



Policy With an Asterisk: Understanding How Staff in Alternative School Settings Negotiate a Mandatory Attendance Policy to Meet the Needs of Their Students

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Compulsory school attendance is enacted legislation in every Canadian province. Provincial Ministry of Education attendance expectations trickle down to the school boards, which create mandatory attendance policies stipulating that students be present at school irrespective of their ability to attend. A body of literature has documented the numerous and often insurmountable obstacles many youths face with respect to consistently attending school. Issues that impede consistent attendance include abuse, poverty, violence, and mental health disorders. However, attendance policies do not pay credence to these issues. Rather, school educators are expected to follow the policies in their rigid conception. This creates tension for the educators, who are expected to uphold unilaterally imposed policies, and yet enact these policies in such a way that does not compromise their students' education. Educators working in alternative schools are often confronted with this moral dilemma because these schools serve high numbers of students often absent from school. As such, we sought to understand the professional and ethical tensions alternative high school staff experience when navigating the enforcement of mandatory attendance policies. This study was carried out in a large city in the Canadian province of Ontario, where the school board's attendance policy requires students over the age of 18 to be demitted from enrollment if they miss 12 consecutive days of school without a "legitimate" excuse. Semi-structured interviews with 16 staff members in four alternative high schools revealed the inherent difficulty of responding to the needs of students by allowing them to miss some school while also meeting the legal obligations of the mandatory attendance policy established by the school board. We argue that these alternative school educators are active *policy makers* in their own right, as they interpret, co-opt, appropriate, and negotiate the attendance policy with the realities of their students' lives.

Keywords: absenteeism, educational policy, policy appropriation, policy implementation, alternative schools, last chance education, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of public schooling in Canada, educational professionals have been preoccupied with keeping children in school. From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Canadian provinces passed compulsory attendance laws requiring all school-aged children to be present in school (Oreopoulos, 2005). This legislation is founded on a deterrent model, where being absent from school is considered to be an illegal act, punishable by fines and even jail sentences. However, despite such legislation, students miss school for various reasons. The causes for absenteeism are as complex and diverse as the students themselves—ranging from casual disengagement to extreme poverty that prohibits school access. As absenteeism is the main precursor to early school leaving, there is concern from educators about the need to eradicate habitual absenteeism, and if this is unattainable, to accommodate it. However, such efforts to accommodate (allowing students to miss some class without penalty), are in direct contradiction of the established compulsory attendance policies. The current study seeks to understand how educators navigate these tensions between meeting student need and upholding official policy.

Following, we explore the issue of absenteeism and frame it as occurring for voluntary and involuntary reasons (Birioukov, 2016). We then describe the compulsory attendance policies in Canada and in the sampled school board, where we then discuss the ways in which alternative school educators navigate these policies. Thereafter, drawing on the literature on alternative schools, we elucidate the unique approach to managing absenteeism that motivated the current study.

Absenteeism

Although many associate absenteeism with “skipping” school—where youths are willingly absent to engage in other activities—this common (mis)conception of absenteeism belies the convoluted and contextual nature of the problem. Students miss school for a plethora of reasons, many of which lie beyond the walls of the school. For example, a number of students experience health problems (e.g., depression; sleeping issues; anxiety) that compromise their ability and motivation to be present in school (DeSocio et al., 2007). A student’s home life can also have deleterious effects on attendance, as families may purposefully keep children from school in order to help around the house and/or earn an income (Kearney, 2008). Moreover, many youths live in tumultuous households, and do not have the stability in their lives to be present at school consistently (Wilson et al., 2008). A substantial portion of absentees come from an economically disadvantaged position (Reid, 2013; Maynard et al., 2017), and living in or near poverty can limit a student’s ability to attend in a number of ways, such as: lack of transportation; little money for food, clothes, and/or school supplies; frequent housing disruptions; living in dangerous and crime prone areas; involvement in the criminal justice system; having to earn an income; and, the perceived irrelevance of education (Hinz et al., 2003; Nichols, 2003; Brandibas et al., 2004; Branham, 2004; Darmody et al., 2008; Leonard, 2011; Marvul, 2012). Schools too cause absenteeism. A negative school climate has been widely

documented as one of the main causes of absenteeism, and is linked to “harsh and inflexible disciplinary practices, rigid regulations regarding school reintegration, school curricula not well-tailored to a child’s individual needs or interests, poor teaching and student–teacher relationships, inattention to diversity issues, and inadequate attendance management practices” (Kearney, 2008, p. 459). When a youth is faced with a hostile and negative school environment they may choose to simply avoid the school setting.

The causes for absenteeism should not be considered in isolation, as multiple causes interact to discourage and/or prohibit regular attendance. To conceptualize the “absentee” as the passive truant who simply refuses to come to school out of disinterest and defiance is problematic, as this conception undermines the individual, home life, school, and societal contexts that our students grapple with daily, as they attempt to be physically and mentally present in our schools. The convergence of multiple factors often make it difficult for students to attend, and their failure to do so has numerous repercussions and consequences for the absent student.

Absenteeism has been associated with: alienation in school (Reid, 2014); strained student-teacher relationships (DeSocio et al., 2007); and lowered academic performance (Mac Iver, 2011; Attwood and Croll, 2015), amongst other consequences. A cycle of disengagement can quickly arise, where the student becomes isolated from peers and staff, thereby further straining their connection to the school (Ekstrand, 2015). For some this process will lead to premature school leaving, as absenteeism has been found to be the dominant precursor to leaving school prior to graduation (Maynard et al., 2012). The life opportunities for those without a high school diploma are severely limited (Uppal, 2017), and this has, in part, motivated a plethora of absenteeism reduction strategies.

