EXAMINING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LITERACY INTERVENTION: VOICES OF ADOLESCENTS LIVING IN AN URBAN, MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY

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Abstract
The current study examined the experiences of adolescents considered to be at-risk for academic underachievement in an after-school reading intervention program (called the Vocabulary Learning Project, or VLP), with the goal of identifying the individual and social contextual factors that influence their engagement in the literacy intervention. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 adolescent participants post-intervention to gain their personal insights on relevant contextual experiences, resulting in the identification of key factors that are associated with student engagement at the behavioral, affective and cognitive levels. The findings from this study serve as an important indicator of some of the multiple influences on the literacy engagement of at-risk adolescents. This has implications for the design of future interventions developed for the purpose of improving the academic achievement, and ultimately the economic and personal advancement, of adolescents living in urban, marginalized settings.
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Introduction

The academic underachievement of marginalized students of different demographic groups has been well documented. In 2008, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) published a report detailing the systematic underachievement of certain demographically vulnerable groups of students. Results indicated that specific demographic groups of students were consistently achieving well below the provincial standard. This trend is observable from Grade 7 and continues into high school. The report indicates that, for example, “less than 50% of students in Grades 7 and 8 from the English Speaking Caribbean and from East Africa in our schools can read, write or do math and science at the Provincial standard” (TDSB, 2008, p. 1). With respect to literacy skill development specifically, students living in marginalized, economically underprivileged communities are often considered to be at-risk for literacy underachievement due to the presence of risk factors at multiple levels – from personal risk factors (e.g., motivation and engagement), to broader risks (e.g., family literacy level, community support) (Malcolmson, 2001). In fact, poorly developed English language skills are associated with lower GPAs and graduation rates, and grade retention (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Under-developed academic English proficiency has been associated with lower performance on standardized tests of academic knowledge in various content areas (Abedi & Lord, 2001; August & Shanahan, 2006).

Adolescent Literacy and English Language Development in a Multicultural Context

There is a dearth of research on the English language development of adolescent students, particularly adolescent immigrant students (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee & Geva, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Historically, research on English language development has been centered on young children or older adults. The challenge, however, is that findings from research with young children or adults are of limited generalizability to adolescents because both the language learning environment and the non-
linguistic developmental factors differ dramatically between these groups, consequently impacting adolescent second language learning processes and outcomes in unique ways (Snow, 1987; Hakuta, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Current knowledge about the literacy engagement and development of adolescents in culturally diverse urban areas is also very limited (Franzak, 2006). There is in fact a dearth of endeavors to systematically and comprehensively account for the unique complexities of populations of multilingual, culturally diverse adolescent students living in urban, marginalized settings (Cumming & Geva, 2012). As previously discussed, the literacy achievement of such adolescents is of particular concern due to marked differences in their academic achievement (TDSB Urban Diversity Strategy, 2008), that then impact on life and career opportunities. Such students are consequently labelled as being “at-risk” for literacy underachievement due to the presence of risk factors at multiple levels, from more proximal risk factors (e.g., motivation and engagement), to distal ones (e.g., parental education, SES, cultural barriers, racial discrimination) (e.g., Finn, 1993; Willms, 1997; Cumming & Geva, 2012; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). However, efforts to improve the literacy skills of such students are even more complex in certain urban settings due to the high amount of cultural and linguistic diversity (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Lesaux, Harris & Sloane, 2012), that needs to be accounted for (Cumming & Geva, 2012).

The Case of English Language Learners

There are even more unique literacy challenges faced by English language learners (ELLs) - students whose first language is something other than English (Kamil, 2002). As academic demands intensify in adolescence, it becomes more difficult for ELLs to catch up to English-speaking peers (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). This gap persists even after six years of English instruction (Farnia & Geva, 2011). For example, Grade 9 and 10 students who are recent immigrants to Canada have been found to perform, on average, well below grade level (e.g., at least between one and two standard deviations lower on standardized tests) with respect to
vocabulary and reading comprehension (Pasquarella, Grant, & Gottardo, 2012). Such findings indicate that when ELL students’ vocabulary knowledge does not match grade-level academic demands, they are likely to face additional challenges as they navigate the school curriculum (Jean & Geva, 2009; Pasquarella et al., 2012b), placing them at increased risk of academic underachievement. Research indicates that both ELL and native language speaking adolescents living in urban, diverse contexts require significantly more targeted support in the specific areas of academic language and vocabulary development, prompting investigations into the most effective instructional approaches for their literacy improvement. Intervention efforts have thus begun to target the specific skills of academic vocabulary and reading comprehension for instruction of both native and ELL student populations especially (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Lesaux et al., 2012). One such intervention is that which will be examined in the present study, namely the Vocabulary Learning Project (hereafter, VLP) – a multi-cohort, intensive and empirically-based reading intervention that provides students with instruction of academic vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies (Pasquarella et al. 2012a). This program will be subsequently described in more detail.

An important consideration to be made is that students’ active participation and engagement are essential ingredients for obtaining the desired results from such interventions that involve adolescent participants living in urban, culturally diverse contexts (Malcolmson, 2001; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Lesaux et al., 2012). Yet, there is a dearth of research that questions student participants about their intervention program experiences, especially with respect to the factors that influence their engagement and subsequent achievement of literacy skills in such programs (Lesaux et al., 2012).
Student Experiences in Literacy Programs

Erickson and Shultz (1992) argue that student curricular experiences have been traditionally neglected, which has resulted in limited research that views students only "from the perspective of the adult educators' interests and ways of seeing" (p. 467). They claim that "teachers themselves need to know more about varieties of student experience if they are to educate a wide variety of students really well" (p. 471). Other research has affirmed the need to listen to youth, learn about their issues and needs, take their perspectives seriously and value their insights into what is most effective for them (Ryerse, 1990; Malcolmson, 2001). Inquiry into student experiences sheds light on how and why they experience what they do. In essence, the potentially optimal way to determine the most effective strategies for assisting adolescents is to gather that information from the adolescents themselves. In this way adolescents have the opportunity to assume the role of active participants in shaping their literacy education.

For this reason, students in the present study were invited to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview in order to provide insight into their experiences in an empirically-based reading intervention. This also gives them the opportunity to gain ownership for the very research that seeks to address their literacy needs (Ovens, 2002). Students’ program experiences can impact their engagement in the program (Lesaux et al., 2012), and consequently their reading achievement post-intervention. Student engagement is thus a critical factor for examination. It should be noted that the VLP is currently undergoing an extensive evaluation of its efficacy as a literacy intervention based on quantitative assessments of pre-and post-intervention outcomes. A discussion of the results of that evaluation are beyond the scope of the present study, of which the goal was to explore the experiences of adolescents participating in the VLP in order to determine the individual and social contextual factors influencing their program engagement.
Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) argue that the impact of instructional interventions is mediated by engagement. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in engagement, and one of the reasons is that engagement has been considered a malleable trait (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement (in an educational context) has been defined by many researchers as a multidimensional construct that includes affective, cognitive and behavioral engagement (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012). Affective engagement refers to students’ feelings and emotional reactions to an academic task, their beliefs about the ability to perform such tasks and beliefs about their importance and utility. Affective engagement can be indicated by examining students’ interest, boredom, sadness, happiness and anxiety (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement refers to students’ willingness to exert the mental effort needed to perform challenging academic tasks – their deep psychological investment in both learning and mastery of knowledge, as well as their intrinsic motivation (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitively engaged readers are those who are able to apply reading strategies such as re-reading, predicting, questioning, summarizing, and paraphrasing – all of which are self-regulatory, metacognitive strategies used to plan, monitor and evaluate their cognition when executing reading tasks (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990; Cumming, 2012). Behavioral engagement refers to students’ actual participation in academic activities. It is characterized by positive conduct, effort, concentration, attention, and contribution to discussions (Finn & Rock, 1997). Studies have shown that behavioral engagement is linked to academic achievement: more behaviorally engaged students perform better on academic tasks (Ladd & Dinella, 2009), and are less likely to drop out of school (Fredricks et al., 2004), especially when they are students who are academically at-risk (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; McNeal, 1995).
Engagement has been described as the result of an interaction between the individual and his or her context; it is thus responsive to environmental variation (Finn & Rock, 1997). This is consistent with ecological theories (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which propose that individuals learn and develop via interactions among the multi-levelled contexts they navigate daily, from the immediate, individual context to broader social contexts. Taking an ecological perspective on the individual, family, instructional, community and cultural variables, for example, that influence adolescents’ literacy engagement is important given that multi-layered perspectives are essential for understanding the complex processes associated with adolescents’ literacy development in marginalized or culturally diverse settings (Borrero & Yeh, 2010). In the present study, literacy engagement will be examined within an ecological framework. When literacy engagement is viewed as a multidimensional interaction between students and their environment, an improved understanding of the complexity of adolescents’ engagement in academic literacy interventions such as the VLP will be better supported, and can potentially facilitate the development of more targeted interventions.

