

Exploring Youths' Experiences of Attending a Rural Outreach School in Alberta

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Abstract

Outreach schools have existed for decades as an alternative for students who have struggled in mainstream education. Students at outreach schools have been cast as “failures” or “dropouts” due to their lack of success in mainstream schooling. Drawing on critical theoretical traditions in qualitative research, this article challenges these hegemonic discourses. This study uses semi-structured interviews with 25 young people (aged 14–19 years) who attended an outreach school in a rural community in Alberta. We identify three themes of participants' experiences attending the outreach school: (1) discovering the outreach school, (2) changing views about education, and (3) planning for the future. The article concludes with a critical discussion of the discourses of choice and success

regarding attendance at outreach schools. We draw attention to social structural forces that impact students at outreach schools in rural communities and constrain their education opportunities.

Keywords: outreach schools, rural education, community-engaged research

Résumé

Depuis des décennies, les « écoles de la rue », des organismes d'éducation alternative en matière de rattachement scolaire, offrent une nouvelle solution aux élèves qui ont eu des difficultés dans le système éducatif ordinaire. On perçoit souvent les élèves de ces écoles comme des « ratés » ou des « décrocheurs », parce qu'ils n'ont pas réussi à s'intégrer dans les écoles ordinaires. En s'appuyant sur les traditions théoriques critiques de la recherche qualitative, le présent article remet en question ces discours hégémoniques. L'étude s'appuie sur des entretiens semi-directifs avec 25 jeunes (âgés de 14 à 19 ans) qui ont fréquenté un établissement de rattachement scolaire dans une communauté rurale de l'Alberta. Nous dégageons trois thèmes liés aux expériences des participants : (1) la découverte de l'école de la rue, (2) des changements de point de vue sur l'éducation, (3) la planification de l'avenir. L'article se termine par une discussion critique sur les discours liés au choix et à la réussite dans le contexte de la fréquentation des écoles de la rue. Nous attirons l'attention sur les forces structurelles sociales qui ont une incidence sur les étudiants de ces écoles dans les communautés rurales et qui limitent leurs possibilités en matière d'éducation.

Mots-clés : écoles de la rue, établissement de rattachement scolaire, éducation rurale, recherche communautaire

Introduction

Outreach schools provide an alternative education stream for students who have struggled in mainstream schooling.¹ The western Canadian province of Alberta requires public school boards to offer outreach opportunities for students. The purpose of outreach schools is determined by the Ministry of Education, which states: “an outreach program provides an educational alternative for junior and senior high school students who find that traditional school settings do not meet their needs” (Government of Alberta, 2023, para. 1). Every school district in Alberta must operate an outreach school. Many districts operate multiple.

Outreach school students have typically stopped attending mainstream schools but still wish to complete high school (Government of Alberta, 2009). Reasons for student dropout are complex and multifaceted (Pokerznic, 2014). Students at outreach schools learn under the same curriculum as students in mainstream schools, but with more flexibility in terms of schedule and attendance. Students may attend outreach school and transition back into a mainstream school, or can complete their diploma at an outreach school. In the 2022–23 school year, when this research was conducted, 6,730 students attended 67 outreach schools across the province (Alberta Education, 2023).² The Ministry of Education suggests that lack of educational success, adult responsibilities, bullying, and poor mental and physical health are likely reasons for students dropping out and enrolling in outreach school (Government of Alberta, 2009). However, there is little literature on outreach schooling in Canada.

The purpose of this article is to explore students’ experiences at a rural outreach school, examining whether and how they perceive their education to be preparing them for their future. This qualitative study seeks to answer two research questions: (1) what are youths’ experiences at a rural outreach school in Alberta? and (2) how do youth attending this school plan for their future education, training, and careers? Here, we review literature on outreach education, introduce our theoretical framework, community context, and methodology. In the results section we present three themes: (1) discovering the outreach school, (2) changing views about education, and (3) planning for the future.

1 Different terminology is used to refer to such schools in different jurisdictions. For instance, “alternative provision” is often used in the United Kingdom, and “alternative education” is common in Australia. In this article, we refer to these programs as “outreach schools,” following common terminology in Alberta, Canada.

2 These data do not include First Nation schools due to Alberta Education’s data reporting practices.

We conclude with a discussion on the tensions between participants' insights and the social structural context in which outreach schools operate.

Literature Review

Outreach Schools in Alberta

Outreach schools in Alberta were established in 1974 in Calgary and have since expanded to every public school district in the province (Isberg, 2002). Some research has been conducted in outreach schools in Alberta. For example, Housego (1999) interviewed school staff and students in four rural outreach schools. Student participants perceived mainstream schooling to be confining and/or authoritarian. Outreach staff participants spoke of their efforts to create a schooling environment that accommodated students' diverse needs, which had been neglected in mainstream schooling contexts.