The solutions to absenteeism are based on where the cause of the absence is thought to originate (e.g., student, family, school, society). Student-centered solutions focus on psychological counseling designed to alleviate mental health issues (Maynard et al., 2015), while more punitive-oriented approaches involve handing out detentions, suspensions, expulsions and even criminal charges for non-attendance (Maynard et al., 2013). Meanwhile, solutions aimed at the family concentrate on augmenting child-rearing practices that encourage regular attendance (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). If these attempts fail, the families may be subject to criminal prosecutions under truancy laws (Monahan et al., 2014). School-based solutions receive much scholarly attention, and the majority concern improving school climate through: reducing bullying (Havik et al., 2015); developing closer bonds between teachers and students (Marvul, 2012); and, the provision of academic and remedial assistance (Kearney and Graczyk, 2014). Societal solutions are few, as changing the current socioeconomic conditions are arguably beyond the abilities of schools. However, increasing the availability of social services (Gase et al., 2015), and the provision of free clothing, food, school supplies, and transportation (DeSocio et al., 2007), are some of the suggested strategies aimed at reducing the societal barriers to attendance.

There are many recommended strategies to reduce absenteeism; however, for a subset of youths whose absenteeism is deeply ingrained, these solutions may not be enough. As a “last resort,” students voluntarily enroll or are placed into alternative schools. These schools have been designed to meet the needs of this at-risk population. Through individualized programming and student-centered wraparound services, alternative schools have much potential to reengage absentees. In particular, alternative schools’ flexible approach to attendance provides room for *accommodating* absenteeism, as well as trying to reduce it. Accommodation differs from increasing attendance by acknowledging that continued attendance is very difficult for some students. The life circumstances of chronically absent youths may be so difficult that the students are involuntarily absent through no fault of their own (Birioukov, 2016). Differentiating between voluntary (motivationally-based) and involuntary (structurally-based) absences allows for recognition that some youths may wish to attend, but struggle doing so due to issues in their lives. Thus, an admission needs to be made that some students’ difficulties are so severe that regular attendance is unachievable. As long as children are abused, neglected, and forced to live in poverty, they will have difficulty being perfect attenders. Youths with challenging personal lives should not be dismissed to the margins of the educational system. Strategies that allow these youths to miss some school without penalty are necessary in an equitable schooling structure. However, current mandatory attendance policies do not differentiate voluntary and involuntary absenteeism.

Mandatory Attendance Policies

Compulsory attendance legislation accompanied the expansion of governmentally funded schooling in Canada; and mandatory attendance was made a legal requirement in all provinces between 1871 and 1943 (Oreopoulos, 2005). Without a national department of education, Canadian provinces are left to design their own attendance policies. However, ensuring that attendance policies are followed has been an ongoing challenge for school districts, and one method to guarantee compliance is truancy laws. The (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019) has found that all “provinces and territories have education laws requiring children to attend school,” and that “parents who violate this law can be subject to fines and/or prison sentences” (p. 14). The province of Ontario too has a mandatory attendance policy that expects all students to be in school consistently *regardless of ability*. The *Ontario Education Act* section 21.1(a) stipulates:

Every person who attains the age of 6 years on or before the first school day in September in any year shall attend an elementary or secondary school on every school day from the first school day in September in that year until the person attains the age of 18 years.

Failure to meet these expectations can result in fines, driver’s license suspension, probation, and jail sentences for both the absentee and their family. The expectation that students attend school consistently regardless of life circumstances is problematic, as it treats all absences as a voluntary decision

by the student (Birioukov, 2016). This conception of inflexible attendance policies trickles down from the Ministry of Education to the local school boards, including the one sampled for this research.

Following the Ministry of Education directive, the school board in which this study took place has a mandatory attendance policy which requires students to be present at all times. At the onset, the policy does not appear to be punitively orientated; for example, there are proactive actions for reporting absenteeism as soon as a student has missed 5 days of school. However, there is an issue of the increased severity and punitive nature of the responses to prolonged absenteeism. As the absenteeism increases, so do the consequences, and there are threats of referral to the criminal justice system if the absenteeism continues. The last threshold is a 12 day¹ consecutive absence streak, after which referrals to attendance counselors, alternative schools, the criminal justice system, or other educational opportunities outside of traditional schooling, are made. The policy does not differentiate between voluntary/involuntary causes of absenteeism, but rather utilizes the excused/unexcused absence classification. Excused absences refer to sickness and travel, whereas unexcused absences encompass all others. A body of literature has highlighted the ineffectiveness of this classification, as there is much difficulty in discerning a truly excused absence, as well as the discrepancies in how schools classify absences (Birioukov, 2016; Heyne et al., 2019). Thus, a student from a privileged background may be “excused” to miss school to go on holiday, whereas a youth in challenging circumstances will be categorized as having an “unexcused” absence if they miss school to stand in line at the soup kitchen. These definitional conundrums have a direct effect on how the absenteeism is managed and punished in schools, as evidenced by mandatory attendance policies which legitimize “excused” absences and punish the “unexcused.”

The policy also does not provide explicit instructions on how to manage absenteeism for students who are over the age of 18. In Ontario, students are legally required to attend school until the age of 18, but have the right to stay enrolled in public schools until the age of 21. Thus, there is a 3-year “gray zone,” where the students have the right to an education, but schools are not legally bound to keep them on roll. It is this facet of the policy that is the most problematic, as it provides an easy avenue for schools to remove challenging students (e.g., absentees) from the roll. The official policy, however, is not always directly implemented in the schools as designed, and educators have a considerable role to play in its adoption and adaptation within their school.

Navigating Authorized Policy

Policy, both in the literature and colloquial public discourse, is typically viewed as a written set of guidelines or rules (Levinson et al., 2009). Authorized bodies construct authoritative policies that are unilaterally handed down to the policy implementers. In this view, policy makers are ministries of education and

¹The actual number of consecutive days absent has been changed in both our writing and in the direct quotes of the participants. This is done in order to protect the anonymity of the school board, the schools, and the participants.

school boards, wherein policy implementers are superintendents, school administrators and teachers (Winton and Pollock, 2013). For Levinson et al. (2009), this *authorized policy* that has been constructed by recognized policy makers then determines the “accepted” norms and modus operandi of the schools. In turn, authorized policy regulates expectations, orders behavior, and allocates resources. Superintendents, administrators and teachers are “not robots,” who objectively “carry out orders issued from above” (Fowler, 2013, p. 8). Hence, understanding educational policy requires attending to the negotiation and co-optation that transpires when educators enact policy in schools. This is to say: to understand policy is to understand the socially implicated contexts in which policy is implemented.

Educational policy is “contested terrain,” for it cannot be easily defined (Ozga, 2000, p. 1). The making of policy typically transpires near the top of the political rung, and the re-making of policy transpires when it is put into action in the schools (Ozga, 2000; Fowler, 2013). Although educators have the professional agency to engage with and enact policy in organic ways, the power of the authorized policy cannot be undermined. Educational policy in this sense is therefore “best conceived as a practice of wielding power” by those who might never be on the ground-floor of policy implementation (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 771). Authorized policy is intentionally vague to be reflective of the general population, but such standardized uniformity often fails to meet the needs of the increasingly pluralistic youth populations (Bates, 2006). Whereas, policy is intended to be generic enough to accommodate diverse populations, the policy implementers must then liaise between the generalist policies with their specific and local student populations. Hence, authorized policies are likely to be, at one time or another, in contradiction with educators’ values and practices as they navigate the modern Canadian classroom.

(Goddart and Hart, 2007) found that when Canadian administrators in the province of Alberta were diligent practitioners of authorized policy, students of marginalized identities—such as those who were English Language Learners or who lived below the poverty line—were too often left by the wayside in their education because they did not/could not conform to the expectations outlined in the policies. The myth of students arriving at school who are “ready to learn,” assumes that all students have arrived on time, well-fed, and have had a good night’s sleep. This myth undermines the realities of marginalized students whose needs are not always reflected in one-size-fits-all policy (Penny et al., 1993; Goddard and Hart, 2007). Educators who attempt to accommodate the diverse needs of their students, particularly students of marginalized identities, are then left to navigate the policies and advocate for their students’ education on their own terms.

As on-the-ground advocates for their students’ education—or what Lipsky (1980) termed, *street-level bureaucrats*—educators are on the front lines to mediate the prescribed policies with the realities of their schools. For Fowler (2013), educators are key actors in the policy development processes, wherein they are active policy implementers, followers, and makers. As more than just passive receptors of top-down policy, viewing educators as *policymakers* highlights the active role they take as interpreters

who mediate and co-opt policy to fit the needs of their students and school communities (Hamann and Lane, 2004). This mediated and co-opted policy represents a shift from *authorized policy* toward *unauthorized policy*, which recognizes the social practice of policy making and implementation (Levinson et al., 2009). Educators as policymakers act not in isolation, but through complex interactions and negotiations with other actors and social contexts, to co-construct “new policy in situated locations” (Koyama, 2011, p. 22). However, educators cannot act outside of authorized policy. Educators in the Canadian context of the profession are public servants who are accountable to school boards, ministries of education, and provincial legislation. The tension between being accountable yet simultaneously meeting student need is particularly evident in alternative high schools, which tend to serve high numbers of absentees.

Alternative High Schools

Having gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s in North America, alternative schools are designed to “provide an innovative and unique way to educate students who did not respond to traditional forms of education” (O’Brien and Curry, 2009, p. 4). Alternative schools have spread in number and scope, ranging from truly innovative forms of education, to serving as placements for students deemed to have behavioral issues (Raywid, 2001). The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) defines alternative schools as being designed to “re-engage students who have had difficulty succeeding in a traditional classroom or school environment, including students who are returning to school after having dropped out” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 2). Alternative schools are renowned for their small size, which allows for the development of positive school climates and tight bonds between teachers and students (Vellos and Vadeboncoeur, 2013). These relationships are vital for students prone to absenteeism, as they are finally able to find “teachers [who] exhibit genuine concern for their well-being that they had never seen before” (D’Angelo and Zemanick, 2009, p. 216). The close bonds permit teachers to know their students well, and with small class sizes teachers can differentiate and tailor their instruction to match the needs and interests of each youth (De La Ossa, 2005). Alternative schools have been documented to raise attendance (Mac Iver, 2011; Marvul, 2012); improve behavior (Simonsen and Sugai, 2013); and, help students graduate (Cox, 1999; De La Ossa, 2005).

Alternative schools are able to reduce the motivational or *voluntary* absenteeism factors (e.g., hostile teachers; bullying) that may be dissuading a student from attending. However, these schools also work to remove the structural barriers (e.g., having to secure food) that cause *involuntary* absences not associated with motivation. Many alternative schools have a number of support staff (e.g., special education; counseling; psychiatric; social workers) who work to address any issues the students may have (Gaskell, 1995; Saunders and Saunders, 2001/2002; Mac Iver, 2011). The support staff progress alternative schools’ position from content delivery to a more holistic wraparound service provider. These attempts are also bolstered by the provision of a number of physical supports in alternative schools such as free food (Gaskell, 1995); clothing (Wishart, 2009); transportation

(Cox, 1999; D'Angelo and Zemanick, 2009) and shower and laundry facilities (The McCreary Centre Society, 2008). Through these services, alternative schools attempt to reduce the barriers prohibiting their students' consistent attendance.

While steady attendance is the goal for all students, alternative schools are cognizant of the impossibility of this expectation for a subset of their students. However, rather than punishing absentees for non-attendance—as is generally the norm in most mainstream schools—alternative schools seek accommodations. Accommodating is done in several ways, such as: flexible scheduling (Morrissette, 2011); removing or modifying attendance expectations and tests/exams (Vellos and Vadeboncoeur, 2015); providing extensions and loose deadlines on assignments (Cox, 1999); and infusing independent learning activities that allow students to progress at their own pace (Wishart, 2009). These strategies are designed to permit students to miss some of their schooling without penalty or the severe repercussions evident in mainstream schools.

A thorny issue arises when alternative schools are expected to adhere to the same policy and accountability measures as mainstream schools. As previously mentioned, mandatory school attendance is a legal requirement for all youths in Canada (Oreopoulos, 2005). Thus, some of the accommodation strategies employed in alternative schools are confronted by the mandatory attendance policies of the Ministry of Education and school boards. This creates numerous legal, professional, and ethical dilemmas for the staff who work in alternative schools—as doing “right” by their students is often at odds with the rigid mandatory attendance policies.

Aims of the Current Study

Our research sought to understand the professional and ethical tensions alternative high school staff members experience when navigating the enforcement of mandatory attendance policies. Sixteen staff members in four alternative high schools in Ontario, Canada were sampled for this qualitative research. Through semi-structured interviews, the school personnel shared the inherent difficulties of allowing their students to miss some school, whilst satisfying the legal obligations of the mandatory attendance policy established by the school board. We argue that these alternative school educators are active *policy makers* in their own right, as they interpret, co-opt, appropriate, and negotiate the mandatory attendance policies with the realities of their students. Our aim is to elucidate the inequitable nature of compulsory attendance policies as well as the ways in which staff working with youths prone to absenteeism respond to these policies.

METHODOLOGY

Much of the absenteeism literature is quantitatively based. Statistical analyses are useful for isolating variables that contribute to absenteeism, as well as monitoring its reduction. However, the realities of absenteeism are convoluted, and much of the complexity is lost in a purely quantitative investigation. This research was purposefully qualitative, and aimed to capture the staff members' thoughts and actions on navigating the

attendance policy. We employed an instrumental case study approach, where the sampled schools themselves were not the point of inquiry, but rather the staffs' negotiation of the policy (Stake, 1995). In other words, it was not the goal of the research to document what each particular site did or did not do, but rather to capture the narratives and perspectives of the staff in how they navigate the inherent ethical, professional, and legal dilemmas when attempting to follow the mandatory attendance policy, whilst accommodating the exceptional circumstances of their students.

Upon receiving ethical clearance from the University of Ottawa and the school board, recruitment and ethical consent was secured from each participant. Four alternative high schools were sampled in a large urban center in the province of Ontario, Canada. The schools are small by mainstream standards (80–225 enrolled students), and are quite diverse in their racial and ethnic makeup (official statistics are unavailable from the school board to protect the identities of the students). Two of the schools offer Grade 9–12 programming (thereby encompassing all secondary grades); whereas the other two deliver Grade 10–12 level classes. However, all students must be at least 16 years old to enroll in the alternative schools. Thus, the majority of the students have attended at least one other high school prior to enrollment in the alternative school. Three of the schools follow regular school day hours of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; while the fourth operates on a university-like timetable, where students attend only when classes are being held.

This research followed (Seidman, 2013) semi-structured interview format. All participants with the exception of two were interviewed individually (Kendra and Liz from Stoneridge Alternative² requested to be interviewed together). Four curriculum leaders, eleven teachers, and one child and youth counselor were interviewed in the four schools (four staff per school). Twelve of the participants were women, and four men. The participants were relatively diverse, with 13 staff members being Caucasian and three who are racialized people of color. Most had worked at other schools in the past, and all but two had worked in at least two schools prior to moving to their current alternative school. The amount of time the staff worked at the schools varied considerably from 8 months to 40 years.

Since the sampled schools are small, they do not have a principal/vice-principal on the premises. The administrative duties are fulfilled by the teachers, who take on the role of *curriculum leader* on a multi-year rotating basis, in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Curriculum leaders were able to offer an administrative viewpoint on managing absenteeism and the tensions embodied in the compulsory attendance policy. In turn, the teachers provided their own accounts of navigating these ethical dilemmas in their classroom. The staff were asked a variety of questions concerning absenteeism in their school. The data included in the current study, however, pertains to answers to the main research question: “What are the professional and ethical tensions alternative high school staff members experience when navigating the enforcement of mandatory attendance

²The names of the participants and their schools have been changed to pseudonyms.

polices?” The interviews were carried out and transcribed by the lead author, and thematically coded by both authors.

In the data analysis phase, the lead author read the entire interview and isolated passages pertaining to absenteeism; the official school attendance policy; and, how the staff member navigated said policy (Morrissette, 1999). Both authors then read the passages individually and made analytic memos. The authors came together and discussed the emergent themes gleaned from the passages and looked for commonalities across the interviews. We then situated our findings to what has been found in the literature.

RESULTS

During conversations with sixteen educators, across four alternative schools, the staff expressed nuanced and complex approaches to balancing the exceptional circumstances of their students whilst still following the attendance policy. As expressed by the educators in their own words below, there was an empathetic awareness of the reasons for students' absenteeism. Hence, because of attentiveness to the needs of their students, staff also expressed an interest in interpreting attendance policy as a guideline. The results of this research are subdivided into emergent themes from the data analysis. In the discussion to follow the findings below, we will return to our framing of educators as *policymakers* who are responsive to the *voluntary/involuntary* absences of these alternative school youth.

Awareness of and Responses to Student Absenteeism

Absenteeism is a serious issue in all of the sampled alternative schools, and weighs heavily on the minds of the sampled educators. The majority of staff members framed absenteeism as the biggest problem their school faces, and that nearly all students exhibit absenteeism to some degree. The staff reported that on average, half of the students were absent daily throughout the year in all of the schools, with absenteeism ranging from as low as 20% to as high as 80% in specific classes (official attendance rates were not made available by the school board). However, rather than despairing, the staff take active measures to locate the cause of an absence. Aided by the small size of the alternative school(s), the staff are acutely aware of the causes of their students' absenteeism. When asked to explain why their students miss school the staff members had detailed and complex responses that reflected the convoluted and interrelated nature of absenteeism, where students were absent for multiple and overlapping reasons. Moreover, the staff articulated an acknowledgment of the voluntary and involuntary absences their students exhibit. For example, Samantha, the curriculum leader at Meadows Alternative spoke about the more voluntary aspect of absenteeism, noting:

There's general disengagement as well, they'd rather go and do something else with their friends, play video games, watch movies, do whatever, drugs as well, those kinds of things. And they see no relevance to school in their everyday life.

Staff members, however, are also mindful of the difficult nature of their students' lives, and how these circumstances impact their ability to come to school consistently. Erin, a teacher and guidance counselor at Pine Alternative discussed the issues her students face at home,

Whether students themselves have mental health concerns or issues, struggles, or their families do, so struggling to help keep a family on its feet as well, so if parents aren't working then they're working holding a job, trying to support the family or struggling with the barriers of having parents that have mental health issues, bring to their struggles personally.

Thus, rather than looking at absenteeism as one dimensional (e.g., excused/unexcused), as articulated in the policy, the staff members seek more contextual explanations for their students' absenteeism. Additionally, they are aware of the fact that the absenteeism is often caused by factors outside of the school, many of which are structural rather than motivational. Kendra, the curriculum leader at Stoneridge Alternative spoke about these external barriers to attendance,

There are issues that our kids face that are far greater than us. We could care all we want in the world and be the greatest, most welcoming inviting place, but their issues are so deep that there are students that are very hard to reach, not impossible, we never give up, but those issues are far greater than we are.

Kendra's comment highlights the involuntary nature of absenteeism for a subset of her students. She, along with many other staff members, is cognizant that their school has limited potential to reduce the overall levels of absenteeism. However, the staff do not take this as an excuse for resignation, and remain committed to reducing absenteeism. Many staff responded that each student is unique, and so are the causes of their absences. As one of the curriculum leaders expressed, “we try to treat each student's absenteeism as an individual occurrence” (Samantha, Meadows). The management of absenteeism is extremely individualized, and Kendra (curriculum leader, Stoneridge) attributed the ability to individualize to the small nature of the school(s):

That individualized program, the individualized attention, the individualized need is the most important. And every single kid knows that they are cared about and that they are an individual when they walk in here...it would be very hard to do that in a school of a 1,000. At a school of a hundred you can reach every kid. We can tell you everything that is going on with every kid at almost any given time.

A number of the educators spoke about various accommodation strategies that help to mediate students' personal complexities with the academic expectations required for them to graduate:

The extra time we give to our students to hand in stuff is pretty amazing. We're pretty forgiving you know? A student can miss a week of the quad and still get the credit if they make up the work that sort of thing. So we bend over backwards (Peter, teacher, Stoneridge).

We have something we call Do or Don't Day. So a week before midterm, a week before finals, we have a day, a catch up day where you can hand in anything from prior. So the answer is never "no." If you've got it, hand it in (Anna, teacher, Meadows).

I've had students who have messaged me and said "ohh I can't make it because of this reason" and I've had to modify how, what day the test is actually on or whatever the case may be. There's – it's open deadlines pretty much. I regularly give out my assignments with full explanation sheets in case they want to do it independently, so there's an opportunity to do that (Natalie, teacher, Pine).

If a student has to leave for work we'll probably say "okay" and "let's talk about [it], we'll see you tomorrow and we'll catch up." So we still keep in mind the student having a chance to be successful... I mean the philosophy is one where we're supporting students to achieve and do well, so if there's a reasonable reason why a student is late or hasn't handed something in, I don't have a problem with accommodating that and working on a plan for them to catch up (John, teacher, Meadows).

Obviously we are not a no-attendance school. So students are expected to attend. But that being said, we do know our population, and so what we do is we make accommodations for students who are unable to come (Anthony, teacher, Bridgeport).

The last quote by Anthony presents the challenging dilemma evident in all of the sampled alternative schools, namely that they are all bound by the mandatory attendance policy set out by the school board. Knowing their students' difficulties coming to school, many of which may not be traditionally "excused" but are nevertheless involuntary, brings about a trying task for these educators: navigating the attendance expectations specified by the school board, without compromising their students' access to a high school education. Many did so by interpreting the policy as a guideline, rather than as rigid and uncompromising stipulations.

Interpretation of Policy as Guideline

When asked about the official attendance policy of their school, the staff members had varying responses. Four staff members had an understanding that attendance is compulsory at their school, but the official policy itself had little consequence in their day-to-day functioning as educators, as Anna, a teacher at Meadows described:

We're a mandatory attendance school, as much as our kids would tell you differently. So they're expected to attend from 9:30 to 3:30 every day... our attendance policy is if you're late you need a late slip, if you miss you need a doctor's note. But, I mean we enforce it only as so far as anyone is able to of course, right?

While a quarter of the participants saw attendance as a general requirement of their school, eight staff members framed the attendance policy as originating from the Ministry of Education and/or school board. Samantha, a curriculum leader at Meadows Alternative, referred to the board policy when describing the attendance expectations in her school,

Well the school board has a policy: if a student misses 12 days in a row, an attendance counselor has to be notified if they're under

18. If they're over 18, they are to be demitted after 12 days, that's the official attendance policy.

What is of interest is that while most educators were cognizant of the "demitting" rule, it is not explicitly stated in the official school board policy. As mentioned in the section Introduction, the school board's attendance policy only dictates actions for students under the age of 18, as the school board has a legal obligation to ensure they attend. Once a youth turns 18, there is a "gray zone" where there is no legal impetus for the board to ensure the student is enrolled and attends school. Thus, schools have the legal right to remove students who are over the age of 18 for non-attendance. It appears that this "unofficial" demitting policy is passed down from the school board to the principals who oversee a number of alternative schools, to the curriculum leaders who serve as the administrators in the sampled schools. In fact, all of the curriculum leaders framed their school's attendance policy in terms of its obligation to follow the one set out by the school board, which in turn, takes its directive from the *Ontario Education Act* stipulating mandatory attendance.

The teachers, however, reframe this construct of "policy" to fit with their ethical and moral stances of what is best for their students. Rather than viewing attendance expectations as formalized "policy," teachers framed it as more of a code of conduct or guideline that should be followed—suggesting there is room to interpret a guideline more loosely than an authoritative policy. One staff member expressed that she,

Would rather use the language *guideline* than *policy* because board policy is often, most often, more a guideline – [compared to] when you break policy, there's not a lot of repercussions" (Barbara, curriculum leader, Pine, emphasis added).

In speaking to the school's official policy, Samantha (curriculum leader, Meadows) differentiated between what the school board states and how it is understood in her practice:

Attendance policy here is what we have written in our code of conduct, and it's just a code of conduct, it's not a policy *per se*... So the policy in terms of attendance? We go by the guidelines of what the [name of school board] outlines, but we've got so many students who are away for reasons like, long term reasons, and they have medical issues or psychological issues where they're away for more than 12 days in a row.

For Samantha, the policy as a "guideline" is integral to accommodate students with mental and physical health needs, but also to keep the school in operation:

We don't have so much of a policy that is enforced as much as strategies to intervene if that makes any sense. Because if we enforced any hard and fast rules on policy then we'd have no kids, right? So we have to be super flexible.

Enforcing these "hard and fast rules on policy," as Samantha expressed it, fails to account for the reasons that brought these youths to the alternative schooling system in the first place. Kendra and Liz, a curriculum leader and school

counselor, respectively, at Stoneridge, spoke of their personal and professional ethos that recognizes the inappropriateness of enacting the same punitive practices and policies they know have not worked for their students in the past:

Kendra: Our personal philosophy is that we're not punitive. We're high reward, high praise. Punitive has not worked for them. They've been in schools where they've been consequence, they've been kicked out, they've been –

Liz: Suspended for a whole bunch of reasons.

Kendra: And that hasn't worked. That's why they ended up here. So of course if a student does something wrong, we're not going to reward them, but when they do correct behavior we high, high, high praise. ... Because if they're getting scolded every time they walk through the front door they will stop walking through the front door, and that is what's happening in many of their high schools. They will tell you about that – that is their experience.

Liz: They were glad to leave their mainstream schools.

Kendra: And some would criticize us, I think, for the softer approach. But I've been doing this for 20 years, and the success rates that we've both had – but I'll speak to me in particular – have been fabulous. So there is something that we are doing right.

Liz: You just got to try to figure it out what it is that you have to do for each student. Not put them all into a box and treat them all the same.

For Kendra and Liz, demonstrating responsive behavior management practices is integral to accommodating students who have had punitive-centered schooling experiences thus far. Other staff also spoke of this individualized, “softer” approach to accommodate students' involuntary absences that might not be formally “excused” by the school board. Knowing that many of their students wish to attend, but cannot do so, the staff members find creative ways to ensure their students receive an education that is otherwise afforded to students who do not have difficult personal lives impeding their ability to attend school consistently:

[We] deal with them with a bit of a softer touch. But if that doesn't work, we're still bound, we still have to do referrals to attendance counselors, we still have to follow the same policies...you're supposed to demit them after 12 days of non-attendance, we stretch that *all* the time (Amanda, curriculum leader, Bridgeport, emphasis for interviewee inflection)

We treat them with a bit more care and concern than other schools which are bigger... We have a genuine concern because we are experienced with students who are on their own or who live on their own, or who are in tougher socioeconomic circumstances, so the student is probably going to realize that we actually care about what's happening and we understand. So we're not so quick to punish. We're more here for support and figure out, you know, what can be done (John, teacher, Meadows).

I think if alternative schools didn't exist for these students they'd drop out, right? If they were forced to be at school from 9 to 3 or 3:30, and heavy regimented school where late marks are given and deadlines are definite, there's students that would 100% I think drop out... When we provide alternatives to the mainstream system, we're providing additional opportunities for students to achieve in something that's very traditional still, right? (Erin, teacher and guidance counselor, Pine)

I mean there's a 12 day policy – you probably know a lot about the policy – so in traditional schools 12 [days] you know, that's the gauntlet, the guillotine – it goes down. In this type of school, we're emailing, we're calling, we're trying to set up meetings, we're trying to push that further so that we can have more wiggle room to reengage (Barbara, curriculum leader, Pine).

These statements indicate the commitment the staff members have to ensure their students are given an equitable chance to complete their schooling. The staff effectively resist and co-opt policy when they see it as incongruent with their students' academic interests. The educators in our sample, much like most others, are nonetheless bound by the policy, and the curricular leaders acknowledged having to demit students for non-attendance. However, the demitting is done as a last resort, and the staff spoke about trying to find ways to avoid using this consequence.

Lessening the Severity of Demitting

In attempts to “stretch” the 12 day rule that culminates in a student being demitted from roll, the staff spoke of interrupting the 12 day consecutive streak with an “excused” absence in the attendance tracking system. When employment or being a parent and taking care of a sick child might be keeping students at home for longer than 12 days, an “excused” absence (e.g., student sickness) can be entered into the attendance tracking system as a “legitimate” absence to break the streak,

If a student calls and says that they're sick or something, you can put something in the system just to buy you a bit of time, so you don't have to demit them. We'll do whatever the work arounds [are needed] to avoid demitting. And if we have to we'll demit with a note saying they can re-enter at any time (Amanda, curriculum leader, Bridgeport).

In the case that a streak is not broken – as Amanda eludes to here – and the student must be demitted, it is done so with an asterisk: demitted but with the opportunity to re-enroll at a later time. Although still following policy stipulations of demitting habitually absent students, the alternative school educators co-opt the policy by saving a spot for them whenever they are able to return. With this, the message is conveyed to the students that they always have a place at the school, regardless of the board-mandated attendance policy. However, such a precarious system is not ideal, and Kendra and Liz (Stoneridge) explained how there is still a risk of losing some students in the process:

Kendra: We're so afraid if we just demit them they'll never go back to school.

Liz: And usually when they are not attending there's a reason behind it, so that's why we like to give them those 12 days. A lot will, some don't contact us unfortunately, but the majority do and let us know what's going on in their lives and then we set up meetings – we try to capture them back in that way.

Kendra: And if a student does leave or has to be demitted after 18 because of the 12 consecutive absences, we will take them back in the next quad or in September to retry again because we do want to give a student every possible opportunity that we can.

Through these actions the severity of the demitting process is lessened, and the results less final. Even when forced to carry out a policy and set of actions they disagree with, the curricular leaders temper the harsh repercussions associated with demitting a student. While specific numbers of demits were unavailable, the staff were unequivocal in their responses that demitting is done as a last resort, and is rather infrequent. Informed by the causes of their students' absenteeism the decisions and actions of the staff members are indicative of them taking on active policymaker roles, as the staff seek to co-opt and appropriate the policy to best meet the needs of their students.

DISCUSSION

When revisiting what these alternative school educators expressed, what is most striking is their commitment to their students' education, not only as dedicated educators, but as advocates for youth who otherwise will be denied an education due to their difficult life circumstances. Our participants conveyed a belief that the local school board's attendance policy is unresponsive to the exceptional realities of their students. As such, we were drawn to consider the ways in which the staff consciously modified the policy to construct an unauthorized policy—as we had prefaced in our introduction. In our context of Ontario alternative high schools, with a demographic of students who are predominantly over the age of 18, the staff members spoke to the ways in which they enact unauthorized policy to meet the contextual needs of their students. Despite the excused/unexcused protocol for “legitimate” absences outlined in the school board policy, the staff exercised their professional discernment to determine what constitutes a reasonable cause for an absence. In recognizing that their students are both voluntarily and involuntarily absent (Birioukov, 2016), the curriculum leaders and teachers expressed ways in which they interpret, co-opt, appropriate and yet still uphold the school board policy, in an attempt to provide their students with equitable opportunities to attain a high school education.

Voluntary/Involuntary Absences

The staff members' management of absenteeism is directly informed by their differentiation of what they consider to be “legitimate” absences as opposed to the narrowly sanctioned absences outlined by the school board. The sampled educators treat their students' absences as individual occurrences, and evaluate the causes of the absence, as well as the necessary responses from the school. Rather than relying on the “excused/unexcused” absence categorization used by their school board the staff utilize their own direct knowledge of the students' lives to demark whether the absence is largely willful (e.g., voluntary) or structural (e.g., involuntary). It is this distinction between voluntary and involuntary absences (Birioukov, 2016) that informs the policy appropriation work of the educators in the sample. The staff members know that the attendance policy has been used to marginalize their students, and are unwilling to fully comply with its mandate.

Appropriating Policy for Equitable Opportunity

Critical educators of policy implementation are aware of their active roles as *policy makers*, who “recognize their action (or inaction) may challenge or perpetuate inequities beyond school walls” (Winton and Pollock, 2013, p. 50). For our participants, the knowledge of their students' personal realities and causes for absenteeism instigates a sense of advocacy on behalf of their students who are penalized by the attendance policy. This advocacy, we argue, takes shape in the form of policy appropriation. The educators guard against the one-size-fits-all attendance policy imposed by the school board; tempering it with their local knowledge of their students' realities and what feasible attendance expectations might look like. The policy appropriation in these alternative schools is characterized by teachers and curriculum leaders who adhere to the attendance policy and maintain high attendance expectations for their students, but who are not afraid to “do whatever the work...to avoid demitting” (Amanda, curriculum leader, Bridgeport). Many of these alternative school youth have already been punished by the school board's attendance policy in their previous mainstream schools; many, in fact, were demitted from their former high school(s) for this reason.

The individualization and assessment of each student's absenteeism as an individual issue prompts the use of accommodation strategies designed to allow students to miss some class without penalty. As discerning practitioners, the alternative school educators are sensitive to the complex lives their students live outside of the classroom; articulating a sense of responsibility to be responsive to the “inconvenient complications” that students' personal lives bring to their practice (Phelan, 2015, p. 17). Guided by an ethos of attendance-as-guideline, the curriculum leaders and teachers of these alternative schools enact loosely interpreted attendance expectations for their students who may have exceptional and pressing circumstances that make regular attendance difficult. In interpreting mandatory attendance to be more of a suggestion than expectation, the staff rationalize the ways in which they exercise their professional agency as critical policy implementers, not just passive policy followers.

While the school board stipulates that 12 consecutive days of absences are grounds for demitting a student, these educators described the 12 day rule as “the guillotine” to their students' education. These alternative school staff recognize the significance of appropriating the stipulations of the attendance policy to better align with the realities of their student population. By being willing to excuse students who must leave early for work, or actively scheduling re-engagement meetings for students who otherwise would be demitted, the staff espouse an intrinsic obligation to mediate the prescribed attendance policy with their students' life circumstances. The appropriation of policy occurs when educators exercise their knowledge of the local, which in turn transforms the authorized policy into *unauthorized* policy as it is informed by its respective context (Levinson and Sutton, 2001). Such appropriation, however, can simply be interpreted as policy “implementation,” in that the enactment of policy is always

inevitably mediated by the beliefs of the educators responsible for implementing it (Honig, 2006; Levinson et al., 2009; Winton and Pollock, 2013). Whether this process is considered to be policy appropriation, or simply the subjective process of policy enactment, is open to interpretation. Nevertheless, what becomes apparent from such policy appropriation is the way in which these educators chose to advocate for their students' education in a system that does not.

