many of these procedures and routines (e.g., taking attendance in a timely manner, distributing materials, organizing groups, giving directions) were often absent during my observations in this study, it was sometimes challenging for me to see through all of the distractions to the procedures and routines, to listen to student’s conversations, and to ask what they were thinking and doing. The distractions included other teachers coming in to borrow materials, students from other classes coming to ask question, and the school intercom interference; for example, the school intercom interrupted the health education class four times on March 15, 2010. Other distractions included a lot of waiting; waiting for the technology to respond, waiting for students to get their materials ready, waiting for students to pay attention, and waiting for groups to be established. The incongruence between what I witnessed in class and what I heard in the teacher interviews, challenged my understanding of how this teacher planned for and supported student engagement. The effective use of class time and teaching that is structured and adaptive are suggested to be factors that create successful schools and engaged students (Willms et al., 2009). Because some of the
classes I observed involved up to 30 minutes of ‘housekeeping’ tasks, some of my data relied more on Claire to clearly recall and describe how she had planned for and supported student engagement, and not necessarily on how I observed that planning coming to fruition in the specific situations.

The various tensions, including time management, classroom structures, and administrative responsibilities highlight the complexities and challenges of teaching. Within this complexity it is clear that not all students will be engaged in health education all the time. The diversity of student background knowledge and experiences, interests, and abilities requires significant planning on the part of the teacher. This study found that traditional learning experiences that require students to remember, recall, and regurgitate, are not engaging and when students are not engaged, the focus may shift away from the learning to managing behaviours. Designing for engagement often takes time, resources, and creativity. With all of the competing priorities in schools, teachers may struggle to find the time and resources.

My findings also suggest that not all students are engaged to the same degree and at the same time. Some students spoke of being behaviourally engaged (e.g., on task), many recalled how they were emotionally engaged (e.g., enjoying the task and having fun), while others spoke of being intellectually engaged (e.g., directing their own learning on animal shelters). Moreover, students can be engaged in none, one, many or all dimensions of engagement (i.e., behavioural, emotional, intellectual).
5.5.4 Factors to Consider

There are particular factors that influence student engagement in learning, and these factors may or may not be addressed in every lesson. One factor that requires further investigation is the use of assessment to motivate learning and potentially engage students. Research in the field of student assessment clearly indicates that effective educators deliberately design assessments into their practice to facilitate students to think deeply about and engage in their learning (Willms et al., 2009). Assessment processes can support students to organize their thinking, to demonstrate what they know, and to speculate about where they have been in their learning and where they need to go. For Claire, student assessment allowed her to monitor her students’ work and identify if a student was struggling. These assessments provided direction for goal-setting and more importantly generated an opportunity for conversations between Claire and her students.

Another factor for consideration is planning for both behavioural and cognitive engagement. The behavioural aspect of engagement (e.g., obedient learners) raises broader questions about the emphasis in the research on cognitive engagement (see Chapter 2) and whether this study would determine a relationship between participants’ behavioural engagement (i.e., obedient learning) with school and participants’ cognitive engagement in learning. I would suggest that future studies focus on determining if the relationship exists and determine if the factors that provide “hands-on” learning experiences are the same factors that create “minds-on” learning experiences.
Studying a middle level classroom required flexibility in the facilitation of my focus groups as well as a renewal of thinking about my classroom management strategies during my classroom observations. Interestingly, the talkative class of students was reluctant to participate in the first focus group discussion. It is possible that spending more time in the classroom and possibly doing a few classroom observations in advance of the group discussions would have provided opportunities for students to become more familiar with me and therefore more comfortable in their initial participation. Extending time spent with young participants, prior to focus group discussions/interviews may be useful in future studies. In addition, the participants’ understanding of engagement was initially focussed on the behavioural aspects. The focus on how they thought teachers plan for and support student engagement would often reflect how they planned for compliance, not necessarily for learning. Designing a similar study using participants who are older and have completed grade 8 health education might be worthy of consideration. Regardless of the numerous challenges that exist when working with young participants, this group was selected for many reasons, including those outlined by Willms et al. (2009):

The challenges faced by adolescent students are clear. There is growing concern about the number of students who are fading out or dropping out of school, and about the gaps in achievement among different groups of students. Evidence is mounting to show that many problems experienced by students in middle and secondary schools –such as disengagement, dissatisfaction with their schooling experience, and dropping out – are significantly linked to the learning environment (p. 6).

A fourth factor for consideration is the method of data collection. Using interviews with individual students, instead of focus group discussions as a
method of data collection would likely offer deeper insights and more opportunities for sharing stories and reflections. The smaller focus group (one as small as two students) resulted in increased participation by the students. Student interviews may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how students believe teachers plan for and support their engagement in learning.