Other research in Alberta suggests that outreach school environments are positive learning and working spaces, where students have significant autonomy over their learning (Jackson, 2015). Schreiber (2007), a former outreach educator, explored an outreach school as a "learning community" from the perspectives of other outreach educators, demonstrating how outreach schools can be unique sites of learning and support for students, staff, and parents.

Beyond Alberta, McMillan et al. (2012) interviewed youth who received support from youth care workers while attending outreach schools in the province of Ontario. Their findings indicate that students felt motivated and supported by care workers, and that the outreach school environment helped youth to achieve their academic goals. These results align with the objective of outreach schools to provide additional wraparound supports (e.g., connection to social services, more one-on-one time with teachers) that students may not have access to in mainstream schooling environments.

Although there is limited research on outreach education in Canada, there is significant literature on outreach education in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. A recent scoping review analyzed 100 studies focusing on youth attending outreach schooling programs worldwide (Fortems et al., 2023). The findings suggest that youth who attend outreach schools face numerous interconnected challenges and barriers to their education, including poverty, low mental health, "academic failure" (Fortems et

al., 2023, p. 8), and previous suspension or expulsion. Fortems et al.'s (2023) review highlights that researchers and practitioners must approach outreach students as individuals with full lives, who may need support in multiple domains, and to focus on the positive attributes youth bring to outreach schools.

Critical Perspectives on Outreach Schooling

Some research exemplars in Australia and the United Kingdom seriously consider outreach schools as alternative places for learners to flourish after being failed by the mainstream school system. Mills et al. (2013) draw on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "wasted lives" (Bauman, 2004, as cited in Mills et al., 2013, p. 13) to explore how outreach students in rural Australia are treated as the neglected subsection of students within an already neglected region of the country. Through conversations with the school principal, Mills et al. (2013) explore how the school was developed in response to students being pushed out of the mainstream school system. This school, the authors argue, challenges the dominant logics of mainstream schooling and capitalist society that expect a subset of students to be failures, incapable of keeping up with the rigours of schooling.

In the United Kingdom, Malcolm (2019) identifies the outreach school in his study as a "qualitatively different social space" (p. 90) when compared to mainstream schools. This conclusion stems from the flexibility and centrality of quality social relationships in outreach schools, which led students to have broader "horizons for action" (Hodkinson, 2008, as cited in Malcolm, 2019, p. 95) when looking to the future. The concept of horizons for action draws on Bourdieu's theory of the field to explain how individuals can impact their social environments.

Critical Perspectives on Rural Schooling

Some outreach school literature highlights tensions between the potential to improve educational attainment, and to reproduce inequities. While these schools can be spaces to flourish, research has also demonstrated how outreach school students can be pushed out of these ostensibly accessible and caring spaces. Neo-liberal policy contexts produce a situation where schools value students more if they are "good" students likely to succeed and graduate, or less if they are "bad" students who may not contribute to a positive image of the school. This creates situations where students who have already been pushed

out of mainstream schools are further marginalized in outreach schools (Dadvand, 2022). As Dadvand and Cuervo (2019) posit, “This process of differentiation leads to the ‘othering’ of those who lack the socially sanctioned norms and are, therefore, positioned and treated differently in the social macrocosm of the institution” (p. 379).

Elsewhere, Cuervo’s work (2014, 2016; Cuervo et al., 2019) has taken up questions of equity in outreach education while interrogating the individualist discourses of “choice” and “aspirations” in rural contexts. These discourses arise in the context of neo-liberal schooling focused on individual testing and achievement, functioning to construct low-income students as underachieving due to a lack of will or desire to succeed in schooling (Bok 2010; Cuervo et al., 2019). Even when educators have good intentions to support students, neo-liberal schooling structures can be inescapable (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2019).

Context

The Community

The outreach school studied here is located in Matlock,³ a town of about 7,000 people in central Alberta, with an economy dominated by oil and gas. Post-secondary education completion rates in Matlock (approximately 43%) are below the national average (65%; Statistics Canada, 2021). Our understanding of Matlock as a rural community is based on our team’s years of research in the region. Following Banack and Pohler (2023), rurality is present when “people...self-identify as such” (p. xix). Study participants strongly identified with the notion that Matlock is a rural community.