It may be argued that the permissive nature of the sampled alternative schools normalizes absenteeism, and enables youths to miss more school than they already are. This is one of the more frequently cited criticisms of alternative schools in general, as there is concern that grouping large numbers of at-risk youths will only exacerbate their issues (Kilma et al., 2009; Flannery et al., 2012). However, the staff in our sample refuted these allegations by pointing to the fact that their students have already attempted and "failed" in the mainstream setting's rigid accountability measures. For these alternative school youths, the system as-is has not worked. In their situation, the schooling system has already marked them as "failures" and/or as "drop-outs."

There is a sense that there is nothing left to lose in the creation of an accommodating school structure.

The alternative high school setting is a last-chance schooling system designed to accommodate the difficult home-life realities many absent students face, and to provide them with an education that mainstream schools have not (O'Brien and Curry, 2009). Yet, alternative schools are still bound by the same attendance policy that penalized their students' previous absences in the mainstream setting. The policy continues to be the black cloud hanging over the absentees' education, who perpetually feel the pressure to be seated in the classroom every school day, regardless of the difficulties impeding them from doing so. Our educator participants, however, recognize the ways in which reprimanding students does little more than push them even further from the end objective of earning a high school diploma. With this, appropriating the attendance policy is a necessary accommodation strategy to ensure students receive an equitable opportunity to a high school education.

Demitting With an Asterisk

Integral to policy appropriation in alternative schools are the ways in which educators outwardly resist uniform and mainstream policies. In the name of providing an "alternative" schooling experience, alternative schooling systems are often at odds with policies catered to mainstream schooling. As Hemmer (2014) experienced with alternative school educators, our staff were also proud to speak to their "maverick and/or symbolic gestures of resistance" (Hemmer, 2014, p. 12), as they exercise their rights as alternative educators in a system that is constructed by mainstream-informed universal policies. Being accountable to the board-wide mandatory attendance policy presents our alternative school educators with ethical dilemmas. As much as they may attempt to engage, re-engage and prolong a student's removal from the alternative school, ultimately the curriculum leaders are obligated to demit students after 12 consecutive absences. This finding highlights the inequitable structure of the compulsory attendance policy of the sampled school board.

The creation of the "gray zone," where students over the age of 18 can be legally removed from school rolls is particularly egregious, as it allows schools to discard students deemed to be too "difficult" or hard to manage. The demitting practice does take place in the sampled alternative schools, but by demitting with an asterisk—suggesting that students can re-enroll at a convenient time—the educators have made ways to accommodate the peculiarities that have previously barred these students from academic success. Whereas, professionally the staff are expected to demit perpetually absent youth, our participants were vocal in their relentless commitment to their students' education, even after they were demitted. Re-engaging and re-enrolling these students is the ultimate goal, post-demitting.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

As with all qualitative research, this study is context-specific, and offers a single account of 16 staff members working in four alternative schools within a single municipality. Thus, the transferability of the results to other locales may be difficult and undesirable. Conversations with educators "on the ground" provide a narrow view of the attendance policy and how it is to be enacted in an alternative school setting. It would be useful to investigate how "higher level" officials (e.g., principals; superintendents; policymakers) conceptualize absenteeism in relation to an adequate attendance policy. While we have highlighted some of the shortcomings of the school board's attendance policy, and its potential to negatively affect at-risk youths, a more detailed analysis of its rationale is needed. Likewise, the issue of permissiveness and the enabling of further absenteeism in alternative settings warrants consideration.

CONCLUSION

Every day thousands of children miss school. They do so for a myriad of reasons, with many being forced to miss school *involuntarily*. These youths may desperately wish to attend, but the circumstances of their lives preclude them from doing so. Not experiencing success in mainstream schools, these adolescents may find themselves in the alternative setting—a setting designed to be more flexible and accommodating to their absenteeism. However, as this research shows, alternative schools in Ontario, Canada are confronted with the mandatory attendance policies passed by the Ontario Ministry of Education and local school boards. These authorized policies treat absenteeism as a criminal act, and reprimand students for non-attendance. Alternative school staff members hence become de facto policymakers as they move from enacting *authorized* to *unauthorized* policy (Levinson et al., 2009). The school personnel see a misalignment between the policy and their students' best interests. Being intimately aware of their students' often involuntary absenteeism, many interpret the attendance policy in a way that is more ethically reflective of their students' needs. While the alternative school staff take steps to appropriate the authorized policy to ensure their students are treated ethically, there are no guarantees that other educators follow suit. Considering that a number of youths

report being pushed out of mainstream schools due to non-attendance (Caine, 2013), it is likely that mandatory attendance policies are used to rationalize their removal.

Wanting youths to be in school consistently is a desire all educators share; however, the feasibility of this goal is questionable. As this study has documented, the current one-size-fits-all compulsory attendance policies marginalize and disadvantage the most vulnerable students in both mainstream and alternative schools. These youths are effectively punished for being unable to come to school. Rather than reducing absenteeism these policies do quite the opposite, and cause youths to miss more school than they already do. The concerning practice of demitting students because of non-attendance is reprehensible, because it allows schools to shed their responsibility for ensuring that all students are given an equitable opportunity to succeed. A failure to reevaluate how attendance policies are developed and enacted will propel the continuous cycle of educational marginalization evident in Canada.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Restrictions apply to the data sets: The datasets for this manuscript are not publicly available to protect participants'

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- confidentiality due to the sensitive and personal information that was collected as part of the interviews. The ethical review board of the University of Ottawa provides all human participants with the option to share their information only with the lead researcher and research team. Making their transcripts public compromises the confidentiality of the participants. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Anton Birioukov-Brant, abiri066@uottawa.ca.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethical Review Board, University of Ottawa Policy, Research and Information Services. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AB-B was the principal investigator who designed and carried out the research, secured ethical consent from the University of Ottawa, school board, and participants, conducted and transcribed the interviews. AB-B and KB-B coded the interviews, reviewed the literature, and wrote the manuscript together.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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