Due to the nature of this study, I did not have the opportunity to examine perception of other educators at the school who taught these same students. Considering how multiple educators plan for and support student engagement in their classes may have deepened the focus group discussions and introduced additional designing strategies for engagement. Examining teacher perceptions and understandings of student engagement and listening to them talk to each other about their planning would allow for a more comprehensive investigation than what was undertaken.

A noteworthy consideration is that students are affected by the power imbalance in the education system (Kumashiro, 2004) and that students' voices are often silent or silenced. Because of this imbalance, some students may not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts about teaching and learning “…without a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome their comments and not retaliate” (Bland, Carrington & Brady, 2009, p. 238). These students need added support to more fully participate in a study such as this. For example, I provided a focus group that was just for EAL students, however I recognized that this support did not, in of itself, balance the power.
It would be desirable to explore the theory behind “flow and the consciousness of creation” in order to establish recommendations for both curriculum development and related pedagogical practices. In what Csikszentmihalyi (Farmer, 1999) calls the “flow” state, the learner is so engaged that time itself seems to disappear. These are experiences that are intensely motivating and students are completely engaged in the task and the learning. Within flow theory, a teacher’s design for engagement supports the culmination of concentration, enjoyment, and interest in the learning (Willms et al., 2009). Students’ engagement in health education would require a holistic experience, where knowledge is interrelated and cultivated through an authentic experience and ability for transfer of understanding and skills within varying contexts.

Teachers may need support putting practice into action, and that knowledge, alone, may not be enough to change planning practices. Claire articulated how she planned for and supported engagement in health education yet what was observed in the classroom did not always reflect what she intended. For example, technology was noted as an engaging tool for learning and was planned for in the lessons. My observation was that the technology was used primarily by the teacher as a “technological blackboard” that left many of the students watching and waiting with their attention on their peers or on what was happening at other tables.

5.6 Conclusion

It is important to articulate that there are no easy answers to tell us what to do about students who attend school because they are forced to, those who go
to school but care very little about the kind of learning that takes place, or those who participate in a “fairytales” as they pretend to be engaged. Engagement theory articulates that learners should be engaged in meaningful learning tasks during interaction with others (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998) and the teachers who plan these learning task should, as Whitaker (2004) writes “touch the heart, then teach the child” (p. 120).

This study has been one step towards broadening the concept of planning for and supporting student engagement to include students’ voices and reflect a health educator’s planning. Further research should focus on engaging multiple health educators in a dialogue about designing health education programs that engage students.

As an educator and as a researcher, I developed a deeper understanding of the importance of using case study to determine why students invest energy, pay attention, and persist. Observation allows one to see particular behaviours but the art of interpreting the function of the behaviour is not available through observation alone. This understanding also emphasized that engagement in school is not necessarily synonymous with engagement in learning. This understanding will be a significant benefit to my work with pre-service teachers and in my role as a health education consultant for the Ministry of Education.

Creating learning environments that intellectually and emotionally engage students require something different than the traditional models of teaching and learning. Educators are called upon to strengthen the teaching practices and become better at designing learning experiences that promote student engagement. These practices need to help students to deeply understand and
address instructional, individual, and environmental (e.g., distractions) factors. This study also discovered that there is no one way or a particular step-by-step process, which may be difficult for some teachers as they already have to negotiate their planning within the pre-determined influences of provincial curriculum, assessment, and school division goals. There are various strategies that teachers can use to support student engagement, but these strategies depend on how well teachers understand and care for individual students as well as their ability to balance their planning, or better yet their designing, of the learning experience.

In environments where designing for student engagement does not exist, my concern is that schools are places where superficial learning is considered of value and students become the “doers” of school without ever becoming engaged with the learning.

They asked me why
I dropped out of school
No love, no caring
Known as a fool
They asked me why
Grades I could not attain
Was it really me to blame?

Did you see me
Did you care
Could I not have had a share
Sat on the outside
Cold on the inside
Engaged?
With whom and what and where?

(Gross, 2007)
REFERENCES


Bobbitt, J. (1918). The curriculum. Retrieved from https://archive.org/stream/curriculum00bobbgoog#page/n15/mode/1up


Planning and Supporting Student Engagement in Health Education
Focus Group Consent

Engagement draws on the discourse of how people learn. Student engagement is variable and depends on a number of factors. The purpose of this project is to discover how student engagement is planned for and supported within health education.

Possible Focus Group Questions:
• What do you like about health education? Why do you like ‘it’?
• Explain specific situation where you were curious to learn more in health education.
• Describe situations when you have ‘gone beyond’ what the teacher required of you in health education.
• What does it feel like, look like, and sound like when you and your classmates are engaged in health education?
• How does your teacher support your engagement in health education?