In Matlock many municipal staff, policy makers, and educators agree that there is a lack of a “culture of education” (Ferdinands et al., 2024b, p. 36), a context driven by the oil and gas industry, which incentivizes youth, particularly young men, into lucrative but unstable work right after high school. The oil and gas industry has been the primary employer in the community for decades and has been subject to numerous “boom and bust” cycles, which result in highly fluctuating incomes and employment rates (Van Assche et al., 2016). Service jobs in the community, traditionally filled by women, are impacted as the town’s population grows with booms and shrinks with busts. In similar communities,

3 Pseudonyms are used for place names and participants to preserve anonymity.

these cycles of instability are cited by youth as reasons for wanting to move to larger centres in search of wider employment options with greater stability (Ferdinands et al., 2024b; Twum-Antwi et al., 2020).

The School

The Matlock Outreach School is located in the same building as a local social services agency. Across the street from the school is a youth hub that provides services and a safer recreation space for young people aged 11–25. The youth hub was accessed by many study participants. As articulated by staff, for most students at the school, “learning has been compromised because, primarily, they have either ‘avoided’ attending regular school classes or their irregular attendance has exacerbated severe anxiety problems” (Matlock Outreach School, 2023a, p. 2). The school serves approximately 400 students from the Matlock region. Of these, 100 students are enrolled only at Matlock Outreach School, while the other 300 are enrolled at multiple schools, with some students taking just one course through the outreach school. This is a common structure for outreach schools, which aim to provide flexibility for students with diverse needs (Government of Alberta, 2009). Matlock Outreach School is staffed by three teachers, a principal, an administrative assistant, and a family wellness worker. Given the low number of students who regularly attend the outreach school, it has a much lower student-to-teacher ratio than mainstream high schools.

Before attending the outreach school, many participants had studied at one of the two high schools in Matlock. Other participants lived in smaller surrounding communities with kindergarten-to-Grade 9 schools, but no high school option. As is typical for outreach schools, Matlock Outreach School has significantly lower three-year and five-year graduation rates than mainstream high schools throughout Alberta. Just 30.1% of Matlock Outreach School students achieve a high school diploma within three years (compared to 80.7% province-wide); while that number rises to 45.1% for five-year completion, it is still well below the province-wide rate of 88.6% (Matlock Outreach School, 2023b). Although our analysis contributes to literature on positive student experiences at a rural outreach school, these lower-than-average graduation rates should be kept in mind, along with structural constraints facing many outreach students including living rurally, poverty, and being targets of homophobia (Fortems et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study draws on a theoretical understanding of power and ideology as hegemonic, working to discursively construct oppressive social structures and practices that marginalize study participants in different ways (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). This study's starting point was to engage outreach students hegemonically constructed as "failures," "burnouts," or "dropouts" (Mills et al., 2013). In doing so, we sought to challenge these discourses and demonstrate how outreach students, both knowingly and unknowingly, resist such constructions.

Our study also draws on critical sociological analyses of rural education. In his research with rural youth in a fishing community in Atlantic Canada, Corbett (2009) developed five "child-rearing frames" (p. 168) to explain how families approached education. First, participants who viewed education through a competitive frame saw school and work as highly competitive environments, where meritocracy determines success. Second, the pragmatic frame views schooling as something that needs to be highly relevant and provide direct credentials for a future career. Third, the security frame is an "ambivalent narrative" (Corbett, 2009, p. 169) that portrays the local community as economically precarious, but relatively safe and secure compared to the unknown outside of the community. Fourth, the entrepreneurial frame is one in which parents advocate for education as a way to learn new innovative, business-focused skills to solve new problems. Finally, the exploratory frame is less career-focused and understands education as a creative, open-ended pursuit of personal growth and development. While Corbett (2009) developed these frames through interviews with parents, we use these frames to analyze interviews with youth attending Matlock Outreach School. Methodologically, we read Corbett's frames alongside each interview and considered in our analysis how each participant fit within each frame. Some participants could be placed within two or more frames, while others came from a family and social background that aligned almost exactly with one of the frames.

We first met with the Matlock Outreach School principal, who supported our research aims. After receiving institutional ethics approval and approval from the local school district's superintendent, school staff shared an information letter with students to get parent/guardian consent to participate (if they were under 18 years old), with each participant providing written consent. In total, we interviewed 25 students aged 14–19

years. Of these, 14 participants identified as male, one identified as non-binary, and 10 identified as women. Most participants ($n = 21$) were active students enrolled at Matlock Outreach School, while others had recently graduated ($n = 4$). At the time of interviews, participants had attended the outreach school for anywhere from four months to three years, including those who had already graduated. Interviews were conducted in person at the outreach school ($n = 21$) or online ($n = 4$), with those students who rarely attended the outreach school preferring to be interviewed online. In-person interviews were held in a private room at the school to ensure participants' privacy.

Data analysis followed a six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach consisting of familiarization, coding, theme development, refining, naming, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). Data collection and analysis were iterative; analysis from early interviews informed how we approached subsequent data collection (Markula & Silk, 2011). The first two authors familiarized themselves with transcripts after each interview. The lead author conducted initial coding and theme identification. Codes were identified for relevance to the research question, and themes were refined in conversation with all authors. We used Dedoose software to organize codes.

Results

We present three themes highlighting students' experiences at Matlock Outreach School. The first theme explores how and why students came to outreach education from mainstream schools. The second theme discusses how attending an outreach school shaped participants' views on education and themselves as students. The final theme details the ways participants planned for their futures.

Discovering the Outreach School

Participants spoke highly of their experiences at the outreach school and explained how it fit them better than mainstream schools. Mainstream schools felt unsafe for many students due to bullying, anxiety in large classrooms, challenges keeping up with assignment schedules, and feeling unsupported. Attending the school removed educational barriers. Nora explained:

Everyone has their own needs. With the [mainstream] schools, there's a lot of kids, there's a lot of bullying. So, you're in outreach for a couple of reasons. It's your safe space, you feel more comfortable there. You either got bullied or you don't feel comfortable at another school. That's where you go because it suits your plan more.

June explained how bullying drove her to leave mainstream schools: "I was receiving a lot of bullying and hate at [my old school]...I finally got sick of wanting to off myself every day. I came here because it's a better alternative." June felt a greater sense of belonging at the outreach school:

There's not a lot of bullying because we're all just weirdos, you know? We're the kids who didn't have a lot of friends when we were in elementary school, or we did have a lot of friends and they completely banished us or hate us, right? We're the kids who kind of just didn't fit in with the normal school systems, so we came here and it's a lot better.

Sparrow was another student who identified broader community values as a barrier to their belonging. Homophobic and transphobic bullying contributed to Sparrow feeling unwelcome at their previous school:

People [at my old school] don't particularly like me, and I don't like them.... They tend to be really homophobic, and we've never gotten along.... My friends, I like. Other people I've grown up with in [my old] school, I don't really like them. The adults around here [are] not necessarily my favourite [because of] homophobia and transphobia.

Participants identified factors that made them feel supported, including more one-on-one time with teachers and other school staff, increased flexibility with schedules, and support for diverse learning styles.

Peter: I'm not very good with people. I'm very anxious. I don't do well around big groups of people because it's very intimidating. I didn't like the teachers all that much. I didn't like the teaching style. I didn't really enjoy it.

Interviewer: Is it better here [at outreach] then?

Peter: Yes, I like it way more here.

Interviewer: Is it more one-on-one here?

Peter: Yeah. I think it's a lot more by yourself, but, if you don't understand something, there's always somebody that can help you understand.

Another support that students appreciated was highlighted when Henry and Elodie spoke positively about the flexible learning environment.

There's no set routine for a day. I can work on putting all my energy into one subject for a day if I need to. (Henry)

The teachers here are wonderful. They're absolutely amazing. They do everything that they can to help you do what you need to. (Elodie)

The COVID-19 pandemic also spurred some participants to switch to the outreach school. As a result, they discovered online and flexible learning approaches were a good fit.

During COVID, I switched to outreach for school. I mostly did that for my family's safety. Then I realized I much preferred being online.... I could do everything at home by myself. I felt like not as much class time was wasted. (Whitney)

[My old school] just really wasn't working out for me. It wasn't my style. And COVID was going to get bad again.... So, coming here was probably a better idea. (Sabrina)

Other participants reported that the flexibility allowed them to pursue a higher level of coursework than they might have otherwise completed. Ezekiel explained that he was taking the primary science stream rather than the secondary course he might have taken at another school. "The schoolwork, it's good," he said, "I can get through it comfortably because I'm in dash 1. And I should be in science 14 right now." The dash 1 course Ezekiel referred to is the primary course stream, accepted by universities throughout Canada, as opposed to the tertiary science 14 stream that he might have been expected to take. As a result, Ezekiel felt he was more likely to be successful by attending the outreach school.

All but two participants attended the outreach school by choice. Two participants had been expelled so they could not attend the local high school. All others chose the outreach school to take advantage of flexible schedules and online learning opportunities, obtain more one-on-one attention from teachers, and escape bullying. Participants' positive perceptions of Matlock Outreach School were likely shaped by their having chosen to attend it. If more participants had no option but to attend Matlock Outreach School, perceptions may have been less positive. However, we understand powerful social forces pushed many of these students to the outreach school. Their "choice" to attend was shaped by social exclusion, poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic, and geographical location, with rurality being a key factor for some participants living in small communities without a high school. For these participants, the flexibility of online learning through Matlock Outreach School was the best option for high school education.

Changing Views about Education

Outreach school students are often stereotyped as people who do not belong or cannot succeed in traditional classrooms (Jackson, 2015; Mills et al., 2013). However, many participants described how their outreach school experiences helped them realize they could excel at education. Many began enjoying school, in some cases for the first time.

Some participants found new passions and subjects they were interested in. Henry explained, "I've had a really good high school experience. I've enjoyed all the courses so far. And I've done multiple extracurricular activities...such as hunters' education."

A few participants explained how the outreach school increased their optimism about academic success. Ezekiel hoped he could finish Grade 11 quicker: "If I can finish Grade 11 next year on a really good pace, hopefully I can have a free block. That'd be pretty cool."

However, other participants missed participating in extracurricular activities due to limited outreach school programming options. Some participants spoke about how they missed mechanics, construction, and foods classes, while others like Riley missed playing on school sports teams, which the outreach school does not have.

Although enrolling at the outreach school positively shaped many participants' views about education, many still identified barriers to completing coursework. Poverty, difficulty with math, and lacking motivation were common challenges. Tyler explained, "ba-

lancing homelessness with school is a barrier, because I'm probably not going to graduate on time at the rate that I'm getting my classes done." Rosie found school "very stressful":

You're behind, then that really sucks. But you have to do this assignment right now because it's due tomorrow. But that assignment is past due.... And then making sure I have enough credits to graduate, plus studying and work.

The outreach school was not a panacea to fix students' problems. As noted in the Matlock Outreach School's education plans (Matlock Outreach School, 2023a, 2023b), many students continue to struggle despite wraparound supports. The school is limited in what it can do to overcome structural inequities, such as poverty, that are faced by some students (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2019). In the rest of this theme, we return to Corbett's (2009) child-rearing frames to interpret participants' experiences.

Pragmatic frame. The pragmatic frame positions school as a form of work directly preparing youth for a future career. Moreover, "where it is not pragmatically focused, formal education is an ordeal that must be endured" (Corbett, 2009, p. 168). In our study context, apprenticeships in various trades programs were the expected pathway for participants fitting the pragmatic frame. This perspective is seen as commonsense amongst many young men and their families in Matlock, but also rural communities more broadly (Ferdinands et al., 2024a). Participants fitting this frame often viewed high school as a hurdle that was not needed for their chosen career path. Jeff explained this dynamic:

You gotta understand basic language arts. But sometimes it just gets to the point where they're trying to get you to write a book. They say, if you were to ever write a book, you do this, this, this. But I don't want to be a writer. I don't want to waste years...going to university.

For participants like Jeff, completing high school was a box-ticking exercise so they could pursue training specific to their career. Ralph agreed, stating: "I'm trying to finish school as fast as I can. Get started [with] an apprenticeship for a company I work for." Riley, who was seeking an internship as a heavy-duty mechanic, felt similarly: "I just put my head down and do my work because I just want to get out. Move onto other stuff." Participants aligning with the pragmatic frame identified this pathway as a commonsense approach for their interests, financial and family situations, and geographical location.

Entrepreneurial frame. In the context of this study, the entrepreneurial frame dovetails with the pragmatic frame. Employment in Matlock is traditionally associated with the oil and gas industry (Murphy et al., 2021). Just as participants in Corbett's (2009) study who fit the entrepreneurial frame wished to pursue training beyond traditional industries, youth aligning with this frame in Matlock wished to pursue training beyond the oil and gas industry. Some participants were concerned that the oil and gas industry, and associated lucrative employment, was waning. They held many of the same ideas as those aligning with the pragmatic frame, such as an interest in trades education, but also wished to acquire skills that would be valuable to Matlock's future economy.

Peter wanted to enter construction and learn to build houses because "it's something that I feel will always be needed. Because you're not gonna not need someone to build houses." Peter understood the challenges facing community members when there were downturns in the oil and gas industry. He wished to avoid that instability. Riley wanted to work in the oilfield, but he expressed a similar viewpoint to Peter: "Nowadays, with all the people that are against oil and everything, how viable is the job gonna be?" His alternative plan was to pursue an apprenticeship as a heavy-duty mechanic, which he felt could be useful in a transitioning economy.

Exploratory frame. Within the exploratory frame, education is viewed as a pursuit of "personal growth and...skills...represented by the liberal arts, humanities and the sciences" (Corbett, 2009, p. 169). Participants who fit this frame typically wanted to attend university, which would require taking on financial debt, leaving their community, and committing years to studying.

Three participants hoping to be teachers said taking on debt to attend university would be worth it to pursue a career of interest. While the primary focus was on self-fulfillment through education, some participants also identified a need to study in a program where they were certain they could get a job. Mason described how his passion for writing shaped what he wanted to study and eventually do for a career: "I write a lot...and I'm going to try to get my Bachelor of Education. I'm trying to work my way to being an English teacher." Mason recognized he would need to take on debt to attend university, but felt it was worth it to explore new ideas and pursue an interesting career.

Corbett (2009) notes that the exploratory frame tends to be associated with economic privilege. However, that was not necessarily the case for most participants in this study. June's ambitions were somewhat stifled by financial constraints:

If you want a career, you obviously have to go to post-secondary sometimes. For me, post-secondary won't be quite as easy because I come from a family who doesn't have a lot of money. The way I look at it is, I don't really want to be in debt for the rest of my life. So, I'll take a couple of courses here and there and definitely trying to get something along the lines of running a daycare. Because as much as it [post-secondary education] is expensive, it's helpful for people.

Exploratory-focused participants wished to pursue an education beyond what they perceived as the norms of Matlock.

To some extent, these frames followed traditional gender norms that might be expected in a resource-dominated community, where men tend to work in the lucrative oil and gas industry more often than women (Murphy et al., 2021). Participants whose views fit with the exploratory frame tended to be more gender-diverse, whereas the pragmatic and entrepreneurial frames were represented almost entirely by young men.

Planning for the Future

While much outreach school literature has extolled students' positive experiences, some argue that outreach schooling reproduces a less-educated group of students and does not sufficiently prepare youth for further education (Thomson & Russell, 2007). One participant, Jeff, explained how the outreach school was "not as demanding," resulting in him falling behind and not dedicating time to schoolwork since deadlines were not strict. Chloe also had concerns that her outreach school education would not prepare her for her goal of becoming an archaeologist. "I feel like I'm scared to go to college," she said, "I'm not going to do as good. Because especially here, at outreach, it doesn't prepare you. It doesn't prepare you to be in a lecture." Concerns around under-preparedness may be compounded by rurality, as some participants explained they felt less prepared to go to a university because they were from a small community. From participants' perspective, "the city" was unknown, different, and distant from the familiarity of Matlock.

Participants shared the varied goals and pathways they envisioned. Ultimately, most participants were primarily concerned with completing high school, despite previous challenges they faced, and pursuing further training to achieve financial stability. Mason and Georgia exemplified a common focus for participants:

It's been a challenge. Trying to find my place in the world is a big thing for me. It's just like trying to figure out where I want to go in my life. My whole entire life has just been preparing for the future. (Mason)

Hopefully, I'm established in a career. That's what's most important for me. And I'm able to support people who are close to me who need it. (Georgia)

These concerns animated the four primary strategies participants used to plan for their futures, which we detail in the rest of this theme.

Choosing high school classes and activities strategically. Many participants identified optional courses and extracurricular activities they wanted to take that would teach them useful skills. Tyler completed all the culinary courses offered at his previous school with the goal of seeking out a job at a restaurant and eventually attending a culinary training program. Others who knew they would be attending the outreach school, where classes like carpentry and mechanics are not options, completed these courses at a mainstream school.

The outreach school also offers niche courses to help students gain credits to graduate. These include courses like hunters' education, textiles, animal basics, and psychology. Georgia took psychology courses at the outreach school to help her decide whether to apply to a university psychology program.

Learning from family and friends as role models. We regularly heard that participants consulted friends and family on their futures. Specifically, participants sought out people who worked in the career they aspired to. The dominance of the oil and gas industry in Matlock influenced participants' views. Some young men looked to their parents for career advice and specifically looked to pursue a similar career path to their male role models.

Henry explained that his uncles and grandpa showed him "if you don't work hard, you won't be able to achieve your goal." Others took more direct inspiration for a career path. Jeff wanted to work in the trades, explaining that he learned about education, training, and work opportunities from his older brothers, who trained as electricians. Riley said he "[grew] up working on semi-trucks and combines and everything with my dad and his buddies."

Sabrina found a role model in her mom, who "worked three jobs...just to keep it steady for us" through financial difficulties. Tyler gravitated toward his culinary interests due to his father's career:

My dad was a chef...so that pumped the idea of it into me. And then I started getting into cooking at a young age when I was really experimental. Because I was home alone all the time. I guess I had a love for cooking.

The centrality of role models to participants' lives was significant. Some outreach school literature has focused on how students at such schools have limited family supports (Fortems et al., 2023). This was certainly the case for some participants, but it was unique to see some participants who had high levels of family support.

Researching options. Participants undertook extensive research to learn about potential career options. A few participants explained how a career and life management class introduced them to a program that let them search for, document, and plan education opportunities. Participants who found this helpful kept using it beyond their school assignments. Mason used this program to research career and university options, and this led him to the outreach school where he was upgrading course marks.

More participants reported the independent initiative they took to learn about their education and training options:

I started researching one school three years ago. And that was at [the university]. And then my mind was just set on that. (Nora)

I definitely want to go to some type of post-secondary, I was thinking of... the [polytechnic school] or something like that. Just to get on track. (Peter)

In general, participants avidly researched post-secondary options. This is an interesting and potentially surprising finding, as outreach students are often stereotyped as those who do not pursue higher education. Indeed, the outreach school identifies high school completion as a goal for students, but it focuses less on preparation for post-secondary education than mainstream high schools.

Gaining work experience. Some students began attending the outreach school so they could work while completing their high school education. Riley worked a busy schedule as a contractor. The flexibility of the outreach school allowed him to complete his Grade 11 and Grade 12 coursework while working. He explained:

Work and flexibility, that's why I came here. It was just something about school. I just couldn't stand doing nothing all day. So now I come here once

or twice a week. If I have a day off work, I'll come to school. Otherwise, I'm working or I just do it from home.

Riley's explanation is a common reason for beginning to attend an outreach school. Highly structured school schedules do not accommodate the diverse scheduling needs of young people who work part- or full-time hours to support themselves and their families. This realization informed the broader development of outreach education programs across Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2009). The flexible learning schedule meant that students could work during the day without sacrificing their education entirely.

Discussion

Our findings echo some existing literature on outreach education in other countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom. Much literature has found that students have had positive experiences at outreach schools, and students have felt the increased attention and support are key to helping them complete high school. Our findings build on those of Malcolm (2019), who describes outreach education programs in the United Kingdom as a "qualitatively different social space" shaped by the relationships built in these schools and the flexible learning opportunities available to students.

This study is unique in that it highlights the experiences of outreach students in a rural, resource-dominated Canadian community. Our findings come out of the specific context of young men being pushed toward an oil and gas industry that is perceived as "dying" by some and flourishing by others. The oil and gas industry is a site of immense political tension in Alberta. Participants like Riley indicated how a downturn in the oil and gas industry shaped his educational outlook. He noted that some people were "against oil," and how that may impact his future career. At the same time, young women attending the outreach school were largely barred from this lucrative line of employment, typically by societal pressures guiding them toward lower-paying employment.

Reflecting on Students' Aspirations

These results challenge the dominant discourse of outreach school students that portrays them as “dropouts” or “failures.” Participants both implicitly and explicitly resisted these discourses. Despite the varied structural challenges participants faced, they demonstrated engagement in their own schooling while looking ahead to their futures. Participants focused on the decisions they had to make to achieve their desired life, including those related to education and work experience. Additionally, participants were acutely aware of the barriers to achieving those goals, and many of them had thought deeply about how to navigate barriers. Critiquing rural education policy in Australia, Zipin et al. (2015) argue that discourses of “raising aspirations” (p. 228) function to individualize the very social problems that marginalized students face. Indeed, the aspirational “discourse interweave[s] with and weaken[s] the impulse to address inequalities between social groupings” (p. 230). This process, we suggest, is compounded for students at outreach schools, who often lack economic privilege or have felt unwelcome and pushed out of mainstream school communities.

Problematizing “Choice” and “Success” Narratives

Alberta's education system is structured by hyper-individualist characteristics shaped by neo-liberalism. It is structured around individualizing narratives of “choice” and “success” that frame students' problems and struggles as individual failings (Cuervo, 2016). These “choice” and “success” narratives have come to be the hegemonic way of understanding student achievement and outcomes. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) note, “legitimated discourses of power insidiously [dictate]...what belief systems and views of success may be taught” (p. 291).

Although 23 out of 25 participants explained how they chose to attend the outreach school, their choice was constrained by social-structural factors such as poverty, homophobic bullying, and lack of support in mainstream schools because of limited resources. The barriers participants experienced were not the fault of students or staff at the outreach school; instead, they were symptomatic of education and social systems that failed to support more vulnerable students (Mills et al., 2013). Rather than choosing the outreach school of their own volition, many participants were actively pushed out of the mainstream schooling system, whether by peers, adults in their lives, public education policy, or some combination of these factors.

The narrative of “success” in schooling goes hand in hand with “choice” narratives expressed by participants, who were acutely aware of the future economic difficulties they might face. In this context, “success” in schooling comes as a result of students “transform[ing] themselves into credentialed, skilled neoliberal subjects” (Corbett & Forsy, 2017, p. 430) regardless of the education and career path they take. Participants identified themselves as successful if they felt they were on track to earn a good wage and/or if they had a well-defined plan for education.

While navigating an outreach schooling system shaped by discourses of choice and success, participants primarily reported positive education experiences. We therefore follow Mills et al. (2013) in understanding the outreach school as a place of support for learners to flourish that nevertheless cannot solve broader structural issues in students’ lives and may even serve to reinforce certain inequities.

Critiques of Outreach Programming

Some outreach program critics argue that they limit students’ future options (Mills et al., 2016; Thomson & Russell, 2007). Our findings suggest there may be some merit to this critique. It is true that male students were overwhelmingly nudged toward trades-focused opportunities, albeit in a small sample size ($n = 25$, of which 14 identified as male). This is not necessarily a negative outcome, however. Many participants recognized they needed to complete high school before pursuing training options they were more suited toward. As such, they appreciated the support provided by the outreach school. The fact that youth are funneled toward trades training may have more to do with the gendered norms of education and labour, which are deeply shaped by the dominant oil and gas industry (Murphy et al., 2021), as well as the barriers to establishing post-secondary education programs in rural communities like Matlock (Ferdinands et al., 2024b).

As noted in the introduction, Matlock Outreach School has drastically lower three-year and five-year average graduation rates than elsewhere in the province. It is understandable that the school prioritizes supporting students to achieve a high school diploma as an end goal, with less focus on preparing students for post-secondary education. These priorities reflect the goals and needs of most students at Matlock Outreach School. As Chloe explained to us, this may lead to the unintended consequence that students enjoy flexible outreach learning but do not feel as prepared for higher education.

There are also limitations to critiques highlighted by Mills et al. (2016), as many young people we spoke with had plans to attend diverse university programs rather than more job-focused training. These participants spoke about how they received teacher support to pursue these goals. We highlight this point to counter the dominant representation of outreach students as “dropouts,” “burnouts,” or, as Mills et al. (2013) put it, “wasted lives” (p. 13). Regardless of what training, education, and work pathways outreach students choose, it is vital to view these educational institutions as alternative places for learners to flourish.

There is a debate in the outreach education literature about the quality of programming. Some critics argue outreach programs are less rigorous, or water down the curriculum (Smyth et al., 2013). However, in Alberta outreach programs must follow the same curriculum as other schools. Outreach programs differ by providing more teacher support and other wraparound support to students. Alberta high schools have three main course streams, -1, -2, and -3. Most participants in this study were completing -1 or -2 courses, accepted as prerequisites by colleges and universities throughout Canada.

Most importantly, critics of outreach schools have taken aim at the systems and policies that produce the need for such schools. Outreach schools “emerged from the [education] system itself, as responses to outcomes of massive cuts, reactionary legislation, and bureaucratization” (Azzarello, 2017, p. 59). Our findings echo these critiques, showing that while outreach schooling positively benefits individual learners, many of the challenges students face are due to structural issues such as poverty, sexism, or a lack of support in mainstream schools as a result of austerity.

Conclusions

This study provides a Canadian contribution to the limited literature on rural outreach schooling. Much of the literature in Canada and beyond has demonstrated the positive experiences students report when attending outreach schools (Fortems, 2023; Jackson, 2015; McMillan et al., 2012). More one-on-one time with teachers, flexible learning environments, inclusivity, a smaller school population, and wraparound supports all contributed to participants’ perceptions of safety and support. Study findings demonstrate that participants felt safe and supported while they were students at Matlock Outreach School, more so than at mainstream schools. Participants took actions to plan their schoo-

ling and complete their goals. These findings resist the hegemonic mainstream narrative that unfairly characterizes young people at outreach schools as “failures” or “dropouts,” and builds on research that has found that these students, who are usually from working-class families, are highly engaged in their educations (Corbett & d’Entremont, 2024; Lor, 2023). These discourses overlook the structural factors that impact outreach school students, most of whom have struggled with poverty, bullying, and other challenges.

We also feel it is vital that analyses of outreach schools consider the structural barriers that create under-resourced schooling systems, which result in the need for outreach programs in the first place. Critical studies of outreach programs must question why such programs exist, how students are pushed into them, and the discourses that are used to justify their existence.

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