In accordance with the multidimensional framework for conceptualizing engagement (e.g., Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Fredericks et al., 2004), indicators of engagement are conceptualized in the present study as including, but not limited to: (a) affective aspects, such as feelings of boredom, anxiety, and happiness, as well as overall interest in the program and in the instructional tools used; (b) behavioral aspects, for example attendance, on-task behavior, persistence, and contributions to group discussion; and, (c) cognitive aspects such as students’ expressed psychological investment in their learning and the personal efforts they made to learn, understand and master the skills taught in the VLP intervention. In order to account for the multiple influences on student engagement, these aspects will be examined with consideration of the relevant individual and social contexts encountered and described by participants (e.g.,
tutoring program context, family environment, community context). This ecological approach is especially important given the demographic context of the study.

Study Context

The high school students recruited for the VLP intervention were already enrolled in a broader, community-wide after-school tutoring and mentoring program administered by Pathways to Education Canada, at its Regent Park site. Pathways to Education is a community-based initiative that is supplementary to regular schooling, with the goal of buffering the impact of poverty and other systemic barriers to academic achievement that exist in society – barriers which serve to marginalize certain communities (Cumming, 2012; www.pathwaystoeducation.ca). The demographics of the Regent Park neighborhood indicate that it is one such community – a community that would prompt the need for a large-scale community initiative such as Pathways to Education.

Regent Park is one of the most economically disadvantaged communities in the city of Toronto, and represents one of the largest public housing projects in Canada (TCH, 2007), although current efforts are being made to revitalize it into a mixed-income community. The community faces numerous challenges, including high unemployment rates, low income families, low educational ‘attainment’, and contains a significant proportion of single-parent families. Regent Park houses numerous new Canadians, and in 1996 the majority of its residents were visible minorities (Cumming, 2012). It is reasonable then, that Pathways to Education aspires to help high school students in low income communities like Regent Park to complete high school and move on to post-secondary education by providing them with the various financial, academic, and social supports necessary for achieving positive outcomes. Through this program, students also receive academic tutoring, available four evenings a week in order to support them in various academic subject areas.
The Vocabulary Learning Project (VLP)

As a result of previous research demonstrating the importance of reading interventions that target the improvement of students’ academic vocabulary and reading comprehension skills (e.g., Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009; Coxhead, 2000), the VLP reading intervention was conceptualized by a team of reading researchers with an expertise in second-language reading (Geva, Farnia, Chen, & Gottardo, 2011). Under their leadership a team of graduate students with background in reading research (Pasquarella et al., 2012a) developed the intervention program that targeted weaknesses in academic vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies. The program provides direct and explicit instruction in academic vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies with the goal of closing the gap between the highest and lowest adolescent achievers. The program was implemented as a series of 13, weekly, one- and a half hour tutor-led sessions, held after school in a small group setting (e.g., four to six students per group). Each session was structured identically, beginning with an icebreaker, two reading passages used for strategy instruction, and two games. Two complementary approaches to academic vocabulary learning were taught systematically: (a) semantic relationships taught through activities such as targeting words with multiple meanings and concept maps; and (b) roots and derivations taught through word families and focus on prefixes and suffixes (Pasquarella et al., 2012a). Reading comprehension strategies included re-reading, paraphrasing, making inferences, and activating prior knowledge, among others. All program content was delivered by trained tutors -- adult volunteers who received intensive training over the course of two to three weeks in preparation for the delivery of effective, research-based instruction of vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies. In addition to providing these tutors with techniques to motivate and engage students, they were also trained to cultivate and maintain cultural competence, as well as to effectively manage adolescent behavior issues when required. To facilitate increased attendance and engagement, all participants were provided the opportunity
to accumulate points (for attendance, punctuality and participation during the session), toward winning a grand prize via a draw held at the end of the program. In the interim, students were also able to receive a token prize whenever they accumulated a sufficient number of points at a pre-determined time-point during the course of the program. The VLP was conducted and evaluated over three consecutive years through partnership and collaboration with Pathways to Education’s Regent Park site, with the aim of offering supplementary, empirically-driven reading support to at-risk students in this remarkably diverse urban community. Preliminary data indicating post-intervention improvements by students on some vocabulary and reading comprehension tasks are promising, however a discussion of the program’s efficacy are beyond the scope of the present study.

*The VLP’s Potential Contribution to Adolescent Literacy Engagement*

It has been previously established that methods of maximizing adolescent engagement are critical considerations when designing literacy programs. For the purposes of the present study, I will highlight the instructional elements of the VLP that are hypothesized to be critical for maintaining student engagement: (1) the intervention included collaborative learning activities that gave students an opportunity to meaningfully engage with one another, increasing group discussion and collaboration while impacting language development (Stahl & Nagy, 2006); (2) every session was centered around a short piece of text that included new vocabulary words for instruction. Texts provided were of varying difficulty in terms of language content, and varied by genre (e.g., poetry, fiction, narrative, expository). Provision of such text-based learning opportunities was consistent with important, empirically validated elements of sound reading instruction (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011); (3) the intervention was developmentally sequenced, such that students would be engaged in activities that allowed for the incremental building of language skills over the course of the intervention (Lesaux et. al., 2012). This was accomplished through session by session, highly tutor-scaffolded, skill building, culminating in
student-led instruction of the strategies taught with guidance from the tutor (a technique known as reciprocal teaching) during the final two sessions of the program (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The goal of reciprocal teaching was to increase students’ autonomy while consolidating their emerging skills, a potentially important factor for supporting their motivation to remain engaged in the program (Meece, Anderman & Anderman, 2006).

The Present Study

There is a dearth of research that examines the factors influencing the literacy engagement of adolescents living in urban, marginalized settings characterized by significant cultural and linguistic diversity. Even fewer studies have evaluated student engagement in the very literacy interventions designed to bolster their academic achievement, particularly from the vantage point of the student participants themselves, despite the established link between engagement and academic achievement (Malcolmson, 2001; Fredricks et al., 2004; August & Shanahan, 2006; Lesaux et al., 2012). The goal of the current study was to identify the individual and social contextual factors that influence at-risk adolescents’ engagement in literacy intervention, by examining students’ perceptions of and experiences in an after-school reading intervention. By adopting an ecological perspective and recognizing the relevant contextual factors highlighted in the literature (including intrinsic motivation, instructor-student relationship and parental involvement - see Fredricks et al., 2004; Malcolmson, 2001; Wiseman, 2009; Lesaux et al., 2012, Cumming, 2012 for examples), in the present study such factors were examined to ascertain the potential multi-level influences on engagement in the VLP reading intervention. This research was based on data collected from 29 interviews completed with a subsample of students who participated in the VLP (year 3 cohort). The in-depth interviews were essential in order to truly allow for a rich understanding and appreciation of any potential similarities or diversities among students’ program experiences. In this way, these students may be recognized
as direct agents of change with respect to ultimately ameliorating their academic outcomes by contributing to knowledge about effective reading interventions.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were high school students in Grades 9 to 11, who were enrolled in the Pathways to Education Program – Regent Park site during the 2011-2012 school year. Over 60 of these students were recruited in the fall of 2011 to participate in the VLP reading intervention. Post-intervention, participants were invited to participate in a one-on-one interview to provide their personal insights on their program experiences according to the following inclusion criterion: the student must have attended at least one session of the intervention program. This allows the sample to capture a representative range of students by including those who completed the program as well as those who dropped out or were withdrawn from the intervention prematurely. Of 62 students contacted, 29 agreed to participate in the interview. The participants (N=29; 8 male, 21 female) had a mean age of 15.41 (SD=1.48). The linguistic diversity of students interviewed reflects that of the larger intervention study sample and the Regent Park community with respect to the range of native languages represented. Forty-one percent of participants reported having English as a native language, 31% Bengali, 7% Tamil, and 3.5% each of Swahili, Creole, Twi, Shona, Amharic and Vietnamese. Overall, fifty-nine percent of participants were Asian, 34% were African, and 7% reported a bi-cultural (mixed) descent. Fifty-two percent of participants were born outside of Canada, with a mean age at arrival in Canada of 8.47 years (SD=5.66; range= 1-18). Seventeen percent had been living in Canada for less than 3 years, and were still in the process of developing English language proficiency. For purposes of the present study these five participants were classified as ELLs. The remaining 48%
of participants were born in Canada, and all reported that they were first generation Canadians, meaning that their parents were born in another country and immigrated to Canada.

The mean number of program sessions completed by interview participants was 9.70 (SD=3.33; range= 1-13). Sixty-six percent (n= 19) of the interview participants completed the entire VLP program, 24% (n= 7) dropped out of the program, and 10% (n= 3) were withdrawn from the program due to insufficient attendance as per program criteria (i.e., they only attended one or two sessions).

**Measures**

*Student background information.* Participants completed a Pre-Interview Questionnaire developed by the author in order to provide relevant background information including: (1) basic demographic data (e.g., age, sex); (2) native language; (3) immigration status; (4) cultural background, and (5) frequency of involvement in extracurricular literacy activities.

*Student experiences influencing engagement in the VLP intervention.* In order to gain rich insight into student’s individual and contextual experiences that potentially impacted their engagement in the reading intervention, a semi-structured Student Interview Guide was developed by the author. This 30-45 minute interview involved 10-12 open-ended questions that were used as a guide to stimulate discussion of student experiences, with frequent probing questions asked to encourage deep elaboration. Interview questions were grouped according to their contextual relevance in accordance with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1997), within five key contextual levels of interest. As such, the interview guide included questions addressing: (1) the *individual level* context, such as students’ academic self-concept, independent involvement in literacy activities, and personal reasons for participating in the intervention program (e.g., How do you feel about your performance in school, like your grades?); (2) the immediate *intervention level* context, such as program attendance and direct program experiences
(e.g., Did you attend every session? What are your thoughts about your tutor?); (3) the peer and (4) family level social contexts, for example parental and peer influences on program experiences (e.g., Did your friends encourage you to come to the sessions?), as well as (5) the broader community and cultural level contexts, such as the impact of enrolment in the Pathways to Education community program on VLP experiences and issues around language and cultural identity (see Appendix B for the interview guide). The interviews always addressed the student’s perceptions of the relevance of identified broader contextual experiences to their experience in the intervention program (except when direct, intervention-specific questions were asked). All interview questions were exploratory in nature, organized into the contextual categories described here based on evidence from previous research of their potential roles in influencing academic engagement and achievement. In this way, due to its open-ended nature the interview guided students in the task of identifying those contextual factors most relevant to their experiences and consequent engagement, while allowing for the opportunity to discover alternate, equally pertinent contexts.

Procedure

After obtaining written consent and assent from students and their parents for participation in the post-intervention interview, between May and August 2012 participants met with the author individually in a quiet setting for the face-to-face interview. Participants were first asked to complete the Pre-Interview Questionnaire, followed immediately by a 30-45 minute semi-structured interview designed to elicit information about their experiences in the program and address other individual and contextual factors that were critical to their engagement in the program. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.
Plan of Analysis

Transcripts of the interviews were loaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Data analysis was based on a thematic analytic approach: multiple readings of the transcripts were performed, and major themes were identified through a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were analyzed through an iterative, comparative process where consistent and contradictory themes were identified and compared within and across participants to develop groupings of similar concepts of participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 1998). Specifically, for each transcript a code was applied to highlight any aspect of the interview discussion that was related to a given theme, and wherever the discussion related to multiple themes the text was coded for each. A second rater read the transcripts to verify the accuracy of the initial coding scheme. Afterward, the two raters met to discuss both the identified themes and the interview content supporting those themes.

A total of 95 codes were applied to the transcripts. The degree of concordance and disagreement on the application of codes to the transcripts was determined. The two raters agreed on 27 of the 29 transcripts, disagreed on one of the transcripts, and on the remaining transcript one rater coded where the other did not. As recommended by Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub (1996), the disagreement was discussed and discrepancies were resolved. The thematic categories were finalized and clearly defined, and the interviews were then re-coded according to the final coding structure.

Results

Ten key themes were identified through the analyses, elucidating the factors associated with student engagement in the VLP reading intervention. Several indicators of engagement were identified a priori based on student’s interview responses. These research-validated indicators (see Fredricks et al., 2004) were used in assessing whether a given contextual factor played a role
in behavioral, affective, and/or cognitive engagement (see Table 1 for a summary of these findings). Key indicators of behavioral engagement included regular attendance at VLP sessions, completion of the entire program, on-task behavior during sessions, persistence, effort, concentration and contribution to group discussions. Affective engagement was indicated whenever students described having any type of emotional reaction to the program, such as interest, boredom, happiness, sadness or anxiety. Cognitive engagement (or psychological investment in learning) was more difficult to assess based on this self-report format; however it was thought to be indicated in cases where students demonstrated a concerted effort to learn, understand, and master the skills and strategies taught in the reading intervention. The themes that emerged from the analysis will now be discussed in turn.

**Individual Level Context**

**Theme #1: Motivation to improve reading/English skills.** The motivation to improve reading skills, gain vocabulary knowledge and improve school grades was cited by 45% of students as the primary reason for participating in the intervention. Students who desired to improve their reading or English skills attended more program sessions and were more likely to remain in the program for its duration (indicating behavioral engagement). One student described his weaknesses in reading, and the utility of remaining in the intervention to exercise his developing skills:

I’m not usually like that strong at reading, to be honest. Like stuff that I learned from him was like simple stuff to use in reading to get a better understanding…so like I found it useful right…so yea it was good. So I just stayed…yeah.

One student expressed anxiety about missing sessions due to the potential loss of the learning opportunity associated with non-attendance:
I don’t know, like the learning makes us go. ‘Cause if we miss one session then like we’re gonna be lost, like say for example like once I missed a session and I went the next session and then after that the tutor was asking me what this word meant and I was like I wasn’t there for that. Yea you feel so clueless when you miss one session and they’re talking about something and then you go the next session and you’re just clueless, you’re like I don’t know this.

Many ELLs highlighted the importance of being dedicated and effortful in becoming proficient in their English language skills, especially while living in a predominantly English speaking context:

I’ll try, give myself a chance… in university, in sciences, wherever you go English is going to be there. Wherever you go, it’s still gonna be there, coming back to haunt you.

Overall, motivation for reading was associated with more consistent attendance, elicited feelings of anxiety around missed opportunities to learn in the event of non-attendance, prompted effortful actions to master English skills (e.g., active participation during sessions, application of new strategies learned in school context), and reflected intrinsic motivation. As such, motivation for reading appeared to be associated with behavioral, affective and cognitive levels of engagement simultaneously.

**Theme #2: Positive academic self-concept.** Eighty-three percent of students had a very positive perception of their overall academic performance at school. A positive perception was expressed by statements regarding academic skills such as “usually I’m pretty good at like almost everything”, “I’m just proud of myself” and “I’m on the honor roll…it’s pretty good”. A positive academic self–concept appeared to have an important yet contradictory relationship with students’ program engagement. In some cases students with positive beliefs about their academic skills expressed decreased interest in the program, arguing that the program material was not sufficiently challenging (e.g., “it seemed a little too…it seemed very...how would you explain
this, umm...I felt like I was past the level…”). Based on similar statements, positive perceptions of one’s abilities appeared to be negatively associated with overall engagement - for some students. However in other cases, a positive academic self-concept was associated with more frequent contribution to group discussion and effortful on-task behaviour. For example, one Grade 9 student stated: “[I’m] on honor roll and have[grades] higher than most of the other kids…always had full attention…participated and…attended every session.” Thus, positive academic self-concept appeared to be positively related to behavioral, affective and cognitive engagement for some students and not others.

**Theme #3: Difficulty balancing other academic responsibilities.** Another individual level factor that significantly impacted some students’ program engagement in the VLP intervention was difficulty balancing other academic responsibilities with involvement in the after-school reading program. As a result of perceptions of competing academic demands, 38% of the adolescents interviewed either “skipped” sessions or were unable to remain in the program for its 13 week duration. For example, one student stated: “I got a lot of homework and stuff, or like some tests that came up, so I had to skip some of them…the sessions, to catch up on stuff…” In fact, when queried about reasons for missing sessions, the most frequently cited reason (55%) was the need to complete school homework, academic projects or exam preparation. The impact of competing academic responsibilities on program attendance and completion provide an interesting nuance on interpreting students’ behavioral engagement that is to be subsequently further elucidated in this study.

**Intervention Level Context**

A critical context examined was that of the intervention program itself. Key factors related to engagement at the intervention level were tutor competence, the nature of the tutor-student relationship, group dynamics, and students’ evaluations of the quality of the VLP program content and its consequent effectiveness.
**Theme #4: Tutor Competence.** The tutor’s ability to teach the program material in an effective manner was important to student engagement. Students were more likely to attend sessions, complete the program, contribute to group discussion, exhibit interest in the program material, and seek new learning challenges when they had a tutor who they believed exhibited competence. From the students’ perspective, this included tutors who effectively tailored program content to suit students’ preferences and abilities (e.g., they selected readings that were both interesting and challenging for students); tutors who were knowledgeable, punctual, prepared and organized to teach; and tutors who demonstrated effective behavior management skills. For example, one student described her tutor as follows:

> If we didn’t understand she would explain it to the fullest until we understood it, and if we didn’t she would try again…she would use a lot of examples for us to understand, and there were certain stories we actually liked learning about. And she’d bring newspaper articles and she’d make us read that. Cause she said if you guys want to read something interesting, what about articles? So she brought this article about this…I think it was a soccer player, and then he went through cancer, and so all his hardships - we were reading about that. And there was this one word we were stuck on, and she was explaining it to us, and she was like…that word can be used in different ways. She was really nice.

Another student described her tutor’s ability to skillfully adapt the reading materials as well as the difficulty of vocabulary words taught to the group’s ability level:

> One or two [reading] pieces was like confusing, like hard to understand. But …after he realized what level we were at…he brought in like different pieces like at our like, level right? So like to make it easily understandable.

A student who eventually dropped out of the program commented that one of the contributing factors to her decision to withdraw from the program was the lack of punctuality on the part of her tutor:
She was late, always late…only a few times she came early but other times she was late…and it was like, you’re taking up our time, like we’re here early for you and you’re not there.

Another reason why the student dropped out of the program was her belief that her tutor did not have sufficient general vocabulary knowledge to effectively instruct students:

She didn’t even know some of the words, what they meant and I thought she was already supposed to know that. OK I get it - sometimes you don’t know it cause some of the words are kind of odd, but then like most of the words she had to look it up.

Overall, tutors who experienced difficulty tailoring program material to students’ preferences and abilities, whose baseline vocabulary knowledge did not meet student expectations, and who were not punctual, organized or effective at managing student behavior issues, were deemed by the students to be less competent in their role -- despite having received preparatory training in these areas. In contrast, more competent tutors were perceived by students to be effective in implementing various aspects of their program training, and thus facilitated behavioral, cognitive and affective engagement.

**Theme #5: Tutor-Student Relationship.** Many students who expressed enjoyment in the program highlighted the positive impact of having a tutor who they perceived as “nice”, “fun” or “engaging”. These were the tutors who invested time into building a trusting, respectful relationship with their students. Students’ effort, concentration, attention and investment in learning were most influenced by the presence of an engaging tutor. An ELL adolescent, for example, described his tutor’s inability to engage the group, which resulted in his dropping out of the intervention program altogether:

We just wanted someone who could motivate the group… he was a good guy but he didn’t get the group engaged and all that, like because the group was down…there was no engagement so everybody started leaving right? So, that’s what I ended up doing… If I had a better tutor, more engaged in person, it makes it interesting.
Another participant described the fact that her entire group actively participated in the group discussions, avoided boredom and maintained attention due to the tutor’s ability to both identify and effectively act upon her tutees’ behavioral cues of disengagement:

*Student:* Well she was really good like, she did it different than other tutors. Like the kids at the other table were so bored and stuff, and then we were actually participating.

*Interviewer:* So what did she do to get you guys to participate?

*Student:* She let us read it. Instead of teaching the lesson, she would make us do it and like, see if we’re doing it well, like if we actually learned something - only sometimes not all the time…She would do the lesson…and then like, let’s just say like I’m not paying attention or I’m just like kinda bored, she would be like OK you do it now, and then …I would do something that she does. Like I would ask people questions, then I would make them answer to me, not her.

*Interviewer:* … So you liked that about her, she got everybody engaged and involved.

*Student:* Yeah.

Students described how they developed positive relationships with their tutors (e.g., “At first it was awkward…but she was a very engaging person, and everyone got over the awkwardness”), and how these relationships played a role in their participation in sessions (e.g., “She was nice…she was doing a very good job because there was one student that barely talked, by the end of the program, she was the person that contributed the most”). These examples demonstrate that as a whole, the tutor-student relationship was associated with behavioral and affective levels of engagement in the program.

**Theme #6: Group Dynamics.** Group dynamics played a role in engagement. Tutoring groups characterized by high cooperation amongst members and that facilitated the formation of new friendships were associated with increased overall program interest and satisfaction, as well as willingness to freely contribute to group discussions. One student divulged that the presence of
non-cooperative group members negatively affected group dynamics and impacted her overall perceptions of the group:

Another student who was not as engaged with everything, he would wander off, and it was difficult…it created sort of a difficult group dynamic because the other student was really not involved at all, and was difficult for the tutor to deal with, so it made it awkward for the rest of the group.

Some students mentioned the formation of new friendships as a result of the program, making statements such as “it was nice, like I made new friends and stuff, it was good” or “Well I think everyone was nice. We all became friends after a couple sessions”. The ELL students became even more engaged when they felt they were part of a group that allowed them to practice their oral communication and social interaction skills in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere: One ELL student stated that:

Sometimes we don’t like join groups or something because we don’t feel comfortable with other people, and we feel so shy, and we don’t like to communicate except the people that we know… before [the program] I used to be so shy, but now, like, I join with other people that I don’t even know.

Theme #7: Perceived Quality of Program Content and Effectiveness. Student’s overall evaluation of the intervention’s quality was a critical factor that was associated with the extent of engagement in the program. Students’ evaluations of the quality of program components such as the specific strategies, reading materials, games and extrinsic motivators used, often determined their likelihood of completing the program, their level of interest and degree of psychological investment in the learning process.

Many students described the vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies as interesting, noting an effective balance between direct instruction and games to consolidate new knowledge. For example a student stated: “I think it was like perfectly balanced, because it was like strategies and like techniques for like reading something, then using them in the games after
reading…it was useful.” Forty-five percent of students interviewed noted that they had been previously exposed to some of the concepts and strategies taught in the VLP through earlier years of schooling. Of these students, 62% mentioned that their prior familiarity with some of the strategies served as a barrier to active engagement because they felt they were not learning novel information, expressed as follows by one student: “If I find something interesting, I get engaged to it. If it’s something that I’ve learned before, I wanna move on, right?” Thirty-eight percent however, perceived the program as a way to solidify previous learning and truly comprehend the appropriate application of reading strategies in a way that they would have otherwise been unable: “I know about [that strategy] but I didn’t use it. After he put it into…with the text I found the use of it”.

Students also tended to evaluate the quality of the short text selection used in the sessions. In some instances students described the readings used as being “boring” or not personally relevant (e.g., “the story should be more intriguing to teenagers…things they can probably relate to”); in other cases they were described as being “interesting”, and a good source of knowledge (e.g., “I really like learned from them”). Evaluations of the quality of the weekly readings were thus differentially perceived - and differentially related to affective engagement. Although it is possible that student perceptions of the readings may have been in part related to other factors such as English skill level or perceived difficulty of the readings, the source of these differences in opinion about the reading material was not readily apparent based on participants’ responses. Nevertheless, in most cases, students remained at least behaviorally engaged with the readings (e.g., persistent, on-task, concentrated).

Another program component that students identified as a facilitator to their ongoing attendance was the provision of extrinsic motivators such as snacks, volunteer hours (to help them partially fulfill standard school board mandated high school volunteer requirements), prizes, and financial remuneration for their time. In spite of some equivocation about the ethics involved
in offering extrinsic motivators it appeared that students valued receiving these items. According to 71% of the students, these items served to help bolster their motivation to attend sessions and engage with the instructional material. For example one student stated: “I heard that it counts for volunteer hours as well, and mom’s always saying go to tutoring, go to Pathways, so it was like I can do this…you know, just a chance to get volunteer hours and do some English.” Another student remarked that “to get our certificate…credit…to graduate we need like 40 hours, and I think that was helpful too, to motivate us…”

The extent to which students described the program to be effective was often associated with the degree of program engagement that they communicated in the interview. Those students who perceived literacy gains as a result of the intervention were more likely to complete the entire program, maintain interest and positive feelings about the program, as well as demonstrate a psychological investment in mastering the strategies taught (often exemplified by their described ability to retain and apply program material to their academic schoolwork). Sixty-nine percent of the students directly discussed making gains with respect to vocabulary and reading comprehension skills as a result of the program. One of the participants, for example, stated: “Well I thought it was good because you learn vocabulary…I learned many words, that’s why I’m feeling good.” Similarly, another student commented on the acquisition of new vocabulary: “it’s like a great learning experience. We do get to learn a whole bunch of new words and it’s like the words do stick to you.” One Grade 9 student recounted the impact of applying the VLP vocabulary learning strategies on her academic work at school:

There’s certain strategies that at first…like when I read a book called The Sight Line, and they had short stories we’d have to read in our English class, and at first I’d find it really boring…like I didn’t like them at all, like I’d just read them and I’d be done. But then going to the VLP program I learned, cause there’s certain words I didn’t know in the short story but I didn’t care, but going to the VLP program our tutor was saying that if you don’t understand a word it’s really good, it benefits you if you find out what that word means, and you can come across that word anytime in your life, and if you don’t
understand what that word means you’re going to feel like “oh I should know all that”. So… I went back to my Sight Lines book, and then I defined each word. Because I didn’t understand it and I was like I’m not going to understand the story if I don’t know the words, so then I think that was one of the reasons why I actually liked going to the VLP program.

This student not only learned the strategies but immediately applied them to her academic work, which reflected the fact that she was sufficiently behaviorally and cognitively engaged when learning the strategies in the session. Another student similarly described her successful application of reading comprehension strategies to her independent reading activities:

There’s a whole bunch of techniques we did like…Click or Clunck… I do use those like if I’m reading a book…and like sometimes it doesn’t make sense so I like read and re-read it… when I am reading it, I try to remember what my tutor said like paraphrasing, or inferencing…I do try to use those and it helps!

Similarly, other students’ descriptions of the strategies they acquired as a result of the program consistently reflected the two complementary approaches to vocabulary instruction – analytic and semantic – that have been empirically determined to be effective, and that were utilized in the VLP intervention (Pasquarella et al., 2012a). The program’s implementation of these validated approaches to vocabulary instruction potentially contributed to student perceptions of the VLP’s effectiveness.

In sum, students’ evaluations of the program’s content and effectiveness were associated with their behavioral, affective and cognitive engagement. Namely, favorable perceptions of the strategies, reading materials, games, extrinsic motivators used, or perceptions of the program as effective for improving reading achievement, contributed to student engagement in various ways. This included such things as more consistent attendance (behavioral engagement), interest in the sessions (affective engagement), and mastery of the strategies taught as demonstrated by their successful application by students in the school context (cognitive engagement).
Peer Level Context

Theme #8: Involvement of friends in the program. Many participants described the role their friends played in their program involvement. Perceptions about the role of friends in establishing engagement, specifically behavioral engagement (e.g., attendance at sessions) were not consistent. On the one hand, a number of students (72%) indicated that their friends and peers had no effect on their participation. According to one female participant, for example:

I don’t really care if my friends are in the program or not. I would just participate. Because for me, it’s not like I’m doing it for my friends. I’m doing it for the benefit of me. So it’s not like I’m gonna do it for my friends, like if my friend is there I’m gonna do it, no. That’s not how life is. You do it for your own benefit so if it was something interesting I’d go and do it, whether my friends were there or not, I still would go ahead and do it.

In contrast, the remaining proportion (27%) of students reported heightened motivation to attend program sessions and persist with personal program goals if they had friends keenly involved in the program. For example, a female participant who only attended two program sessions disclosed that: “I think if my friends came and like they told me to come, and they like pressured me to come to like all the sessions, then I would have come to them.” Taken together, the involvement of friends in the intervention program did not have a uniform influence on engagement. Some students consistently attended sessions whether or not their friends were present; others were less motivated to attend and engage with program material if they either lacked friends in the program or if their friends were enrolled but still failed to attend sessions. It is interesting to note that all of the students who did not perceive a strong peer influence on their participation had at least one friend enrolled in the program. For most students, the co-involvement of friends was a point of consideration at least when enrolling in the intervention but did not necessarily reinforce consistent attendance throughout the duration of the program.
Family Level Context

**Theme #9: Parental encouragement.** Students whose parents supported their involvement in the program by encouraging them to attend sessions and by “checking in” on their program experiences were more likely to persist with the program for the entire duration. For example, a participant explained the importance of her parents as a motivating force for her engagement in the VLP as well as in her other academic work: “Without my dad, without my parents’ encouragement, I probably wouldn’t care … my dad he makes me feel so much better so then I’m like OK, fine, I’ll stay…and work hard to do better…” Another student commented that her mother persuaded her to attend sessions, resulting in her attendance at every session:

*Interviewer:* Did you attend every session?
*Student:* Yea
*Interviewer:* Good for you, and why?
*Student:* Because my mom told me to go.
*Interviewer:* Your mom told you to go. She pushed you and reminded you every time?
*Student:* [nods head]

When describing her reasons for participating in the VLP, one Grade 9 student remarked: “My mom wanted me to go because she was like you should get your vocabulary straight.” Parental encouragement thus contributed to students’ reported attendance and commitment to the program, or in other words, their behavioral engagement. In fact, 27 of the 29 of students interviewed described their parents as a source of motivation. Of these, 70% attended at least 10 or more of the 13 VLP sessions.

Community Level Context

**Theme #10: Views of the intervention as a form of extended community support.** Given that all VLP participants were simultaneously actively enrolled in the larger Pathways to Education community support program for students, several viewed the VLP as an extended form of support from the community. As such, students indicated that they valued the program more,
because it was provided in a context or environment with which they were already familiar (e.g., in their community, within familiar surroundings), making it easier for them to attend sessions. One student who attended most of the program sessions and who actively encouraged other peers to attend, expressed her view of the importance of delivering the program within the community setting: “You guys should keep doing [the VLP] in Regent Park…I’m in Regent Park…cause some kids need something and never got a chance to learn it. Pathways is a great place to come and try it out…it’s a good program, I like it.” Another student tied the program to community-building efforts, and demonstrated her positive perceptions of the program by stating: “I actually thought that it was a good thing for the community.”

The perception of the intervention as an extension of community support in fact strongly promoted behavioral engagement for many students in that they were more likely to describe that they attended sessions, participated during sessions, and remained in the program for its duration. This was particularly evident in the case of one student – a former gang member who believed that his involvement in the VLP prevented him from partaking in disruptive, violent, and possibly criminal behavior:

*Interviewer:* You were in the program right to the end?

*Student:* Yes…I guess you guys wanted to keep the youth busy, instead of being on streets all the time. Cause if I never signed up for the program, I’d probably be on the streets, doing bad stuff. So it kept me busy, you know.

*Interviewer:* So what would you have been doing otherwise?

*Student:* If I wasn’t in the program?

*Interviewer:* Yes

*Student:* Beating up people, yeah and stuff like that…I would have probably been in jail.

This student’s behavioral engagement is thus exemplified by his comments that he remained in the program for its duration, at least in part due to his views of the program as an outlet afforded by his community to occupy his time in a meaningful way. These were not his sentiments alone: 7 of the 11 students who explicitly described that they
viewed the program as a form of community aid conveyed that this contributed to their ongoing program attendance.

**Summary and Interpretation of Findings**

Using an ecological framework as a guide for inquiry, the current study examined the perceptions of adolescents at-risk for academic underachievement in an after-school reading intervention (the Vocabulary Learning Project, or VLP). The goal was to identify the individual and social contextual factors that were associated with their behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement the intervention. The systematic synthesis of data from in-depth interviews with students resulted in the identification of a variety of factors described by students as contributing to their engagement in the VLP.

*Factors Associated with Engagement at the Individual Level*

At the individual level, the factors that played a role in engagement included student motivation to improve literacy skills, positive academic self-concept, and difficulty balancing other academic responsibilities with involvement in the after-school intervention.

Upon reflection on student comments about their motivation to improve their literacy skills, it became more apparent that students seemed to convey a deep understanding of the importance of cultivating well-developed reading and vocabulary skills for maximal societal success. This understanding possibly translated into their desire to take advantage of opportunities that would facilitate future academic success, exemplified by actions such as conscious attempts to avoid missing sessions, or completion of the program (e.g., 66% of the interview participants remained in the program for its duration, rather than dropping out or being withdrawn for poor attendance). Such interpretation is supported by other studies which have shown that
heightened motivation for academic improvement results in an increase in engagement (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Lesaux et al., 2012).

A salient theme at the individual level was that of academic self-concept. It is noteworthy that a large proportion (83%) of the students interviewed in this study described themselves as having a positive perception of their academic performance. It is therefore quite possible that the role of this factor in engagement may have operated in tandem with student motivation to improve reading performance. Essentially, students who perceived themselves as performing better academically were also likely to pursue opportunities to improve their academic skills (e.g., Marsh, 2007). In addition, students’ positive academic self-concept potentially contributed to their motivation to handle other academic responsibilities jointly with their participation in the program. In some cases this may have resulted in perceptions of difficulty balancing all such activities – a factor that was associated with decreased program engagement in this study. Given that involvement in extracurricular activities has been generally linked to increased engagement in the school environment (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997) it is an interesting finding that 52% of students interviewed opted to miss sessions (and were thus behaviorally disengaged) when they felt they had competing school-related academic tasks to complete, such as exams, tests and assignments. This may again be indicative of the fact that the participants in this study were, on the whole, particularly invested in their academic improvement, with aspirations to better themselves and their future career prospects. Students’ aspirations were perhaps exemplified in the simplest manner by their mere act of enrolling in an after-school program designed to help support their language skill development, despite the option to refuse such supplementary academic involvement. In many cases, the realization that extracurricular involvement could potentially hamper their engagement in school-assigned academic tasks encouraged these already highly motivated students to direct their efforts to tasks
that would directly impact their grades. This represented a paradoxical expression of the type of academic engagement critical to school success - transcending any facilitating impact of the extrinsic motivators provided (e.g., volunteer hours, rewards program prizes).

It also important to note that while some students who reported having a positive self-concept were more engaged as a result of their beliefs about their academic skills, other students became less engaged due to confidence in their skills. As previously discussed, positive academic self-concept has been shown to be a factor that motivates individuals to improve their academic performance (Marsh, 2007). Such improvement requires engagement with effective and challenging materials or strategies (Lesaux et al., 2012). As such, students who have a positive academic self-concept and express needs for more challenging activities to support the strategies being taught, yet who do not have these needs met, are potentially more likely to become affectively and behaviorally disengaged.

Factors Associated with Engagement at the Intervention Level

When student engagement was considered within the context of the intervention program itself, the relevant factors that emerged were tutor competence, a positive tutor-student relationship, group dynamics, and students’ perceptions of the program’s quality (in terms of its content and effectiveness). Analyses of students’ statements during the interviews indicated that the personal characteristics and competence of the program tutor was a pervasive factor that influenced their relationship with both the tutor and other students in the tutoring group. As such, it is possible that these factors operated in a combined fashion to play a role in students’ behavioral, affective and cognitive engagement. Other studies have demonstrated that instruction from a knowledgeable tutor (Fredricks et al., 2004) who supports the development of an affable
relationship with students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Moje, 2000; Malcolmson, 2001) helps to facilitate academic engagement. Moreover, when overall program perception was favorable, students were more likely to describe increased engagement, as has been demonstrated by other studies (Kamil, 2002; Nokes & Dole, 2004; Lesaux et al., 2012). Given the salience of students’ perceptions of their tutors, it is likely that this factor also influenced students’ perceptions of the program’s content and effectiveness as a whole. These findings thus highlight the importance of ensuring that tutors are adequately selected, trained and have the skills to apply all aspects of their knowledge when working directly with students of different abilities. This is particularly important when volunteer tutors, who may lack sufficient prior field experience, must be relied upon. It will be critical to assess tutor fidelity to the program manual to ensure that the program was delivered as expected, and that any described influences on student engagement in this study were not attributable to inadequate program delivery. As such, overall results from this study should be interpreted with consideration of the fact that the VLP intervention is still undergoing formal research evaluation.

Factors Associated with Engagement at the Peer, Family and Community Levels

Within the peer level context, the joint participation of friends in the VLP was the main factor associated with engagement in the program. Although the importance of peer support with academic work at school was expressed equally across participants, some students felt that the joint participation of their friends in the literacy intervention enhanced their engagement, while others did not perceive any influence. Other studies have linked peer social support with positive academic outcomes (Nokes & Dole, 2004; Wilson, 2012a). The fact that the effects of peers on engagement were not consistent in this study highlights the diversity of adolescent experiences with respect to the extent, type and quality of peer literacy support desired and attained (Wilson, 2012b).
When the family level context was examined in this study, the factor that played a role in engagement as described by the students was parental encouragement. Overall, students described their parents as having the type of supportive presence in all aspects of their academic work that extended into support of their engagement in the VLP. In urban, multicultural contexts, particularly those in which students are at-risk for academic failure due to a variety of reasons, parental involvement in student’s literacy learning efforts likely plays an important role by promoting students’ motivation to succeed (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001). Students interviewed in this study often described their parents as active participants in their academic lives, assisting with homework or persuading them to seek other sources of support as needed. Students in turn were able to explain that they successfully diverted their efforts into seeking and receiving assistance, demonstrating behavioral and cognitive engagement.

At the community level, when students viewed the intervention as an extension of the community support they were receiving through Pathways to Education, they described that this played a role in their behavioral engagement in the program (e.g., attendance and program completion). It is important to consider that the students participating in this study resided in a relatively close-knit community where individuals and families were potentially interconnected. Hence, the fact that the intervention program was delivered within the community context likely encouraged trust and comfort with the program. It may have also thus encouraged their engagement in the program – to the extent that one student claimed that he opted to avoid engagement in criminal activity by taking advantage of the support afforded by his community, minimizing his risk of academic failure. Students’ perceptions of the intervention as a form of community support needs to be further investigated given its
potential impact on student behavior, particularly in light of other studies demonstrating that positive perceptions of community-based interventions serve to maximize student engagement - especially in urban, multicultural contexts (Cassity & Harris, 2000; Epstein, 1996).

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations to the findings of this study must be noted. The nature of the results obtained was constrained by the type and depth of questions posed by the examiner, as well as the depth and veracity of responses provided by the students. Also, in effort to minimize recruitment challenges, a convenience sample was relied upon in this study. As a result it is important to note that there may be inherent differences between the sub-sample of VLP students who agreed to participate in the post-intervention interview and those who did not (e.g., in terms of overall ability level, baseline motivation and engagement). Such biases can serve to minimize the extent to which the sample in question is representative of all students who participated in the intervention.

Future research in this area should take advantage of the power afforded by the utilization of a mixed methods approach, which incorporates quantitative analyses of outcome data (e.g., the influence of the social contextual factors at play in students’ lives on measured academic literacy achievement - a key outcome of the larger intervention evaluation study). It would also be beneficial to assess these factors longitudinally with diverse, multiple informants and sources (e.g., focus groups, interviews with tutors, questionnaire data, standardized measures), moving beyond a presentation of student perceptions and attributes in order to more intensively ascertain the nature of individual and social contextual influences on both student engagement and actual achievement.
Potential Implications of the Findings

Despite its limitations, the present study has some potential implications for the development and design of effective reading interventions for youth, particularly in urban, multicultural and often marginalized contexts. The findings at least suggest that in order to successfully engage youth, programs may need to consider the broader contexts within which literacy learning occurs, and incorporate those elements that play a role in facilitating behavioral, affective and cognitive engagement wherever possible as outlined in this study. It is crucial to be mindful of the social and cultural influences on adolescents’ literacy so that programs are balanced and sensitive to students’ lived experiences. The considerable diversity in student perceptions of the importance of aspects of their individual and social contexts on program engagement, as demonstrated in this study, is reflective of the diversity of student needs with respect to intervention programs. That is, students’ needs for effective intervention program delivery are highly subjective, and will differ depending on factors such as the student’s degree of intrinsic motivation, baseline language skill level, perception of the intervention program’s quality, and degree of parental encouragement. High quality intervention programs hence must be sensitive to this diversity, recognizing that a “one size fits all” approach is neither sufficient nor necessary. In fact, the success of intervention programs that are better able to support student engagement may lie (at least in part) in their ability to take advantage of adolescents’ diversities by incorporating those individual differences into program design.

The body of existing evidence makes it clear that highly engaged readers are those who make greater academic gains, which often results in improved career prospects and associated economic and personal advancement. A renewed focus on maximizing student engagement within empirically-based literacy interventions
symbolizes a strong, positive step towards the improvement of outcomes for socially and economically disadvantaged youth whose life circumstances otherwise place them at the unfortunate yet tangible risk of academic failure.
References


### Table 1

*Factors Associated with Student Engagement in VLP Intervention*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Type of Engagement Impacted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Level Context</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation to improve reading/English skills</td>
<td>Behavioral; Affective; Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive academic self-concept</td>
<td>Behavioral; Affective; Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty balancing other academic responsibilities</td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
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<td><strong>Intervention Level Context</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tutor Competence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Tutor-Student Relationship</td>
<td>Behavioral; Affective; Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Dynamics</td>
<td>Behavioral; Affective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived quality of program content and effectiveness</td>
<td>Behavioral; Affective; Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Peer Level Context</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement of friends in the program</td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family Level Context</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental encouragement</td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community Level Context</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervention viewed as an extension of local community support via collaboration with Pathways to Education program</td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix A

Consent Forms
Individual and Focus Group Interview Consent Form

Research Project Title: Vocabulary Learning Project (VLP): Understanding Student Experiences in the Program

Dear Student,

You participated in a language and reading tutoring program (known as the VLP) run by professors and researchers at the University of Toronto. We are pleased to invite you to participate in a one-hour individual interview and/or a one-hour focus group discussion where you will have an opportunity to provide us with feedback about the program. You will also be able to share your thoughts about other things that might have affected how you did in the program, or why you could or could not complete the whole program (for example having lots of homework, family activities, and motivation). Talking to as many students as possible about their experiences will help us to understand if there are things that can be changed about our tutoring program to make it better and easier to do.

How is University of Toronto involved in this project?

Pathways to Education is participating in the tutoring program research study developed by a team of researchers at the University of Toronto. A graduate student who is part of this team will meet students for a one-hour interview and/or focus group discussion. Interviews and focus groups will happen throughout the spring, summer and fall of 2012 (May to September), but you will only need to participate in one interview and/or one focus group.

What are the responsibilities of participants?

We will ask you to take part in a one-on-one interview and/or a focus group discussion with about 4-7 other students. You will be asked some questions about your participation in the VLP. You will be asked about what you thought was good and bad about the program, and about other experiences that may have affected your performance in the program. The interview and discussion will take about one hour. Interviews will be recorded on an audio tape so that we can review the comments and prepare a report.

All information that is collected will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside the study unless required by law. All identifying information will be removed from the written transcripts. You will not be named in any reports, publications, or presentations that may come from this study.

What are the risks and benefits?

There are no direct risks to you in participating in the interview or focus group. You may appreciate being given the opportunity to express your views and give us feedback.
In doing so, you will help us to plan ways to make projects like the VLP easier to do in the future. You will receive $10 upon completion of each interview.

**Is participation voluntary?**

Participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. You may refuse to answer any question you do not want to answer, and you may end your participation in the interview or focus group discussion at any time.

**How do I agree to participate?**

If you agree to participate in an interview and/or focus group, please complete and return the permission form to one of our University of Toronto or Pathways representatives or to your SPSW by May 31, 2012. If you have any questions about this project, you can contact Linda Iwenofu (University of Toronto) at (647) 401-9277 or Tiffany Brew (Pathways) at (416) 642-1570.

Sincerely,

Linda Iwenofu
Study Coordinator
Student Consent

I, ________________________________, am over the age of 16, and I agree to participate in a one-on-one interview and/or a focus group discussion about my experiences in the Vocabulary Learning Project.

What is your date of birth? ________/___/________
(Month /Day /Year)

Signature ________________________________

Today’s date: ________/___/________
(Month /Day /Year)

Name of SPSW, or Pathways or University of Toronto Representative (if applicable):
___________________________________

Vocabulary Learning Project (VLP): Understanding Student Experiences in the Program
Individual and Focus Group Interview Consent Form

Research Project Title: Vocabulary Learning Project (VLP): Understanding Student Experiences in the Program

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your child participated in a language and reading tutoring program run by professors and researchers at the University of Toronto. We are writing to you now to ask for your permission to allow your child to participate in a one-hour individual interview and/or a one-hour focus group discussion where your child will have an opportunity to provide us with feedback about the program. Your child will also be able to share his/her thoughts about other things that might have affected how he/she did in the program or why he/she could or could not complete the whole program (for example having lots of homework, family activities, and motivation). Talking to as many students as possible about their experiences will help us to understand if there are things that can be changed about our tutoring program to make it better and easier to do.

How is University of Toronto involved in this project?

Pathways to Education is participating in the tutoring program research study developed by a team of researchers at the University of Toronto. A graduate student who is part of this team will meet students for a one-hour interview and/or focus group discussion. Interviews and focus groups will happen throughout the spring, summer and fall of 2012 (May to September), but your child will only need to participate in one interview and/or one focus group.

What are the responsibilities of participants?

We will ask your child to take part in a one-on-one interview and/or a focus group discussion with about 4-7 other students. Your child will be asked some questions about his/her participation in the language and reading tutoring program (known as the VLP). The participants will be asked what they thought was good and bad about the program, and about other experiences that may have affected their performance in the program. The interview and discussion will take about one hour. Interviews will be recorded on an audio tape so that we can review the comments and prepare a report.

All information that is collected will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside the study unless required by law. All identifying information will be removed from the written transcripts. Your child will not be named in any reports, publications, or presentations that may come from this study.

What are the risks and benefits?

There are no direct risks to your child in participating in the interview or focus group. Your child may appreciate being given the opportunity to express his/her views and give us feedback.

Interview and Focus Group Consent - Parent
Version 1.0, May 11, 2012
In doing so, he/she will help us to plan ways to make projects like the VLP easier to do in the future. Your child will receive $10 upon completion of each interview.

**Is participation voluntary?**

Participation is voluntary. Your child does not have to participate if he or she does not want to. Your child may refuse to answer any question he/she does not want to answer, and he/she may end his/her participation in the interview or focus group discussion at any time.

**How do I agree to participate?**

If you agree for your child to participate in an interview and/or focus group, please complete and return the permission form to one of our University of Toronto or Pathways representatives or to your child’s SPSW by May 31, 2012. If you have any questions about this project, you can contact Linda Iwenofu (University of Toronto) at (647) 401-9277 or Tiffany Brew (Pathways) at (416) 642-1570.

Sincerely,

Linda Iwenofu
Study Coordinator
Parents or Guardian Consent

I give permission for my son or daughter ______________________ to participate in a
(Print First Name & Last Name)
one-on-one interview and/or a focus group discussion about his or her experiences in the
Vocabulary Learning Project.

What is your child’s date of birth? _______/___ /________
(Month /Day /Year)

Name of Parent or Guardian____________________________
(Print First Name & Last Name)

Signature of Parent or Guardian ______________________________

Signature of Student ______________________________________

Today’s date: _______/___ /________
(Month /Day /Year)

Name of SPSW, or Pathways or University of Toronto Representative (if applicable):
________________________________________
Appendix B

Materials
PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

To be completed prior to either the one-on-one interview or focus group interview

1. Age __________
2. Sex (please circle): MALE FEMALE
3. Grade ________

4. First Language ____________________

4. Born in Canada? (Please circle) YES NO
   4a. If you were NOT born in Canada, how old were you when you came to Canada? _____ years old
   4b. If you were born in Canada, check one:
      ___I am a 1st generation Canadian (my parents were not born in Canada)
      ___2nd generation Canadian (my parents were born in Canada)
      ___3rd generation Canadian (my grandparents were born in Canada)
      ___Other (please specify): ____________________________

5. Your cultural background ➔ Check ALL that apply:
   □ African-American / Black / African Origin
   □ Asian-American / Asian Origin / Pacific Islander
   □ Latino-a / Hispanic
   □ American Indian / Alaska Native / Aboriginal Canadian
   □ European Origin / White
   □ Bi-racial / Multi-racial
   □ Other (please specify): ________________________________

6. What five words or phrases would your closest friends use to describe your personality? WRITE YOUR FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS BELOW:

1. ______________________________
2. ______________________________
3. ______________________________
4. ______________________________
5. ______________________________
6. How often do you participate in each of the following activities? PLEASE CHECK (✓) ONE ANSWER PER ACTIVITY.

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<thead>
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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Few times a week</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Few times a month</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Less often</th>
<th>Never</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study for school</td>
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<td>Do homework</td>
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<td>Watch TV programs (English)</td>
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<td>Listen to the radio (English)</td>
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<td>Surf the Internet</td>
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<td>Read magazines (any language)</td>
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<td>Read books that are not for school purposes (any language)</td>
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<td>Write, but not for school purposes (ex. journal, blog, diary, letters, stories etc.)</td>
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<td>Email friends and family (any language)</td>
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<td>Text message friends and family (any language)</td>
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<td>Work or Volunteer (where: _________________)</td>
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<td>Engage in other extra-curricular activities</td>
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<td>Another activity: ______________________________________________________</td>
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<td>Another activity: ______________________________________________________</td>
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<td>Another activity: ______________________________________________________</td>
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Great!

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.
One-on-one Interview Guide

Please note that given the free response format, these questions will likely lead to additional questions to encourage elaboration of ideas, such as:

- Why?
- How often?
- Could you explain further?
- Would you give me an example of what you mean?
- Tell me more about that.
- How do you feel about that?
- What makes you feel that way?
- I’d like to know more about your thinking on that issue

Volunteering (warm-up question)

☐ In general, how do you feel about volunteering for things (e.g. for community work, research projects, school clubs, etc.)?

VLP Program (Tutor, Group Dynamics, Preferences)

You [participated for _x__ session(s) in the VLP program/completed the VLP program].

☐ Did you attend every session? Why?
☐ Tell me about the things that you liked about the VLP.
☐ Tell me about the things that you did not like about the VLP.
☐ Why did you choose to complete/not complete the program?
☐ What do you think is the purpose of a program like the VLP?
☐ Tell me about your VLP tutor.
☐ I’d like to hear your thoughts about your tutoring group.
☐ What do you think you have learned from participating in the VLP?
☐ Do you have any suggestions about how we can make the VLP program better?
☐ What did you think about the length of the sessions? The size of your group?
☐ What are your thoughts on the reading materials that you used?
☐ Would you participate again in the VLP?

Peers and Family/Home Literacy

☐ Did any of your friends participate in the VLP? How did you feel about that?
☐ Do your friends help you with homework? Parents? Extended family help with homework, reading and writing?
☐ What kinds of things do your parents do to help you do well in school, stay motivated, etc.?
□ Does your family read together at home or somewhere else (e.g. newspapers, magazines, religious materials, games, internet)?
□ Who are most important people in your life?

**Academic Self-Concept, Independent Literacy Engagement**
□ How do you feel about your performance in school, like your grades? Why?
□ Do you enjoy reading in your spare time? Why?
□ Do you ever practice the lessons you learned from VLP when you are reading or when you come across words you don’t know?

**School Factors**
□ Tell me about your school. What things do you like/not like about it?
□ Tell me about your teachers. What things do you like/not like about them?
□ Any teacher/mentor/friend/person who has made a lasting impact, in terms of helping with school, goal setting etc.?

**Extra-curricular activities and responsibilities** (if relevant)
□ Tell me about your extracurricular activities. Do you think that participating in [insert activity] affected how well you did in the VLP? Does it affect how well you do at school?
□ Did you participate in any academic summer program last summer? Tell me about it.

**Language and Culture**
□ *If English is not first language*, ask: Do you speak or read [first language]?
□ What language(s) do you usually speak with your friends?
□ In what language are the TV, movie and radio programs that you prefer listening to or watching?
□ How would you rate your English speaking and reading skills on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)? Why?

I’d like to ask about your cultural identity, meaning the culture(s) you feel you belong to and that you share your values and beliefs with.

□ When you or your family (e.g. parents/grandparents) come from a different country to live in Canada, often you are exposed to both cultures – Canadian culture and the other country’s culture. Do you feel that you are more a part of Canadian culture, the other culture, or both? (Can you give me examples?)

**Additional Questions Asked?**
□ Focus group?____________________________________________
□ ______________________________________________________
□ ______________________________________________________
Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions. It really means a lot to us and will really help us understand more about how we can improve our reading programs.