The undersigned, _______________________________________, agrees to participate in four to five student focus groups that will guide a discussion about personal experiences of engagement in health education. The undersigned agrees to the following terms and conditions and understands that:

1) The participant will receive a list of questions that will be asked in the focus group.
2) The focus groups will take approximately 20-30 minutes. These will be conducted at the school. The focus groups will be audio taped.
3) There will be the opportunity to provide additional comments in writing throughout the research process.
4) The participant has the right to refuse to respond to/participate in any part of the focus group discussion.
5) The participant has the right to withdraw his/her assistance from this study at any time without penalty, even after signing the letter of consent.
6) Pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identity of the participants. The information disclosed in the conversation and/or in writing will be confidential. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed as direct quotes or stories may identify the participant to others.

I, __________________________________________, agree to the conditions stated in this letter of consent and certify that I have received a copy of the consent form.

_________________________________  ______________________________
Signature      Date

The research was approved by Dr. Twyla Salm at the University of Regina. Questions concerning the study can be directed to researcher Kyla Christiansen (787-1999) or thesis advisor Dr. Twyla Salm (585-4604).
Group Agreement for Maintaining Confidentiality

This form is intended to further ensure confidentiality of data obtained during the course of the research study entitled *Planning for and Supporting Student Engagement in Health Education*. All parties involved in this research, including all focus group members, will be asked to read the following statement and sign their names indicating they agree to comply.

I hereby affirm that I will not communicate or in any manner disclose publicly information discussed during the course of the focus group discussions. I agree to not talk about material relating to this study or interview with anyone outside of my fellow focus group members and the researcher.

Name: ______________________________________________
Signature: ____________________________________________
Date: _______________________________________________
Project Director’s Signature: ____________________________
Permission Letter to Participate in Focus Groups

Dear Parent/Caregiver:

My name is Kyla Christiansen and I am completing my Masters of Education at the University of Regina. I was formerly a health education teacher and principal of a Saskatchewan high school. In my current role as the health education consultant for the Ministry of Education, I develop the provincial health education curricula.

My research project is entitled “How Teachers Plan For and Support Student Engagement in Health Education”. Student engagement varies from student to student and depends on a number of factors. The purpose of this project is to discover how these factors of student engagement are planned for and supported within health education.

This purpose of this letter is three-fold:

1. First, I would like to inform you that I will be observing four health education classes.

2. Second, I am asking permission for your son or daughter to participate in a 10-15 minute written survey that will be administered on January 29, 2010. This survey is voluntary and anonymous; students will not put their names or any other identifying information on the survey. Each student will be given the option of leaving blank any questions that s(he) prefers not to answer. All results from the study will be presented only in group summary form. Questions such as “What do you like about health education?” and “What does it feel like, look like, and sound like when you and your classmates are engaged in health education” will be part of the survey.

3. Third, I am also asking permission for your son or daughter to participate in four focus group discussions – two will take place in February and two will take place in March at the school immediately following my class observations. The focus group discussions are to help clarify what students found engaging in the health education lesson. Each student will be given the option to not answer any questions s(he) prefers not to answer. The discussions will be audio-taped and the transcripts will be shared with students for any clarification, additions, and deletions.

Please sign below if you are willing to have your son/daughter complete the survey and/or participate in the focus groups.

Please contact me at kyla.christiansen@gov.sk.ca if you have any questions concerning the study.

Thank you,

Kyla Christiansen

I, __________________________, agree to allow my son/daughter to complete the student survey.

I, __________________________, agree to allow my son/daughter to participate in the focus group discussions.
Student Survey
Student Engagement in Health Education
February 22, 2010

Please complete the student survey. You have the right to refuse to respond to any part of the survey. Do not include your name or any other identifying marks on this paper. If you do not know the answer to a question, please leave it blank.

Thank you for completing the survey!

1. What activities do you like to do in health education? Please check all that apply.

   ___ role plays   ___ video   ___ group work
   ___ case studies   ___ interviews   ___ silent reading
   ___ research   ___ action plans   ___ drawing, painting
   ___ experiments   ___ journals   ___ presentations
   ___ power points   ___ Other: ____________________________

2. Why do you like those particular activities (identified in number 1)?

3. Which of the following factors (below) would you change about health education if you could? For those you would change, please indicate how and/or why you would change them. (For example: _x__ homework  I want less homework and more time to finish my work in class.)

   ___ amount of class time   ___ topics
   ___ time of day   ___ notes
   ___ resources (e.g., books, videos, handouts)
   ___ group work   ___ discussions
   ___ technology used   ___ expectations

   Other? _________________________________

4. What questions do you have about health education?
DATE: February 11, 2010

TO: Kyla Christiansen
Box 1101
Lumsden, SK  S0G 3C0

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Student Engagement in Health Education (File # 63S0910)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☐ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F), ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Twyla Salm – Education

** supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca